



The Christ of joy

In spite of all that I have said about the sorrow of Jesus, it would be a mistake to imagine that his life knew no joy, or that he was a stranger to joy and happiness. As Donald Macleod states:

A joyless life would have been a sinful life. Would Jesus have been guilty of the anxiety he forbade in others (Matthew 6:25)? Would he have fallen short of Paul's attainment as one who had learned to be content whatever the circumstances (Philippians 4:11)? Or of the precept to rejoice always (Philippians 4:4)? Could he have been filled with the Spirit and yet not have known the Spirit's joy (Galatians 5:22)? Could he have given rest and relief to others (Matthew 11:28) while remaining depressed and disconsolate himself?

(PC, p171)

Other passages speak explicitly of Jesus' joy.

First, we are told about Christ's joy in the context of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in his life.

In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, *'I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will'* (Luke 10:21).

This passage is important for two contextual reasons. The first is that Jesus has just indicated to the disciples what the source of their joy ought to be. They have returned, stating that the devils were subject to them. Christ's response is a reminder that the power to tread on serpents and scorpions belongs to him. The disciples are not to rejoice in what they are enabled to do, but in that their names are written in Heaven. Then Luke tells us that at that moment, Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit.

This section of Luke's gospel is often called the travel narrative, beginning as it does at 9:51, where Luke says that *"when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem"*. We are not far into this narrative when Luke reminds us of the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of our Lord. It is this Spirit-filled life that produces joy even on the way to the cross, and so it must be for those cross-bearing Christians, who follow in the steps of their Master.

There is also another important contextual consideration. Matthew 11:20-30 parallels Luke 10; apart from the reference to the rejoicing in the Spirit, Christ's words are almost identical in both contexts. But Matthew tells us that Jesus offered this prayer of thanksgiving to the Father in the light of the widespread rejection of his ministry. Jesus *'began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent'* (Matthew 11:20).

Yet that was when Jesus rejoiced in Spirit and said *"Thank you, Father"*. At the very point where others might have walked away saddened and dejected, Jesus rose above the circumstances with a joy that was ministered to him by the Holy Spirit. The joy of the world is often dependent upon circumstances; it is a joy that is conditional upon certain criteria being met. But the spiritual joy that Jesus experienced, and which it is our privilege to experience too, was one that was unconditional, and did not depend on his being in any particular place or with any particular group. It was conditional only upon his being in a particular relationship with his Father. There is something vitally important there for us too. Christian joy is the result of a bond with God, not the result of pleasures, places or even people. It is elation through relation.

Secondly, the parables are windows into the soul of Jesus. We often take the parables as affording insight into Jesus' teaching and work and ministry; and of course they do that. But they also open a window for us into Jesus' emotions.

Take, for example, the parable of Luke 15, told in three stories in response to the complaint of the Pharisees that *'this man receives sinners and eats with them'* (Luke 15:2). Jesus wants us to know the truth that is contained in that complaint. He does, in fact, receive sinners and eat with them. But what does that mean? The answer is in the three-dimensional parable of the chapter, in which he tells the story of a shepherd who finds his lost sheep, a woman who finds her lost coin, and a father who finds his lost son. The common element to each of these stories is the note of joy, as the shepherd says *"Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost"*. The woman says something similar (15:9), and the father immediately begins to celebrate.

So, in contrast to the grumbling and murmuring of the Pharisees is the joy and celebration and exuberant response of those who have recovered and restored what had been lost to them. Christ is telling us that while the Pharisees grumbled in his receiving sinners, he rejoiced to welcome them into his embrace and into his fold and family.

The same note is struck in other parables where the kingdom of heaven is likened to a marriage feast. Matthew 22:1-14 tells of the invitation to the wedding, the rejection of the invitation, the renewal of the invitation, and the need for a wedding garment. But the whole context is one of joy, exuberance, rejoicing. This gospel, Jesus says, is *'my banquet'*. There is rejoicing, festivity, gladness at his table. It is not a place for sadness.

But the parables were also spoken by way of polemic against the legalism of the Pharisees. It was they who grumbled that Jesus received sinners. It was they who complained and said to Jesus *"why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners"* (Luke 5:30). And many of the parables were told to illustrate the glory of the gospel against the joyless legalism of these hypocritical Pharisees. *"They had made religion so impossibly grim and grimly impossible. It grieved Jesus to see how joyless the Law had become to many ordinary folk"* (Hidden Face of Jesus, p94). This is exactly the point made by Max Lucado in the following extract:

All the world religions can be placed in one of two camps: legalism or grace. Humankind does it or God does it. Salvation as a wage based on deeds done – or salvation as a gift based on Christ's death.

