

13. TASTING THE SPIRIT'S FRUIT

Galatians 5v22, 23.

This morning I want to look at the fruit of the Spirit from an unusual angle.

In the Preface of his allegory, 'The Pilgrim's Regress' (1933) C.S. Lewis describes recurrent experiences which dominated his childhood and adolescence. They were, he says, moments of intense and delightful longing which he called "*sweet Desire*." Different stimuli triggered this desire in him: "*the smell of a bonfire, the sound of wild ducks flying overhead, the title of 'The Well at the Worlds End', the opening lines of 'Kubla Kahn', the morning cobwebs in late summer, or the noise of falling waves.*" These strange longings left him full of delight but unsatisfied. For Lewis there was always "*a peculiar mystery*" about the object of this Desire. He described these experiences as "*immortal longings,*" for that "*unnameable something, desire for which pierces us like a rapier.*" He came to realise later in life what this was all about. He had longings and desires aroused by God which could only be satisfied by God Himself.

You may have experienced something like this yourself. Moments full of stirring beauty which give you intimations of something "beyond". I think I understand what he means, although for me it is different things which trigger the longing; a beautiful sunset, a rainbow, the roar of a great crowd, a large orchestra performing in a majestic setting, the sea, heroic courage or even a new born baby's hands.

Evangelical Theologian Jim Packer refers to this as "*that tang of the transcendent in the everyday that hits the heart like a blow as one experiences and enjoys things, revealing itself ultimately as a longing not satisfied by any created realities or relationships, but assuaged only I self-abandonment to the Creator's love in Christ.*"

This morning I want to suggest that tasting the Fruit of the Spirit can also stir "*sweet Desire*" in us. **The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.** These qualities give us an appetising foretaste of something beyond, "*that tang of the transcendent*", because they give us a taste of what God is like.

This is heaven's produce; the Spirit's fruit. And while what we experience is full of delight, we long for more. Our desires have been awakened. We have tasted something of the sweetness of perfection. We have detected the fragrance of purity. And we now know there is so much more and we long for more.

This is what I want to explore this morning. But my first focus may surprise you.

1. The fruit in those who do not believe.

The apostle emphasises that these qualities are the fruit of the Spirit, not of human effort. But isn't it possible to find these qualities in people who are not Christians? People around us of no faith and other faiths are capable of **love, joy, peace, patience kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control**. So how does this fit with what the Scriptures say here – that these are the produce of the Spirit? Does this contradict what the Bible is saying? Not at all. In fact, it reinforces it.

The explanation is back in the Genesis account of man's beginnings. Genesis 1 v26. "*Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness*", and v27 where the narrative moves from prose to poetry. "*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*" Men and women were made more like God than anything else in creation. They were made to reflect God in a unique way. We often say of a child that they are the image of their father or mother. So it was with men & women. They were created bearing the image of the Creator with God's very own character qualities of **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control**.

But the Genesis account goes on to describe how the first man and woman sinned and sin entered the world corrupting and polluting everything it touched. Yet, despite this, something of God's image remained in man. Even the horrors of sin could not totally obliterate the image of God. That image is now marred and distorted and blurred but it is nevertheless recognizable. Hence, all men and women are still capable of **love, joy, peace, patience kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control**.

Those who demonstrate these qualities reflect God's residual image. We must not devalue the best qualities we see in men & women around us; they are a glimpse of God Himself and an expression of His grace. They stand in contrast to the brutality and selfishness and greed and predatory lust and revenge that confront us in our national and world news every day.

And for many this stirs up "*sweet Desire*", even though it is not recognised as such. Take the towering example of Nelson Mandela, and his dignity and restraint on being released from years of prison in South Africa. You may have watched the extraordinary scenes on his release. Many had predicted a bloodbath in the aftermath of apartheid. But his great leadership steered the nation away from revenge and hatred. And ever since the world had flocked to him! No one pretends that he is perfect, but he is still one of the most loved and respected men in the world. Every celebrity wants their picture taken with him. Do you detect "*sweet Desire*" here? People are longing for this kind of integrity. They long for leaders they can respect and love and trust. The qualities seen in this one man, even imperfectly, point to the One who is Perfect and Righteous in all His ways.

