

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (20-7-1997 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Christian joy

Acts 13:48,52

Additional Bible reading: Acts 2:41-47; 8:5-8

Introduction

The theme of joy is often present as we read of the early church. The early church was a rejoicing church and a glad church. Luke was obviously very interested in the subject. His Gospel begins and ends with joy. The four canticles – the Magnificat, Benedictus, Nunc Dimittis, and Gloria in excelsis – are from Luke's Gospel. Three of the parables he records are about joy in heaven, and he tells us how Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit. Then in his second book, Acts, Luke tells us of the joy in the Master's church. It was not a rich, popular, prestigious or problem-free church, but it was a joyful one.

Could this be said of churches today? Christians today do not face half of the dangers and difficulties the early Christians faced. We have many more advantages and facilities – but we are not noticeably more joyful. In fact it is arguably the reverse. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that he might have gone into the ministry, but for the fact that the local clergyman's face was like that of an undertaker. In some circles, joy is seen as a mark of spurious religious experience, and not true conversion.

Life which is rooted and maintained by Christ is intended to be a life of deep satisfaction, and that should be evident in the Christian's life and face. This was certainly true of the church in Acts. Many smiles in life do wear off, but the Christian has something to smile about that should never wear off, because the Gospel touches the springs of life.

What is joy? It is not happiness, for happiness depends on circumstances. Joy is independent of circumstances. We have happiness because of what we have. We have joy because of what we are. Happiness comes from things outside. Joy leaps up from within. It is the work of God in the soul. Happiness is affected by life changing on the surface of the ocean. Joy is like the ocean bed, untouched by the wind and the atmosphere. Joy is not superficial exuberance, neither is it humour. It is inner radiance of spirit and the result of being right with God. The soul that is fully yielded to God finds His joy imparted to him. **I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete** (John 15:11).

Joy in knowing Christ

Joy in knowing Christ is continually underlined in the book of Acts. When men forsook their sins and put their trust in Jesus, then joy flooded into their hearts. **When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad** (Acts 13:48). When Philip preached in Samaria and the people turned to Christ, **there was great joy in that city** (Acts 8:8). When the Ethiopian eunuch believed and was baptised, he **went on his way rejoicing** (Acts 8:39). The Philippian jailer heard the word, believed and was baptised, and **he**

was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family (Acts 16:34).

This must be so. To start with we are in the wrong with God, and subject to condemnation. Then Christ says, “Go in peace, your sins which are many are forgiven you”, the burden falls off our back, and we are right with God, accepted into His family. We have nothing to fear, and there is nothing between God and us. Do we go into mourning or sing a solemn dirge? **May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him** (Romans 15:13).

*“God has blotted them out-
I’m happy and glad and free.”*

*“Joy, Joy, Joy, with joy my heart is singing.
My sins are all forgiven,
I’m on my way to heaven.”*

Those who look to him are radiant (Psalm 34:5). Robert Burns said he was “haunted rather than helped” by his religion. It is a pity he had not met authentic Christianity. It does not haunt men, it makes them radiant.

Joy in observing the progress of God’s work

When the early Christians saw or heard of God’s working in people’s lives and churches, there was great joy. Barnabas, arriving in Antioch from Jerusalem, **when he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad** (Acts 11:23). When Barnabas and Paul reported about Gentile conversions they had witnessed, **this news made all the brothers very glad** (Acts 15:3).

There is always great joy when the Gospel spreads. It is one of the great evidences that we understand the Gospel and long for men to come to Christ. We are delighted to hear of its progress. **It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth** (2 John 4). **I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth** (3 John 4).

Speaking of our families and exchanging news is the greatest joy we can share with one another. How well and fit they are, the exams they have passed, their new house, new job, and above all, that one of them has come to the Lord. Is it the same among churches? Do we truly rejoice to hear and to tell of God’s blessing in other churches, or are we more likely to pass on bad news from another church, to spread the word about a split in another church?

It is a challenge to men in the ministry – how much can they rejoice in the success of others in the ministry when they are not receiving the same blessing? Andrew Bonar’s diary for Friday 23rd September 1859 read, “Envy is my hurt and today have been seeking grace to rejoice over the usefulness of others, even where it casts me into the shade.” The early church genuinely rejoiced in the blessing of others and advances in other churches.

Joy in Christian fellowship

In relationship of Christian with Christian and in meeting with fellow Christians when worship is enjoyed, they were joyful. The reason was that they shared so much in common, felt a oneness, and their company meant so much. So there was joy. **Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts** (Acts 2:46). There was such togetherness, and they even shared possessions. The result was gladness and joy.

This togetherness marked the early church. Whenever they met together, joy overflowed. And joy is one of the great advantages any church can have. It is good medicine for any church. It heals rifts among members, creates unity, and makes that church a good advertisement. It makes the church attractive and causes people to want to return. What a tragedy when Christians become known as “killjoys”. In the last century, to be converted was to be known as “becoming serious”. “Some took it very seriously indeed. I wish it were described as becoming joyful” (Hudson Taylor). More flies are caught by honey than by vinegar. Being a Christian is a feast, not a fast.

Joy in adversity

This is the most surprising feature, the most extraordinary factor. Persecution, ostracism, prison and courtrooms were a common experience for the early Christians. **The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name** (Acts 5:41). **The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison... and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God** (Acts 16:22-25).

Jesus told His disciples that they would be “blessed” when they were persecuted. **Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven** (Matthew 5:11,12). **You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions** (Hebrews 10:34). Paul was able to write from his prison cell to the church at Philippi, **Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!** (Philippians 4:4).

There is no clearer proof that joy is in the Lord and is independent of circumstances than this amazing practice of rejoicing in adversity. Right the way through Christian history, not least when men have been jailed, on the day of their execution or burning at the stake, this has been their testimony.

John Wesley, during the 18th century revival, received a letter from the father of a prodigal son who was in York jail and had been converted while in the condemned cell. As the son was taken to his execution, his cheerfulness, composure and countenance amazed the spectators. He had found a joy, which not even the scaffold could take away. Christian joy is indestructible, and independent of everything. We can never lose this joy, and we can never lose Christ.

Joy in knowing the power and presence of the Holy Spirit

The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52). The two things are intimately connected – joy and the Holy Spirit. **For the kingdom of God is ... of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit** (Romans 14:17). It is no accident that when the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, joy was a marked feature of the early church - through His indwelling, authority and being given freedom to work in many lives.

The Holy Spirit provides the sphere in which joy is experienced. He communicates Christ's joy to us. Here is the reason why Christians are joyful in adversity, in fellowship, and in watching with delight the work of God progress. We are not just living on the memory of the joy of conversion, but on a continuing experience of the Holy Spirit. If we have no up-to-date experience of the Holy Spirit, we will be dull Christians. If He does not have free access in our lives, the channels are closed, our lives are impeded. At the centre and core is an uncrucified self. We must yield our lives to the Holy Spirit, and the joy of our salvation will be restored to us. Some of the best hymns were written during times of Revival. Billy Bray said, "If I were put in a barrel, I would cry Hallelujah through the bung-holes."

Conclusion

The church should be orthodox, faithful, loyal, obedient and joyful. Are you rejoicing in the Lord? If your life is joyless, something is wrong and lacking. There is joy in forgiveness, joy in fellowship, joy in seeing the progress of God's work, joy in adversity, and joy when filled with the Holy Spirit.