

Reading: Romans 5:1-11

Theme: Joy 1.

Looking at John 16:20ff we have come across references to the joy Jesus promised - to His apostles first of all, but also to all believers. Christianity of all religions, is to be characterised by joy - a joy that will be in place in the triumphs and the trials of life; a joy no one can take from a child of God. We use the word 'joy' often, but what is it, what does it mean and involve? Do we understand and have the joy the Lord Jesus promised His people? These are important questions for us as individuals and as a church. To be joyless as individuals and as a church can bring dishonour upon the Lord Jesus. We are meant to enjoy our salvation, our new life, our God and not just endure it! We would think a newly married couple strange if there was not a mutual delight and joy in each other's presence and company.

There are many references in OT and NT to joy, being joyful, rejoicing, taking or having pleasure in, delighting in God and the things of God. There are a great variety of words used in the Hebrew and Greek that relate to joy, but before we mentioned some of them, let's try and define joy as it is used in common English usage. My dictionary says joy is "*gladness, pleasure*". We could add the words *happy, delight*. Joy is all these things - something or someone we find makes us glad, gives us pleasure, causes us happiness, is a delight to us. What causes joy varies from person-to-person. For some it is caused by a steam train, others their favourite team winning, not relegated or getting promoted; others it's good business results, getting good news from an old friend, a complex puzzle solved, a good book read; so we could go on.

In NT three main Greek words are used for joy. In John 16 the word (χαρά) means “joy, delight” is used most in NT. Another word (αγαλλιασις) means exultation, exuberant joy e.g. Luke 1:44 - unborn baby John leaping for joy in Elizabeth’s womb, or Jude 24 we read that God/Jesus is able to present us before His presence with **exceeding joy!** The third word (ευφοροσυνη) is the word from which we get our English word euphoric - means mirth, good cheer, joy, gladness of heart e.g. Acts 2:28. The OT has a vast range of words meaning joy, rejoicing, joyful singing, joyful shouting, gladness, mirth, joyful proclamation, to burst forth into or with joy.

It would seem joy is something dynamic, pleasurable, affects us, is desirable for our good and benefit. It sounds fantastic and something that good must be sinful! Yet we are to have this joy the Lord Jesus bequeaths, gives to all believers. It is ours to know, to experience with pleasure, even to be ravished by, to be strengthened by and be motivated by it.

Perhaps it sounds too much like emotionalism, as we in our Christian tradition and upbringing may feel it’s not for us. Yet we can be in danger of neglecting real spiritual experiential aspects of our faith. The Lord has promised us joy, but we may feel it is a deep joy - so deep it never surfaces or shows in our lives, because it is buried deep out of sight! We may be afraid of being thought less of, or doubts cast upon our orthodoxy, or it may be a reaction against some excesses in parts of the Christian scene. Perhaps our background, our personalities may not be helpful in expressions of this joy.

As I had time to consider this topic, I saw 4 areas emerging which I felt would be worth covering, but there is too much

material for one week so we'll look at the topic of joy over the next few weeks and our main heading today is:

1. False ideas of this joy.

This joy is marvellous, wonderful - as one old Scot is reputed to have said "*It is better felt than telt!*" Last time I said that joy is not the gospel message, but it is carried along within the gospel message. Yet because it is so good, wonderful and amazing, it carries with it many dangers and distractions.

Sadly people, even Christians, can become preoccupied with this experience, feeling, emotion of joy and they seek this alone - "the joy of the Lord" - meaning wonderful, ravishing, mystical experiences, ecstatic, euphoric emotions. They may have an experience of such feelings and emotions, but it does not necessarily mean it is the joy of the Lord. The joy of the Lord is **part of the fruit of the Spirit** and not some experience to be plugged into. Such experiences can be counterfeits of true Christian joy - so close, but not the real thing. Joy is not to be sought in isolation for its own sake, but is part of a growth in knowledge and grace as an outworking of the fruit of the Spirit.

Nowhere are we told to seek joy for its own sake. The joy the Lord promises is not some sort of mystical, higher life experience; some subjective thing that sweeps over us, but unrelated to the truth or the tests of God's word. Many religions provide ecstatic experiences for their followers. Christian joy is not a subjective emotion or experience alone. It is an emotion, but more than that, for it has a solid foundation and basis.

The extent of this Christian joy is not limited by our circumstances - what we have, enjoy etc. - so health, wealth and

prosperity do not necessarily add to this joy, nor take away from it. Christian joy is not even tied to how we view ourselves, our worth, or how much we are appreciated. We do not base our joy on our outward circumstances etc. - in NT we see the apostles suffering and yet having joy; being scourged, imprisoned and yet this joy was in place; even when they were mocked, ignored they had this joy. This joy goes beyond our ideas of joy and contentment – e.g. Hebrews 10:34.

This joy is not some one-off instant experience as some would teach. They have a formula - this, then this and the results are immediate. This joy is an increasing, growing and developing joy. Yes, there's a great joy when we come to faith, for we know our sins are forgiven and we feel that wonder, but this joy has to be worked out, pursued, chased after in a correct way.

This joy is not worked up, but worked at and worked out! Some try to work it up – the right atmosphere, music, rhythms, get people in the mood, get them euphoric and full of emotion. This joy is present when in pain, wounded, bleeding after a beating, feet stuck in stocks in a high security dungeon, when hungry, thirsty and tired, yet this joy enables singing at midnight! Is a 'nightingale' joy - singing best in dark nights, not only in sunny times!

