

Delight #4 – Getting the balance right

Based on *Delight! – Discipleship as the adventure of living and being loved* by Justin Rossow

Introduction

Last time we looked at two kinds of delight that are found in the Bible.

The first was *delicious delight*, how God's Word, the Bible, when we think about it deeply, applying it to our lives and the lives of others, brings with it delicious delight as it leads us towards savouring the presence of God in our lives.

The second was *desirable delight*, the joy we discover from knowing just how much God loves us and learning to live in the mutual delight that we share in our relationship with God, not because we have to, but because we want to.

In previous sessions we also looked at how the Bible talks about *joyful delight*, *thoughtful delight* and *playful delight*.

I hope that the studies have helped us understand that being a Christian is not about following an endless list of rules and regulations laid down by a harsh, uncaring God, but about living a guilt-free life empowered by a God who loves and cares for you.

But I am sure that there will have been some of you thinking... 'hmm... it's all very well studying the verses about God delighting in us, but there's also plenty of stuff in the Bible that is difficult to understand, and there's plenty of stuff where God isn't delighted'.

And, of course, you're right. And that's what today's session is going to begin to address. So, let's roll our sleeves up, and ask the Holy Spirit to help us do some serious Bible study.

First, let's look at Isaiah 64:6

*All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and **all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;***

*we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*

and yet these words, also from Isaiah, say...

*But now, this is what the LORD says –
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:
‘Do not fear, for I have **redeemed** you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;
I give Egypt for your **ransom**,
Cush and Seba in your stead.
Since you are precious and honoured in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give people in **exchange** for you,
nations in exchange for your life.*

Isaiah 43:1-4

So, what are we to make of these verses? When God looks at us, is he filled with disappointment or delight?

Do even our most righteous acts appear to God like filthy rags?

Or are does he delight in us so much that that he will do anything to save our lives?

And the answer is... yes. Both statements are true.

God created us in his image, he intended that he would be a source of delight to us, and that we would be a source of delight for God. The garden of Eden was created to be a place where God and humans lived in perfect relationship, delighting in one another.

At the fall, when Adam and Eve chose to listen to the devil rather than God, humanity effectively ‘changed ownership’, allying itself with Satan, becoming enemies of God. And the fall didn’t just mean that humans were sinful, no longer God’s friends, it meant we became captive to the devil. Not just alienated from God, but captive to sin. Not just *deserving* death, but *belonging* to death, *owned* by death.

But despite this, we still bear the image of God, although we are brainwashed by a world around us that tells us we are just products of evolution with no eternal hope, that there is no God to turn to, we still find ourselves longing for something better. Longing for God.

The filthy rags image in Isaiah 64 is there to illustrate how in our fallen state we exist as allies of God’s enemy, we are clothed with sin, our rebellion against God separates us from his purity and holiness.

Isaiah 43 gives us a different set of images which describe how despite us being fallen and unclean, God still sees us as incredibly valuable. He sees us as being held captive and enslaved by an evil tyrant. *Redeem*, *ransom* and *exchange* are not words that you use for something that is worthless. God wants us back because we are precious to him.

If we focus too much on how much God delights in us, we can lose sight of the fact that he does so not because there is anything inherently good in *us*, but because *he* is utterly good.

And God’s utter goodness and faithfulness is why Jesus through his life, death, resurrection and ascension, paid the price to bring humanity, people like you and me, back into God’s ownership.

But although we are self-centred, selfish and sinful, so that even our best actions are tainted like filthy rags, God considers us valuable enough to redeem us from sin and death. To pay a huge price to bring us back under his love and protection.

He has redeemed us, ransomed us, through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. *Despite* our unworthiness., we are utterly loved and accepted by God.

Another passage in Isaiah reads...

I delight greatly in the LORD;

my soul rejoices in my God.

For he has clothed me with garments of salvation

and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,

as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,

and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

God has replaced our filthy rags with beautiful new 'garments of salvation'. And because of this we are able to properly delight and rejoice in the Lord.

