

The fruit of the Spirit: Joy

What is the first thing you think of when you hear the word joy? As I have thought about it this week the things that have come to my mind are:

- A smiley laughing happy-go-lucky person
- An immediate feeling of dread and guilt that you aren't joyful
- How could anyone be joyful in my circumstances?
- Joy is a fleeting experience that never lasts.

Then the next thought that came to my mind is, "If you were searching for joy where should you try and find it?".

- In a hobby
- In creation
- In people... friends and family.

Well, this morning, as we unpack this big topic, I hope you will see that joy is available for every Christian and is found in God. Perhaps you are here this morning and are thinking, "If you knew my circumstances you would know there is no way I could experience joy currently! I am in a place of darkness, despair and doubt. There is no way I could have joy." Yet as you look at joy in the Bible the fact is, and I have been amazed by it this week, that joy in the Bible is at its greatest in tough times.

Why should a Christian be joyful?

Joy is a topic that comes up throughout the Bible. It is a vast topic. Yet the overarching theme of joy is that a fruitful Christian must have joy. If you don't have joy you need to ask yourself if you have fully surrendered your mind, body and will to the Holy Spirit. God is a joy-giver so every Christian should have joy. Where the Spirit is there is joy.

So this morning I want us to consider the following: What does joy actually look like and if I have no joy how can I find it?

As I was preparing this week, I read an account of a preacher preaching on the topic of joy. After the sermon a person approached the preacher and said, "Thank you for your message today, I have joy in my heart." The preacher looked at them and replied, "That's great but you should tell your heart to let your face know about it!" Joy for a Christian should be more than just an internal feeling. Joy should be visible in us not just an internal emotion. There is something wrong if a Christian is a glum, gloomy person.

The need for joy in a Christians life is evident in both the Old and New Testaments. Just some examples are:

- Nehemiah 8:10 – for the joy of the Lord is your strength
- Psalm 16:11 – you will fill me with joy in your presence
- Proverbs 17:22 – A joyful heart is good medicine
- John 16:24 – Ask and you will receive that your joy may be full
- Philippians 4:4 – Rejoice in the Lord always again I say rejoice
- Luke 2:10 – the purpose of the gospel is to bring joy to all people

- Matt 28:8 – The women at the tomb are filled with joy
- Luke 24:52 – The disciples are filled with joy when Jesus ascends

So then let's be clear on the greatest source of joy?

By far the greatest source of joy is salvation. Being forgiven and saved from the guilt and power of sin brings joy. There is also joy in the assurance of salvation and the gift of eternal life. There is joy in knowing that Christ has gone to prepare a place for us. The Bible itself points us to this conclusion of salvation being the greatest source of joy:

- Isaiah 12v3 – As fresh water brings joy to the thirsty, so God's people rejoice when he saves them.
- Psalm 51v12 – Give me again the joy that comes from your salvation.

Do we not also experience joy when we see other people saved. That's why baptisms are such happy occasions as the church family celebrates new life.

So, we have seen that joy is something a Christian should have but what exactly is Christian joy? It is hard to put an emotion into words so instead I am going to show us three things that Christian joy is not and three that it is.

Joy is not...

1. An act of will power
2. Superficial and flimsy
3. Natural

Joy is...

1. A spontaneous, emotional response of the heart
2. Deep and firm
3. Spiritual.

Joy is not an act of will power but a spontaneous emotional response of the heart

This is true of all joy not just Christian joy. Joy is an emotion and you cannot just summon up true emotions at a whim. 1 Peter 1:8 talks of being filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. To be filled shows an external source. You do not fill a jug with water from within itself but from a tap. That is the difference between emotions and decisions and joy is an emotion.

Obviously, there are times when you can do things to try and make yourself joyful like look at the beauty of creation or speak to a loved one or whatever it is for you. But whether joy actually happens or not is not in your power. It may or may not come. In a sense you can prepare for joy but you cannot muster it. It is a gift of the Spirit.

Joy is not superficial and flimsy but deep and firm

There is where Christian joy differs from the worldly sense where joy finds its root in happiness and pleasure. As I mentioned earlier, joy is spoken of in the Bible as flourishing in suffering and pain, for example:

- Romans 5:3 – We rejoice in our sufferings
- 1 Thessalonians 1:6 – you received the work in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit
- 2 Corinthians 8:2 – In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

This shows us that joy is not just an emotion experienced when everything is going well and but that even in the toughest of times a Christian should know joy. When things go bad for a non-Christian one of the first things that goes is their joy and happiness. Bad circumstances and hard times get people down really quickly. Yet for a Christian because their root of joy is in Christ and is a joy that comes from the hope of salvation and knowing God's sovereignty, their joy should remain even in the difficult times. Christians should suffer hardship, trials, ill-health with joy.

