

Genuine Joy

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[0:00] My wife is not with me this morning because... I don't mind admitting that I'm a person who struggles with keeping my emotions under control from time to time.

! So there are occasions when you have slightly wet eyes and maybe a struggling voice. Some of you may be familiar with a television program called Long Lost Family. And stories of people looking for relatives that they haven't seen for 40 or 50 years. Most often it's a story of perhaps a mother looking for a child, a son or a daughter that they had to give away back in the 50s.

When a time when having a baby outside of marriage was completely unacceptable in the society of the time. And they describe that moment as the saddest time of their lives.

The pain of separation as they gave that baby to a foster family or to another family or to a social worker or whatever it was.

[1:15] And that pain was so intense and it's remained with them. And they've wondered, what happened to their child? How did it go up? How did it do? Did it have a happy childhood?

Was it well behaved? And so they get these researchers on the case and they find that person after all these years.

And there's that moment when they arrange that meeting. And I find it difficult to resist a tear, you know, because it's just an amazing moment, isn't it?

When they've reunited. There are tears on the program as the people greet a moment of genuine joy. I want to describe it as that.

I want to think a little bit more about that subject as we look at this passage. Because Paul, here in this letter, he's talking to the Thessalonians about that moment of separation.

[2:15] Which to him was just like being orphaned. Being separated like a mother and a child. Of course you've read about, I'm sure you've gone back to Acts chapter 17 to remind yourselves how he was separated from them.

He was driven out of the city by the jealous Jewish leaders. One verse of the Bible says, we were torn away from you. The NIV has gone with the original Greek which gives us our word orphan. And in the previous chapter you've seen Paul using those words, haven't you? Like a nursing mother, like a father to his children. It's like family. This separation is like tearing the family apart. And he's so frustrated because Satan has interfered with his desire to return. And the jealous Jews are Satan's agent in preventing him from returning.

He has been the instrument whereby the gospel of the Lord Jesus has been brought to the Thessalonians. And by God's grace and power they've not only believed it, but they've worked it out in their daily lives.

[3:25] And are living in hope of glory to come. Look back at chapter 1. We remember, says Paul, before God and Father your work produced by faith. Your labor prompted by love.

And your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. But just think about it. It's really striking, isn't it? These young Christians, they'd heard the message from Paul, was it three Sabbath days?

Three weeks. That's all. That's all the instruction they'd had in the Christian faith. Before Paul was kicked out of the city, with Silas and probably Timothy too.

He's kicked out of Berea. He goes on to Athens. And then in desperation he sends Timothy back. He says, Timothy, go check out these guys. How are they doing? And he finishes up in Corinth, as you know.

But look at verse 19 this morning of our passage. What does it say? 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?

[4:29] Is it not you? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. What a beautiful thing to say about his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Perhaps even tears of joy as he wrote the words. I don't know. But what is his focus? What is it that's driving him on? What drives him on to preach? What is it?

He's looking forward to something, isn't he? He's looking forward to that moment when Jesus will return. In the Greek word, the parousia.

Not his incarnation that we thought about a few months ago. A couple of months ago. December? Yeah, two months ago now, isn't it? Not his incarnation as a helpless baby, but as a triumphant king.

What is his hope? He is anticipating an ultimate reunion. Not just with those dear saints from Thessalonica and elsewhere, but union with Lord Jesus Christ.

[5:29] And that joy, he says, will be indescribable happiness. And the crown in which we will glory in the presence of Lord Jesus that is coming. What does he mean?

Actually, I think he means that seeing those people in the presence of Jesus at that moment will mean more to him than anything else. He's so passionate about his brothers and sisters.

And that moment is going to be so special. I mean, we do understand that there are crowns mentioned in the New Testament.

The crown of righteousness, the crown of life. What is this crown of rejoicing? Is it a reward? I don't think so. I think it's actually him just expressing something of the joy of that day when he sees those brothers and sisters to whom he has brought the gospel standing in the presence of the Lord Jesus. But chapter 3, verse 1, Paul goes on to explain his predicament. Is it possible someone could get me a glass of water? Sorry. Thank you. He cannot be with them.

