

Joy: Finding Joy - 22nd January 2023

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[0 : 0 0] We're starting a new Sunday series today, focusing on a small word with a big meaning, and it's this word, joy. Joy, yeah.

Might need some in January, I tell you. It's one of those words which crops up a lot in the Bible, in church, in worship songs, you know, so from singing, give me joy in my heart, maybe from school assemblies back in the day to declaring joy to the world.

You know, the Lord has come at Christmas time just a few weeks ago. So in many ways, I guess those kind of joy-filled songs reveal that joy is intended to be at the heart of our faith.

If we go to the Bible, well, in Paul's letter to the Galatians, for example, he lists what are known as the fruit of the Spirit, these nine characteristics of what it means and what it looks like to have God's Spirit shape in our lives.

Now, Paul puts love first, as you'd maybe expect, but then second of all in this list of the fruit is joy, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and so on.

[1 : 0 2] So joy is evidently a key quality that we're called by God, like with this idea of fruit to receive, to nurture, to be shaped by. Or then take Jesus himself when at his last supper, he says this, he says, As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you, now remain in my love.

If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love. Again, so love first there. But he says then, I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

So here Jesus says, not only is living life God's way rooted first and foremost in love, yeah, but in doing so, we can receive God's joy, even says complete joy.

No sort of stingy half pint measures there from Jesus, nah. That's the ideal, I guess that's the hope. And yet experiencing profound joy in this life, well, you all know as well as me, it can feel at times pretty distant, even an elusive prospect.

I think that's why on a title slide that we've got for this series we're doing, we've got this kind of flickering neon sign of joy. Yes, our lives are meant to glow like a neon sign with joy.

[2 : 2 3] But in reality, our joy can at times feel pretty faulty, like it's coming and it's going and it's coming and it's going. So I guess given this tension perhaps between joy being on the one hand God's desire for our lives, and yet if we're honest, we can often feel distinctly lacking in joy, especially perhaps at this time of year.

I guess my hope is that in this series we might be able to explore what true joy at actually is. Because if we can crack that, then we might just be able to know it more consistently or more completely, as Jesus says, in our lives.

So what is joy? Well, on one level, we obviously use the word joy to describe those feelings of happiness and pleasure that we might take in something. That's a kind of basic dictionary definition.

If you look up joy in the dictionary, it says taking pleasure and happiness in something. So we can take joy, and you'll have your own things for me, anything from a pork pie to a painting to a person to a Peroni, whatever you want to take joy in in life.

Joy is associated with all sorts of pleasure and happiness. And yet the joy that's often spoken about in the Bible, the joy which ultimately comes from God, my joy in you, as Jesus says.

[3 : 46] Well, that kind of joy goes far deeper than simply being an emotion or a feeling of happiness. Now, in fact, God's joy isn't dependent or influenced by circumstances, it seems.

Rather, it's this ever-present sense of gladness within us that comes from knowing that whatever happens, whatever ups and downs we might go through, God is with us.

That's what gives the joy. Indeed, here's how Charles Spurgeon, the classic Baptist preacher, not someone I tend to quote very often, but he helpfully describes joy like this.

He says, joy comes not from what we have, but from what we are. Not from where we are, but from whose we are.

It's not based on circumstances. It doesn't come from what we have, but from what we are, loved by God. Not from where we are, wherever we live, but from whose we are.

[4 : 49] And we are God's. So whereas an emotional sense of happiness is almost totally dependent on the stuff of life going well, you know, health, wealth, family, friends, weather, entertainment, football results, and so on, God's kind of joy says, now, even if those things are lacking or they go pear-shaped in our lives, still we can be joyful because joy is based not, as we're saying, on outward circumstances, but on this inner knowledge, this inner conviction that God is with us.

And that means that joy is never in denial that things will and do go wrong in life.

No, just the opposite, in fact, because joy says that even in the midst of suffering or illness or pain or loss, still we can rejoice because God promises to be with us in and through those times.

So joy, I think, helpfully, doesn't deny sadness or depression or grief. And neither is it some sadistic glutton for punishment that sort of laughs in the face of pain and says, bring it on, give me more, give me more.

