

“WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO ALL YOUR JOY?”

Galatians 4:1-20

Firstly, a word of apology and explanation. The keener-eyed and more attentive of you may have noticed that we are this morning looking at the fourth of these studies in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. And one or two of you may have realised that we haven’t yet had No. 3 in the series. I could have let it go unremarked and assumed (probably correctly) that no-one else would have noticed – or would, at least, have thought it was their mistake, not mine. But when Liz planned out this series, she had intended No. 3 to precede No. 4 and had worked out who would preach what and when. Unfortunately, we moved things forward last month to accommodate something else and changed the dates – and I looked at the wrong bit of paper when I was preparing for this. So, as usual, it’s all my fault. Liz has forgiven me fully and freely for messing up her meticulously planned series – I hope you will do the same.

Having got that out of the way, let’s have a look at this fourth chapter of the letter. If you were to talk to most people who are not Christians (and probably many who are, as well), you would probably find that Christians (that’s you and I, folks) are not normally known for their joy. For many people, the religious life seems a very boring and unhappy life to lead – at least, according to its critics. And whatever you think may or may not be the truth, the simple fact is that they must have got that idea from somewhere.

In a passage in the gospels which has many similarities with this passage here, Jesus says to his followers, *“I have told you this [all about God’s love] so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete”* (John 15:11). He clearly saw an important part of his mission to help his followers be joyful. But it hasn’t always seemed an attractive life to lead. Billy Joel sang, *“I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints”* (in “Only the good die young” on *The Stranger*). The loony German philosopher of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche, wrote, *“If they want me to believe in their Redeemer, they had better look a bit more redeemed”* (in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*). And American journalist H L Mencken defined Puritanism, one of the most fervent forms of Christianity, as *“The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, might be happy”* (in *Chrestomathie*).

And here in this passage which we’ve read this morning, Paul asks one of the saddest questions in the New Testament of his once enthusiastic and committed converts. In 4:15 he writes to them, *“What has happened to all your joy?”* These people who had responded so eagerly to the proclamation of the Gospel, who had found their lives transformed by the amazing grace of God, are now so joyless that Paul has to ask this question. And we could well ask that question today as well. Why are so many Christians – who should be the most joyful and care-free people on the face of the earth – why are they such grumpy old people? Why are they seen as killjoys and spoilsports? Why are they characterised as having long faces and moaning attitudes?

Well, many of them – of you, of us – are like that anyway. It’s just your personality. There are plenty of moaners in the community at large – you have only to read the letters columns in the local newspapers. But people who have encountered Jesus Christ, who have had their lives transformed by the power of Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit, should surely have left all that behind. As we’ve already said, Jesus came to bring joy to the joyless and to give us a zest for life that contrasts markedly with those who have not encountered him. But there are still many of us, I’m sure, who say with the hymn writer, *“Where is that blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord”*.

Paul has seen how joyful the Galatian Christians have been. He has experienced first hand the freedom with which they shared that joy – and, indeed, all their resources – but now they are very little different from how they were before the gospel came to them. They’re slipping back into the old ways, trusting the old rules and rituals to give meaning to their lives – which is whole point of this letter. But how is that joy being extinguished? What is stifling it all?

A. HOW IS JOY STIFLED?

1. Slavery to the basic principles of this world. (vv3,9)

When Jesus died on the cross at Golgotha, one of the things he achieved was to enable human beings to have a choice. Finally, we could choose to do good, to avoid sin. Until then there was no choice, really. People tried to live good lives, but the power of evil was too strong. In the cosmic battle which he fought on the cross, Jesus broke once and for all the power which enslaves us and drives us to act selfishly and rebelliously. It meant that men and women could be free of the guilt that so often drags us down and stifles our joy. The singer Madonna wrote about her Catholic upbringing in these words:

“Sometimes I’m racked with guilt when I needn’t be and that, to me, is left over from my Catholic upbringing. Because in Catholicism you are a born sinner and you are a sinner all your life. No matter how you try to get away with it, the sin is with you all the time.”

“Ah,” you say, “but we’re not Catholics.” No – but we behave very much like that, don’t we? We return to what Paul contemptuously calls here, “*those weak and miserable principles.*” He clearly has no time for it all. Yes, we are sinners – but we’re sinners saved by grace: and often we don’t get past the first clause and try to find our own way out. That leads us to the second thing which stifles joy.

