

Welcome

A lot of y'all know I love to BBQ. And I know, I've talked about it in a few sermons already. But wow - it's an incredible metaphor for our spiritual life. Because there are few foods that are as much art as they are science.

It's become trendy to smoke everything these days, from tofu to turkey. But BBQ began as a way to cook particularly tough, fatty cuts of meat. The technique originated on the island we call Hispaniola today - home to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. From there, it spread to Florida and the South-East to Tennessee and then over to TX, primarily through enslaved populations.

Why? Because BBQ wasn't originally a prized culinary method. Poor and enslaved populations developed it as a way to prepare cuts of meat that were otherwise pretty gross.

The two most popular incarnations of BBQ are probably pulled pork and brisket. Both cuts are tough, fatty cuts of meat. If you prepare them the way you prepare another cut of meat - cooking at 350 degrees or higher for a relatively short time, the fat turns into rubber. You get meat you have to chew for days to be able to swallow.

Not good. So guess who didn't buy or cook those cuts of meat? Yeah... anyone who could afford not to.

BBQ is a cooking process developed by oppressed and marginalized peoples. It's an innovation, a creative means to thrive in the face of oppression. "You're only going to give us briskets and pork shoulders? Okay, we'll turn them into the most delicious thing you've ever tasted."

The mantra of bbq is 'low and slow'. Low temperature for a long time. There's a reason for that - if you stick a thermometer in those fatty cuts of meat and put them in a smoker set at 250 degrees and watch, you'll see the temperature rise steadily until it hits about 160. Then it stops rising.

This is what pitmasters call 'the stall'. It looks like nothing is happening. When you're first learning to smoke, this is where you freak out. What changed? Am I doing something wrong? Why did it quit working???

The secret to a great smoke is that the stall is good. It looks like nothing's happening, but this is actually the sweet spot. This is where *everything* is happening.

The reason the temperature stops rising during the Stall is that all that energy from the heat is being used to melt the fat. If you get too far about 250 degrees, the meat cooks too fast and

locks all that fat into place. But keep the temp down and be patient - low and slow! - and eventually the fat will all melt and the temperature will start rising again.

That's when your meat is cooked and you can pull it off the fire, let it rest.

Low and slow. A pork shoulder usually takes around 12 hrs. A brisket closer to 20.

It's a lot of work. Because during that whole time, you're tending the fire. That's the secret to a great smoke: you don't watch the meat; you watch the fire. Tend to the fire and the meat will come out perfect every time.

But the whole point of the smoke isn't a big log of charred meat. It's the feast!

This is where I love BBQ as a metaphor for the spiritual life.

BBQ is a lot of work - from carving and prepping the meat to choosing the right wood to tending the fire for hours. But in all that time, the meat just sits there. The magic that makes it wonderful is happening where we can't see.

And of course the whole point isn't all that work. It's that feast at the end, this wholly separate experience that couldn't look less like the smoke itself and yet couldn't happen without all that work that came before.

Today, we're exploring the promise of the Christian life - particularly the ideas of God's peace and joy. The reality is that many of us don't experience a ton of peace or joy, and that can lead us to wonder if we're doing this whole faith thing right.

So what happens when we start looking at faith as the 'low and slow'? To see those hard times not as judgment on our faith, but as the Stall, where all the work God is doing is unseen, but no less real? What does it mean to tend the fire of the Holy Spirit in those times? And how does that lead to those times of feasting?

Could it be that this 'low and slow' faith is more vibrant and powerful than we imagined?

Message

This summer, we're putting *your* questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to create conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

We began last week by looking at how we know God. Today, we've got a question that hits at our experience of God's goodness. Let's look at the questions guiding us today:

"What about the joy/peace of the Lord from the Epistles? Is this something experienced emotionally or just an external reality? How can we expect to see this manifested in our life as related to the fullness of our life? Can all believers expect to "have access to that" in our lifetime?"

These are great questions. After all, how many of us have battled with feeling like a bad Christian because we weren't happy? How many of us feel shame or guilt because we experience anxiety or depression or anger? Maybe because we struggle with forgiveness.

So let's look at these related concepts today: peace and joy. Let's see how they're much more than what we tend to think of, and what it means for us to experience them.

Turn with us to [Leviticus 7](#).

I know, right? Leviticus is the book of Israel's laws. And it's here we see the laws concerning a Peace offering. The Hebrew word is the *shelamim*, which is the same root as *shalom*. And you have all the usual instructions you'd expect: a person brings their cow or goat to the priests, who slaughter it and offer the fatty parts to God.

