

Galatians 5 v 22 The fruit of the Spirit is joy

Introduction

If there are a few words central to God's plans for the lives of His people in the New Testament then this word *joy* has a strong claim to be one of the most significant. It is claimed that the verb *to rejoice* occurs seventy-two times and the word *χαρά* (joy) occurs sixty times [William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit*, p. 76]. However, this is not all, a scholar who counted all the 'joy' related words in the New Testament claimed there were 326 of them, albeit with a variety of meanings and contexts, including references to people who had 'joy' in the wrong things [William Morrice, *Joy in the New Testament*, p. 15]. I haven't counted them, but if there are anything remotely like this number of references then we have a clear message as followers of Jesus that this ought to be an integral part of our Christian experience. If this is meant to be a part of the normal Christian life, then we need to ask ourselves this question: Am I a joyful Christian? If not why not?

1. The fruit of the Spirit is joy not happiness

In the week in which these words were written, I have heard of the deaths of two young women with cancer; one newly married and the other a mother of a young child who has also left her husband as a widower. A family I know well and with whom I have been in contact recently has had to come to terms with the terminal illness of a son-in-law who moved with their daughter to the other side of the world a few years ago to live their dream life- only to be stunned with the news that he has months at best to live. I could list more stories and undoubtedly others here could add to this number from this past week. None of us would dream of urging people in these or lesser bad news situations, like a child with toothache or an adult with a more minor health problem, or someone recently made redundant from their work, for example, 'to be happy'; it would be cruel and absurd. The confusion surrounding the words 'joy' and 'happiness' is a real problem. I remember in my late teens knowing young Christians of a similar age whose extremely charismatic churches appeared to confuse the two so that they went around with a smile pretending to be happy even when broken hearted inside. This kind of disconnect will eventually fall apart as it bears no relation to the real world- and I would argue no connection with God's Word either. Happiness and sadness are two opposite emotions that will be part of our life experience between now and eternity. The richest and the poorest; the most powerful and the least and everyone else in between will all taste of both emotions. However, there is a contrast between these emotions and what the Bible describes as *joy*; and the command to us to *rejoice*.

Let us for a moment take a biblical example from the book of Acts, the well-known story of Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi, recorded in Acts 16:22-25: *The crowd joined in the **attack** against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be **stripped and beaten with rods**.*²³ *After they had been **severely flogged**, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.*²⁴ *When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and **fastened their feet in the stocks*** (Acts 16:22-24). Humanly speaking it was a wretched day for these two Christian missionaries. First a beating by a mob in a town populated by ex-servicemen; then to make matters worse the magistrates decided to give them a good thrashing to soften them up before interviewing them the next day. If that was not bad enough they put them in the maximum security unit locking their feet in the stocks. If ever two people had a right to feel hard done by

Paul and Silas could have staked a claim. However, at midnight, in a culture where everyone went to bed and sleep much earlier than that, something caused the rest of the prison population to listen in awed silence at the sounds coming from their cell. Acts 16:25 states: *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.* It led in time to the prison governor and his family coming to faith with counselling; medical attention to the men; a baptismal service and then a late dinner all completed before the next working day began at 6am. In this context what do we conclude was happening? In Nehemiah 8:10, at a time when under the conviction of God's Word the people present began to weep before the Lord, however, they were given this advice by the godly Governor Nehemiah: *Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.* In the midst of a time of some unspecified difficulties David came to a place where this was central to his experience. *The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and He helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise Him* (Psalm 28:7). The problem was real. It had not gone away, but David's attitude towards his trial had changed as he had brought it to the Lord. It was an inner contentment in God, an assurance of His presence with him and support for him through his trial. Baptist pastor and author Stephen Winward highlighted six characteristics of joy: (1) The source of all joy is God. (2) This joy is revealed and embodied in Jesus Christ; we receive this joy through our response to and relationship with Him; (3) Joy springs from love- where there is love there is joy. (4) Joy is the byproduct of creative activity and achievement; (5) Joy is expressed primarily in worship; (6) Joy is only partially present in this life; it is complete in heaven [Stephen Winward, *Fruit of the Spirit*, pp. 88-89]. I found his list of characteristics helpful for my own personal reflection. We must not confuse our assurance of belonging to the Lord as believers and our security in Him with the state of our feelings at any given time. What Paul is referring to here is the former not the latter. The majority of the growth of the growth of the Christian Church over the centuries has taken place in settings where hostility from the ruling regime has been experienced. There has been growth too in areas of massive population growth and full freedom as happened, for example, in the Nineteenth Century in the USA as a wave of new immigrants entered the country and searched for a place to settle from east to west across that vast country. However, this development followed faithful witness by Evangelical Christians outside the recognized state church that laid the basis for the growth, for example, during years of persecution in New England and Virginia, prior to that era. The New Testament Church may have faced limited state opposition in the first thirty years of its existence but it certainly faced serious difficulties in many local communities. No-one could ever say the early apostles and those associated with them had it easy. They suffered a great deal for their convictions. However, they had the assurance of the Lord's presence with them through their trials and heartaches. The letter I Peter, written to Christians in northern Turkey was a classic example of this experience.