2. The Law and legalism. (vv5,10)

Part of these “*weak and miserable principles*” is the idea that we can somehow get out of it all under our own steam. We can assuage our guilt by **doing** the “right” things. The Law was provided to give people a yardstick, a set of standards by which to live. It was something to aspire to and to hold as a goal for men and women who wanted to live good, godly lives. But it didn’t deal with this idea of slavery to the old, sinful nature. Basically, men and women couldn’t live up to it. So once again there was this problem of feeling guilty all the time – and joy went out of the window.

The holier people tried to overcome this by following all kinds of rituals of cleansing and sacrifice so that they could get themselves back into God’s good books. Tithe this, sacrifice that, pray at these times, say these words (all in the right order and at the right time). But there were two problems with this. Firstly, no-one could get themselves back into God’s good books (as we shall shortly see). And secondly, if you’re doing all that stuff all the time, there’s no opportunity to enjoy life. You’re always worrying that you’ve missed something out or that you’ve put your foot in it all over again. And many Christians today are just like that. (There’s a passage in Brennan Manning’s excellent book *The Ragamuffin Gospel* which describes that feeling of never being quite sure if you’ve got it right, if you’ve done all the things you need to do to be forgiven properly.) They have their rituals and rulebooks and only those who live by such things (or, as Paul would say, who are “*enslaved*” by such things) can possibly hope to please God.

In fact, there were (and are) people who preach that kind of stuff all the time. They have an overwhelming enthusiasm, not for life in all its fullness but for rituals and rulebooks. And they can usually keep to the rules (after all, they made them up, by and large), so not only do they make people feel guilty to start off with, but those same people then feel extra guilty because they can’t keep up with the “zealots” as Paul calls them in 4:17,18.

3. Not knowing God properly (vv8,9)

But here’s the root of it all, really. In v9 Paul writes about “*knowing God – or rather being known by God*”. It’s all about relationship with God – and the Galatian Christians had got that relationship all wrong, as have so many of us today. They knew about God – or so they thought – and they knew about him as a slave driver. That was the reputation they had given him because they assumed the rules that they were struggling to keep had been made up by him. I wonder how often you’ve heard about someone and have dreaded meeting him or her because of what you’ve heard about them, because of the reputation

they seem to have. And then when the time finally comes to meet them, you find that they are completely different and far more friendly and approachable than you ever expected them to be.

Through Jesus and his Holy Spirit, these Galatian Christians had encountered God and had discovered in him a kindly Father who looked upon them as his much-loved children. He didn't want to treat them as slaves who constantly needed to be **doing** the "right" things in order to get into his good books: they were there in his good books already, where he had put them, and he wanted them to know that. And once we start to look upon God as a slave master who is constantly chiding us for getting things wrong, we lose sight of the loving aspect of his being which welcomes us into his open arms as a father who loves and is proud of his children.

So, slipping back into the old ways of thinking, trying to work our way into God's favour and looking upon God as an unforgiving slave driver all help to stifle joy. And those who call themselves Christians but who are still plagued with guilt because they can't live up to God's standards under their own steam are devoid of joy and struggle constantly to get the most out of life. In his book *The 77 Habits of Highly Ineffective Christians*, Chris Fabry puts this at No. 40: "Shun joy".

"Every day you choose a way to look at life. Nothing robs you of your ineffectiveness like joy. You must shun it.

"Shun joy in the morning when you wake up and notice you have another chance at life. Shun joy when you see the sun rise in splendour. Do not let this sight make you think of the pure light of heaven that is Christ

"Shun joy as you go about your work. Do not revel in the gifts and talents given you or thank God you can use them to help others.

"Shun joy in music. If a particular style makes you light-hearted and desirous of skipping or dancing about in the kitchen, tell yourself that this is sinful and should not be done by sober-minded people.

"Stop smiling, for this is an expression of joy. Squelch any feeling deep within that wants to spring forth in thanksgiving and praise. When you have accomplished the above in your own life, you must spread the feeling to others, which will happen naturally if you follow these directives.

"Action point: Eat a pickled gherkin and a freshly cut lemon. Immediately look in the mirror. This is how you should appear at all times."

Fair enough, but that's all a bit negative – and not terribly joyful. Paul asks what has happened to all their joy, and suggests to them some of the reasons why it is not as it should be. But what are the positives here? What **should** we be doing as Christians to enable that joy to be present? How can we experience joy in our own lives and communicate something of that to the people we meet every day – and help to dispel the myth that Christians are joyless old wossnames who want to stop others enjoying themselves too?

B. HOW IS JOY TO BE ENCOURAGED?

1. Redemption (vv4,5)

The first thing to remember is that this is all God's work. He has redeemed us through Jesus. He has shown us his saving grace. The word "grace" doesn't actually appear in this chapter, but the whole of what Paul writes here is suffused with the idea of grace. As we've seen, we were all enslaved by the basic principles of this world: there was no choice open to us but to sin and then to try and work our way back into God's good books – which was always going to end in failure and guilt.