But then there's this one little bit that's incredibly profound, but we usually skip right over it:

The meat of the peace offering of thanksgiving must be eaten on the same day it is offered. None of it may be saved for the next morning. -- Leviticus 7:15 (NLT)

Did you catch it?

The whole animal has to be eaten *that day*.

The whole goat. The whole cow, y'all.

You know what this means?

Yes. The peace offering is a BBQ. (That's not a joke - that's literally how my friend Rabbi Eli describes the *shelamim*).

Now, these didn't happen every day. In fact, in the sort of agrarian, subsistence economy of Ancient Israel, these were relatively rare occurrences.

Which means that most of the time, everyone was getting by. Working sunup to sun down. Worshiping on the Sabbath. But every now and again, someone in town would have enough extra to offer a *shelamim*. And then it was time for shalom. For peace. So they brought the animal to the priest. The priest offered the sacrifice and cooked the animal. The smell of that smoked deliciousness wafted through the village.

And that brought everyone out. Because it was time for a break. Time to celebrate *shalom*. To share a meal with God. To celebrate that everyone had what they needed and just a little bit more, so it was time to party.

Friends, that's what God's peace has always looked like. When the Scriptures use the word '*shalom*', they're pointing beyond the simple absence of conflict - which is what a lot of us think of as peace.

Instead, they reach for the seventh day of creation, the Sabbath day. The day when everything is in its proper place. All the smoking has been done and the meat is rested and all we have left to do is feast together.

That's what *shalom* is. It's this big, expansive word that points to fullness, abundance, everyone having what they need to thrive.

And we know the world isn't there. But we get these little glimpses of it. Pockets of flourishing. Glimpses of the world that will be. Sort of like when we sing together!

Song

I want to suggest ‘joy’ is the same sort of idea. We treat ‘joy’ and ‘happiness’ as synonyms, but Scripture treats them differently. Happiness is an emotional response to circumstances. It’s by definition fleeting and, well, circumstantial.

Joy is something different. The Greek word here is *chara*. It’s related to the word *charis*, which we translate *grace*.

Grace is one of those profound theological words we use so often it’s become trite. It means that God gives us what we need, even when we don’t deserve it.

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In other words, God’s *charis* is the path to *shalom*. Joy, *chara*, is our response to that reality. When we experience God’s grace to us, when we burst into that peace God is working for, we experience joy.

But here’s the big hold up: how many of us would say we often experience shalom and chara? How many of us would even say we experience it *regularly*?

Turn with us to [Romans 14](#).

The church in Rome faced a deep dispute about eating meat. That’s because - like in ancient Israel, in Rome the ‘butcher shops’ were temples. So any of the meat those early Christians could get had been sacrificed to Roman gods.

Some of the Christians shrugged. No big deal. Those gods aren’t real anyway. Just eat the brisket and enjoy.

Others were scandalized. Eating idol meat was participating in idol worship. Idolatry is one of the Bible’s most egregious sins.

And the biggest problem? The early church worshiped around a shared meal. So this was a problem *every time* they worshiped together. At least every Sunday, you had some folks who were saying, “Well in *my* house we don’t practice idolatry!” and munching on some olives and mushrooms while, at the other end of the table, someone was shoving a juicy hunk of lamb in their mouth and saying, “Well in *our* home, we’re not afraid of imaginary gods!”

Not great, right? What do you do? Let’s hear what advice Paul gives them:

Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don’t argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it’s all right to eat anything. But another

believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall. And with the Lord's help, they will stand and receive his approval. -- Romans 14:1–4 (NLT)

Don't you love that Paul doesn't explicitly identify who's 'weak' here? He just says, "Hey, don't worry about them. Everyone is doing their best, following what God has told them is right."

He goes on for a while more about this, before landing at what I think is the really fascinating statement:

Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. Then you will not be criticized for doing something you believe is good. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. -- Romans 14:14–19 (NLT)

The Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and *peace* and *joy*. (That word 'goodness' is really better translated 'justice', but that's a whole different sermon.)

The point of the peace meal isn't to fill your tummy. The point of the peace meal is to celebrate God's chara and God's shalom.

Communion + Examen

Communion is a peace meal Jesus shares with us!

When in the last week have I experienced peace and joy?

What in the last week have been barriers to peace and joy in my life?

What might be a barrier to peace and joy this week?

How can I be intentional about receiving peace and joy with God this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Low & Slow