2. The joy experienced by Christians

(a) **The joy of Christian fellowship** Have you sat on a bus or train on a longer trip and in conversation with the person sat near you discovered that they also are a follower of Jesus? I had that joy on a trip this summer in a minibus with seven other people as we headed for a fairly easy trip up part of a mountain. Out of the eight people six of us were Christians and two Jewish who had independently responded to an advert from a travel company to take this particular trip. It was a joy to share something of our stories with fellow Christians and in my case to share something of my pleasure of visiting their country with the two Israeli citizens who were Jewish. I have always felt this is a real blessing to meet other believers when I have been away from

home. It was a particular blessing to the first Christian believers as their numbers were so small. You can feel the encouragement as you read the words of passages like Paul's letter to his friend Philemon vs 4-7: *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers,⁵ because I hear about your love for all His holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.* ⁶ *I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.* ⁷ *Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.* The Christians in Thessalonica in Greece had a hard time as their church was first planted. But they endured through hard times. In II Thessalonians 2:17-19 Paul is unashamed to say how much he misses being with them. *But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.* ¹⁸ *For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan blocked our way.* ¹⁹ *For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when He comes? Is it not you?* ²⁰ *Indeed, you are our glory and joy.* Do you have joy in fellowship with fellow believers? I hope so. However, sometimes we take it for granted and become complacent. Good quality relationships take effort to maintain and develop. It helps to be disciplined in praying for other believers. Having a prayer diary and systematically praying for other people is a good start. You grow in love for other Christians if you spend time asking God to bless them and assist them with particular needs that you may be raising. We grow in fellowship by developing the habit of looking out for other people to take interest in them and their lives and needs; our time together after services is not only an opportunity to get some refreshments, more importantly it is an opportunity to give some time to listening and speaking with a range of different people in the church family – don't just stick to the same small group of people; look out each week to speak to someone new to you. In that way you will gradually get to know many more people in the fellowship.

(b) **The joy of the gospel of Jesus Christ** (i) **Joy associated with God's activity** In response to God's work in creation, there are a number of poetic passages in the Old Testament that picture the sheer joy overflowing in heaven and on earth at the beauty of creation. For example, in Job 38:7: *the morning stars [heavenly beings] sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?* And David in Psalm 65: 8, 13: *The whole earth is filled with awe at Your wonders; where morning dawns, where evening fades, You call forth songs of joy... The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with corn; they shout for joy and sing.* The redemptive activity of God also produces such a response. In Isaiah 35:10, in response to liberation from exile in Iraq (Babylon), *those the Lord has rescued 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.* It is more than happiness at beautiful scenery or recognition of material needs supplied or in the last example relief at finally getting back home, it is an acknowledgement that behind it all is the blessing of God. It is the assurance that God is ultimately in control of our lives and circumstances. In the light of recognizing this there is an inner sense of assurance which sustains us when we are yet to see the outward blessings. In life we can be so busy doing things that we fail to appreciate God's handiwork. When we fail to notice and appreciate the little blessings of life – we will have a diminished sense of the joy of greater things. In our culture we always have to be striving to get more 'things' or do more things to give life greater significance. Therefore we struggle with verses such as I Timothy 6:6: *But godliness with contentment is great gain.* If we were more willing to be more content with our appearance, or our gifting, and with our blessings in life we might gain or regain more of the joy in God and His activity that He desires for us. God created you to be you and took delight in it. Am I willing to accept who I am in Christ with joy?

