

Poulner Baptist Chapel 8th August 2010

Psalm 66 – A Life of Joy

Tonight, we are going to look at Psalm 66, which I consider to be a prayerful song of ecstatic joy – describing a life of overwhelming joy that exists between an Almighty God and one of His followers... So please do turn to that Psalm in your bibles.

Charles Spurgeon said of this Psalm *"it is a marvellous psalm just to read; but set to suitable music, it must have been one of the noblest strains ever heard by the Jewish people."*

The first impression I get from this Psalm is that there is a sense of a deep intimacy between God and the Psalmist. Part of that intimacy and that relationship was joy, true joy. Let us see together from Psalm 66, where joy fitted into the life of the Psalmist. The author was probably King David and we have no reason to doubt that. Then we will go on to discover what I think joy actually is, before discussing what is one of the greatest barriers to joy. Then finally, we will see where joy is to fit into our life.

1. The Psalmist and Joy!

a. Joy and the Earth (vs. 1-4)

*1 Shout with joy to God, all the earth!
2 Sing the glory of his name;
make his praise glorious!
3 Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!
So great is your power
that your enemies cringe before you.
4 All the earth bows down to you;
they sing praise to you,
they sing praise to your name."
Selah*

Throughout the history of Israel, the majority of scribes and leaders of Israel usually gave praise to God in silence, in meditation and solemnity. This was of course acceptable to God and proper to do so.

But here, on this occasion, first of all for the Psalmist, among a great number of people, the whole earth is encouraged to shout with exuberant joy to God. It is quite natural for great crowds of people to shout in harmony. If praise is to be widespread, it must be vocal; joyful sounds stir the soul and cause great thanksgiving spread throughout the people. Of course everybody is different and each person praises differently! Some people are naturally loud and others naturally quiet! Whatever your own style of praise, God is to be praised in all styles and with both the voice and the heart. The whole earth, everything and everyone, is encouraged to sing of the glory and power of God!

The psalmist encourages worshippers to turn their praises of joy to God alone! Turning in joy and admiration to a God who one day will cause all the earth to fear and tremble before him. For those who are enemies of God, who have never believed in him, never followed Jesus Christ, they too will be forced into submitting worship to Him before departing His presence forever. They will be forced to worship Him, due to His joyful magnificence and through forced submission, not because they choose to.

But their worship will not be like those who decided to follow Jesus Christ during their earthly life. The worship of all those who truly believe in Him, following Him intimately – their worship will be of truth, love, service and pure unadulterated joy. Their reward will be to praise God eternally.

b. Joy and the nation of Israel (vs. 5-12).

*5 Come and see what God has done,
how awesome his works in man's behalf!*

*6 He turned the sea into dry land,
they passed through the waters on foot—
come, let us rejoice in him.*

*7 He rules forever by his power,
his eyes watch the nations—
let not the rebellious rise up against him.*

Selah

*8 Praise our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard;*

*9 he has preserved our lives
and kept our feet from slipping.*

*10 For you, O God, tested us;
you refined us like silver.*

*11 You brought us into prison
and laid burdens on our backs.*

*12 You let men ride over our heads;
we went through fire and water,
but you brought us to a place of abundance.*

The psalmist now goes on to exhort great communal joy because of what God has done for Israel. He has done mighty works for his people. Did not God start the nation of Israel from Abraham in Genesis? Had not God led His people out of exile in Egypt by parting the Red Sea with His mighty hand so that his people could walk to freedom? Does not God rule forever by his mighty power and His outstretched hand? God watched over that nation of Israel, making covenants with Abraham and Moses, promising that He will be their God and they will be His people. The people of Israel were to be a people of joy, because they could look and see what God had done for them, and had a sure hope of what He would do for them in the future. They were His and He was theirs – a cause for great joy!

The psalmist continues to encourage the people to exhibit joyfully. God kept the feet of Israel from slipping. Even though Israel often turned their back on Him, God always kept a remnant of true believers for Himself. God sent Israel into exile under oppressive enemies, as punishment for their rebellious ways! Eventually He led them into the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey.

