

In God's Presence there is fullness of Joy Luke 2:8-20; Psalm 16:5-11

Do you know that in the church, Christians as children of the Most High God, that, we are to be marked by contagious and unceasing joy? It's true! It was CS Lewis who said that 'JOY is the serious business of heaven'. Another wrote "Joy is the atmosphere of heaven and the reality of His presence on earth." And we are supposed to be marked by this contagious and unceasing joy from heaven on earth- even though life at this time of the year brings more heat with summer, busyness, tiredness and often increased levels of stress as we approach the Christmas season. So isn't it great that through the Holy Spirit we have access to an unending supply of joy that comes from the wellspring of restored relationship with our heavenly Father. And God longs to fill us with his joy that we might live the abundant life Jesus died to give us, who longs to make us children fashioned in the image of our Father that we might share his unending joy to a world that is without hope- the eternal life saving hope that we have through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is my prayer and desire that each one of us this morning may discover and even receive a greater portion of joy made available to us through the Spirit as we encounter the heart of our heavenly Father in the build up to Christmas.

By the grace of God, we have a wonderful inheritance of eternal and tangible relationship, which is a true, real and certain relationship with our heavenly Father. Psalm 16:5-6 that we have read from says, "*Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.*" And later in verse 11 David the author of this Psalm in describing the joy of the total security that God's faithful care provides speaks of himself and of the actual life that he himself enjoys when he writes, "*You make known to me the path of life; you fill me with joy in your presence at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*" Another version puts it like this, "*in your presence there is fullness of joy*".

Fullness here means abundance or satiety as in when you've had a very good meal and filled your stomach with the right amount so that you have satisfied your hunger without making yourself sick which is what we call 'satiety'. You have enjoyed the satisfaction and benefit of a good meal and your stomach is able to chime in with an Amen along with the rest of your being and body that is blessed by the nutrients, quality and right quantity of the food.

Over and above talk of a fine and satisfactory meal, God has chosen and given the wonderful inheritance of his presence to us. God's people Israel knew what it was to centre their worship and gatherings around the presence of God. For it was His presence, after being delivered from the bondage of slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt, that had guided them through the Sinai wilderness via a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. It was His presence that won battles for them beginning with the Amalekites in the wilderness and continued throughout their history. And it was God's presence within the tabernacle and then the temple once it was built in Jerusalem that was so powerful between the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant which resided in the Holy of Holies. God's presence to Israel in these real and tangible ways was the sign that He was both with them and for them.

And with regards to His presence this important verse from Psalm 16(11) tells us that in the presence of God *"there is fullness of joy."* Let's take a moment to just imagine further, beyond our stomachs, what the fullness of joy looks and feels like. What would it be like to have a real encounter with the fullness of joy today? Especially when you consider that in the fullness of joy there is no sorrow, there is no worry, doubt or fear. Instead, in the fullness of joy there is abundant life, peace, freedom and love.

Psalm 43:4 says, *"Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy."* It was from the psalmist's own real and tangible experience of consistent encounters with the presence of God our heavenly Father that had him proclaiming that his God is the sole source of *"exceeding joy"* in this life on this earth. And the continuing sense that I pick up from God's word and the word of his servants is that it is only in spending time going to His altars will we experience the joy that is our portion. Only in his presence will the joy of the Lord truly become our strength (**Nehemiah 8:10**).

Heavenly joy is an essential element to the Christian life. Joy isn't something we are created to live without. What oxygen is to our body so that we might live- joy is to our spirit. It isn't a pursuit secondary to other pursuits. It is a cornerstone on which we live lives that reflect the goodness, grace, love and reality of our heavenly Father in spite of the daily circumstances that we find ourselves in. Joy is meant to be the mouthpiece by which we declare how wonderful our relationship with God truly is.

We have a great illustration of this in the shepherds from our reading in Luke today. What they had heard and seen and therefore experienced served to transform their lives as lowly shepherds from the bottom strata of social and religious order of Israelite society because in their occupation they were considered to be untrustworthy and ceremonially unclean. Picture then these 'lowly' Shepherds out in the field tending their sheep, first receiving the good news from the angel in Luke 2:8-11 and then actually going to be in the presence of the baby Jesus... From there lowly position out in the fields with their sheep where they experienced fear in the presence of the angels and the glory of the Lord shining all around them, to the stable with Jesus and the animals around the manger they were in the presence of the great joy for all people. Then after they had received their filling in his presence, what do they do? They head off to spread the word to one and all that they met. Filled with the presence of God's joy their heartfelt response was with their mouths to declare just how wonderful their and our relationship with God truly with their glorifying praise of God, having seen, heard and been deeply inwardly touched by the good news that had caused them great joy!