The reason for accepting God's grace is not just to receive a 'get out of jail free' card, it is to *experience* and *delight in* his reality, his love and acceptance, in our day-to-day lives, and to let the rest of the world know about that love through our words and deeds.

The tension between our uncleanness before God and the fact that he places such great value on us is something we have to live with until either we die, or Jesus returns. There will be a time when this tension will be resolved, when God renews his creation and we will learn the true meaning of delighting in him, forever.

The Bible is full of tensions like these, because the God who inspired the Bible's authors is very, very, very different from us. He is not physical, he had no beginning and will have no end. He has no limitations. He does not exist in time. He is not dependent on

anything. He didn't create the universe to fulfil any 'felt need', he doesn't need it to exist, in fact the universe depends on *him* for its second-by-second existence.

As the 4th century church leader, St. John Chrysostom said...

'A comprehended God is no God.'

And so, when we finite, sinful humans try to talk about who God is and how he works, it's inevitable that we are going to struggle. Which is one of the reasons why God's word, the Bible, written by human beings inspired by God the Holy Spirit, is not always easy to understand. If we want to get the most out of our Bible reading, it will require effort, concentration and application on our part.

We've seen that in our look at Isaiah, but to reinforce what we've learned, let's look at 2 verses that appear back-to-back in Proverbs.

*Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you yourself will be just like him.*

*Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.*

Proverbs 26:4-5

The book of Proverbs belongs to a genre of writing known as 'wisdom literature'. The obvious reason for this is that it contains wise sayings, but the other reason is because it requires wisdom to apply them appropriately.

Most people get this instinctively. There are times when 'many hands make light work' is true, and others when 'too many cooks spoil the broth' is true. It depends on the context.

Proverbs 26:4 tells us not to answer a fool according to his folly, or we will be like him. In this situation, the fool is not seeking to learn anything. He (or she) is just being argumentative, looking for a quarrel or a fight. To answer the fool's specific allegation or even

accusation would be playing into the fool's plan. You either have to find a clever way to short-circuit the fool's foolishness, or, and this is often the best course of action, don't engage at all.

Proverbs 26:5 is saying that there will also be times when presenting what the 'fool' has said back to them will make them realise how stupid what they are saying is. Like when a child excuses what they are doing by saying, 'My sister told me to', and the parent responds, 'If your sister told you to jump off a cliff, would you?'

When we read the Bible, we should keep in mind that while it does provide guidance on how we should lead our lives, it does not present it in the same way many modern self-help manuals do, via a set of check lists of what we should and shouldn't do.

The Bible is a collection of books, written by humans as they were inspired by God the Holy Spirit. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to Timothy...

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

and 1 Corinthians 2:13...

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

See how Paul views his teaching as 'Spirit-taught words'. We need help from the Holy Spirit to properly understand what God's word is saying to us. He is the Spirit of truth (John 16:13) who works with us as we read the Bible.

But we don't get that simply by praying for guidance. Learning how to read the Bible properly takes time, discernment and wisdom on our

part, including listening to experienced Bible teachers, reading commentaries, talking with wise Christians.

There is now so much good information freely available online. The Apostle Paul would have wept with joy if instead of having to wait for someone to bring him his beloved manuscripts, he could have simply done a quick Google search! (2 Timothy 4:13)

But learning is not enough by itself. The Bible is a supernatural book. To understand it properly requires guidance from the same person who inspired it, God the Holy Spirit. Every time I read the scriptures, I ask God the Holy Spirit to help me understand them, and to put what I learn from them into practice.

This is another one of those ‘virtuous circles’ I was talking about last week.

- Read the Bible
- Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand
- Discern what God is saying to you
- Put it into practice in your life (where relevant)
- Observe the results (where relevant)
- Note any questions you have
- Seek answers to the questions...
- Repeat!

There will be times when we read the Bible, and nothing seems to apply to us at all. And that’s fine. A lot of our lives consists of filling what’s empty and emptying what’s filled. But when you do think that God is speaking to you, make sure you listen.