That is why Israel could have exultant joy because of the hope they had in their God and the testimony they could give as a nation under their God!.

Indeed, in the book of Leviticus, which is little read these days in Christian circles, in 9:24 we read, "Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for **joy** and fell facedown." How often have you heard joy linked with the book of Leviticus? WOW!! The Psalmist would certainly have been aware of that!

c. Joy and the psalmist (vs. 13 -20)

*13 I will come to your temple with burnt offerings
and fulfill my vows to you-*

*14 vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke
when I was in trouble.*

*15 I will sacrifice fat animals to you
and an offering of rams;*

I will offer bulls and goats.

Selah

*16 Come and listen, all you who fear God;
let me tell you what he has done for me.*

*17 I cried out to him with my mouth;
his praise was on my tongue.*

*18 If I had cherished sin in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened;*

*19 but God has surely listened
and heard my voice in prayer.*

*20 Praise be to God,
who has not rejected my prayer
or withheld his love from me!*

Thirdly, now after joy as a community, the Psalmist turns to himself and gets personal! His own joy starts with a sacrifice of vows and burnt offerings - a sacrifice, which costs him something. The psalmist has given promises to God and he wants to fulfil those promises before his God. Because of his great joy, the psalmist tells others of the source of his joy. He gives testimony to the love of God: how he confessed his sins to God, and how God had listened to him and heard his prayers. The Psalmist told the people to come and "Listen to what God has done for me." They had all seen God's work, but they also needed to hear

that He was a gracious God! The psalmist has developed an intimate relationship with Almighty God, which is revealed in the joy of the psalmist through sacrifice, testimony and praise.

2. What is joy?

Now that is all very well you may be thinking, but just what is joy? Is joy merely a form of bloated happiness, or is it more? Joy is not going around everywhere and at all times with a silly grin on your face! That kind of joy is dependent upon circumstances and feelings! The type of joy the Psalmist was talking about, was to a certain degree dependent upon circumstances and feelings but he was also talking about a deeper, inner joy that is not! The source, object and target of the Psalmist's joy, was God and God alone! That kind of joy, however, is not to be confused with mere pleasure or feeling good! That joy was a way of life and it permeates every facet of the person and not just at an emotional level.

To enhance that thought, hear what C.S. Lewis once wrote: "Joy is never in our power, and pleasure is. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted true joy would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasure in the world." As Christians, we are all instruments in the orchestra of God's joy. Does that describe your experience of joy?

As humans, we feel happiness or pleasure depending on our circumstances, while true internal, biblical joy is always separated from our circumstances and is a heartfelt response that endures regardless of circumstances. The world says happiness is looking out for number one, look out for your own interests and negotiate your own personal good in all you do and at all times. The world says the greatest good is your own personal happiness! They also mistakenly call that joy. But that is not true joy! That kind of happiness or type of joy doesn't last long so the perpetual search for happiness continues in a circle – like a dog chasing its tail. Now I am not saying happiness is a bad thing, but in comparison to true joy – well there really is no comparison!

True joy as we have seen results from praise, testimony and sacrifice! Joy in the

bible is more to do with peace and salvation rather than just an emotional state! Over and over again, joy is mentioned with peace and salvation. Joy is always for the good of others, not for our own selfish gain. When we give away our will, for the sake of others, we receive the joy that Jesus desired for us. Happiness and joy are radically different.

True joy is never an end in itself. It is only as we make Jesus Christ our overwhelming first priority, that true joy, almost without our knowing it, comes. The source, object and target of our joy as Christians, is to be Jesus Christ and Him alone! Where Jesus is glorified in the power of the Holy Spirit, so is the Father and this pure, unadulterated joy is released upon us and in us! If we seek joy for joy's sake alone, we will mislay it, because it cannot be caught. People of the world seek mere happiness, which is a form of anemic joy. The happiness industry is big business! "Me, me, me" they cry when in fact, true joy is "Jesus, Jesus and yet more Jesus!" True and unbridled joy, is given only by Jesus Christ and we receive it by serving Him and Him alone.