[6:41] He's so concerned to find out how they're doing. And so he sends Timothy. No telephones? Just think about it. We don't often think about it. No telephones, no postal service, no internet, no trains, no planes.

Just an awful long walk. 470 miles. Check it out. And it's even further on the way back because, well, Timothy probably came back to Athens, but then he finds that Paul's gone on to Corinth.

Oops. Another 50 miles. What's another 50 miles between friends? But the news he brings Paul is such an encouragement, isn't it? He's facing daily persecution for his faith.

Faith. Thank you. Thank you very much. He's facing daily persecution for his faith, and the Thessalonians are also facing persecution, and they're persevering, says Timothy.

Timothy brings good news of their faith and their love. Verses 6 to 8. You can see and feel the emotion in the words. It's almost as if they're meeting again. Verse 6.

[7:59] Timothy has now just come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love.

He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us, and that you long to see us just as we also long to see you. Isn't that lovely? You can feel that in the words, can't you, that emotion there.

But Paul goes on because he says, we live if you are standing fast in the Lord. It's almost like, he's, the feeling is so intense.

How he can have this, it's almost as if he, he would be feeling as though he would be dying if they weren't living, if they weren't standing fast.

But it's a tremendous relief, because he realized that they've withstood persecution, they've remained faithful. And even though he still desires to see them face to face, you know, he is content in that.

[9:11] I'm sure he's asked Timothy to address some of the issues at the church as he visits them. And then he's going to write about some other issues later in this letter.

But it leads to another reference to joy in this chapter as well, if you notice. The joy we have in the presence of God because of you, he says. Verse 9, 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?

Night and day we pray more earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. What is that joy in the now? Joy as he is in prayer for them, praying continually for them.

Here he's praying, it says, night and day so that he can see them again and supply what is lacking after his initial short visit. Joy in prayer, we'll come back to that later.

But we finish this little section with a Pauline prayer which I think is a pattern for Paul as he prays for the church. But it can be a pattern for us too.

[10:19] And he says in his first section of the prayer here, verse 11. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your heart so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Lord, I want to see them again. Please make it happen. That was specific to that circumstance, wasn't it? But then he says, make your love increase and overflow.

And you say, well, hang on a minute. This church was already a church that was faithful. Their work produced by faith, their labor prompted by love, your endurance inspired by hope.

This was a model church, wasn't it? May your love increase and overflow. There's always room for improvement, isn't there? It doesn't matter what church you belong to.

[11:20] Every church needs to grow in love. They've never reached perfection. So it's a prayer you can use anytime for any church and for anyone. And the next section, may he strengthen your hearts in order that what?

You will be blameless when? At the coming of Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords with all his holy ones. That's a prayer you can pray for anyone, anywhere, anytime, isn't it?

For a church, for an individual. A little pattern for prayer there if you want to think about in future. So I think that's a helpful little pattern that Paul provides us with.

But what is joy anyway? Let's think about joy for a moment. You can look in the dictionary and check it out. And you get all sorts of descriptions.

An emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good. A state of happiness or felicity. That's a good old English word, isn't it?

[12:23] Well, I've got three main points. And I hope you'll be able to follow. We're going to look at genuine joy at the beginning of our spiritual journey.

And then we're going to look at genuine joy in all the experiences of life. We can't cover all the experiences of life, but we'll cover some of them. And then we're going to look at genuine joy at the end of the journey.

So first of all, genuine joy at the beginning of the spiritual journey. In chapter 1, verse 6, we'll just go back to that for a moment. We read these words.

You became imitators of us and of the Lord. And in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. Joy that they received at the time of their responding to the gospel.

They had turned to God from idols to serve the true and living God. And they'd repented. They had become Christians.

[13:31] They had become believers in Jesus. And the Holy Spirit gives them joy. Despite what's going on around them, there's that genuine joy given by the Holy Spirit as he opens their hearts and their minds to the truth about Jesus.