I’m going through a process of doing this at the moment, and as well as praying about it, I also share my thoughts with trusted Christian

friends, and as they pray about it as well, they can let me know if they think I'm doing something unbiblical or plain crazy.

And as you move in the direction you think God is leading you, keep reading the scriptures and asking God to guide and help you, trusting that even if you have got it wrong, he's strong enough to cover you.

And over time you will start to notice the way that scriptures link to other scriptures, the way there are themes that thread their way through the Bible stories... the more you do, the more satisfying it becomes. And the more you integrate what you read with the way you live, the more real it becomes to you, and the more real God will be in your life.

And, like most good things, it takes work. There's a phrase that you hear a lot in Christian circles, 'Let go, let God!' And, there is truth in it. But it's only a *part* of the truth, one *aspect* of the truth. We do have to let go of our selfish ways and let God work in our lives. But it's not just a case of sitting there and waiting for God to do something.

Not many people know this, but I have a torture chamber in my garage. Three times a week, I descend into it for an hour and a half and pick up and put down heavy things.

Hebrews 12:11 reads...

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

I can't say I enjoy my gym sessions. In fact, I regularly have to pray that the Holy Spirit will give me the determination to start and finish the sessions. I even have a Bible verse that follows the one we just read on the wall to help motivate me.

Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

Hebrews 12:12

And, week by week, month by month, the work that I do helps this wrinkly old body stay a little bit stronger and more flexible than it would otherwise be. And there is delight in this, real gratitude-to-God-filled delight.

The Apostle Paul, as a former persecutor of the Christian Church was very aware of God's amazing grace, God's totally undeserved favour. His letters are saturated with it. But this didn't cause him to just let things happen, in fact, as he writes in 1 Corinthians 15:10...

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

We do not, we *cannot* earn grace. But the realisation that God is forgiving and gracious towards us gives us the freedom to work hard at living a life devoted to what God wants for us. With time and work, the scriptures will open up to you, revealing life-transforming truths about God and about ourselves, helping us to delight in God, and to understand how he delights in us.

Living our lives in this way is another example of a virtuous circle.

*But by the grace of God I am what I am,
and his grace to me was not without effect.*

*No, I worked harder than all of them –
yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*

and then back to 'But by the grace of God'... and so on...

It is all grace, but we are called to be actively involved in the process.

As Psalm 147:11 says:

*The LORD delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.*

God works through people like you and me to make the good news of his incredible grace is made real in this world. Christians are sinful, self-centred people who believe that God has put immeasurable value on every human being.

Like the Proverbs and Isaiah passages we looked at, we need to keep these truths in a dynamic balance. Until Jesus returns, repentance and delight will both be part of our everyday living.

So, it will be true that even my most righteous acts will be tainted with selfishness and pride, like filthy rags compared to God's absolutely goodness and purity. And it is also true that despite this, I am precious and honoured in God's sight, he takes delight in me.

And so we approach God with empty hands, knowing there is nothing he needs, but also knowing that God delights in us approaching him, that we were each created to be his, to live in close and loving relationship with him, even if, at the moment, our self-centredness often keeps us from this being as good as it could be.

And we do this by accepting God's ongoing grace and forgiveness in our lives, giving us the confidence and determination to work at discerning what God's will is for us in our lives.

And so, step by step, day by day, we prayerfully move towards attaining a balance between God's grace and our hard work in being ambassadors for God in this world.

Let's close today's talk with a prayer...

Lord Jesus, thank for what you did for us on the cross!

We turned away from relationship with God, choosing to obey your enemy, moving from your loving presence into the devil's domain, becoming part of his household instead of yours.

But you wanted us back. And through your incarnation, death, and resurrection, you took our place, dying the death that should have

been ours, and defeating death that we might rise again to be family with you.

Father God, thank you for loving us so much. Help us to respond with the confidence of individuals created and chosen by you, to live lives filled with gratitude and thankfulness that overflows into obedience, praise and worship.

Holy Spirit, deepen our understanding of your love. Help us us to see ourselves as you do: as the valuable, beautiful, people you delight in. And help us as you helped the psalmist – to experience and express our delight in you.

Amen