No, joy is honest and wise enough, perhaps, to admit that these things, you know, grief, depression, sadness, they suck in life. They're hard. They're hard things to cope with.

[6 : 20] But joy is fully aware that even in sadness or depression or grief, actually, there is always light. There's always hope because joy knows that God promises, as I say, to be with us in and through those times.

I think that's why the Apostle Paul, someone who we know from his writings, experienced being beaten and imprisoned and shipwrecked and more. That's why Paul can state at times like this.

He says, yeah, I'm full of sorrow, but I'm rejoicing, he says in 2 Corinthians. Or again, a little bit further on, in all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.

Joy doesn't mean, as we're saying, pretending sadness or affliction don't exist. Instead, like some faith-filled champion poker player, he says, all right, I see your sadness, I see your pain, but I raise you joy. I raise you joy.

And why? Well, because through joy, God provides us with the peace, the patience, the purpose, if you like, to persevere through that pain.

[7 : 31] So it kind of makes sense. It's this underpinning, underlying quality. Now that's the theory, at least, in life. But I guess the question is, perhaps for today, how?

How might God nurture our ability to know joy, to help our joy, as Jesus says, to be complete? Well, we're going to explore various ways that this might be true over the course of this series.

But for this first one today, I'd like us to dip our toes into the Old Testament, and in particular this morning, to look at the book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes. Now, there's a chuckle over here, because I think Simon realises. I don't know if you've ever read the book of Ecclesiastes, but on the surface, at least, if you have or you've tried to, it appears to be one of the bleakest, most depressing, most cynical books in the whole of the Bible, which is kind of an ironic place to start, really, thinking about joy, I know.

But, as I hope we'll see, and for my money, I think, Ecclesiastes, I'd say, is actually one of the most helpful books in the Bible, for working out how we might know and experience joy in this life, even when there's so much in this world which might cause us to feel just the opposite.

[8 : 55] So let's get stuck in and kick off with the opening few verses from Ecclesiastes chapter 1. And straight away we're told who's speaking to us, because it starts like this. It says these, the words of the teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

And who's that? Well, that's Solomon, King Solomon, son of David. Supposedly the wisest man who's ever lived, which I guess means we should take note, perhaps, of what we're reading.

But, brace yourselves, because that's the opening verse. From verse 2 onwards, it doesn't exactly ease us in. He says this, he says, meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher.

Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun sets and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north. Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

[10 : 00] All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. All things are wearisome. More than one can say, I have seen all the things that are done under the sun.

And all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. It's cheery stuff, isn't it? Blimey, I tell you.

I mean, can you imagine Solomon coming down to a pub club? He'd walk in and everyone, oh no, here he comes. You sit with him this week. No, you sit with him, you know. Happy chappy himself, isn't he, Solomon?

And I guess if we take these kind of words at first glance, you know, they are incredibly depressing. Meaningless, meaningless, utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless, he says.

And yet, this word that we translate into English as meaningless, it's an interesting one. Because thankfully, I think, all might not seem as hopeless as it initially does.

[11 : 06] You see, in the Hebrew language in which Ecclesiastes was written, meaningless is a translation of the Hebrew word, hevel.

Now, if you've been around a while, you know we like to get a bit multilingual these days. So, do you fancy some Hebrew this morning? Can you say hevel after me? One, two, three. Beautiful, beautiful. Okay.

Now, you can translate hevel as meaningless. But actually, it literally means vapour. Okay, vapour.

As in the sort of misty appearance of our breath on mornings like today. Or the product of someone vaping even. Even in the summer, you can see it. But that vapour just disappears as quickly as it's appeared.

So, rather than saying perhaps that life is meaningless or pointless, as one translation says. It could be read instead that Solomon is saying that everything is fleeting.

[12 : 07] You know, transient. Almost blink and you miss it. And that's a very different kind of emphasis. Now, what kind of emphasis might that be? Well, what's interesting is that this Hebrew word hevel is, in fact, the same word which we translate into English as the name Abel.

Abel. As in Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve. Now, why is this interesting that hevel is associated with Abel in the Bible?