I was at a baptism yesterday, which is a family matter, but my younger sister was baptized yesterday. But I was just thinking about the journey that she's gone through.

Do you remember your journey? We'll come back to that in a moment. But there is something absolutely unique about coming to faith, isn't there? Because there's something happens in your heart.

And joy comes to indwell you. The Holy Spirit indwells you. The Holy Spirit indwells you 24-7, 365. Ever think about that? He doesn't indwell you just on Sunday mornings when you come here, does he?

He's with you every moment of every day. And there is a genuine joy as you begin that spiritual journey with Christ. But let's move on.

[14:46] Because we need to think about the other experiences of life. And there's a joy in the waiting. Because we're waiting for something, aren't we?

We're waiting for that day. Are you waiting for that day when Jesus is going to come again? Because that's the culmination, really, of all that we know, isn't it? The point at which he's going to come back and take us to be with him.

We thought about it earlier. The new heavens, the new earth. Can you wait for that day? I can't. Paul says in chapter 1, verse 10, They were waiting for his son from heaven, who he raised from the dead, Jesus.

Peter talks about it, doesn't he? Peter talks about, though you've not seen him, Jesus that is, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy. That is inexpressible.

Something you can't really define. And genuine joy is something that words cannot adequately describe. As we wait for the Lord Jesus to return.

[15:58] So there's joy in the waiting period. And further to that, there's joy in suffering and persecution. There are already five references to suffering in this letter.

And I think, really, the word suffering here, we should imagine, understand it to be in terms of persecution. I.e., they would be attacked in some way, verbally or physically even, for believing in Jesus.

In fact, in verse 1, verse 6 of chapter 1, we read it already. They had received the gospel message in the midst of severe suffering, severe persecution.

So as they heard the gospel, in those three weeks, the jealous Jews come up and attack them and kick Paul out. Do you think they left the Christians alone after that?

I doubt it. But they had joy in that moment. In that moment of persecution. In that ongoing persecution.

[16:59] And there's a connection between joy and persecution. And I want to tell you why. If you look back in Acts 13, you can read Acts 13, verse 48.

We read of Paul and Barnabas preaching the gospel in Pisidia, Antioch. And this is what it says. And when the Gentiles heard this, the gospel that is, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord.

And as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and drove them out of their district.

But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were what? Filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Go back to Acts 5. Gamaliel. Speaking about the gospel being preached. And he says, you know, if it's of God, you will not be able to overthrow the gospel. He says, you might even be found opposing God.

[18:06] So they took Gamaliel's advice. And when they called in the apostles, they beat them, charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council.

What? Rejoicing. That they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus. And every day in the temple from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

Joy and persecution. I don't think we understand it because we've never been, or maybe, I don't know, some of you may have been, but I've never been persecuted like that. Go back a little further.

Jesus talks to his disciples, doesn't he, in John's gospel. He talks about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He says, you will have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

So even in persecution of the fiercest kind, the disciples had joy in their hearts, and it couldn't be taken from them. And, you know, you can read the countless stories through the ages, can't you? [19:14] Believers, Christians, facing persecution, facing death for the name of Jesus. And yet there was a genuine joy in their hearts and in their experience.

I'm going to mention suffering as well now because I think we've seen the word suffering here. I think we do have to face up to the fact that can there be genuine joy in physical suffering? Because some of us have to go through that.

Some of us are going through that. And I can only point to the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Because here is Jesus in the most bitter anguish of soul.

And he's about to face pain and shame for us. And his human body sweat was as if it were great drops of blood. So intense was his agony.

And he prayed that his father might relieve him of the cup of his anger. Yet he says, not my will but yours. And he resigned himself to the safe hands of his father, who, as we know, vindicated him.

[20:19] He raised him on the third day. But we can't imagine the pain and the suffering. But he went through them because they were part of a greater plan.

He endured for the joy that was set before him. Hebrews tells us this. During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.

And he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son, though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered. And once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Jesus knew pain. He knew suffering. He knew persecution. In a way that we won't even begin to know. But does Jesus know?