This joy is not to be compared to anything society can give. Realise the world gives us many joys. It was designed and created to do so by God, who made men and women in His own image and we are still to appreciate, delight and joy in the world around us. All things have been given us to richly to enjoy and there are many legitimate joys in life. Sadly, there are many ugly

sordid “joys” so called. Yet all the joys of life are temporary, are subject to the law of diminishing returns.

Sin has many joys and pleasures - for if it did not, it would not be so attractive! Yet sin and its joys always promise more than they can give. The pleasures, joys of sin are but fleeting joys. Solid joys and lasting treasures none but Zion’s children know. So, let’s just pause to consider under this heading **The contrast between worldly joy and spiritual Christian joy:**

We own there are many rights joys and pleasures for us, but we need to be careful our hearts do not become snared, trapped by them. They may be allowable, but may not always be beneficial to us. As we consider this contrast, please realise **I am not** putting down legitimate joys and pleasures - as that would be most sad. I enjoy life and realise God has built within us the capacity to greatly, rightly enjoy so many things. Yet we need to realise the **primary importance** of spiritual joys compared to earthly joys.

A. Christian joy make us better, but worldly joy may make us worse!

Often, we can become so comfortable in this life and we are distracted from our joy and comfort in Christ - focusing only on joys of this life. Without realising it, we focus on this life and world as our chief source of joy and pleasure. If the joy of the Lord is our strength, then the joy of the world will surely weaken us - unless we are very careful as we prayerfully use the world’s joy to praise God. The world’s joys may have a tendency to make us more worldly, earthbound; but the joy of the Lord causes to be more spiritual.

B. Spiritual joy tends to be heart joy.

In John 16:22 Jesus speaks of seeing His disciples and they will rejoice. KJV says “your *heart* shall rejoice”; ESV, RSV says “your *hearts* will rejoice”. True Christian joy lies within us, the joys of the world lie outside of us. How many have been seemingly so happy on the outside and yet have been empty and miserable within and may have ended up taking their lives even with fame, fortune and fabulous lifestyles. In the cellar of the church in Barton is a well. It was out of sight, but if we wanted to, we could have gone and drawn water from it! Believers draw joy as refreshing and constant water from the unseen wells of salvation (Isaiah 12:3) which has been put in place by the Lord in the lives of every believer, so believers are able to draw from such the streams of living water which Jesus speaks of in John 7:38-39.

C. Spiritual joy is sweeter than other joy.

There is nothing on earth to compare with the joy of personally knowing “*Now I belong to Jesus, Jesus belongs to me, not for the years of time alone, but for eternity*” - we are His and He is ours. There’s a joy with a newly married couple that is never again the same. They may love each other more intensely, more deeply, more sensibly, but the sweetness of our first love cannot be compared to anything else and it is joyful. Yet for believers that joyful love can be ever delighted in. As we look on His wonderful face, the things of earth will grow strangely dim and will lose all their attractions.

D. Spiritual joy is pure.

Sadly, the joys of the world can deceive us and take us into wrong things. We can delight in Creation and its pleasures more than the Creator and be guilty of idolatry. We are commanded to delight ourselves in the Lord (Psalm 37:4) and doing this will

cause us to hold the world's joys loosely and use them in a right way as they further our delight, joy and pleasure in the Lord.

E. Spiritual joy is most satisfying, stronger and lasting joy.

Jesus speaks in John 16:24 of prayer - praying correctly and our joy being complete. We are most satisfied when we pursue our joy in the Lord, when we are taken up with Him, accept His providences for us and seek His glory. John Piper wrote "*God is much glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him*". Richard Baxter wrote "*may God make our carnal minds so spiritual that loving Him and delighting in Him may be the work of our lives.*"

The joy of the Christian keeps on when worldly joys are no longer in place. Many believers have had greater joys on their death beds, at their dying experience than ever before - but such joys are not guaranteed! The joy of the Lord was in them before they entered into the joy of their Lord! We know full well that many earthly pleasures fade and diminish over the years. Historians tell us that King Xerxes (Ahasuerus) offered a reward for a new pleasure! I think people are trying to do that today - have new experiences for new highs, pleasures and yet they are ever trying to go on getting more. It is like a thirsty man drinking saltwater from a cup with a hole in it! God says something like this in Jeremiah 2:13 - His people had forsaken Him the source of living water and dug leaking cisterns, wells for themselves!

F. Spiritual joy is eternal joy.

The Greeks and Romans would strive for mastery at their games, with a laurel wreath for the victor. What joy they would know, but the wreath would soon die and wither. All the joys of earth will fade, will lose their charm, but the joy of the Lord in

us is to keep on growing and developing. Yes, one day this world's pleasures and joys will end for us, but then we shall enter into the joy of our Lord - fullness of joy at His right-hand and pleasures for evermore. Heaven is described as a place of unending joy and delight. Yet the amazing thing is that we are able to be partakers of the joy of the Lord in this life i.e. now. Our Lord wants us to know and have such joy.

I've mainly focused on the negative, the false, what joy is not, but next time we will look at what it is, where it comes from, the ways in which it can be known, the Bible speaks of a growing joy, a growing realisation of this joy.

Here is this promise of joy - it can be known and experienced by each and every believer. It is joy in the Lord, joy from the Lord. It is the joy of enjoying and delighting in God. It is a joy that is linked to glorifying God in our day by day lives - holiness and joy are closely linked. The chief end of man is to glorify God **AND** to enjoy Him forever. That glorifying and enjoying are to be seen as closely, intimately linked, for this joy is a holy joy.

My prayer for us all is that God may help us to know, glorify Him and enjoy, delight in Him and this joy may be shown to us all as we have great joy and peace in believing.