

Joy

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Romans 8¹⁻¹¹ / Matthew 13⁴⁴⁻⁵⁰ / Isaiah 53¹⁻³

As a third-century man was anticipating death, he penned these last words to a friend: "It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians—and I am now one of them." Can you imagine that? A man condemned to die, facing perhaps his last day on earth because of his beliefs. And why does he give his life so freely. Why is prepared to die? For the sake of a joy that is "a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life." What a joy that must be! What a treasure for men and women to be prepared to die for it. We speak today of this joy. We dwell on it at this time of year and for good reason.

The Kingdom of heaven and joy are intimately connected in the NT.

⁴⁴"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. (Matt 13)

¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, (Romans 14)

God clearly intends His people to be joy-filled.

¹³"I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. (John 17)

Indeed joy is a fruit of the Spirit – it is something we develop as we grow our relationship with God's Holy Spirit.

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5)

But the reality of our lives is something different. We are, increasingly, a people of despair. When I say 'we' I mean our society, our culture. Despite being probably the richest overall culture and people in all of history, despite having lifestyles only the super-rich in times past could have dreamed of and despite being amongst the healthiest people who ever lived – we who live now in the West are turning to antidepressants at an ever increasing rate.

Health Ministry figures show antidepressant use has nearly doubled in the past decade, with almost two million prescriptions written for the drugs each year. And not only has it doubled but we are now looking at giving antidepressants to children. The Mental Health Foundation is concerned about the use of antidepressants to treat preschoolers, following recent media reports that say very young children can experience major depression. Records of the national drug buying agency Pharmac suggest thousands of prescriptions a year are being written for children under 10. Causing most alarm are the figures for babies, even though these dropped sharply during the last three years.

Now is antidepressant use wrong? Absolutely not. I know that many people use antidepressants because it makes their life liveable and it allows them to function in a way that helps both them and their families to live in a Christlike fashion. So let me state categorically that antidepressants are not evil or wrong in and of themselves. But this whole phenomenon exposes something of the emotional turmoil that exists in the lives of many many people in our culture and it challenges the myth that we in the West are happy with our lot. This lifestyle we've built for ourselves, this wealth we've gathered, this beauty we adore and these icons of success we worship – none of these have made us a happier people. We still struggle with underlying feelings of sadness and despair. We still struggle to feel worthy and valued. **We still struggle to know joy...**

So when Paul says to us something like ²²**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness...**' what are we to make of ourselves? Are we failures as Christians? Have we missed the boat somewhere? Are we failures as people? What are we to think when despite our faith we find ourselves sinking into another black hole against which we seem to have no ability to fight or to resist and we wake up morning after morning with this dark weight on our consciousness which we simply can't budge?

There is another strand in the Word to which we should turn at this point. It is a strand which concerns itself with what Jesus went through when He lived on earth. It is the absolutely core Christian understanding of who Jesus was and which makes our faith not only unique but convincingly real in every aspect. You see Jesus was human. He was entirely human. He wasn't a human who could call on supernatural powers to life Him out of trouble when it came His way. He was really and truly limited as we are limited by His humanity. And despite obvious temptation to make of Him an untouchable god-like figure and despite the various heresies which arose in the early years of the Church which did exactly this – what we have in the Bible is a very faithful rendition of this humanity. It is a rendition which continues to offend other religions especially Islam which while recognising Jesus as a prophet cannot have Him dying on a Cross whilst still being intimately related to God. It bemuses Buddhism because it emphasises the one thing Buddhism tries to de-emphasise – namely, that our humanity is good and has eternal value in and of itself. And it challenges Hinduism because it claims that in this One very human person we have the unique and only revelation of God.

This strand emphasises, surprisingly, that Jesus Himself knew deep and abiding depression...

³⁸**Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." (Matt 26)**

'Overwhelmed with sorrow...' This particular verse exposes what Jesus was going through prior to the Cross but we should note that He hints at this throughout His ministry. He describes His work as being like the taking up of a Cross. He further describes it as being like having nowhere to rest – no place to call home. He pronounced judgement on those who had nothing but laughter in their life...

Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. (Luke 6v21)

for they would know clearly what He knew now – mourning and weeping. And He pronounced blessing on those who followed Him along a path of sadness for though they knew depression now they would come to know joy.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. (Luke 6v24)

Jesus was, as the great passage from Isaiah describes Him,

a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; (Isaiah 53v3)

We are not dealing with a superman who knew nothing of the deep anguish of we who live with depression and sadness but with someone who was intimately acquainted with both and who connected these to the titanic struggle we all have with sin and its effects. Jesus knew depression. He knew the deepest sadness in his life. He knew what it was to live with both loss and failure. But He also knew something else...

He knew that this was not the way God has intended for human life to be lived. He knew that in God's kingdom **joy** was the order of the day and fulfilment and happiness was what we would and should know.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb 12)

Jesus looked forward to the joy He would know in the kingdom of God – joy that He did taste even while on earth – joy that humankind was made for. And this, I think, is why lack of joy is so devastating to us. Something deep within is aware that we should be joyful; we were made for joy, joy is our true dominion. And when we recognise a lack of joy we not only feel this lack but we grieve for our true life, the life we were meant to live before sin. But does this mean shouldn't expect joy this side of death?

Of course not. Jesus experienced and love joy perhaps more than anyone else. While John was complained about because of his apparent severity, the complaint about Jesus was that He partied too much. And there is much else in the Gospels to indicate that He did experience joy on many occasions. But the joy of Jesus wasn't just any joy. Not all joy is good... We must realise that just as anger can be misplaced so can joy. When we take joy in another persons sorrow we can be sure that this is not joy that the Father likes. When we rejoice in the suffering of another

or even at the expense of another we must realise that this is not kingdom joy. The joy of Jesus is quite something else for He says...

⁹“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. (John 15)

This joy has a specific subject and focus. It is joy that has been trained as it were to respond to someone and something. You see one of the perverse things about human emotion is that it can be trained to arise in response to almost anything. Thus some people get joy out of pain. Others take great joy in the suffering of people. Some find joy in starvation and others find it in destruction. The human spirit is pliable and teachable and it can be taught to respond in wrong ways to the wrong things. Joy has an ethical element. There are some things we should not take joy in and children need to be taught this.

What is, then, the joy Jesus speaks of? What is ‘His joy?’ We have it here. His joy was to remain in the Father’s love; to remain in the place in which He could draw from God’s love. Jesus literally sucked love from God by virtue of His obedience. And as He did so he found completion, He found peace. The life He lived He lived for joy. Each step of obedience drew the Father’s love and we too will find God’s joy seeping into our lives as we live ‘according to the Spirit.’ This is true joy, eternal joy – to live according to the Spirit of God. It will not come naturally to do this. We need help. We need to let Jesus in to our lives; we need the fellowship and wisdom of the body of Christ and we will need to be prepared to be led – to do and to commit to things we wouldn’t have done normally.

Perhaps the thing that I have come to find some of the greatest joy in my life has been working with children. And yet if you’d asked me in my younger days whether I enjoyed children or not I would have said no. Children were, largely a nuisance as far as I could tell. But when I gave my life over to God as a young adult one of the first things God led me into was working over the summer holidays in SU Children’s Holiday Programmes. And as soon as I started doing this I suddenly realised what joy this gave me. I would never have known this joy had I not allowed Christ into my life.

As we obey the call of God in our lives we begin to sense, to feel, to experience the **joy of God**. It is an almost inexpressible thing. A thing that brings peace, that brings a sort of confidence or, as the Bible calls it, **assurance**. **This, my friends, is true joy – to know the Father’s love and to know that He will be faithful to us despite what we are going through today. This is what Jesus called ‘The Father’s joy’ and it is this which the Bible calls ‘our strength.’**

What is God calling you too today? Are you perhaps still at the point of opening your life truly to Jesus. If so, don’t be afraid. God is calling you to a life of joy – joy that you can’t even imagine at this stage. Perhaps you are already a Christian. What is God calling you to do? Perhaps it’s something quite outside your comfort level and something you hardly dare contemplate. Again I would say to you this morning, give it a go – joy awaits the obedient...