Does he understand? Does he have any idea what you're going through? Yes. Yes. He does. And he has a plan.

[21:27] If you're suffering physically in the moment, he has a plan for your suffering. Psalm 73 reminds us, doesn't it? That wonderful psalm.

He has hold of you by his right hand and will lead you into glory. Sometime. When you don't know. But I want to suggest that with the Lord Jesus walking with you and with the end in view, there can be joy even in suffering.

I don't know what that's like because I haven't been in that position. But I just want to mention that as something to think about to encourage people who may be suffering.

There's also genuine joy in seeing the Holy Spirit at work in the world.

Paul gets that message back from Timothy. Timothy tells him that the Thessalonians are standing firm in the face of persecution. 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?

[22:31] Does that ring true with you? As you read about churches in other parts of the world, Sri Lanka for instance, I don't know. When are you flying soon?

14th. Not your first time though, is it? No. But we'll get news straight back from Sri Lanka about the church in there. Does it warm your heart that Jesus is at work building his church, often in the most unlikely places, and frequently in the places of the severest persecution?

You think about North Korea at the moment. How many Christians do they reckon there are in North Korea? Hundreds of thousands. Jesus is building his church.

The gates of hell will not prevail against it. The gospel is unstoppable. And that should give us a cause for joy. Genuine joy in prayer.

There's joy in that waiting period in prayer. Verses 9 and 10. Joy in the presence of God because of you. As he prays for them. We've just touched on some of the things in our life.

[23:46] The waiting period. What we're waiting for Jesus to come back. I want to suggest there is genuine joy in that waiting period. Stop. I

said, you know, there is genuine joy there. We need to just apply the word to our hearts.

And if you want to take issue with me afterwards on any of those points, I'm happy to talk it through. But there should be a genuine joy in our hearts.

But lastly, we want to talk about genuine joy in our hearts. At the end of the journey. There is a time coming when our joy will be complete.

That might mean passing through the gates of death. We sang that wonderful hymn this morning. I saw a new vision of Jesus in that final verse. For yonder, a light shines eternal, which spreads through the valley of gloom. Lord Jesus resplendent and regal drives fear far away from the tomb. [25:04] Our God is the end of the journey. His pleasant and glorious domain. For there are the children of mercy who praise him for Calvary's pain.

Maybe you won't die. Maybe you'll be amongst those who are alive and remain that is coming. And will be caught up in the clouds. And it will be a meeting with our Saviour.

A moment which will eclipse anything. Anything you have ever thought or dreamt of down here. It'll be a moment of completeness. A moment of indescribable joy. And there'll be even more joy as reunions take place with those who have gone before.

And sometimes we just need to stop and think about it. There's so much going on around in our world and we don't take time out just to meditate.

[26:10] What will it be like? It'll be indescribable. There's also another joy, I think, at the end.

We notice in verse 10 of chapter 1 that the that's only Christians, they've come to faith and they were waiting for his son from heaven who will be raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

There will be joy in rescue. Because as we see God's judgment taking place, Satan finally defeated, sin and the curse gone forever, justice will be seen to be done.

but we will have been rescued by Jesus from that loss. Genuine joy in rescue. So, I've given you a little flavour of my thoughts on genuine joy.

joy. And, how are we going to apply that to us this morning?

[27:28] I suppose the question is, do you have genuine joy in your heart this morning? There are two reasons why it may not be there.

One is because you've never been there in the first place. You've never experienced the saving grace of the gospel. You've never turned away from the idols to the living and the true God.

I don't know many of you here this morning because every time I come there's more of you.

Wonderful. But, now is the time to do just that.

turn and serve the living and true God and you will experience genuine joy. And, if you don't know what we're talking about, I know you can ask Phil, you can ask anyone here who knows Jesus and they will tell you about him and explain it more.

But, the other reason is because you've lost sight of the gospel this morning because you're becoming complacent. And, it easily happens.

[28:34] are you allowing the world's value system to water down your joy? Are there things distracting you from that focus on Jesus?

