

Joy

At the time of writing the world is in the grip of a global pandemic as the Covid 19 virus stalks the earth, as it has done for many months. In its wake there have been varying degrees of restrictions and 'lockdowns' resulting in isolation, loneliness and the deprivation of enjoying close interactions with family and friends and the human touch that those relationships bring. For others there has been the anxiety and distress of loss of income, the threat of unemployment or of business failure. The many landmark events of life such as weddings, graduations or other special celebrations have been delayed or fallen short of the dream once imagined with all the feelings of disappointment which that brings. Most of all the incalculable sorrow, grief and loss experienced by families separated from loved ones as they have been fighting for their lives in I.C.U.; for those who sadly died and whose funeral could be attended by so few, when loved by so many.

We could go on to think of the young, whose education and social development have been seriously affected by months abnormally spent at home and whose futures may be affected by confusion over exam results and a very strange experience of student life. Then there is the collateral damage for those who suffer mental illness or the delay in diagnosis or treatment of non-Covid health problems.

Most of us have experienced some effects of this time and increasingly so the longer that it has gone on, with feelings of fatigue, loss of motivation and lack of a sense of purpose. The onset of winter, the shorter days and the uncertainty about when it will all end can fill us with gloom and a nagging feeling of anxiety.

With this back drop and with many other personal pressures upon each one of us, where is our joy? The scriptures instruct us "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). But what is joy? How do we discover it? How do we sustain our joy despite the circumstances? Why is joy important and what can rob us of our joy? These are some of the issues that we shall explore together.

What is Joy?

The Oxford dictionary defines joy as a vivid emotion of pleasure and gladness, something that causes delight. While there is nothing wrong with human sources of joy, for the believer in Christ there has to be something more.

"For those who know what it is to be reconciled to God through our Lord Jesus Christ's atoning work, and to be adopted into God's family, our lives should be marked by a unique joy. Joy tends to arise from an agreeable set of circumstances.....but these things are not everyday experiences and are at best passing joys." (Prime p73)

The New Bible Dictionary states that in both the Old Testament and the New Testament joy is consistently the mark, both individually of the believer, and corporately of the church. It describes joy as not merely an emotion but a quality that is grounded in God Himself and derived from Him (Psalm 16:11, Philippians 4:4, Romans 15:13). While joy characterises the

life of the believer on earth (1 Peter 1:8) it also anticipates the joy of being with Christ forever in the Kingdom of heaven (Revelation 19:7).

Pablo Martinez emphasises that God's presence is a source of joy. That Christian joy goes beyond feelings and is a condition of deep wellbeing. He sees joy as an essential trait in the relationship between human beings and their creator and that God always intended fellowship with Him to be a source of pleasure.

In their book "Praise: a door to God's presence" Warren and Ruth Myers write that Joy is a by-product of knowing God, that the joy God gives far exceeds human joy, it is indescribable and full of glory.

"Though you have not seen him, you love him; even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:8-9)

"Until we set our sights on joy that is based on God and His will, we postpone indefinitely the day when we will know true, consistent joy, joy that does not fluctuate with happenings. Only God is always good and permanently satisfying. Everything about Him is unchanging and eternal – His love, His power, His throne, His promises." (Myers p152)

Joy in the Scriptures

The New Bible Dictionary tracks the sources and experience of joy for individual believers and for the corporate life of the Church throughout the scriptures:-

In the Old Testament exuberant joy was part of the celebrations and festivals that marked the cultural, national and religious life of the people of God. These were times of worship, praise and remembering what God had done for them. (Deuteronomy 12:7 and 16:13-16, Ezra 6:16 and 22)

The Psalms are filled with the theme of Joy, sometimes in the form of a call to rejoice and praise God (Psalm 5:11, Psalm 105:1-4). David wrote frequently of his joy in God's dealings with him (Psalm 30:11-12) and his joy in God's presence (Psalm 16:11). Even when downcast the writer of Psalm 42:4 is encouraged as he remembers the joy and thanksgiving he had when processing to the house of God. Psalm 126 is a song of ascents that would have been sung by the people going up to the Temple to celebrate Passover and verses 2-3 records that their joy and recognition of the great things that God had done for them was observed and acknowledged by the surrounding nations.

Isaiah links joy to the theme of salvation and redemption. Each year, at Christmas we hear the verses in Isaiah 9 that speak of the joy at the coming birth of the Son, to be our Saviour. The song of praise in Isaiah 12 is a recognition that God is his strength and has become his salvation and his source of joy. Isaiah 61:10 resounds with joy and delight in God, who has clothed him with the garments of salvation and arrayed him in a robe of righteousness.