(ii) **The joy of finding the good news** The gospel of Jesus Christ is associated with good news. What was it Luke reported concerning the message of the angel to the shepherds at Bethlehem? *Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause **great joy** for all the people* (Luke 2:10). How did the wise men react after their audience with King Herod in Jerusalem when their journey neared completion and the star they had seen in the sky directed them to Bethlehem? Matthew 2:9-10: *After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.* ¹⁰ *When they saw the star, **they were overjoyed**.* The coming of our Saviour resulted in an overflow of joy as these recipients of God's guidance rejoiced in the privilege granted to them. Jesus in His teaching wanted the disciples together with other hearers to grasp something more of the significance of God's rule in their lives and in one of His stories referred to it as being like a special treasure found in a field. *When a man found it, he hid it again, and then **in his joy** went and sold all he had and bought that field* (Matthew 13:44b). It was something so vividly experienced after the resurrection of Jesus. After meeting with the angel early on Easter Sunday morning Matthew 28:8 records: *So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid **yet filled with joy**, and ran to tell His disciples.* Their emotions were all over the place, yet deep down they had that inner conviction (joy) that God had been at work accomplishing something extraordinary in the life of Jesus whom they adored. A similar experience was felt later that day in the upper room in Jerusalem when Jesus met with the frightened disciples. They struggled to make sense of what had taken place yet experienced *joy and amazement* (Luke 24:41). In the same way after Jesus ascended back into heaven some weeks later Luke records that: *they worshipped Him and returned to Jerusalem **with great joy**.* Once again in terms of feelings it would have been quite a mixture. Sadness that in the foreseeable future Jesus would be physically absent from them, but also a deep inner assurance (joy) that God was in control of these circumstances and that what He had promised would happen! When you and I find the good news of Jesus we gain a fresh perspective on our lives; we glimpse something of the purpose of our lives; we begin to appreciate that we are a part of something so much bigger than ourselves in the will of God. It gives us a sense of direction in which to travel.

(iii) **The joy that flows from receiving the good news** However, it is not just finding the good news that brings joy, a greater joy can be ours as we receive it for ourselves and place our lives in God's hands. It is collective amongst the people of God, but it must also be personal. Has there been a time when you personally accepted Jesus into your life as Lord and Saviour? In Luke 19 Jesus encounters one of the most hated men in the country, a hated tax-collector for the occupying Roman army called Zacchaeus. This unwelcome attendee in that Jericho gathering had a choice to make- would he welcome Jesus into his home and in effect into his life? Luke 19:6 gives us his response: *So he hurried and came down and **received him joyfully*** (ESV). In I Thessalonians 1:6 Paul describes how that young congregation first responded to his evangelistic messages. *You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering **with the joy given by the Holy Spirit**.* There was a serious price to pay for following Jesus in that social context, but they had that inner assurance that they had received something truly worth paying a price for; it is something that enables us to commit to following Jesus even when it can be a lonely road to travel if family or friends do not share our faith. Imagine being the first person in your country to come to faith in Jesus. The Ethiopian 'Chancellor of the Exchequer' whom Philip led to faith in Acts 8 went home experiencing God's joy as Acts 8:39 records: *When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, **but went on his way rejoicing**.*

(iv) **The joy of expectancy in the Gospel** Paul had a strong sense of expectancy of God at work in His life; in the lives of fellow believers, together with the people who in time would come to faith in Jesus. His letter to the Church at Philippi, written from prison, expressed a strong desire to continue his ongoing work and such a future would contain a significant amount of *joy!* *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,* ²⁶ *so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me* (Philippians 1:25-26). Life in the Roman world of two thousand years ago could be difficult, violent and short for many people. However, Paul wasn't alluding to the physical circumstances either he or they were experiencing at that time; instead he was highlighting their common assurance of God's love and grace and their confidence that their future was secure in His hands. It was this assurance in the face of death of many of the martyrs that so troubled the Roman authorities; other people were afraid to die, but these Christians although happy to live were equally looking forward to life beyond the grave. It was a 'win-win' situation for them either way. American Christian martyr at the hands of the Huaorani tribesmen in Ecuador, Jim Elliott, famously wrote in his journal prior to his death in January 1956: 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep [his life] in order to gain what he cannot lose [eternal life]'