Well, just briefly, here's the story of Cain and Abel and how it plays out from Genesis chapter 4. It says, Now Abel, hevel, kept flocks and Cain worked the soil.

In the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought an offering. Fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.

The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering. But on Cain and his offering, he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast.

[13 : 18] Now Cain said to his brother Abel, Let's go out to the field. And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Cheery stuff.

I know there's a consistency here this morning. But in the Bible, Abel is portrayed very positively. There's nothing at all negative about Abel. For example, he's described as the first shepherd in the Bible.

You know, it's an important role because it anticipates perhaps other important shepherds to come. And there's loads of them in the Bible. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David. Even on to Jesus, who calls himself the good shepherd.

So Abel was the sort of prime shepherd, if you like. His role is a positive one. But we're also told that when he gave an offering of his fattest firstborn lambs to God.

Think of a doner kebab. It's that kind of idea. Okay. God was pleased. You know, he looked with favour on Abel. In comparison, his brother Cain's offering.

[14 : 21] It doesn't go down as well with God. But primarily, it seems, because he brought not his finest or his first fruits to God. But we're told, some of the fruits of the soil. And you can imagine it's the kind of slightly deformed, slightly squashed fruits or whatever.

He wanted to keep the best for himself, not give it to God. And so because God doesn't exactly think, thanks mate, that's great. Cain becomes angry and jealous. So much so that he attacks and he kills his brother Abel.

Now, thinking of Abel's name, this Hevel, was Abel's life meaningless, as one translation of his name might suggest?

I say no, no. Certainly not. Because for the time he had, Abel was fulfilled. He was clearly someone whose attitude and character pleased God.

He was a generous shepherd. So no, Abel's life, Hevel's life, wasn't meaningless. But it was, I think, as his name also suggests.

[15 : 28] His life was fleeting. Incredibly short life, cut short. Has gone almost in the passage as quickly as a puff of vapour.

As a puff of Hevel. He lived up to his name. And this, I would say, is crucial for us understanding what Solomon means when he says life is Hevel.

Life is fleeting. He's not saying, as some translations have, that life is pointless or meaningless. No, because in using this word, this name Hevel, I'd say he's recalling and recognising the fact that Abel's fleeting life was actually a fulfilled one.

Solomon's pointing out, therefore, that yes, life is short and fragile. Life can be frustratingly, unjustly, fleetingly transient.

But, like Abel, a fleeting life can nevertheless be a fulfilling one. Now, I don't know if you'd agree with Solomon that life is fleeting.

[16 : 43] I don't know if you feel that or not. I think, for me, the older I get, and I'm 47 and a half now, so I'm cracking on, I tell you. I think I'm, because this is, I am getting older.

I feel it in my bones, obviously. But I'm increasingly aware, I think, that life does indeed seem to be moving faster the older I get. I'm increasingly aware that it's picking up pace, if you like.

Now, when I was young, when kids are young, you know, a month, let alone a year, feels like an eternity when you're little. Think of the six weeks holidays in the summer. They would go on and on and on forever.

And now, as a parent, you know, thankfully, they're quite quick in some way back to school. But they go pretty fast. And I guess the longer we live, though, the quicker time seems to fly, perhaps.

Because I guess each year is a progressively smaller portion of our life. Indeed, I imagine, I don't want to speak for those on a more senior side of things, but I imagine there are days when you look back and you think, you know, where did those years go?

[17 : 49] Where did that life go? And so, really, I think Solomon is right. Life is fleeting. You know, our years on earth, certainly in relation to eternity, are incredibly few.

But given this fact, what's fascinating is how Solomon processes and responds to this realization, this insight of wisdom.

So, yes, if you read the whole of Ecclesiastes, Solomon does have his fair share of grumbles and moans. And he reckons, probably rightly, that much of life can be depressingly mundane.

I'll give him credit for that. But in light of all that is mundane, and especially in light of the fact that life is over, perhaps all too fast. Here's a few examples of what Solomon consistently concludes life should therefore be about.

Or in other words, he answers the questions, I think, how might we find fulfillment in this fleeting life? He says this, for example. He says, a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their work.

[19 : 03] This too, I see, is from the hand of God. For without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? He says this, when God gives someone wealth and possessions and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their work, this is a gift of God.