In his book *In Our Joy* John Piper writes,

"But when God gives the radical change of new birth and repentance, Jesus himself becomes our supreme treasure."

And this treasure is no fool's gold but pure unadulterated joy.

So today let us be encouraged to spend time encountering the fullness of joy that can only be found in the presence of God. Allow God to bring a radical change of new birth and repentance that positions Christ as your supreme treasure. And in having done that we might then pursue heavenly joy, that you and I might demonstrate the surpassing kindness of our heavenly Father to a world that is desperately seeking what can only be found in a restored relationship with him. To apply this to your life and do this in a practical way I would encourage you in these following ways:

Application

1. We can Meditate or dwell on the fullness of joy available in the presence of God. Do this by picking up the Bible, reading it, getting in to it in such a way that we allow Scripture to stir up a desire to encounter the joy of the Lord today. Listen and open the ears of your hearts as we read again...

"You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." Psalm 16:11

"Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy." Psalm 43:4

"The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance." Psalm 16:5-6.

Now that we've dwelt and the desire to encounter the Lord's joy might be beginning to stir let's now...

2. Ask the Lord to reveal his nearness. God is never far from you and me. His presence is with you and me. He longs to make himself known. Simply rest in the truth of his nearness and allow him to reveal himself to you. Listen now, for.. *"Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God."* Psalm 84:3

And now that we've asked the Lord to reveal his nearness, let us now...

3. Ask God to guide you into the fullness of joy available in his presence. Cast off all other cares, doubts, worries and concerns so that we might with a sole focus of heart Ask God to fill each one of us with abundant joy that you and I might live today declaring his goodness to the world around us. Listen, Jesus says...

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." John 10:10

"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

"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." John 15:11

Asking God to guide us into the fullness of His joy is life giving and able to be experienced today just as it was for the psalmist who I'd say is definitely a glass half full type of guy because he is not given up to the realm or the place of death v. 10. That is not his faith filled focus for life. On the contrary, in v.11 he has had made known the path of life. That's why in verse 9 his heart is glad and his tongue rejoices because he knows that death in this life is not the end, so that in this life he can truly and honestly declare that "In your presence is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore" v.11. This God, his great Lord is in the business of life not death.

This God's presence is filled with joy and pleasures forever. All of our beings—kidneys/organs, heart, pulse, our whole bodies—are claimed for this God who calls us to reject all other so called holy and mighty ones, and to give ourselves over to this God only. Jesus is alive, and so can we be if we live in the power and gift of this joyful and pleasurable God. You and I can choose to receive this same gift just as the shepherds did.

For them we know that seeing was believing! And being in the presence of God in man had the affect of moving their hearts from being filled with fear when the angel first appeared to being filled with joy. And what did joy look like manifested on the outside by the shepherds...opening their mouth's to spread the word to everyone they met to tell them about the good news of the birth of a baby in Bethlehem that night who was none other than the long awaited Messiah of Israel, Saviour of the world and Lord of the universe. And if they weren't speaking as an outflow of the effect of being filled with joy in the presence of God they were glorifying and praising God.

It would be wonderful at the conclusion of all our church services and fellowship meetings if we too could go away filled with the peace and joy of our salvation, overflowing with the hope of glory in our hearts having come together to worship God, to be in his presence connecting with God in a real and tangible way along with the fellowship of one another.

However my concern would be that church might be not be like this for you because it remains just another meeting, no different from that of your social club, hobby or special interest group, your community service organisation or historical society, instead of being the tangible and real experience of the church worshipping together as a living body and filled with the very real life giving Spirit of Jesus Christ the head of the Church in the presence of God.

My desire is that as the body of Christ we would grow in our knowledge of God's nearness. My hope is that we would then walk in the fullness of relationship with our heavenly Father available to us on the earth. And I pray that as we do we would grow in our reflection of God's goodness to a world that longs to know him. May you pursue the presence of God with greater fervour as you go throughout your day- each and every day. May you experience his nearness and live your life with the joy of the Lord as your strength, because...**In God's Presence there is fullness of Joy!**