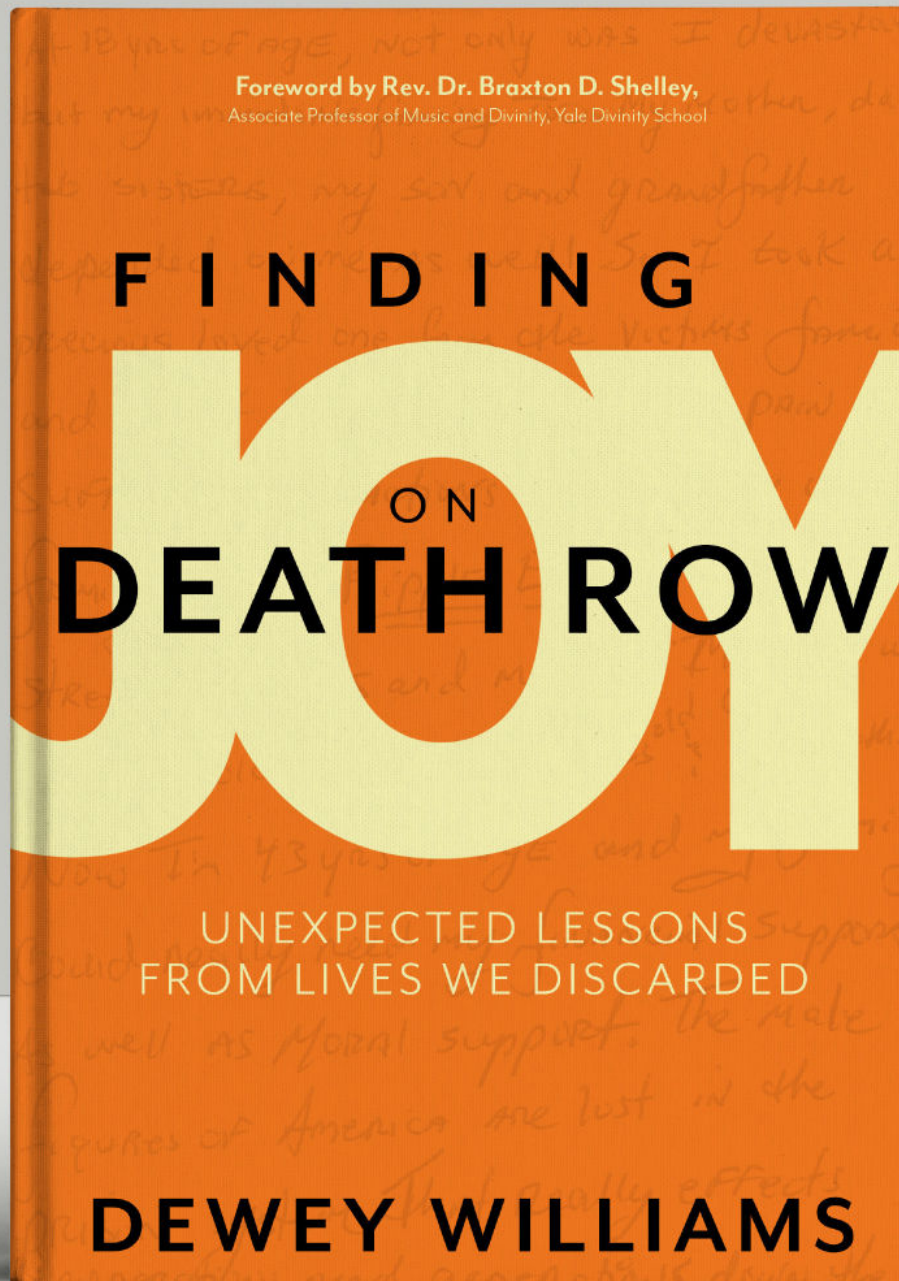


FINDING JOY ON DEATH ROW

BY DEWEY WILLIAMS



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SUMMARY

Finding Joy on Death Row is the powerful story of a broken preacher's transformative experience learning about joy from death row prisoners, combined with profound handwritten responses from more than twenty men currently sentenced to die.

As Pastor Dewey Williams serves and shepherds death row prisoners, their stories are unveiled, reminding him of his broken past. The testimonies and contemplations of those sentenced to death continue to bring Pastor Williams to his own place of healing, leading to a new understanding of joy in his life.

This important work reveals the power joy has to reach us all, the free and imprisoned alike. Unprecedented and revealing, Finding Joy on Death Row provides a window into the tragedies, hardships, and victories of those sentenced to die, ultimately encouraging us that we are loved, forgiven, and capable of change.



DEWEY WILLIAMS is pastor of Mt. Bright Missionary Baptist Church outside of Durham, North Carolina, a doctoral student at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, and a graduate of Duke Divinity School. In 2017, Williams's sermon series Joy on Death Row won the top award at Yale Divinity School's Theology of Joy and the Good Life competition. Finding Joy on Death Row is Williams's first book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Q1. Before the book begins, Dewey includes an epigraph: Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. Habakkuk 3:17–18. After having read the book, how does this epigraph connect to the stories you've read, and the individuals you have read about?

Q2. In his introduction, Dewey speculates: Perhaps everyone, everywhere, no matter whether their prison was real or imagined, could find joy. -p.7. Do you agree or disagree with this claim? Why or why not?

Q3. Throughout the book Dewey and the inmates contemplate and grapple with the idea of joy—fleeting or constant, solitary or communal. What aspects of “joy” spoke most to you? Is there an area of your life in which you’ve been unable to find joy? Discuss this.

Q4. Dewey includes hand-written letters from the inmates he talked to. Why do you think he chose to include photos of hand-written letters, rather than type the contents of the letters out? In what ways did the handwriting of the inmates stand out to you?

Q5. Dewey finds his own joy as he ministers to the incarcerated. In what ways did Dewey’s story compare with those of the inmates?

Q6. Was there a particular inmate whose writing especially spoke to you? Did you highlight or underline any of their responses? Discuss.

Q7. The title, *Finding Joy on Death Row*, presents the reader with an immediate question: is it possible for an incarcerated person to find true joy on death row? Did any of the inmates’ responses to this question surprise you?

Q8. Was there any moment in the book where you were shocked to find that joy was possible?

Q9. At the beginning of chapter 3, Dewey writes: I concluded that the death penalty was a fallacious practice that did not serve the community, the victims, or those sentenced with good outcomes. -p.52. After reading, how do you feel about the death penalty? Were your views impacted by the stories of the incarcerated?

Q10. The first time I’d asked them to write in a larger group setting, it was a disaster. -p. 52. Despite his early setbacks, Dewey took a leap of faith in pursuing the testimonies of those in prison. In what ways—big or small—can you mirror Dewey’s bravery in your own life?