In the New Testament joy is infused with a new quality, since it is the joy of fulfilment at the birth of the Saviour and the proclaiming of the Good News of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Christ's life is marked by great rejoicing:-

Luke 1:43-44 Elizabeth exclaimed that the baby in her womb leaped for joy as Mary, the mother of her Lord visited her.

Luke 2:10-11 and 20 The shepherds received "Good news of great joy" from the angels at Jesus birth.

Mark 11:7-10 There was joy and celebration at Jesus' Triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Matthew 28:8 The women, who discovered the empty tomb after Jesus' resurrection, were "filled with joy".

Luke 24:50-53 The disciples who were present at Jesus' Ascension "worshipped him with great joy".

In John 15:11 and John 16:22 and 24 The Lord Jesus Christ shares his joy with us as he shares his life with us, in a living and abiding relationship

Acts 13:52 "The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit." Joy marks the life of the early church with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the miracles performed and the conversion of the Gentiles to Christ Acts 15:3.

In the epistles written by Paul, he refers to joy in three different contexts:-

1. Joy because of the growth in faith of new believers, especially those he has led to Christ, and he often referred to them as 'our joy' Philippians 1:3-6, 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20.
2. Christian joy may paradoxically be the outcome of suffering and even sorrow for Jesus' sake, since it is produced by the Lord and not by ourselves 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7.
3. Joy as the gift of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22), which is closely associated with love, God's love for us and our love in response and thus it follows love in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit (cf 1 Peter 1:8).

James 1:2-4 and 1 Peter 1:6-9 reflect on joy as our response to times of trial and suffering as we recognise how God is using these experiences to mature our faith and character.

The Source and Foundation of our Joy

God Himself- Our joy is grounded on God Himself and is ultimately derived from Him. "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." (Psalm 16:11). The apostle Paul urges us to focus on the Lord and to choose to rejoice and to find our reason for joy in Him "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:1). Perhaps the source of our deepest joy in God is that He has sought us, found us and saved us and so we belong to Him "Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord and delight in His salvation." (Psalm 35:9). We rejoice in His

forgiveness of our sin, in being justified by faith in Christ, that we are reconciled to God and adopted into His family as His children – loved and accepted in Christ. We are forever connected to God and His everlasting joy by spiritual birth.

“And the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” (Isaiah 35:10)

Christ’s joy in us – Christ is central to our experience of joy “A great truth to grasp about Christian joy is that it is the joy of our Lord Jesus Christ *in us*. Christian joy at its best is the Lord Jesus Christ sharing his joy with us as he completely shares our life.” (Prime p76)

In the last conversation that Jesus had with his disciples before he was arrested and faced death on the cross he said “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” John 15:9-11. What the Lord had just told them was that the relationship of love that he enjoyed with the Father was a result of obedience to His Father’s commands. In the same way, we will know true joy as we share in Christ’s life by loving and obeying him. Jesus was anointed with the oil of joy above his fellows because he loved righteousness and hated evil (Psalm 45:7). Actively loving what is right and hating what is evil will cause us to know Christ’s joy and to become more like him.

Joy, the Holy Spirit’s natural fruit- Just as a plant in the garden will naturally bear fruit if it is fed, watered, healthy and pruned from time to time, so the believer will bear the fruit of joy that the Holy Spirit delights to produce in their life. Galatians 5:22-26 explains that joy, along with the other fruit, is not a result of our efforts but the outflow of a life lived by the Spirit and by keeping in step with the Spirit.

Joy in fellowship with other believers – the last few months have revealed to us how much our joy is enriched by fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, as we share in common our joy and fellowship with God. Just to be deprived of singing songs and hymns together has felt like a real loss. It makes us realise how much we gain and are able to give to each other through the smiles, hugs, listening and sharing our life in Christ with one another. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Colossians 3:16

Joy in our eternal hope – this is the joy of looking forward to sharing God’s eternal glory and our Saviour’s ultimate triumph when every knee will bow to him and every tongue confess that he is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11). It is joy based on the hope that we will spend eternity with the Lord because of all that he has done on our behalf.

