

Where's the Joy?

How we can experience inexpressible joy and full of glory

In **1 Peter 1:8** the apostle Peter writes, “though we have not seen Christ, yet believing, we rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.”

Really? Does Peter expect us to take this seriously or is it merely religious rhetoric? Is it real or just a pipe dream? Is it flowery “church speak” or can it really be true?

Maybe we should take it with a large pinch of salt, or maybe it was overdone a bit in translation and it doesn't exactly say that. That being the case, should we treat the rest of the Bible that way too, then, accepting some bits as written but dismissing others due, in our view, to the writer being “carried away” with too much enthusiasm and religious dreaming?!

Perhaps Peter's statement is hard to accept, though, because in our own experience, or in describing our own congregation, Peter's phrase isn't the first thing that springs to mind. Inexpressible joy?! Is that what bubbles out of your average Christian? And not just joy, but joy beyond description?! That is the phrase Peter used, though, to describe what the Christian Church and a Christian life should be, so unless we're prepared to write off God's Word, or accuse the apostle of just spouting religious hyperbole, we're going to have to accept it.

On the other hand, wouldn't we just love our lives and our church to be that way?

What, then, prevents us being full of inexpressible joy and glory? Could it be that we've settled for physical and emotional sensations, instead, that give us feelings and flushes of what seems like joy, but the moment soon passes and we sink right back into “ordinary” life again?

That's not what Peter is talking about, though. He's talking about the joy we experience from the relationship with God brought about in Jesus Christ, which cannot be described or experienced in worldly terms. It is truly “inexpressible.” It's joy that's stirred by much more than natural sensation. It's stirred, instead, by understanding why God created us.

So, why did God create us? According to Paul, God's whole purpose, determined before the world was, and the one and only reason for creation and humanity, is that he, God, wishes to share his life of love and fellowship with us. “He predestined us to be adopted as his sons, in accordance with his pleasure and his will (**Ephesians 1:5**).” God planned this from the start through Jesus Christ, that we would be included in the relationship that he, Father, Son and Spirit, experience.

Jesus then completed his Father's will, **John 17:4**. “It is finished,” he said, in **John 19:30**. Jesus took our old sin-bound humanity and crucified it with him on the cross. He then resurrected us with him as a new creation and in his ascension took us home to the Father where, along with Christ, we've been adopted into the relationship and life of the Triune God. Christ now lives in us and us in him. We share everything Christ has and is. It's all clearly spelled out for us in God's Word. But if we leave it as just information it has no effect upon us, except perhaps to make us proud, and therein lies the problem.

For God's Word to work in our lives, we need to understand it, believe it, live it and enter into what we know to be true. And what we know to be true is that the Father, in his pleasure, has made us his beloved children, and brought us into his home to share his life and love. We can “walk in the garden” with God just as Adam did before Adam destroyed that relationship, and his mind, by believing Satan's lie.

The Father, however, renewed our mind in Jesus Christ, making our relationship with him even closer and more profound than Adam's. And it's when we begin to experience and live in that relationship that we're on the road to joy inexpressible.

Unfortunately, the dazzling truth about the passion the Father has for us, and what he has completed for us in Jesus Christ, has been buried under religion. Religion obscures the truth

about the Father's love for us by telling us God is an "account-keeper" who won't accept us unless we measure up to his standards. It tells us that living in joy with God is something for the future and life now is all about getting our religion right so we can "make it." It tells us we'd better "do something for God" to make him pleased with us. So off we go with the best of intentions to pray more, evangelize more, do God's work more, work yet another church program, or anything else we think might please God to bring us into a better relationship with him.

But in so doing we lose sight of what we are in Christ. C.S. Lewis talked of this in 'The Great Divorce' when he wrote, "There have been some who were so occupied in spreading Christianity that they never gave a thought to Christ." We must "do more for God," we think, so round and round the hamster wheel we go, "doing God's work," until we drop from sheer exhaustion. No wonder there's so little joy; we've missed the entire point of Christianity!

The point of Christianity is knowing we sit with Jesus Christ at God's right hand living in the Father's pleasure as his adopted children. But religion blinds us from seeing that, because it issues us with the wrong glasses! They're so dark we can't see a thing. We can't see what God says in his Word, and in not seeing it we don't get to experience the joy it offers, or even believe such a joy exists.

C.S. Lewis describes this condition to perfection in the 'Chronicles of Narnia.' The heroes have just entered Narnia, the promised land. It is stunningly beautiful. They are full of joy, excitedly running around experiencing the sheer beauty and splendour of the scenery. They are laughing in unashamed happiness and freedom.

But they're not the only ones in Narnia. Sitting in a huddle in the darkness of a stable are several dwarfs. They have no joy or pleasure. Instead of the splendour all they see is the dark and dirty donkey stable. Lucy, one of our heroes, seeing the dwarfs' wretchedness, calls out to them, "Come into the sun and play, can't you see the beauty?"

"We can't see anything in this horrible darkness, leave us alone," replies one of the dwarfs. But Lucy has an idea. She picks a violet and taking it to the dwarf she says, "Your eyes may be all wrong but smell *that!*" The dwarf, however, can only smell the dankness of the stable.

At that moment the great lion, Aslan, the creator of Narnia appears. Lucy appeals to him, "Please help our friends." Aslan shakes his mane and a feast of food appears. Golden goblets of rich red wine are placed into the dwarfs' hands. They eat and drink greedily but they taste only old cabbage leaves and uncooked turnips, and the wine, they say, is like drinking dirty water from the donkey's trough.

See what's happening here? The dwarfs are actually *in* Narnia. They couldn't be any closer. Its pleasures and joyous freedom surround them, but they're in darkness still. They can't see what they're part of, so they don't experience it, or even believe it's possible.

And that's exactly what happens to us when we're busy with religion. It obscures what we're part of, and what we're actually *in*, too. "God raised us up with Christ," Paul writes, "and seated us with him in the heavenly realms (**Ephesians 2:6**)." We're "raised," he says, *past* tense. In other words, we're already there! We've already entered Narnia, too! God "has blessed us (*past* tense again) in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (**Ephesians 1:3**)." That's the feast our Aslan has given us! It's all ours to enjoy now.

So here we are, **Colossians 3:3**, our lives already "hidden with Christ," and the Spirit constantly witnessing with our spirit that we *really are* the children of God (**Romans 8:15-16**). It's like God giving us a violet and saying, "Smell that!" Religion, however, keeps us in the dark. We can't see where we are. And not seeing it, we can't experience it. And we won't experience the joy of it until we throw away our religious glasses and believe what God's Word really says. And what does it say? It says joy inexpressible is ours to experience now.