So, I asked you earlier, do you remember the day you first believed? Can you remember that far back? Remember your baptism, maybe? Do you remember that sense of joy? that sense of being in Christ, being held by him, no longer under condemnation?

That sense of being in relationship with the God who made you, sins forgiven. Have you forgotten that moment? Bring it back to your memory.

brother, sister, do you need to refocus your heart today? I hope you're not weary of the gospel of grace.

Your sense of wonder at amazing grace should grow each day and joy should be at the heart of your living, whatever your circumstances, because you're a child of God.

[29:50] I sometimes think we're too caught up with the comfortable culture in which we live. We have an abundance of everything we need and anything we want and the culture takes the edge off our joy because we become less dependent on Jesus and we become more like the world,

dependent on what we have and the world value system undermines our joy if we're not careful.

The chorus, the old chorus had it aright, I think. Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. I was reading a bit about Joni Earecks and Tarda this morning and she talks about her experience of that awful accident that left her quadriplegic I think some years ago now. But she talks about suffering in a way that is really helpful. She says it helps her focus on heaven. It sharpens her focus on where she's going. So we need to think about it a bit more, turning our eyes on Jesus every day and the things of earth growing strangely dim. I need to listen to this this morning.

[31:25] I know I do. We sang that other little hymn Best Be the Tie That Binds. You know there's real joy in the encouragement of brothers and sisters.

Is that what you do as you meet with each other? Are you an encourager? Do you share that joy? Do you point forward to that day? Is that in your mind? Is that what you focus on?

We have all sorts of daily ups and downs don't we? And we need encouragement. We need to be encouraged to hold on to our faith.

What do you say to those who are in pain and suffering? Do you encourage them with the joy of the new heavens and new earth to come?

That vision that John gives us? There will come a time when there's no more pain, no more suffering, no more sickness, no more death. And further on it says there's no more sin and there's no more curse.

[32:28] That's the reality of where we're going, isn't it? And it should bring a deep sense of joy. Are you an encourager in the face of persecution? I don't know what persecution is today.

I've not been in school for a very long time. I've not been in college for a very long time. But what I hear doesn't fill me with great excitement really because I think those places are really hard places to be a Christian.

So we need to encourage our young people. What help do they need? Pray for them. Pray with them. Because they need a real sense of joy in the face of severe opposition today to the gospel. Paul's focus was on the coming of Jesus wasn't it? The triumphant arrival of Jesus to take his people to be with him and that needs to be our focus. The thought that he might come today. How would that shape your day do you think? Or mine? He might come tomorrow how would that shape your thinking? How would it shape your life?

[33:43] How would it shape your relationships with brothers and sisters? Are you passionate about your brothers and sisters as Paul was? Are you at odds with the brother or sister?

Go to the cross. Remember the Lord gave his life for them too. And then look forward to that day. Are you loving each other more as Paul reminds us in that prayer?

How does that show itself? Are we joyfully giving time to share each other's burdens? things? I want to just suggest as we close that the looking at this passage this morning your joy will be deepened daily as you focus on that day.

That day when your joy will be complete. When the joy of brothers and sisters will be complete and above all the joy of our Lord Jesus will be complete. because as you focus on that day your outlook on life will be radically affected.

Radically affected. People will notice and they'll say what is it about you? What is that hope within you?

[35:13] Why do you believe that? And they'll want to know about your genuine joy. And I hope you're going to be ready to explain it to them.

It's all about Jesus isn't it? How are you going to be at work tomorrow morning? Be honest. Are you going to be like the rest of them?

The Monday morning blues? You as a Christian should be different whatever your circumstances. So get a bit more heavenly minded so that you can be more earthly use. Genuine joy is given us by the Holy Spirit at the moment we believe.

love. And we need to keep focus on what are we looking for? The Savior coming to save us ultimately. The Lord Jesus coming as King of Kings, Lord of Lords.

[36:19] And if you're lacking that joy this morning look to him again and look forward to his coming again. let's sing about what's going to happen when he does come back.

I've forgotten the number now. 900