

**AMAZING GRACE – Part 16**

*'Joy – The Proof of Grace'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

**Psalm 16:11** *"In His presence there is fullness of joy."*

That verse is one of the most confronting we will find in the Bible because it makes an unambiguous link between joy and the presence of God. Therefore, every human on the planet is forced to concede that if at any point in time they are not experiencing fullness of joy, then they are not experiencing the presence of God in their life. Consequently, now that we have more accurately defined grace as the empowering presence of God, then we can confidently say that joy is the proof of that grace in our life. Just ponder that for a moment before we move on.

One of the key signifiers of the empowering presence of God in a believer, is the presence of real joy. You can't manufacture real joy – it's the fruit of the life of God within us. It is the one single, infallible proof of God's amazing grace in a person's life. God is love and where His empowering, loving presence is, there is joy. If our lives are not marked by this deep, peaceful joy, bubbling up like a stream from the depth of our soul, then we have a lot to look forward to because we have yet to experience the fullness of joy that has been given to us freely in God's grace.

God is in you, so joy is in you and if you don't experience that joy it's because the stream is blocked. When we identify those blockages, God can deal with them and release the spirit of joy that lies within each of us. That's what grace does. The presence of God is characterised by joy. If Christ is in you - joy is in you. If Christ is in you, power is in you - and if you're a Christian, Christ is in you. It's that simple. It's that clear.

Many of us remember the joy we felt when we came from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and embraced God's gift of salvation. C.S. Lewis described his whole conversion experience as being *Surprised by Joy*, in the book by that name. The Bible itself describes our conversion experience as coming to joy. When the Ethiopian eunuch heard and believed the good news preached to him by Phillip, he went on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:39). When the Philippian jailer received salvation through the preaching of Paul and Silas, he was filled with joy (Acts 16:34). Joy is the mark of the conversion experience. The Apostle Peter said it best:

**1 Peter 1:8,9** *"Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls."*

You are receiving salvation so you are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. I've had people say: *'Well, yes that is the conversion experience, but you get over it. The emotion dies down and you mature out of that into a deeper understanding of your faith.'* What a load of Codswallop! What they're effectively saying is when they first met Jesus they were thrilled and excited and full of life and spontaneity and joy, but the longer they knew Him, the more dull and uninteresting He became!

I believe religion has dealt a fatal blow to joy and openness to God in so many of us. It replaces the free, unbridled life of grace with works, guilt and shame. The enemy of God has robbed many believers of that inexpressible and glorious joy through false teaching and bad role models. Satan has done all he can to remove any emotion or spontaneity from us - particularly with the men in our culture.

Some people stand before the living God Himself in worship looking like they're sucking on a lemon or like they'd rather be somewhere else and when they see someone responding to God enthusiastically or showing some emotion during worship they might think: *'Well if they want to do that, that's fine. It's just not my cup of tea.'* However, we wish deep down that they wouldn't do it, because it makes it look like they've got something we haven't. We might even consider these people as immature, highly emotional or unstable in their faith when in fact they are actually encountering the power and reality of God in worship and they cannot contain the joy within them. When the enemy of God took away our true understanding of God's grace and replaced it with an abstract theological concept, he took us away from the real presence and power of God, and consequently the joy, excitement and spontaneity that goes with the presence of God also disappears.

I put a question in a home group study book many years ago which read: *'What excites you most about your relationship with God?'* Believe it or not, one group in that Church spent an entire night debating the word *excitement* and whether that is an appropriate emotion in our relationship with God. Some suggested that excitement was shallow and inappropriate and perhaps not even from God. They were fearful and equated excitement with the Pentecostal wing of the Church ... those people who were 'out there' in their emotional response to God. How sad – but how incredibly common. These people had been robbed of the joy of the Lord and the reality of God's presence and the enemy was using them to keep it that way and keep their congregation that way. The joy of the Lord was simply not there.

Why do we do this to ourselves and to each other? The more we look at our sins and how bad we are, the more depressed we get. Why should that surprise us? When you stop looking at Jesus and start looking at your sins or the sins of others - how do you expect to feel? Next time there's a beautiful sunrise - just sit there and gaze at it and see how you feel. Then hop in your car and drive out to the local rubbish dump and sit there in the hot sun and watch a million blowflies on the rotting food and rubbish - then see how you feel. You don't need a university degree to work out why you would feel a little depressed gazing at garbage ... but feel a peace and quiet deep in your soul as you focus your attention on a beautiful sunrise.

So where is your focus? That's why worship is so important. It shifts our focus back to God - His love, His grace, His power, His mercy, His ability and desire to fulfil His plan and purpose in us and through us. Intimate and personal prayers and songs lead us to relate to God one-to-one. When your focus is upon Him and Him alone, joy will just rise up within you and take over. Corporate worship is one the few opportunities we have each week when we can come together and support each other in forgetting about ourselves. We take our eyes off what's wrong with us and the world and focus our attention on what's right with God! That alone should cheer you up if nothing else happens!