“To Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and for evermore! Amen.” (Jude 24)

The Snares that rob us of our Joy

- Neglect of prayer and meditation on God's Word that is the food for our souls. "The lack of personal spiritual nourishment causes progressive weakening and weariness leading eventually to a neglected, dry vineyard.....Our relationship with God provides the main spring of fresh water in our renewal." (Martinez p65)
- Failure to choose God as the primary source of our joy. We will only know the deep joy of God as we value Him in our hearts more than anything else, as we fit in with His purposes for our lives and fulfil God's design in creating us (Myers). The Psalmist, even when downcast, focussed his mind on the unchanging basis for joy Psalm 43:4 "Then will I go to the altar of God, to God my joy and my delight." The Apostle Paul considered everything else as loss compared with knowing Christ. Philippians 3:7-11.
- Failing to restore broken relationships and to deal with sources of resentment that hinder our fellowship with other believers and with God. If we allow a root of bitterness to grow up within us it will destroy our joy.
Romans 12:14-19, 1 Peter 3:8-9
- Allowing our faith to drift or to plateau rather than to mature, failing to obey God's Word, may result in unbelief and eventual doubt, which will cut us off from our source of joy. Hebrews 3:12
- Grieving the Holy Spirit because of unconfessed sin in our lives Ephesians 4:30. One of the most poignant of all the Psalms is Psalm 51 written by David as he seeks God's mercy and forgiveness following his adultery with Bathsheba. "Create in me a pure heart, O God and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me." Verses 10-12

Sustaining our Joy

Seeking God's presence and enjoying fellowship with Him. Psalm 90:14 says "Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days." To grow in joy needs the watering of God's presence, especially in the drought times, when we learn to depend on God, and on Him alone. Troubles and disappointments drive us to God for His comfort, love and strength and to seek Him as the primary source and focus of our joy.

"Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10. Pablo Martinez describes the inner renewal that results from this vital connection of spending time in God's presence, listening to Him:-

- We receive God's strength to relieve our fatigue and lack of motivation.
- His peace and rest to calm our anxieties and fears.
- His joy to cope with our disappointments.
- Renewed hope to dispel our weariness and dismay.

"Remaining joyful is an accurate indicator of healthy inner renewal. The joy of Christ is the best 'vaccination' against pessimism and disappointments." (Martinez p76)

Pursuing a deeper knowledge of God in His Word – Our joy increases as we focus on the truths that strengthen our experience of God and our understanding of who He is so that we trust Him. This helps to dispel the emotions that suppress joy such as guilt, anxiety, fear and resentment. In Psalm 63 David writes of how he meditated on God through the night, when he was on the run from Saul in the desert and had nowhere else to turn; he moves from a soul that is ‘thirsty’ to a soul that is ‘satisfied’.

Some of the truths that are helpful in sustaining our joy are God’s total forgiveness, His unending, unconditional love, His sufficiency, His faithfulness and His ultimate victory in Christ, in which we share. As we fill our minds and hearts with these truths that God has revealed to us in His Word and believe them, He fills us with His joy, peace and hope.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13.

Joy in prayer – The Lord Jesus encouraged his disciples to come to his Father in prayer “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.” John 16:24. The apostle Paul links prayer with sustaining joy, peace and hope particularly in times of anxiety or difficult circumstances Romans 12:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17 and Philippians 4:4-7. For some reason, when we most need to pray it is often the last thing that we feel like doing. Pablo Martinez recommends that we see prayer not as a source of guilt or just one more burden but as a pleasure:-

“I would like the reader to think of prayer without guilt – prayer should not be just one more burden in life, but a pleasure to enjoy. Prayer is a powerful tool to bring emotional healing to our lives. It is in prayer that we encounter, face to face, the Supreme Physician, our Lord Jesus Christ, who wants to give us life to the full.” (Martinez p75)

Joy as we choose to hope in God – To experience God’s joy consistently we need to make mature, obedient choices in our daily attitudes. To choose to rejoice despite our situation rather than waiting for our circumstances to change (Philippians 4:4). We can choose to adopt an attitude of hope - of expectant confidence regarding the future based on the promises of God.

When Christ was in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing the cross, he was not filled with joyful exuberance, he chose God’s will on the basis of the joy that awaited him in the future and he endured with hope Hebrews 12:2. We are encouraged to “fix our eyes on him” and to “consider him” in choosing a hopeful outlook that will keep us rejoicing in the Lord regardless of what our natural feelings tell us. So whatever happens, we are to choose an attitude of rejoicing and hope. This choice hinges on a more basic choice – on simply deciding to believe God. (Myers p155-156)

“We wait in hope for the Lord; He is our help and shield.

In Him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in His holy name.

May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord,
even as we put our hope in you.”