2. The fruit in Jesus Himself

There is something uniquely Christ-like about the fruit of the Spirit: If we looked at each of the fruit of the Spirit we would see how each one reflects the character of Jesus. But I will take just one as an example.

The first in the list is **LOVE**. The Greeks had a variety of words for love but God's love for the world in Jesus Christ so completely transcended every other expression of love that it required a new word. *Agape* is therefore on a different level all together. It denotes love at its purest. Love which seeks the other's good whatever the cost; love whether the object is worthy or not. *Agape* is a love on a different level from other loves.

This love comes from the very nature of God, who *is* love, and it is perfectly seen in Jesus - in his coming into the world and laying down His life for us: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His Only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3v16) *"Christ loved us and gave himself up for us."* (Ephesians 5v2)

When we come to God in repentance and faith we discover this love. But our experience and understanding of redemptive love gives us just the faintest glimpse of the full glory. We appreciate so little. We see such a small amount. What we do see fills us with delight and meets the deepest needs of our heart – and yet it leaves us longing for more.

This is why so much of the time we do not feel we know God well enough. We feel we have experienced love but we know there is so much more. Our appetite for God's love has been awakened. Throughout eternity we will have every opportunity to explore His great love to the full.

3. The fruit in the Christian.

The Spirit is working in us to produce Christ-like character. He is renewing the image of God in us. We are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. Once again it would be possible to go through each of the nine fruit listed in vv22,23, but I will take the second on the list as an example of the Spirit's fruit in Christian character; the fruit of **JOY**.

When C.S. Lewis wrote of his *"immortal longings"* he spoke of them as the desire for Joy, ultimately the desire for God Himself. 'The Pilgrim's Regress' describes various false joys the pilgrim meets on his journey and contrasts them with true joy. The book was autobiographical. In the Preface Lewis writes: *"I have, myself been deluded by every one of these false answers in turn, and have contemplated them earnestly enough to discover the cheat. "*

Jesus spoke of *His* joy being in us and our joy being complete. (John 15v11) So His Spirit produces Christ-like joy in us. That is why joy is characteristic of someone coming to salvation. This is what first grabbed my attention and prepared me for my own encounter with Jesus. A friend who had recently

believed in Jesus was so full of joy that she was almost unrecognisable. *“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”* (1 Peter 1v8)

When we find joy in encountering Christ, we also find the Spirit producing new expressions of joy our life. We delight over different things. We share the joy of heaven. We feel joy at the news of someone whose life is changed by coming to faith in Jesus. We are thrilled at hearing of the spread of the gospel in nations like China. We feel joyful exhilaration when we worship or when we find something in the Scriptures that really helps us. We even find joy in giving generously, like the Christians Paul mentions in the Macedonian churches. *“Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.”* (2 Cor.8v2)

Most extraordinary of all – we find joy in those suffering severe persecution. At his first trial in 1527, the Reformer Thomas Bilney faced death with joy. He said *“This is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.”* Significantly that joy turned to despair when he followed the well meaning advice of friends to be more moderate and save himself so that he could continue to serve Christ. He made amends later.

In more recent times Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian pastor persecuted by the Soviet authorities could write: *“Alone in my cell, cold, hungry and in rags, I danced for joy every night. Sometimes I was so filled with joy that I felt I would burst if I did not give it expression.”*

We can experience real joy, even supernatural joy. But in this world our joy is mixed with pain and sorrow and grief. This mixed experience directs our thoughts above. We experience, in C.S. Lewis' words *“immortal longings”*. For what the apostle John saw and heard in his revelation of heaven: The voice from the throne saying: *“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”* (Rev. 21v1-4) I suspect that we have only had the faintest taste of real joy. But we have experienced the presence of the future in the here and now and it has ruined us for anything less.

It is little wonder that C.S. Lewis called the memoir of his early years leading up to his discovery of Christ, ‘Surprised by Joy.’ He encountered “Joy” – pure, eternal Joy in the Person of Jesus Christ. But what surprises await us all when we see Jesus face to face? Our foretastes of heaven will be a thing of the past. *“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is”*. (1 John 3v2)

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