The New Testament makes it clear that the ongoing experience of a Christian is to be marked by joy. We have been born again into *the Kingdom of God*. The whole Christian life is a participation in the words and the works of the King - Jesus. So see if you notice something in these passages that talk about the Kingdom of God.

**Matthew 13:44** *"The kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."*

When a man or woman sees the kingdom of God, their first reaction is not: *'Well, this is the way to overcome the evil one. This is the way to truth and life ...'* all of that is absolutely true, but their first reaction is *'Yippee! Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!'* Their first response is joy!

**Luke 10:17-21** *"The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."*

They come back after doing the works of Jesus and they're full of joy and so is Jesus. Participating in the life of the Kingdom of God is not only joyous for you and me, it also brings joy to God. There's joy in heaven and there's joy on earth when we're connected with God as human beings - fully alive in Christ.

**Romans 14:17** *"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, (not a matter a religious dos and don'ts) but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*

The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It is a kingdom characterised by joy! Is that the witness and testimony of the majority of people in the Church today? It was obvious in the first century Church when the kingdom of God came in Christ. When you're converted to Christ, you're converted to a life of joy from beginning to end, unless it is blocked or stifled in some way. It is joy even when things don't go our way.

**Luke 6:22,23** *"Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice, be full of joy in that day and leap for joy because great is your reward in heaven."*

**2 Corinthians 8:1,2** *"And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."*

The joy that bubbled up inside them overcame adversity and enabled them to rejoice and be full of gladness and to give sacrificially of their money even in severe poverty. The power of persistent joy lies at the heart of the power of God in our lives to overcome all our enemies and to undo all the bad stuff in our life. That's why we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. The joy of the Lord is our strength and that joy will not quit or be thwarted; it will not be stopped by adversity or even Satan himself. What stops our joy is wrong thinking or a wrong focus. Taking our minds and our focus off Jesus and putting them on ourselves will stop joy quicker than anything I know. Your sins can't stop joy - we've all proven that. Time doesn't stop joy; neither does suffering, the early Church proved that! The only thing that will stop joy is taking your focus off Who Jesus is and what He has done and what He is doing, and looking instead at your own flawed, sinful life.

This is true inside and outside the Church. Thousands of people are trying desperately to be happy and joyful and none of them are finding it outside of Christ.

**If you go after joy as an end in itself, you will never find it. If you go after Jesus, you get Him, and joy comes as a bonus! Joy is a by-product of knowing Jesus and worshipping and connecting with Jesus. There is nothing that's wrong with you that a connection with Jesus won't fix!**

That is why so much of what masquerades as counselling today is utterly useless. The focus is always on the person - identifying their problems and finding ways to change their behaviour and fix it without having the power to do any of it ... because the power comes from Jesus!

I can't imagine a more frustrating and pointless way to spend your life than to be a secular counsellor or psychologist. They do not know Jesus, or the empowering presence of God. They cannot connect people to the only true source of joy and peace. When are we ever going to learn that we can't fix us or anyone else, only Jesus can! In time we've just got to stop thinking about ourselves. Sooner or later we've got to move on and get a life - a life characterised by joy in spite of the circumstances around us.

**James 1:2** *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sister, whenever you face trials of many kinds."*

There's no way you can have that kind of joy in the midst of trials, insults and opposition if you shift your focus away from Jesus. He is the source of that joy, you cannot manufacture it. When somebody's down and depressed and very aware of how bad they are, you can't just say: *'Snap out of it, be joyful, praise God!'* That just adds another 'do more, try harder burden' that they are already failing in.

**Joy is something God does in you, all you do is create a possibility for it to happen.**

If you're a Christian - joy is in you. If you're not experiencing it – it's because it's blocked. Paul knew that there was something seriously wrong with the Galatian Church, because he asked: (Galatians 4:15) ... *'what happened to all of your joy?'* He didn't say: *'What happened to your quiet time; or your scripture reading or your prayer or your tithing or your witnessing?'* He asked about the absence of JOY in their life. He then spends the rest of the letter telling them what happened to their joy - they started replacing Jesus with something else ... mainly their performance.

Joy is something you get for free and as long as you keep the channels open you go on experiencing that joy all your life. It won't diminish from your conversion experience - it will intensify! If a marriage can get better between two sinful people, don't you think that an intimate relationship between you and the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords can get better too?

The most noticeable trait of Churches that are struggling under the weight of abusive, legalistic teaching or are starved of good teaching all together is the absence of joy. But the joy that is talked about in the Bible is a force that bubbles up from within us like an artesian spring. When Paul comes to describe his motivation for ministry - he describes it in terms of promoting joy in his people.