3. Joy and Suffering

I am aware that there are all sorts of barriers to having and exhibiting true joy. One of the principle things that will often hamper a life of joy is suffering. I am not that naïve and to say otherwise would be to deny human experience.

We all suffer in some way. I am sure some of you know very well from personal experience, just as I do. In the New Testament, joy is often associated with all kinds of suffering. One day soon though, we will have perfect bodies and full health. One day there will be no more persecution, terrorism, missiles, guns, wars or bombs. No more will humanity's inhumanity to humanity be allowed. No more pain. No more sickness. No more death. No more suffering. No more sin. No more evil of any kind!

Suffering of any kind leaves some sort of scar or mark. Do you have scars? Physical, emotional or mental scars due to sickness. Perhaps you are scarred because somebody else sinned against you or as a result of your own sins? Scars come as a result of human life and experiences. Much like a house that

has been lived in. Scratches visible in the paintwork. Windows, which are broken or cracked. Dents and knocks in the walls. Our human bodies are the same. Yet... Yet... One glorious day all those things will be gone!! Vanished!! Perfection attained and with exultant joy, it is to the glory of God and His majestic doing, that this will occur. Do you believe it? Do you live it? Salvation is to be your joy, as you are an instrument in the orchestra of God's joy! If you keep forgetting, put Psalm 66v1-2 and tape it to the bathroom mirror!

4. Applying it to ourselves.

Now, finally, we come to ourselves and what does all this have to do with us! If the psalmist's intimate relationship with God and life of joy involved sacrifice, testimony and praise, so that is also the key to our own joy! Jesus prayed that his disciples would have joy: "I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them" (John 17:13). WOW! And not only for his 12 disciples, but also for all those who profess to follow Him!

As I look around in my daily life, I see faces and eyes devoid of joy. When I look into their eyes, I see a hunger and thirst for joy and imagine how they have searched in their journey of life for true joy. Whether that is through materialism, drugs, sex, alcohol, the search for true joy continues. Sadly that also includes people who would profess to be Christian.

If we are honest, sometimes we don't feel as if joy is part of us. We look around at the world we live in and see all the misery and injustice; we see human life being wasted by cancer and HIV Aids, and we don't feel very joyful. But when we do that, we are confusing happiness and true joy. If we have lost the joy of our Christian life, we need to put back into perspective just what God is calling us to do, remember what He has done for us, look ahead to the promises He has made us and consider if Jesus Christ is still truly first in our lives.

As Christians, we can never truly lose joy, but we can mislay it if our priorities get jumbled up. Once we make a conscious decision to claim the joy hidden in the midst of all kinds of suffering, life becomes a celebration. Joy never denies

the sadness, but transforms it into a fertile soil for yet further joy. Joy unbounded if you like! Joy is a relationship – it is Jesus Over Yourself. True Joy is the result of being in an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and Him alone. Joy stems from seeking to obey God in all things and through all facets of human experience! The joy of Jesus Christ is transferred to us as we enter into a personal relationship with him and go about the task of serving him in this world. Joy is to be a quality about us, just as it was a quality of the Lord Jesus Christ, the apostles and of the New Testament church. We are his disciples, his followers, and we are to practice joy! Salvation is your joy, and your joy is to be your salvation dancing in action! Joy was sacrifice, testimony and praise to the Psalmist. It was in the life of Jesus Christ and therefore it is to be for us as well if we call ourselves His followers.

a. Praise - Firstly, there is Praise! Praising God lifts the heart, soul and spirit when we are feeling down. The psalmist praised God, and there was great joy in his heart. He had many reasons to praise God, God listened to His prayers, took his sacrifices and worship and forgave him when he had confessed his sins. God had not withheld his love from him. Surely the praise of God's people should cause great joy to be spread amongst them. Now if you want to praise God quietly that is fine! If you want to praise God loudly, that also is fine! Let us not decry each other's way of praising God but be joyful simply that God is being praised!