But here we have the idea of slaves being bought out of slavery, a price being paid so that we are no longer slaves but free people. And on top of that, we have been adopted by God as his children, people who are able as his heirs to enjoy everything that is his. The slave could do none of that himself – it had to be done by someone else. We can do none of that ourselves – it has to be done by God, and he has done it through the death of Jesus Christ. Let me just say that again: we can do **none** of that ourselves – it has to be done by God. Part of the reason for our loss of joy is our ability to forget God’s grace. Listen to these words from Frederick Buechner’s book, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*. In the entry under “Grace” he writes this.

“Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There’s no way to earn or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth

*“A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There’s nothing **you** have to do. There’s nothing you **have** to do. There’s nothing you have to **do**.*

*“The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you **are** because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It’s for you I created the universe. I love you.*

“There’s only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can only be yours if you’ll reach out and take it. maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.”

2. The rights of sons (vv5,6)

As part of this process, as we’ve said, we become heirs (v5). It’s God’s sovereign grace that enables that to happen – nothing that you or I can do. Children don’t do anything to become children – they are! God’s children don’t do anything to become God’s children – they are! Because he loves us so much he makes it possible for us to become his children. We can do nothing about that, other than enjoy it or reject it. And those who live their Christian lives without any joy are the ones who reject it, who believe they still have to do things to earn the right to be called sons and daughters of God.

All God has is at our disposal as his heirs. And we have such an amazing relationship with him that we can call him “*Abba*”. That word, as you will have heard many times, is a word of intimacy: it’s an Aramaic word, the closest equivalent to which in English is our word “Dad”. God is not a slave driver, not an ogre or a tyrant. He loves you! He loves you! You can sink into his arms, which are always held out for you. He wraps his love around you. He will provide for your every need. He will protect you from the slide back into the old ways, the return to the “*weak and miserable principles*” of which we have already spoken. He loves you – and it doesn’t depend on you. Doesn’t that fill you with joy?

3. Receiving the Holy Spirit (v6)

And just so that you know God is serious about all this, he gives you the gift of his Holy Spirit. His own Spirit comes and fills you. It’s a way of ensuring that you bear the family likeness. The Holy Spirit of God motivates us, he fizzes away within us so that we end up overflowing with joy. He grants us a deep down assurance of God’s love. So when there are times when things just don’t seem to be going right, when we begin to doubt if God is really there, somehow the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s promises and reassures us of his love.

It’s not about jumping up and down with a big grin on our faces, but about that peace and serenity, that being at one with God and the world that shows that we really do have the joy of God within us. When things don’t go right, we don’t beat ourselves over the head with the idea that it’s our fault, but we

recognise that we are held secure in his wonderful arms. As Oswald Chambers wrote, *“The joy that Jesus gives is the result of our disposition being at one with his own disposition.”* And another writer, Leon Bloy, wrote, *“Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”* If we have the presence of God through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit, then it should issue forth in real joy.

4. Recognised by God (v9)

If one of the things that stifles joy is not knowing God properly, one of the things that encourages us to be joyful is the knowledge of God – and, as Paul emphasises to the Galatian Christians, the knowledge that God knows you. Just pause for a moment and reflect on that: God, the Creator of it all – the architect and constructor of this vast, beautiful, terrible universe, the weaver of the spider’s web and the crafter of the alpine valleys, the painter of the sunrise and the composer of the nightingale’s song – that God knows you, that God loves you. And he wants the very best for you. (...) Isn’t that a wonderful thought?

You can do nothing about it: it’s all his doing. And he is perfectly reliable. He has his desires for you – that you should enjoy freedom not be weighed down by guilt; that you should know joy, not fear or anxiety. You need not worry if you have done enough to be right with God, because he has done enough for you to be right with him. Go on – allow a smile to creep across your face! Acknowledge that. Receive that. Live in that. God sent his Son (v4) so that you can know real joy. Don’t let it get pushed out by guilt and fear.

“What has happened to all your joy?” asked Paul. Is your reply, *“It’s all come flooding back!”* ?

(Housegroup discussion notes follow on next page)

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Questions for discussion

1. What do you think makes a person seem joyful? How can you see evidence of it in their life?
2. Why do you think so many people – especially Christians – have such a problem with guilt?
3. What do you understand by "knowing God"?
4. How can we really experience God's grace? What do we need to do to receive it?
5. Does an emphasis on grace mean we can then do as we like? Why/why not?
6. What prevents you being joyful? What can you do about it?