**Philippians 1:22-25** *"If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again, your joy in Christ may overflow on my account."*

This is absolutely amazing! Paul says: *'I'd like to be with Jesus - to be with the Lord and away from this old, tormented body, but you need more joy so I'm going to stick around!'* He doesn't say: *'My mission is not completed yet: I have more Churches to plant; I haven't finished writing the New Testament; there's still a lot of sin in you I've got to root out and fix.'* No! He says: *'I'd like to check out of here - but you need some more joy so I'm going hang around until you get it!'*

Friends, that is exactly why I'm here. Through teaching, equipping and ministering among you, my first and foremost purpose is to release the joy of the Lord in you. I want people to be happy they are part of the Church! My own philosophy of ministry is summed up by Paul when he is writing to the Church at Corinth:

**2 Corinthians 1:24** *'Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.'*

We work with you - **for your joy**. If ever there was a stupid and sinful Church; if ever there was a Church that needed to be slapped around and straightened out; if ever there was a Church that needed to be told where to get off; if ever there was a Church that needed some discipline - it was the Corinthian Church. Yet Paul says: *'My first obligation is not to fix you ... my first obligation is to increase your joy.'* He did that by preaching grace - over and over and over again, until they understood it in all its truth, because he knew that the joy of the Lord would just well up inside them and flow spontaneously when they experienced the empowering presence of God.

Whenever I teach about grace, somebody asks: *'Why the emphasis on God's grace? Now that we've had grace - when are we going to move on? How do we get people to stop sinning and read the Bible? Too much of this grace and our kids are going to rebel and do whatever they like.'* If you're thinking anything like that, then you haven't heard the message of grace yet.

I preach on grace and will continue to do so because that is the gospel. That is what changes peoples' lives and produces in them an inexpressible joy that floods their whole being and overflows to those around them. The cleverest perversion of all is when we start to understand grace and the enemy says: *'Wow - you understand this stuff better than those legalistic Christians!'* Once you focus on your understanding of grace and take your eyes off Jesus - just watch the joy dissipate. Grace is not to be your focus. Joy is not to be your focus. Jesus is to be your focus! It's hearing about Him, looking at Him, talking to Him, worshipping Him, reflecting upon Him, being filled with joy by Him ... that's your focus.

You might be thinking: *'There's more to me than I'm experiencing - there's more to me than people have seen yet; there's more worship in me than has been expressed; there's more prayer in me; there's more joy in me than I've experienced ... but for some reason it's just not getting out.'*

Childbirth is the best analogy I can think of. Many women have had to have emergency caesarean operations because the placenta had moved into the wrong position and was blocking the path of the fully developed unborn child. If they were to go into labour both mother and child would be at risk ... and many years ago there were many mothers and babies who died in the process. They have a fully developed life within them but it can't get out. That's what it's like for some of us. The life of Jesus within us is blocked because of an obstruction. Constant exposure to God's grace and the joy of others will gradually erode that obstruction - so stick around and it will happen eventually.

But there is also a very real, anointing of joy from God. We see this in the book of Hebrews:

**Hebrews 1:6-9** *"And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire." But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."*

There is an anointing of joy that Jesus has in Him and people who have experienced it have been radically changed. Jesus is joy - Jesus is full of joy - and Jesus is in you. So in the name of Jesus, I bless you with joy right now. I bless you with the full inheritance of your salvation - joy that will defeat depression; joy that will defeat evil; joy that will defeat anxiety.

Be anxious for nothing because God is in you and God is joy. Be fearful for nothing for Christ is in you and He is anointed with joy. Be optimistic about the future because the Spirit is in you, leading you into the future and He is the Spirit of joy. I pray that God would release that spring within your spirit and cause that joy to bubble up to the surface now and flood every part of your life, removing the barriers of self-pity, bitterness, shame, anger, unforgiveness, self-hatred, judgements spoken against you and repression of emotion.

So choose today to enter into the presence and working of God in your life and the joy of the Lord will be your strength. It is the product of the life of Christ in you. When you are lacking in joy, it is a sign that the life of Christ is somehow being blocked. Loss of joy is the first thing you will notice when you fall away from grace and come under the burden of the law, and even joy becomes an effort. You can remove the blockage and recapture your joy when you take time to connect with God in worship, and in the presence of His people. You participate in the joy of the kingdom through partnering with God in ministry.

Even trials and persecution for the sake of the gospel cannot quench your joy – that only happens when you take our eyes off Jesus, and look at yourself again. As in all things, you can make the choice to allow grace to have its effect in your life, and then your joy will be restored, and you can freely serve others so that their joy may increase.

How then shall we live? In fullness of joy, by His grace – for His glory!

1. Read through this week's sermon once without taking notes or highlighting anything ... just to get the big picture. Go through the text more closely. Highlighting or underlining key phrases or paragraphs which stand out as significant to you. What single statement impacted you the most? How will that now change your life? Write down what you need to do to respond to God's truth today.

2. Ponder the following statements from this week's sermon. What practical implications could or should flow from each of these statements? If you ask "How then shall I live?" in light of each of these truths, what would be your answer?

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*Be anxious for nothing because God is in you and God is joy. Be fearful for nothing for Christ is in you and He is anointed with joy. Be optimistic about the future because the Spirit is in you, leading you into the future and He is the Spirit of joy.*