

**“THE FRUITFUL LIFE”**

**3. Joy**

***John 16:17-26***

Some of you, when you saw that the title of this morning’s sermon was “Joy”, may well have thought – as I probably would have done – “Oh no. Here we go again. Another lecture on how we’re not looking happy enough when we sing”, or “We’re getting ready for a lot more of those up-tempo, happy-clappy songs.” Maybe you’ve come along here this morning feeling a bit under pressure, unwell or struggling with life, and now you’ve got to sit and listen to this – the next in our series on “*the fruit of the Spirit*”.

There are nine qualities listed under this heading of “*the fruit of the Spirit*” by Paul in his Letter to the Galatian Christians. They are the characteristics of life in the Kingdom of God, qualities that should characterise the lifestyle of all those who walk with Jesus Christ in the way of the Holy Spirit. If you’ve been here the last couple of weeks, you may recall we’ve noted that these nine qualities come as a package. This is not a checklist that you need to score a few of, nor is it a menu from which you can choose which ones you want to go for. You need to take the lot and display them all in your life if you’re serious about being a follower of Jesus Christ. Last week we looked at the first of them – **love**. We are called to demonstrate a love that is humble, encouraging, prayerful and sacrificial – and it is that kind of love that will identify us as disciples of Jesus.

So this morning we come on to the second of the qualities on the list – **joy**. Now, in case you’re worried, this isn’t simply happiness. The American novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner, in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, writes this:

*“Happiness turns up more or less where you’d expect it to – a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it.”*

That is, it turns up in some very unpredictable places, as we’ll see a bit later.

“Joy” here is the English translation of the Greek word “*chara*”. “*Chara*” is one of seven words usually translated “joy”, but is by far the most commonly used. It’s a word that was widely used in Ancient Greek to mean “rejoicing”. It comes up all over the place, but nowhere is it more frequently found (relatively speaking) than in the New Testament. There’s a great little book by William Morrice entitled *Joy In The New Testament* and in there he writes, “*The New Testament is the most joyful book in the world.*” That’s not because it makes you laugh a lot or is always bringing a smile to your face, but because, as he quotes from another author, “*Joy is more conspicuous in Christianity than in any other religion and in the Bible than any other literature.*”

Christian joy – this word “*chara*”, which comes from the same root word as “*charis*”, meaning “grace” – is solidly founded on the main doctrines of our faith: the character of God, the incarnation, salvation, resurrection and the work of the Holy Spirit. That’s what we are called to be joyful about. It is, like grace itself, undoubtedly a gift of God, a delight in life that is deeper than pain or pleasure. We might think of it as including a sense of contentment, of serenity, that helps us cope with every eventuality. As part of this “*fruit of the Spirit*” it is a quality of life, not a fleeting emotion. As the New Testament scholar Gordon Fee puts it:

*“For Paul, as for the rest of the New Testament in general, the presence or absence of joy is quiet unrelated to one’s circumstances ... It is related in its entirety to what God has done for us in Christ through the Spirit.”*

And good old Martin Luther in his commentary on *Galatians*, from which we quoted last week, says this:

*“God loveth not heaviness and doubtfulness of spirit: he hateth uncomfortable [discouraging] doctrine, heavy and sorrowful cogitations, and loveth cheerful hearts. For therefore hath he sent his Son, not to oppress us with heaviness and sorrow, but to cheer up our souls in him.”*

Fair enough. But as with so much stuff that we talk about to do with our faith, it’s easy to talk about it and to think about it in very abstract terms. But how do we actually connect with this amazing joy? We’re going to turn to John’s Gospel again, the Gospel in which “*perfect joy*” or “*fullness of joy*” is an important theme. It is, to use theological language, an eschatological term – it’s something that is very much part of our eternal destiny, but which we can start to enjoy now. And we’re going to turn to the same conversation as last week – the last, long conversation that Jesus had with his close friends, the disciples, before he went off to his death. Last week we saw him speaking about the “*full extent of his love*” and here he is talking about “*your joy (chara) being complete.*” In the words we have just heard read to us there are (as always!) three things to reflect on.

## **1. JOY IS COMING (v20)**

Jesus, having tried to prepare his closest friends for the trauma that they’re about to undergo as he is hauled off and executed, tells them that their “*grief will turn to joy*”. This joy will not replace their grief and sorrow, but will be there in it. It will give them a sense of the bigger picture. Don Carson, whom some of you will hear at Keswick later in the year, writes this:

*“The promise will not eliminate their grief and perhaps scarcely alleviate it; but it will stabilise the believers by providing a larger perspective.”*

It will allow them to put their “*light and momentary troubles*” into an eternal perspective, as Paul tells the Christian in Corinth (*2 Corinthians 4:17*).

You see, for the disciples, the looming cross will initially be a cause of sorrow, but soon it will become a source of joy. In *John 20:20* we read of the disciples being “*overjoyed*” at the sight of Jesus again. It means the renewal of our relationship with God, the beginning of the restoration of creation that ushers in the fulfilled Kingdom of God. It reminds us yet again that things do not have to be this way, there is an alternative. It brings what F F Bruce describes as “*the joy of uninterrupted fellowship with him henceforth through the Spirit.*”

Once again, this is one of the great paradoxes inherent in our faith – joy in the midst of sorrow, God’s promise of a better future with him, even in the muck and mess of this life. “*Joy,*” as C S Lewis puts it, “*is the serious business of heaven.*” But nevertheless it is a promise: we will experience joy – and the cross and resurrection were God’s means of sealing that promise.