They seldom reflect on the days of their life because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart. Or again, so he says, I commend the enjoyment of life because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be joyful.

Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun. It's a far cry from meaningless, I think.

In other words, says Solomon, find the joy, find the joy in life. Eat, drink and be merry, as some translations say.

Not as a way of denying that the rest of life can be hard, but eat, drink and be merry because the rest of life can be hard. Spend your time, he says, working at something that gives you a sense of fulfillment.

[20 : 26] You know, since we have to work, at least let us find ways to work at something which brings us satisfaction, whether that's paid or voluntary. Find the joy, he says.

Find those moments when everything seems at peace in your world, even if you're fully aware it isn't. And why?

Because life is short, says Solomon. Life is fleeting. Life is Hevel. But that fleeting fragility, that makes this life such an incredibly precious gift.

A gift God has given us to enjoy and find fulfillment in. And if we don't make a conscious decision to seek out the things which make this life worthwhile, that bring us and others and ultimately God joy.

Well, says Solomon, it's going to be over before we know it. From one philosopher, Solomon. I want to just quote one of my other favorite sources of wisdom, which is Ferris Bueller.

[21 : 36] If you've seen that film, it's a classic. I think he sums up the book of Ecclesiastes with this quote here. He says, life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.

That's the book of Ecclesiastes in a nutshell there. And so in answer to this question posed earlier, how might God nurture our ability to know joy?

Well, if Solomon's wisdom is anything to go by, if Ferris Bueller is anything to go by, which I think both are, perhaps our prayer might be for God to grow in us a desire to seek out and find those things in life which bring us joy.

Which bring God joy through us. Those things which remind us that God is with us. Yes, God is with us in the bad times, but he's also with us in the good times and has given us things to enjoy as well.

As I said, and I want to make sure we don't lose this. Enjoying life isn't wrong. It doesn't mean pretending it's not depressing or difficult at times, but rather it's because life can be difficult and depressing.

[22 : 50] A person can do nothing better, says Solomon, than to find enjoyment. Indeed, along similar lines, like these words from Rob Bell, who puts it like this.

He says, joy doesn't come from avoiding the pain of life, but going through it and finding enjoyment and meaning beyond it.

And so I wonder, for you as you sit and listen and think this one through, what might finding joy in life look like for you in these days?

What might your equivalent be of eat, drink and be merry? If I'm honest, I don't need an equivalent. That's what I find joy in, eating, drinking and being merry. So I need to carve out more time to do that.

I know that brings me joy. It's biblical. That's okay. It's okay. What about you? What about you? When do you experience, when can you remember really feeling a sense of joy?

[23 : 52] And how might you claim that joy, revisit that joy? How might you access more of those times? Think about what you do with your time, your work, whether it's voluntary stuff, perhaps involved with here, perhaps it's paid work.

What gives you satisfaction? What brings you fulfillment in that? How might you find joy in being productive in retirement or in your studies?

Perhaps in looking after those you care for, whether they're young or they're old. How might you find joy in simply sharing a conversation with those who you sit with or talk on the phone with?

Good timing. Thank you. You see, if Jesus longs to give us joy so that our joy may be complete, it can only be a good thing to ask God to give us ways to enjoy our work, our rest and our play.

And who knows, that may mean God calls us to be brave in stopping some of the things that sap our joy in order to see what God might want us to pick up that will give us that deeper, profound sense of joy and fulfillment.

[25 : 13] Indeed, let's pray.

From God. From God. So if I think how you spend your time, kind of frame of mind perhaps you wake up with in the morning, what you go to bed thinking about.

when you look back on your day, on your weekend, was there sufficient joy? Or was it just a slog?

See, joy is one of the fruit of the Spirit. Joy is God's gift to us. And that means we can ask God for joy. We can request it.

We can ask God to lead us to things which bring us joy. Because the things which bring us joy from God-given things will bring God joy. Just as any parent wants their children to know enjoyment in life, so a Heavenly Father is exactly the same.

