

Digging Deeper : Christian Hedonism

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (produced in 1648 during the Commonwealth and still used by several denominations) begins:

Quest 1. What is the chief end of man?

Ans : Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

(Rom 11.36, 1 Cor 10.31, Ps 73.24-28 & Jn 17.21-23 are offered in support.)

The American reformed baptist pastor, John Piper, has suggested that it would be more correct to say that we glorify God **by** enjoying him forever. In his book *Desiring God*, he coined the phrase *Christian Hedonism*. This has been criticised for various reasons. You may feel that there is not enough background here to come to an informed view but you might like to discuss the following.

First, the phrase Christian Hedonism has been criticised because it is likely to mislead people into drawing an incorrect parallel with Hedonism. Hedonism is the idea that we live simply for pleasure and seems to be what motivates many people in our world today. Piper defends his phrase by saying it is deliberately provocative. What do you think of the arguments for and against this? Is the term likely to mislead people and can you see any dangers in it or is this an over-reaction to a snappy title?

Secondly, Piper seems to put the focus on us and our enjoyment rather than on God. What to you seems to be the difference, if any, between the original Westminster answer and Piper's change to it?

Thirdly, one of Piper's expressions is "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him". Critics say that this makes God somehow dependent upon our satisfaction for His glorification. What do you think of this criticism? (The arguments on this point can get quite deep because it raises questions about the extent to which glory is an eternal attribute of God and whether it is in any sense reliant upon His creations glorifying Him.)

David Phillips, April 2012

The Fruit of the Spirit is ... joy ...

Bible Study 2 on Gal 5.22-23



The Biblical word for this fruit of the spirit is *chara* and the related verb is *chairo*. They are usually translated as joy and rejoice.

The word *charis* is also related. It is usually translated as grace having the root idea of looking with pleasure, or favourably, on those who are undeserving of such.

1 Joy in heaven

Read Luke ch 15 vv 1-7 (but at home in preparation you may like to read the whole chapter).

Which verses in the parables themselves speak of rejoicing?

In which verses does Jesus comment on joy?

The Pharisees were not rejoicing (v2). What was their problem?

Do you think churches can be resistant to new people because they unsettle our fellowship and the way we do things? How can we make sure we don't do this.

Is there a danger that we as Christians can become like the Pharisees in this? If so, what can we do about it so that we do rejoice when people come to faith? (That is, how can we cultivate this fruit?)

If you want to have this joy of seeing people (sinners) come to faith, what do we as individuals and as a Church need to do?

Are there particular things you think we should be doing but aren't? Are you willing to help make sure they are done?

2. Joy in believing

Read Acts ch 16 vv 22-34

What does Luke tell us was the reason for the joy of the jailer? Why is joy a proper response to our coming to faith; what do we have to be joyful about?

Can you remember a point at which you felt this joy for the first time? Do you think it is part of your ongoing walk in faith?

Either in preparation beforehand, or by asking each group member to look up a different verse, find some of the reasons we have for rejoicing if we are trusting in Christ:

Matt 13.44, Matt 25.21, Lk 2.10-11, Lk 10.20, Jn 15.11, Rom 5.2.
(Beware - the NIV translates some of these verses as 'be glad', but they all have the same Greek words behind them.)

Do you think of joy as mainly an inward feeling, or something that is expressed outwardly?

3. Joy in trials

In the Acts 16 verses we read above what was Paul and Silas' attitude to their punishment? How do you think you would have responded if you had been in their sandals?

So far we have not tried to define joy but in this third section we see that joy is deeper than just happiness. If you are going through difficult times at the moment then it may not be easy to think about why you should be joyful in this, indeed because of it, yet that is where the Bible points us.

Read James ch 1 vv 2-4

What does James say we should do when we go through trials? Why does he say we should do this?

Do you think this is easy to do in practice? Have you found times when passages such as this have helped you during difficult times?

There are quite a lot of verses in the New Testament about rejoicing through suffering.

Look at one or two of the following and see what reasons are given for rejoicing in the midst of suffering. In each case ask whether this is your attitude in similar situations and if not why not?

- 2 Corinthians ch 7 vv 4-9 (NIV v9 'am happy' should be 'rejoice')
- Acts ch 5 vv 40-41
- 1 Peter ch 4 v 12-16

Finally look at Matthew ch 5 vv 11-12. What reason is given here for rejoicing in the middle of persecution?

Christian martyrology (past and present) demonstrates that many of those who gave their lives for the sake of the gospel died in great joy despite dreadful suffering and persecution. Some of the group may have read biographies or accounts of such and be willing to give a (brief) summary.

Do you think there are reasons why they were able to rejoice in the midst of such sufferings? Are there things therefore that stop us from having such joy.

What do you think of those who, like the early writer Tertullian seem to have actively sought martyrdom. (Tertullian also coined the phrase "the blood of the martyrs is the seed (of the church)".)

4. Joy to come

We started by thinking about joy in heaven and that is where we finish.

Read Hebrews ch 12 v 2. What are we told here was the means by which Christ endured the cross? How does this compare to what we saw above in Matthew chapter 5? (If you looked at 1 Peter ch 4 above then you can compare this too.)

If you mostly have the same Bible translation then finish by reading Psalm 98 together.