## **2. JOY CANNOT BE TAKEN AWAY (v22)**

This joy is not dependent on circumstances or on emotions. It’s not like happiness or pleasure, there when your eyes first meet (as a couple, I mean – not when you go cross-eyed), when Can scores a belter of a goal out of nowhere, when the beer’s good or the gin’s flowing freely, when the waiter gets the decimal point in the wrong place on your bill (and then says he can’t change it because of the computerised till). Those kind of things can make you happy, but it won’t necessarily last. That’s not real joy.

We are talking about deep joy – awestruck joy – a gift from God on whom you can always depend. God wants you to delight in life. That’s why we were originally created – to share with our Creator the thrill of life and love and creativity and imagination and relationship. It’s sin that has distorted and perverted that, that has sucked the joy out of a life that is now spent trying to survive. Jesus came to put it right again, to enable us to renew our relationship with the Creator, to enjoy the life we were meant to have, to recover that original sense of joy in living as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Taking Jesus seriously, turning to him and committing to living with and for him means that God now sets that joy within your heart, fills you with an awareness of his presence and gives you sense of eternal security that is unassailable.

In Jesus, God has gone to a lot of trouble to put things right, to reset this amazing universe to its factory settings, to restore his creatures – you and me – to the place he wanted us to have within his creation. He is not then going to let it all go wrong again. He will sustain your joy. “*No-one will take away your joy.*”

Of course, you can let it go, if you want. You can reject it, refuse it, deny it and ignore it. God won't force it on you. But nor will he allow anyone or anything to take it away from those who want it.

### 3. YOUR JOY WILL BE COMPLETE (v24)

This is, if you like, the true goal of God's project of salvation. He doesn't do things by halves. Calvin talks about this as "*an abundance of blessings, calm contentment*". It's what God really wants for you, so it follows that we can depend on him to keep us joyful as long as we remain in that relationship. A joy that is complete means that there is no room for despondency or despair over our circumstances and situation. The first Christians seem to have cottoned on to this. Just two examples. Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Philippi. *The Letter to the Philippians* is full of joy. It's about as upbeat a letter as you'll find anywhere. Paul writes things such as:

*"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength."*

Easy for him to say that, we might think. What does he know of the real world? Well, if you look at the first chapter of this letter, you'll discover that he wrote it while in prison, chained to a couple of Roman soldiers. His joy was so complete that he could write about being content even when his liberty was so severely curtailed.

And in the *Letter to the Hebrews* we read this:

*"Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and **joyfully** accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions."*

"*Joyfully*"? How on earth could they act joyfully in such circumstances? What madness is this? Well, they had grasped – as had Paul – what this was all about. They held on to their renewed relationship with God, made possible by the work of Jesus and kept in good repair by the activity of the Holy Spirit. Their joy was complete. If they knew they were safe with God and could depend on him whatever, then they could get on with life with that deep sense of satisfaction and fulfilment that comes from knowing your eternal destiny is all sorted out.

OK. So how do we get this joy, then? Jesus says here quite simply and starkly, "*Ask and you will receive*" (v24). Do you really want this joy, this delight in life that can sustain you even in the most difficult situations? Well, pray for it. Reach out and ask God to help you cultivate this joy in your life.

There will be an element of surrender in all this, because you will be acknowledging that God knows best and that he – and he alone – can truly grant you this joy. But ask God for it and he, in his faithfulness and grace, will give it to you.

Then that joy can find expression in your life – and the more you express it, the stronger and deeper it becomes. It can be expressed in renewed worship as you give voice to the joy that is within you, through prayer and reflection and music. You can allow it to transform your attitude to your work as you begin to see all things affected by the joy of the Holy Spirit, doing what you do as a way of glorifying God. It will be seen in your attitude to difficulty as you look at the bigger picture, seeing things in perspective, seeking out the positives and starting to enjoy your eternal destiny as a citizen of God's Kingdom. It will be obvious as you serve God and your fellow human beings with a smile, rather than simply grudging acceptance. You will have an outlook that shines with hope.

So this isn't about being all happy-clappy, about forced smiles and thin facades of fatalism. It's not to do with a life of ups and downs – high as a kite one day and deep in despair the next. This is about acknowledging the grace of God, about surrendering to Jesus, about allowing the Holy Spirit to fill you. It's about something profound and personal, but something that will be seen by others in the way you approach life and react to circumstances with serenity and trust. It's another aspect of that fruitful life that God really wants you to live. Get practising!

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So how do we get this joy? Jesus says here quite simply and starkly, "*Ask and you will receive*" (v24). Ask God for it and he, in his faithfulness and grace, will give it to you. Then that joy can find expression in your life – and the more you express it, the stronger and deeper it becomes. You will have an outlook that shines with hope.

### **Questions for discussion**

- 1) How would you describe "joy"? How do you experience it?
- 2) The Greek words for "joy" and "grace" are very similar and from the same root. What do you think is the link between them?
- 3) What kind of things drain your joy?
- 4) How is joy obvious in the life of a believer? Do you see it very often?
- 5) Jesus says, "*Ask and you will receive*". Why does that sometimes seem not to work?