Joy is not natural but spiritual

What does that mean? Have you ever had to sit down and stir up a feeling of envy, pride, guilt, lust? No, of course you haven't because they are natural emotions for fallen humanity. But have you had to try and force yourself to feel love, joy, peace? If you are like me then definitely because these are spiritual not natural. Of course, you can sit down and tell yourself to be joyful, and we need to at times, but all this will produce is a short-lived, flimsy joy. Long lasting joy is a spiritual gift from God.

This is also obvious from the fact that joy is a fruit of the Spirit and has the character of the Spirit. God is a joyful God and he wants his people to be joyful. As we saw earlier from 1 Peter 1:8, joy is not from ourselves but from God. Jesus also makes this point. On several occasions, he said that he wanted to have his joy fulfilled in his disciples. So, joy is not the product of the human response to pleasant circumstances. It is the product or fruit of God's spirit. It is the very joy of Christ fulfilled in us.

As Christians we need to be aware of false joy. Joy that is not a fruit of the spirit but self-conjured. That sort of joy will only last a little while. False joy is not joy in God but merely in some of the comforts that God might give. If you have this kind of joy you will find that it quickly goes when hardship or challenges come.

So then, having said that joy is not an act of willpower or natural, how come joy is commanded in the Bible? As you read the verses in the Bible about joy you will quickly see that for a Christian it is not an option. There are commands to rejoice all over the Bible:

- Matt 5:12 – rejoice and be glad
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16 – rejoice always
- Philippians 4:4 – rejoice in the Lord always

- Romans 12:12 – rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation be constant in prayer

From these verses and others joy is clearly something that Christians are obliged to do. Even though joy is not controlled by our willpower and is a fruit of the Spirit beyond our natural resources we are commanded to have the experience of joy. That in some way seems unfair and yet shouldn't joy be automatic to a believer when they understand and see what Jesus has done for them? When you understand the total transformation God has made of your life, how can you not be joyful? God has transformed you from lost sinner to loved child. He has given you the best reason ever to be joyful so it follows that He can command you to be. God is infinitely worthy of our delight, praise, worship and rejoicing. That joy should so fill our hearts that it has a visible effect.

If we are commanded to have joy, how do we obey this command to have joy?

Primarily by knowing the hope Christ has given us. We read in Romans 5:2-5 – we rejoice, or have joy, in our hope of sharing the glory of God. As a Christian you surrender your whole life to God and open yourself to receive his Spirit which then works to produce joy in you. But along with rejoicing in hope Paul rejoices in suffering since he knows God is using it for his good. So, when tough times come, instead of getting downhearted, rejoice because it is a sign that God is at work in you.

Finally, this passage in Romans shows us that the root of joy has an unshakable foundation in the love of God. The Holy Spirit pours this love into our hearts to make us see it, grasp it and cherish it. John Piper, speaking on this passage, said: "First, there is the love of God which chooses us and calls us and justifies us and guarantees for us a share in the glory of God. Then, there is the work of the Holy Spirit that pours the love of God into our hearts so that we recognize it and cherish it. Then, out of this deep experience of the love of God grows an unshakable hope even in the midst of suffering. And finally, in this hope we rejoice."

Obedience to this command to have joy brings great joy. Nehemiah 8 show us this. They have finished rebuilding the walls and finally get to hear God's word again which brings them joy. Through hearing the word and being taught the word they are given commands to build temporary shelters to remind them of where they have come from. As a result of obeying these commands they are described as having great joy (v17).

So how do we practically experience this joy in everyday life?

How do we fight for joy in the ups and downs of life? It is easy to have joy in the good times of life but how, like Paul, do we rejoice in suffering as well? By fixing our eyes upon Jesus since he provided the greatest source of joy through his death on the cross providing salvation.

How do we fix our eyes on Jesus? Through spending time with God in his word (Jeremiah 15:16 – Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart) and in prayer asking God to fill you with and increase your joy.

And finally, through obedience to God. In many ways this is the starting place. John 15:11 – These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. Jesus says this at the end of a command. We cannot have joy in prayer or bible study unless we are willing to be obedient to the instructions which Jesus gives us. A disobedient child is not a happy child. Will you be obedient in fully surrendering your life to God?