(v) **The joy that comes through tribulation** It was an assumption that there was a heavy price to pay for following Jesus. When we read Bible verses like Mark 8:34b-35: *'Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me.'* ³⁵ *For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it.* We do not expect to lay down our lives for following Jesus. However, there are brothers and sisters in Christ who live daily knowing it might realistically be their last. Benjamin Francis, the extraordinary Indian Christian leader, who has led the planting of over a thousand churches in West Bengal, told the story a few years ago of the soldier in Pakistan who came to Christ, through reading a scrap of paper that contained the beatitudes from Matthew 5, who witnessed boldly expecting one day very soon to be executed for sharing his faith with his colleagues. Peter writing to believers in new churches in northern Turkey included these words in his letter: *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ *But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed.* ¹⁴ *If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.* ¹⁵ *If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.* ¹⁶ *However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name* (I Peter 4:12-16). Paul in his letter to the Romans simply mentions it in passing as something that was normal in his and his readers' experience of living for Jesus. *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,* ² *through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.* ³ *Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;* ⁴ *perseverance, character; and character, hope* (Romans 5:1-4). A Christian does not go looking for trouble or persecution for their faith, but in many countries of the world today there is potentially a heavy price to pay for some followers of our Lord and Saviour. In the UK there have been some examples of jobs lost or promotions denied or legislation like the 'Named Person' scheme in Scotland which potentially could have led to serious problems –not just for Christians – had it not been partially blocked in the courts; it is important in such times for Christians to stand together and encourage one another to stand firm in our faith in Christ.

(c) **The joy of Christian work and witness** (i) **The joy of seeing God at work** In a context of a healing miracle, recorded in Luke 13, the author summarized the outcome of the day's events in Luke 13:17: *When He [Jesus] said this, all His opponents were humiliated, but the people were **delighted** with all the wonderful things He was doing.* In Luke 10 there is an account of a mission trip undertaken by a group of more than seventy other followers of Jesus who *returned with joy* (Luke 10:17a) and reported what God has done through them. How did Jesus react to these wonderful testimonies? Luke 10:21 states: *At that time Jesus, **full of joy through the Holy Spirit**, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned [Jewish religious leaders], and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.* Does it bring joy to your heart when a fellow believer testifies of an answer to prayer about something? Or concerning a profession of faith or some other wonderful blessing? We should do! If we are resentful, wanting to complain to God –saying why didn't I see such a blessing- or why did that church see that blessing rather than our church or some other church down the road? Then we need to say Lord help me to gain real joy at seeing You at work wherever it may be and through whoever! (ii) **The joy experienced at the spread of the Gospel** In Acts 11 there is an account of the growth of the Church in Antioch. Barnabas was sent from the Jerusalem congregation to see what was happening. Acts 11:23 states: *When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, **he was glad and encouraged them all** to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.* John, in his very short pastoral letters showed a similar spirit. II John 4: *It has given me **great joy** to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.* Or 3 John v 4: ***I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*** Is that true for you as well? As a Christian parent or grandparent do you communicate to your children or grandchildren that the thing that would give you the most joy is that they come to faith and go on with the Lord? I certainly hope so! They also need to see in our priorities that we live in line with such words as well. (iii) **God intends His people to be joyful** In John 15:9-11 Jesus uttered these words to His disciples at the Last Supper: *'As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love. ¹⁰If you keep My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commands and remain in His love. ¹¹**I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*** When Jesus looks at your life and mine just now – will it be bringing joy or tears of sadness because of our attitude or words or actions in recent days, weeks, months or years? It cannot be both. If we are truly joyful we are bringing joy to Him as well. Nothing gives me greater joy than those moments when someone has committed their life to Christ; apart from that hearing of someone going on with the Lord or being restored to fellowship with the Lord or engaged in faithful service for Him or enduring for Him while experiencing great trials. What gives you most joy? I hope and pray that what gives you your joy is likewise that which brings joy to our precious Lord and Saviour, Amen.