Praising God is not simply to be going through the motions, because praising God is to be a sacrifice! It is to be done with effort and not complacency! Praising God the Father joyfully through Jesus Christ the Son, regardless of our feelings, emotions, situations and circumstances. As part of an intimate relationship with God, it can only be done through the comforting and encouraging power of the Holy Spirit who lives inside all Christians! Praise, is a reflection of the inner joy of both the individual believer and the community of believers!

b. Testimony, - Secondly there are testimonies! Testimonies and stories such as that given tonight by Andy! Testimonies telling people of what Almighty God has done should cause great joy in both them and us. Hearing people talk about

what God has done for them should cause every one of us to have even greater joy. Telling others of God's mercy, grace and love is also to be part of our joy. The joy of God bubbling inside of us and demanding that we praise God the Father, through God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit. Joy is praise in action! Joy also comes from encouraging others, urging others on to grow in faith and being encouraged to do likewise!

c. Sacrifice - Then thirdly, there is sacrifice. The psalmist never presented a starving goat to God as a sacrifice, but always well fed and perfect animals of the very best fields. In the book of Leviticus, all sacrificial animals were to be perfect – without spot, stain or blemish! We are no longer required to make sacrifices and offerings in accordance with the book of Leviticus, because of the sacrificial work of Jesus on the cross.

But we are required to make sacrifices, indeed our whole lives as Christians is to be sacrificial! Making sacrifices takes effort, no room for complacency and shows gratitude to God in action. It means that we should always give our best to God – both as individuals and as a community. Joy derives from giving all things to God. It could be sacrifices of praise as commanded by the writer to the Hebrews. It could be a sacrifice of time and money given to serving! One of the hallmarks of the early church was true joy and members of the early church sacrificed time and material possessions. Where somebody was in need, they fulfilled that need as soon as they could. They were radical in their sacrificial giving of time and possessions. Are we? The New Testament church made sure that giving was done and that the poor, the oppressed, the lonely and the widows were taken care of. People gave sacrificially. When anybody was in need, another member of the church fulfilled that need: physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual needs. That is to be one of the hallmarks of a joyful church and not just at a local level here in Poulner but a statement about the global church!

Conclusion

In Hebrews 12v2 we read this "Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the **joy** that was set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Jesus Christ, the Son of God and our saviour is now experiencing glorious joy in all senses of the word!

As I conclude, let's go to the end of the Bible and let me read to you Revelation 21:4 - *"God will wipe away our tears. There will be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying and no more pain, for former things have passed away."* What a gloriously joyful day it will be for those of us who love Him now. Jesus Christ Himself, caressing our faces in His own hands, and wiping away our tears. We often think of tears as meaning sorrow. But tears can also be tears of overwhelming joy! WOW! What a day, that will be!! We will enter those gates with tremendous joy.

I finish with this quote from CS Lewis' last book of the Narnia Tales, "The Last Battle": *"But for them it was only the beginning of the real story ... which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."* A life of pure, unadulterated and unending joy awaits you and I if we follow Jesus Christ alone and persevere to the end!

If you haven't that true joy because you don't know Jesus personally, come and see one of us after the service. But if you are a believer here tonight, go out into the week with joy, knowing and remembering that salvation is your joy resting in God and joy is your salvation dancing in communion with peace! Let us go, both as individuals and a community of believers, practising joy by showing joy in action, through obedient service to God by way of testimony, praise and sacrifice! Go and see where joyful praises, joyful testimonies about God and joyful sacrificing takes you! The secret to having true biblical joy is beginning and developing an intimate relationship with God, which involves praise, testimonies and sacrifice – all key elements in the life of all those who would call themselves followers of Jesus Christ. Go into this week, knowing you are indeed instruments in the orchestra of God's exultant joy