

Studies in Practical Christian Living

A Biblical Perspective of Joy

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2010

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Background

The dictionary tells us that joy is “*a vivid emotion of pleasure; extreme gladness.*” If we try to understand joy from a worldly perspective, we might perhaps further characterise it as a transient and fleeting emotion that waxes and wanes as we pass from one experience to another. Whilst we can acknowledge the ‘highs’ that some experiences might bring we must admit that these ‘highs’ rarely last long. Many people strive to skim from one high to the next much like a butterfly briefly touching upon one flower and then another.

The Bible tells us that “*the eye is not satisfied to see, nor is the ear filled from hearing. That which has been, is that which shall be. And that which has been done, is that which will be done; so there is nothing new under the sun.*” (Ecclesiastes 1: 8b-9). This describes so well this fruitless quest for worldly fulfilment. Christians too can get caught up in this quest, whilst forgetting the central truths and promises of God that we learn of in Scripture.

Scripture also tells us “*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” (Matthew 6: 19-21). Perhaps this is the first of the clues that will begin to provide a Biblical perspective of joy.

Perhaps a criticism that non-believers could make of Christians is that if God is such an all-powerful God why do Christians experience unhappiness and suffering?

In this study on joy we can't expect to provide instant fixes, because the circumstances that every individual can find themselves in are often unique. What we can try to do, however, is provide some answers for these questions and give some insight into the Biblical perspective of joy.

The Message

To try and cover the Biblical perspective of joy in entirety in a single study would be impractical. What we hope to achieve, therefore, in this first study is to provide some pointers which the reader can explore in more depth. We encourage you to follow these pointers beyond this study.

When trying to understand joy from a Biblical perspective we can begin by looking at the stages of a Christian life and how we experience joy at these times.

Joy at the beginning of Christian life

New Christians often go through a ‘honeymoon’ period in which they are so close to the Lord, so filled with joy and so clearly overwhelmed by the liberty that giving their life to Jesus has provided - and we must ask ourselves why should this period ever have to end?

(Acts 8: 8-39; 16:34; 1 Thessalonians 1:6)

Joy throughout the course of the Christian life

The Bible tells us *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has regenerated us to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an incorruptible, undefiled and unfading inheritance, having been kept in Heaven for you by the power of God, having been guarded through faith to a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time in which you exult. Yet a little while, if need be, grieving in manifold trials, so that the proving of your faith, much more precious than perishing gold, but having been proved through fire, may be found to praise and honour and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ whom not having seen, you love; in whom yet not seeing, you believe and exult with unspeakable joy and glorified obtaining the end of your faith and the salvation of your souls.”* (1 Peter 1: 3-9). This parallels so much of what we understand of faith from Hebrews *“Now faith is the substance of things being hoped, and the evidence of what we have not seen.”* (Hebrews 11:1)

Joy at the close of the Christian life

Paul tells us of his anticipation and tangible joy *“For I am already being poured out, and the time of my departure has arrived. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”* (2 Timothy 4: 6-8). Oh that as our last days approach we too might echo Paul - I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Joy in Christ

Jesus tells us *“As the Father loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will remain in My love, just as I have obeyed My Father’s command and remain in His love. I have told you these things so that My joy may remain in you and that your joy may be complete.”* (John 15: 9-11). By keeping Jesus’ commandments and remaining in His love, His joy will remain in us and our joy will be complete. The Lord knows what is best for us, and if we are bridled by the Spirit, He will guide us in the way of truth and life.

Joy in the Spirit

The Bible tell us *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. So let us pursue the things of peace and the things for building up one another.”* (Romans 14: 17-19). We can experience peace and joy in the Holy Spirit by serving Christ, pursuing the things of peace and the things for building up one another.

Joy in God

The Bible tells us *“Then, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patience, and patience works out proven character; and proven character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.*

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more will we be saved from God's wrath through Him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life! Not only in this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” (Romans 5: 1-11)

Biblical examples of Joy

Joy very much characterises the life of the early church. It accompanies the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples (Acts 13:52), the miracles performed in the name of Christ (Acts 8:8), and the fact and report of the conversion of the Gentiles (Acts 15:3).

Paul is blessed with intense joy as he witnesses the progression in faith of the members of the body of Christ, and particularly those he has led to Christ (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, Philemon 1:7).

Paradoxically Christian joy may be the outcome of suffering¹ and even sorrow for Christ's sake (Colossians 1:24, 2 Corinthians 6:10, 1 Peter 4:13, Hebrews 10:34), since it is produced by the Lord and not ourselves.

Joy is finally a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22) - and is therefore dynamic and not static. We need to live by the Spirit, and keep in step with the Spirit.

Diminishing of joy

It seems clear from the Bible that Satan will try to corrupt and pervert everything that is of God. So many times we can feel angry at God because of the broken-ness we encounter in the world. But we live in a fallen world - the product of a conscious decision by man. Without the freedom to have made that conscious decision, we may be living in a 'utopia', but we would be living without free will. How could a God that loves us so much, a God that was prepared to sacrifice His one and only Son to bring about redemption, do anything but give us the choice to accept Him or reject Him. How He weeps at the pain we feel when we encounter this world that is reaping the consequences of our choice, our sin. This pain we feel so much more as Christians because we know how it might be and are all too aware of how it is. How He weeps when we make that choice to sin. How He weeps when He sees the state of His creation. So what should our response be to non-believers who question the injustice within this world?

Restoration of joy

It seems clear that the world can wear us down. There are practical steps that we can take to keep in step with the Spirit and follow Jesus' commandments. These include:

- **Church & Fellowship** - it is important to minister to one another and be ministered to. Imagine your time in fellowship as a time when you are washing the dust off your feet so that you are ready to face the world again;

¹The subject of suffering and injustice will be covered in a separate study.

- **Worship** - worship can be liberating and is an act that does not have to be restricted to our times at Church. It is often good to have a time of prayer and worship at House group meetings as we come together before the Lord to study His Word. In fact our very lives can be an act of worship;
- **Prayer** - fundamental to our growth as Christians we need to spend time in prayer to God'
- **Bible study** - speaking the truth of God's Word into our lives that our hearts might have His words carved into them;
- **Meditation** - times of reflection and consideration.

Conclusions

- Our joy should be fundamentally be founded or rooted in Heaven - we should "*store up for ourselves treasures in Heaven*";
- We should accept that the Bible does not tell us that life will be an easy ride when we become Christians. We need to "*fight the good fight, finish the race and keep the faith*";
- We need to ask ourselves have we lost the joy that we had when we first became Christians, and if we have was that joy founded in God? What steps can we take to restore that joy?;
- We need to meditate on the great price that Jesus paid for us and accept that He paid that price for us!
- We need to meditate on the character and personhood of Jesus and speak the truth of Scripture into our hearts;
- We need to meditate on the promises of God contained in Scripture;
- We need to humble ourselves before the Lord and ask Him to lift the veil from our eyes that we might see clearly and understand with all of our hearts;
- We need to understand the paradox of joy that grows from suffering;
- We need to understand how joy from a Biblical perspective is undergirded by faith, hope and love;
- We need to pray that the fruit of the Spirit would be evident in abundance in our lives;
- We need to identify what diminishes our joy and identify ways to deal with it;
- We need to pray for discernment that we might keep the commandments of Jesus.

Questions

1. In your quiet time, take a few moments to write down all those things in your life that diminish your joy. Then take a few moments to write down all those things that restore your joy. Try to identify what steps you can take to change the balance towards a life filled with joy.
2. What practical steps can we take to bring joy into the lives of people around us?