

COLLECTIVE

Life in the Spirit series (Lesson 8): Fruit of the Spirit – Joy (Part 2)

Read: Galatians 5:16-25

For our CG lessons this year, we will focus primarily on Life in the Spirit from Galatians 5. In our previous lesson, we learnt about the 2nd Fruit of the Spirit – Joy. Today, we continue on the 2nd part of our study on Joy: -

Joy Is Having a Feast

Joy, as part of the fruit of the Spirit, is a New Testament word. Of course, and as we've seen, Paul uses it a lot. But it is also prominent in the Old Testament. In fact, the people of Israel were commanded to rejoice and be joyful! So many of their songs in the book of Psalms call on the people to celebrate, sing, rejoice, praise, give thanks, etc. Joy is very much in the air (of course, it goes alongside some very serious lament and protest too, since life could sometimes be as tough for them as it can be for us).

There were three annual festivals in Israel—Passover along with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles. You can read about them in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16. These were opportunities for all of the people to have some holiday, since they were told not to work (in addition to the regular weekly Sabbath day, of course). But more than that, they were told to rejoice. “Rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name and “Be joyful at your festival” (Deuteronomy 16:11, 14). God's overflowing blessing each year should produce overflowing joy—with celebration, eating, drinking, and rejoicing.

The Old Testament has no embarrassment about celebrating the good gifts of God. Whatever God gives is to be received with thanksgiving and joy. That could include: the gift of the law; the annual gift of harvests; the word of God through the prophets; the building of the temple; a new king; and all the ordinary gifts of everyday life, such as work, love, marriage, beauty, nature, bread, and wine. There is so much to give thanks for, so much to give us joy. Therefore, as Christians, we shouldn't become so spiritual that we forget to take real pleasure in the ordinary gifts of God and don't allow ourselves to be filled to overflowing with joy.

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However, having affirmed that point very strongly, we should also notice that in the Old Testament the earthly joy of feasting together as an act of joyful thanks to God is protected and purified in two ways:-

1. **Joy must be morally clean.** God warned Israel not to be tempted by the kind of debauched “joy” of the Canaanite festivals, which included sexual immorality, drunkenness, gluttony, and idolatry. They had two terrible object lessons about where that kind of sinful “joy” could lead. First, there was the wild orgy that happened at the foot of Mount Sinai while Moses was on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments (recorded in Exodus 32–34). And the second was in Moab, when they were tempted into immorality at Baal Peor on the advice of the pagan seer Balaam (Numbers 25; 31:16). By contrast with such sinful excess, Israel’s feasts were to be full of fun and food, but not full of drunken immorality. They were to be occasions that the whole family could enjoy together without embarrassment (Deuteronomy 16:14).

Are we able to celebrate our joy as Christians like that? We will, if we follow the example of Jesus himself, who was able to enjoy a good party, a wedding banquet, and eating with his friends (including many people that nobody else would eat with). “The Son of Man came eating and drinking,” he once said, when people contrasted him with John the Baptist and criticized him for eating with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners (Matthew 11:19). Jesus could enjoy a good feast of food and drink without condoning sin and immorality.

And that is the message of the rest of the New Testament too. The Bible does not forbid drinking wine, but it does forbid drunkenness (1 Corinthians 5:11; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Peter 4:3). It does not forbid enjoying our food, but it does condemn gluttony (Proverbs 23:20-21; Titus 1:12). It does not forbid humor and laughter, but it does forbid obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking (Ephesians 5:4)—the sort that is filthy or hurtful to others. The Bible gives us abundant room and reasons for joy, but warns us against letting celebration sink into degradation.

2. **Joy must also include “thinking others”.** God commanded the Israelites to have their festivals, to take time off, to have great parties with lots of food and drink—but he also told them to make sure that nobody got left out. This is emphasized twice in Deuteronomy’s instructions for the festivals.

“And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows living among you.” (Deuteronomy 16:11)

In other words, Israelite family members were not to enjoy a big feast while all the servants did the hard work. And they were to take particular care to include those who did not have land of their own to harvest (Levites and foreigners), and to include those who did not have families to provide for them (orphans and widows).

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One concrete example of this principle in action is found in Nehemiah 8. The people of Israel had returned from exile to Judah. Nehemiah had led them in rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. Then he led them in a great occasion of covenant renewal. As part of that, Ezra read the law aloud to the people and the Levites translated and explained it to them so they could all understand it. When the people began to weep (probably because of conviction of their sin and failure), Nehemiah and Ezra encouraged them not to weep, but to rejoice on this great occasion of returning to the Lord and his covenant. Nehemiah told the people to go and enjoy party food and celebrate! But, he added, make sure you provide for those who don't have any food and drink of their own. Nobody should be left out. "Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength'" (Nehemiah 8:10).

So the joy that is the fruit of the Spirit, if we think of it in the light of the Bible, can include the sheer joy of eating and drinking together. Joy is a feast. No wonder Jesus used that picture to describe the future that we will enjoy with him in the new creation, in the messianic banquet. But our feasting needs to reflect the joy of the Holy Spirit, and so it will be clean and wholesome and not tainted with immorality, greed, gluttony, or excess. And it will be inclusive, making sure that all those who belong to the family of God are included, and not just those we happen to like.

Discussion/Reflection

What is your definition of joy?

Is the nature of your joy self-centred or thinking others?