Psalm 33:20-22

Joy in the fellowship and encouragement of other believers – Worshipping and praising God together helps to ignite our personal worship and praise. As we sing songs and hymns together, some of which were written by saints many generations ago, we realise that we are part of God’s eternal family both globally but also historically with those who down through the centuries have owned Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

We can also know the joy of partnering in the Gospel with fellow believers just as Paul expressed in Philippians 1:3-4 “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.” We can enjoy a sense of belonging and having a role to play using our gifts and serving each other “So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to us.” Romans 12:5-6

Paul also knew the joy of seeing new believers growing in their faith “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you.” 1 Thessalonians 3:8-9. Our age need never be a barrier to encouraging and being encouraged by the growth of other believers in Christ.

Joy in God’s creation – I recently listened to a doctor on the radio saying how he prescribed for his patients “awe walks” in order to lift their spirits and to reduce the effects of stress. These were walks to be taken in natural surroundings, observing the beauty and wonder of all that is around them. There was no mention of God in this scenario but God has graciously made His creation available to all to enjoy.

Pablo Martinez is a clinical psychiatrist and he writes “It cannot be mere coincidence that God placed the first humans in a garden. Nature endows us with harmony and equilibrium. We have all experienced the invigorating effects of a long walk in the countryside when we are worried or tense. In a world where the whole creation is ‘groaning’ (Romans 8:22), we should neither idolise nor idealise nature. Nature saves nobody, but it does bring us closer to the Creator and renew us physically and mentally.” (p59)

Psalms 96:11-13 personifies nature itself as rejoicing in the Lord who made Heaven and earth:-

“Let the Heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; and they will sing before the Lord, for He comes, He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His truth.”

Joy in trials and suffering – this concept seems to us to be so counter-intuitive. Trials are not enjoyable; they are painful, burdensome, frustrating and seriously unwelcome; we would naturally want to do all that we can to avoid them. And yet God’s word says:-

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:2-4)

Jerry Bridges writes about these verses “We may conclude that we have learned about genuine Christian joy until our lives are shattered by an unexpected calamity or grievous disappointment. God uses these difficulties to reveal to us our need to grow, so that we will reach out to Him to change us more and more into the likeness of His Son.” (p86)

He goes on to explain that it is not the adversity in itself that is the grounds for our joy, but the expectation of the results, as God develops our character. We need the eye of faith to see beyond the circumstances to what God is doing through them in our lives. This attitude was exemplified in the life of Christ as he faced the cross Hebrews 12:2.

This could make us feel that God’s dealings with us are harsh or unloving and to question why He could not find some other way. Again Jerry Bridges comments:-

“Every adversity that comes across our path, whether large or small, is intended to help us grow in some way. If it were not beneficial, God would not allow it or send it, “For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men” (Lamentations 3:33). God does not delight in our sufferings. He brings only that which is necessary, but He does not shrink from that which will help us grow.” (p189) See also Romans 5:3-5

Timothy Keller writes that although the scriptures exhort us to rejoice in our sufferings, this does not mean that we should feel happy emotions pretending that we are not struggling inside, nor are we meant to determine to endure in our own strength. He says that in I Peter 1:6-7 the writer explains that it is possible to both experience joy in our salvation (as recounted in vv3-5) and for a period of time to suffer grief and trials that will refine our faith.

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.” (1 Peter 1:6-7)

Keller says that the joy and the suffering are both in the present tense and thus experienced at the same time. So they are rejoicing in their salvation at the same time as going through suffering, deep grief, hurt and sadness. Apparently the word for suffering here is the same as the word used for Jesus’ suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he is described as being sorrowful and troubled, “meaning severe mental and emotional distress”. The key thing here is that we neither suspend joy in Christ because we are suffering, nor that we refuse to be sad and to grieve appropriately, because we see it as a denial of our joy. The scriptures, especially the Old Testament, are full of the theme of lament and sorrow. In Psalm 62:8 David encourages us to “Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge.” So that the grief and sorrow drive us towards God to know His love and comfort and grace, not away from Him.

As we continue to experience what has been called by many people, an unprecedented year, let us choose to say with Habakkuk (3:17-19):-

“Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Saviour.
The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
He enables me to go on the heights.”

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Points to Ponder

1. The last few weeks have not been easy for most of us.

What have you found most difficult?

Have you been surprised to find elements that you have enjoyed?

Has the time served to remind you of what is important to you?

What have you learned about yourself during the time?

2. Pablo Martinez says, "Remaining joyful is an accurate indicator of healthy inner renewal."

What contributes to healthy inner renewal for you?

3. "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

How do you sustain joy despite the circumstances?

4. Do you agree that it is possible to rejoice even in trials and suffering?

Has this been your experience?

What has helped you to do so?