A legalist believes the supreme force behind salvation is you. If you look right, speak right, and belong to the right segment of the right group, you will be saved. The brunt of responsibility doesn't lie within God; it lies within you. The result? The outside sparkles. The talk is good and the step is true. But look closely. Listen carefully. Something is missing. What is it? Joy. What's there? Fear (that you won't do enough). Arrogance (that you have done enough). Failure (that you have made a mistake). Spiritual life is not a human endeavour. It is rooted in and orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. Every spiritual achievement is created and energised by God.

(He still moves stones, in Grace for the Moment, p95).

Thirdly, we can take note of the explicit references Jesus makes to his joy in the farewell discourse. He is moving from the Upper Room to Gethsemane, where fellowship will give way to fear and communion will give way to conflict. Yet during that transition, he can talk of joy on two occasions:

"These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

(John 15:11)

"But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves."

(John 17:13)

The first of these references is in direct speech to the disciples; the second is in direct speech to his Father. In the first, Jesus explains that his doctrine has as its specific design that the joy of Christ might be replicated in the disciples, and in the second, he is saying that his intercession is offered within the hearing of the disciples, again so that his joy will be repeated in the hearts of his disciples. And clearly he is concerned that they will rejoice; *'you have sorrow now'* he says, *'but I*

will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (John 16:22; cf. 16:20, 21, 24).

But what is his joy, and how does the upper room, with all the intimation and expectation of suffering, shame and death, become the place in which joy is expressed? This is how the 19th century expositor Charles Ross, in his *The Inner Sanctuary*, expresses it:

It is not merely the joy that he would produce in them – the joy of which he is the author; neither is it the joy, which he feels on their account; but it is the joy which he experiences in knowing himself to be the object of his Father's love.

(*TIS*, p131)

It is only in relation to his Father that Jesus knows joy, both in being the object of God's love and the subject of God's decree. As Don Carson puts it, "*Jesus experienced the joy of a completely fruitful life because he was obedient to his Father, and he desires that his followers share to the greatest extent that same fruitful joy by being utterly obedient to him*" (*Jesus and his Friends*, pp99-100).

This should not surprise us: it was the very thing David prophesied in Psalm 40:8, where it was said of Messiah "*I desire (lit. 'delight') to do your will, O my God*", words cited in Hebrews 10:5-7, with the explanation that "*by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*" (Hebrews 10:10).

So when Jesus talks about his joy, he is telling about the inward dynamic and psychology of his obedient relation to the Father, loved by the Father and delighting to love in return. Or, as Donald Macleod puts it, "*he served not as a slave but as a Son*" (PC, p171).

There is one final passage which is relevant to this theme. Hebrews 12 encourages us to run the Christian race with patience in the following way:

Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

(Hebrews 12:2)

It was, therefore, in the pursuit of a particular joy that Jesus endured the cross and counted its ignominy as nothing. Or, to put it otherwise, great as the suffering and shame of the cross were, the joy that was set before him promised him something even greater, something of infinitely greater worth which made the cross, although supremely agonising, comparatively tolerable. He felt the pain, but endured it for the joy. He felt the shame, but despised it for the joy.

In our running of the Christian race, this is our example. This is what the writer is trying to set before these Christians: 'the persevering, under the influence of faith, in doing the will of God, notwithstanding all the dangers and difficulties in which this may involve us' (Brown, p614). It was the prospect and promise of joy which sustained him, and his present joy was intimately related to the faith he had in these covenant promises that were held out to him by his Father and his God.

Thus A.B. Bruce can say: *Though a man of sorrow, he was even on earth anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows ... Shall we wonder that there was divine gladness in the heat of him who came into this world, not by constraint but willingly, not with a burning sense of wrong, but with a grateful sense of high privilege; and that he had a blessed consciousness of fellowship with his Father, who sent him, during the whole of his pilgrimage through this vale of tears?*

(*The Humiliation of Christ*, p334)

These emotions and affections have their counterpart in our experience too. For us, the fruit of the Spirit is joy (Galatians 5:22). For us, it is possible to experience and have restored to us time and again the joy of salvation (Psalm 51:12). For us, the prayer is "*lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it*" (Psalm 119:35). And for us, the prayer of the apostle Paul is that we will progress and experience '*joy in the faith*' (Philippians 1:25).

At last, what David wrote about the Messiah is what all Christ's children can appropriate to themselves:

My heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

(Psalm 16: 9-11)

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