[26 : 48] So you might just want, perhaps in your mind's eye, just a place before God, your time, what you do with it, how you spend it, what you're involved with. You may not get all the answers this morning, but perhaps as you do that before God, there's a way of saying, okay, can you help me?

Can you sort me out? Can you help me to drop the things that bring me down in order to find the things that will bring me and you joy in life, God?

Yes, we carry on praying. We carry on working through the things which are difficult, that depress us, that challenge us.

and they will always be there. But in the midst of those things and through those things, the deeper truth is that joy is the thing which surrounds and can wrap up that bleakness in a way which ultimately exudes light instead.

So would you come, Holy Spirit, and give us your joy, we pray.

[28 : 20] Joy which is better than happiness or pleasure. Joy which comes from knowing you, God, are with us in the valleys, but also on the tops of the mountains.

Now that might be a line of prayer that you want to continue as we worship.

And there's people who are willing equally if you're singing, may not be your thing this morning. There's people who will be more than willing to talk and pray things through with you. There's Jane and Marie and Jack who will be out in the foyer.

As we sing, it might just be something as simple as a request to say, I don't know what to ask for, but I know I need more joy. I don't know what that looks like, but I want to ask God for it because I can't manufacture it myself.

That's often where I'm at in life. Maybe that's you. Alternatively, you might just want to sit or you might want to sing. You might want to just use the music as a way of helping you to encounter God, inviting His Spirit to speak with us.

[29 : 45] So I'll be quiet. The band will play. And let's make the most of this time now. When all foundations have been shaken, when I'm left standing in the dark, and all I feel is my heart breaking.

You still reign and you're still God. And when it feels all hope has faded, the heavy questions hit so hard.

And though my soul may feel forsaken, you still reign and you're still God.

You still reign and you're still God. Though I can't see what's before me, I know that I can trust your heart.

And this one truth will be my story. And this one truth will be my story. You still reign and you're still God.

[31 : 35] I will declare that you are with me. Though voices whisper that you're not.

You'll never leave me or forsake me. Because you still reign and you're still God.

Though I can't see what's before me, I know that I can trust your heart. I know that I can trust your heart.

And this one truth will be my story. You still reign and you're still God.

You still reign and you're still God. You still reign and you're still God.

[32 : 57] You still reign and you're still God.

You still reign and you're still God. And when my enemies surround me I'll trust the victory of your cross And fix my eyes upon you, Jesus For you are God and I am all You are good and you are faithful And you have been from the start You're working all things for your glory Cause you still rain and you're still blind

Though I can't see what's before me I know that I can trust your heart And this one truth will be my story You still rain and you're still God Yes, this one truth will be my story You still rain and you're still God You still rain and you're still God You still rain and you're still God You still rain and you're still God Thank you.

Thank you.

An easy one, perhaps a welcome one to consider because just joy might well feel very distant from us, from you, if it's you.

[36 : 19] Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. and hope to our lives. So if you are living with depression, and I know there's a large chunk of us here who are, then asking for joy is not a bad thing.

It is a good thing. And even if we don't feel like asking for joy, because that's where depression has got us down in, then asking God to help us want to ask for joy may well be the right prayer at this stage.

As I say, joy can feel a distant prospect when you can't put your finger on anything that brings you joy in life, perhaps. So start with God where you're at and say, I don't even know if I want joy because life just feels meaningless in that truest sense as we might think of that word.

[38 : 03] So start with that lack of meaning and say, bring me to a place, God, where I want to begin to anticipate and ask for joy. Take me down that route at the pace and in a direction that you know is best for me.

We've just been singing that. I'll walk with you wherever you go. God wants to lead us into joy. So start by asking God, perhaps, to bring us to a place where we want to make that our desire as well.

And it's a long-term thing, perhaps, but I hope being part of this church, this community, I hope you know that it's a warts and all kind of community.

You know, there's no urgency to get fixed or right. There's no pressure. But we, our commitment is that we will walk with you at the pace you're ready to go at.

And even when you go three paces back and it's one pace forward, instead we'll still be alongside you in that as well. As I know you are with me as well.

[39 : 10] So take comfort from that this morning. And I pray for God's joy to rest on each of us in the right dose at the right time.

Amen. Amen. All right. Amen.