

## Surprised by Joy

CS Lewis was one of the finest Christian writers and he tells of his conversion to the Christian faith. He was an atheist and also an academic but he came to faith in the God of Jesus Christ. His book, “Surprised by Joy” tells of his pathway to faith.

Surprised by Joy, is the title of today's sermon, for I would like us to consider two individuals who surprise us by their joy.

The first is Habakkuk.

Habakkuk was a minor prophet.

His book is only 3 chapters long and yet they are important chapters for our understanding of being surprised by joy.

He lived about 625 BC.

He was a man who was in a relationship with God. He brought to God the people's prayers and he brought to the people God's responses.

The Babylonians were sweeping westwards and Habakkuk saw them coming. The sands of time were running out fast for Israel.

His country would be destroyed by the Babylonian.

His country and the world were full of violence.

In v1, he cries to the Lord, *“How long O lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen! Violence is everywhere I cry but you do not come to save!”*

Here is a prophet who is absolutely honest with God, his maker. It's good for us also to be honest with God. There may be times for us also when we feel that our prayers have not been heard and we may want to cry out.... *How Long O Lord....*

His prayers seemed to fall on deaf ears.

What was happening in Israel?

V4... The law had become paralysed and there was no justice in his courts. His country was in tatters. It was falling apart.

Then God spoke to him. He told him that he is raising up the Babylonians, a powerful people who will be his instrument. Habakkuk could not see the justice in God's plan to use the Babylonians to destroy his nation.

Then Habakkuk asked the question of the Lord, *“Surely you do not plan to wipe us out...I will go to my watch tower and stand by my guard post to wait for you to answer.”*

Throughout it all God had a plan and his nation would be eventually returned to Jerusalem again.

So this takes us to our passage today, we hear Habakkuk demonstrating the most wonderful faith, and it is a faith this is characterized by joy.

It is an unexpected joy, it is one of the most surprising passages in Scripture.

*Surprised by Joy.*

Knowing that he is surrounded by suffering, that his nation will be crushed like grapes in a wine press, that the fields will yield no food and there will be famine and no crops, no flocks in the field...absolute destruction and what is his response...even though this all happens...even though the worst possible outcome...how will he react?....

*Yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation.*

When we read this, we can only be surprised by his joy.

How can this be? When everything has been taken away, how can we rejoice in the Lord?

Habakkuk does two things.

Firstly, He looks back and he remembers what God has done in the past and as he recalls past glories his heart fills with joy. Past memories of good times of blessings can fill our hearts with joy.

*What about us today?*

Can we look back and see the times of blessing in our lives. For if we can, then this will help us to be surprised by joy.

Secondly, he resolves to delight upon God. The circumstances have changed. His life is going to be very different, but yet he retains his spiritual compass. He doesn't turn his back on God, but he leans into God for strength.

*Even though everything has gone, yet I will still rejoice in the Lord.*

Matthew Henry writes, *“Those who when they were full enjoyed God in all, when they are emptied can enjoy all in God”.*

God is not just for Christmas, He is also the God of Easter. He is there for us in the happy and the sad times.

He is there in the birth of his Son in Bethlehem and he is there on the cross of his Son in Calvary. Its important for us to grasp this point.

This leads us now to our second passage from Scripture from Philippians.

In the first century, Philippi was the chief city of the western part of Macedonia. The Apostle Paul was a prisoner in Rome. This comes late on his ministry and from his prison cell he writes this letter to encourage the Philippian church.

He loved this church; in fact he planted it and he saw himself as a father figure to it. So, he is warm in his letter and encouraging to them.

Initially he was led to Philippi through a vision where he saw a man from Macedonia standing and telling him to come and help them in Macedonia.

When he arrived, he had a hard time in Philippi through opposition and persecution, and yet he had great love for his brothers and sisters in Christ.

From a small seed this church grew into being a flourishing church in the first century.

Here we are again surprised by joy.

Despite being chained for the gospel, he is able to say *rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice.*

Despite being persecuted, beaten, shipwrecked, lashed and jailed, Paul can still say *rejoice in the Lord.*

*Our joy must be found in the Lord.*

When we look to him and see what he has done, when we look to his creation our hearts sing with joy...for the beauty of the earth, and indeed at this time of year with such spectacular colours, let us rejoice in the Creator, and there are so many ways for us to rejoice in the Lord. We rejoice through our senses, through our sight when we behold beauty...it is from the Lord, let us rejoice in the Creator. When we hear marvellous music, let us rejoice in the One who has given us the minds and ability to produce such music. Let us rejoice with our senses of smell and taste, that we are blessed with wonderful food and God has given us and provided for us in so many ways.

Let us rejoice that he has given us the sense of touch and although restricted at this time, there will be a day when we will be able to hug each other and to hold a new born baby.

So, when Paul says *rejoice in the Lord*, it is an umbrella statement for so many things that God has given to us, that we can look to Him and say *thank you for all these blessings, we can rejoice in you Lord*.

Paul is also reminding us that there is enough of God to bless us with his presence even in the worst of times and we can look to him like Habakkuk and say *Lord thank you, even when everything is taken from me, You are still there to love and hold me*.

The rest of the passage is Paul encouraging his people to live a life that rejoices in the Lord. For it is not just about our words or our prayers or our hymn singing, it is our very lives.

It's who we are as individuals, for this is what really matters to God. That we rejoice in him by being the best we can and offering Him our lives as a living sacrifice.

So briefly look at what Paul would want us to do. What does a life that rejoices in the Lord look like?

Be people of prayer...don't worry about things, rather take it to God in prayer. He is delighted when we as his children come to him and call on him as our Heavenly Father. Tell him what you need and thank him for what he Has done. This is what it means to rejoice in the Lord, to give God, our Creator his rightful place.

“There is a care of diligence which is our duty, but there is also a care of distrust which is our sin and folly”.

Prayer is the way to peace. Prayer opens the doors of blessing, it allows God's spirit to come into our lives. The weakness of the Christian church today is our lack and our unwillingness to spend time in prayer.

Prayer is where we meet with God, and prayer is our opportunity to rejoice in God, and with God.

The peace that we find in prayer will keep our minds focussed on God and so keep our spirits raised.

The rest of the passage is a wonderful encouragement to be God's people. To be Christian people. Fix your thoughts on what is honourable and true. Seek the higher things in life. Be the best you can. This is what Paul is telling the church.

Look up and not down, and fix your thoughts on things that are excellent and worthy of praise, and keep putting into practice all these things that the bible teaches us. This is what to be filled with joy looks like.

So, today we have looked at the second fruit of the spirit JOY and we have discovered that joy is not merely happiness but joy is deeper, it is a spiritual gift given to those who trust in Jesus.

Because when we trust him, his spirit comes into our lives and it is a spirit of Joy.

His life radiated joy.

He attracted people to him all the time, and his life was an explosion of joy. A joy which came from his relationship with his Father. A joy which he came to earth to share and to bring us into that same joy.

There is a beautiful verse in the bible which says *“For joy set before him, he endured the cross”*.

Jesus knew of the joy was that set before him, his face was cast in this direction.

Friends let us also look to the joy that is set before us. Look ahead to those moments in the future when you will know God's blessing in our lives.

The ultimate joy, of course, is heaven, and as Christians we believe in a bigger perspective to life, and that the years we have are only a fraction of what lies ahead in God's presence, and that should bring us joy.

Not that we wish our days away here on earth but that we have a quiet confidence in everything being restored, in the love, and mercy of God.

Go forward rejoicing and trusting in his eternal care,

Amen.