

Romans 12:9-18 “Rejoicing and weeping”

The moon and the earth are having an argument. Which one gets frustrated first?

It has to be the moon. You can just hear the final words: *you just can't see the other side, can you!*

Folks, with just about every argument, there is always another side. Whenever you hear someone report an event, there is always another side. Someone else will always see things a bit differently. We need to train ourselves, every time, and particularly when someone comes to you with some tale of their being mistreated ... *but what's the other side to this?*

Yes, that person *might* have said those words to them, perhaps even with that cutting tone. But ... what had been said or done to them that might have *provoked* that response? Is there something going on in that other person's life now, or hidden in their background, that might account for some over-reaction? Bearing in mind the other person's sensitivities or situation, they might have been amazingly patient in only saying as little as they did!

The person coming to you might completely and sincerely believe their accusation – though whether it's appropriate to recruit someone else to take their side is a further question. But there is *always* going to be some other side to equally understand.

And when you come to church – this is one of the glorious *and* the frustrating things about it – no matter how you feel, there will be some people there who are feeling differently, maybe even diametrically oppositely, from you. If you come in feeling exhilarated by your past week's experiences, there will be some people there who are just desperately worn out from theirs. If you want some peace and quiet, there are others who feel the need to be exuberant and jig around to those bouncy new *loud* songs.

I'm sure you can see where we're going with this. If you've noticed the title for today's talk – and I hope you can't really have missed it – then surely one of those verses from today's reading is already chiming in your head. So here it is, with chapter and verse:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

(Romans 12:15)

And if you remember that we're going through this current series of talks to help us think through in advance that Church Covenant that will be kicking in in the New Year, you might guess – and you'd be right – that this verse is going to be something like quoted as one of the individual promises or commitments there. And it is:

We will rejoice at each other's happiness and endeavour with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other's burdens and sorrows.

So the way that has been phrased there, it's already starting to spread it out a bit and think it through. It looks as if it's just one of a whole lot of rapid-fire bullet points that Paul is rattling out as he comes to the end of this mighty letter of Romans, but as ever I'd

like us to start just a bit further back, to get even what looks like a superbly stand-alone-able verse properly in its context. Then a few angles to think through.

Choose to rejoice
Permit distress
Value both
Cross the divide

I've occasionally heard the book we usually call just "Romans" – or Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome – referred to as "the Gospel according to Paul". Gospel in a different sense, perhaps.

Matthew and Mark and Luke and John carefully chose accounts and incidents about Jesus, and words from his own mouth to present a more *personal* portrait of Jesus. And not just a take-it-or-leave-it biography, but portraits deliberately crafted to be as persuasive as possible. And the phrase "the gospel of" or "the gospel according to" is a special usage of the word, for that kind of document.

But "the Gospel according to Paul" is different. He's not giving us another biography, but thinking through theologically how that "good news" of the Gospel – that's what the word actually means, *good news* – works and applies to us. He's showing us how those facts about Jesus are meant to be understood and how they're meant to work, behind the scenes, making us right with God and making us into new people. And he revels in just how good and glorious this *Gospel* is. Believers as well as unbelievers need to be refreshed and challenged by hearing it:

So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

(Romans 1:15)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

(Romans 1:16-17)

And you could see the rest of those first 11 chapters of Romans as unpacking just how "The righteous shall live by faith", how it works. A theological underpinning to the experience of being saved *by faith*. You could sum it all up, very nicely, with a short phrase: ***"the mercies of God"***.

But then in what is now called chapter 12 – Paul didn't write in chapters, remember – Paul starts to talk about what difference all of this theology and, you could say, theory, should make in our lifestyle. There is a distinct connection. It follows on totally logically – as you can see by how he introduces the chapter:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, ...

(Romans 12:1)

And the basic choice we have to make, he says, is between *conformity* to this world – the anti-God system we all live in, irrespective of which country we live in or political slant we prefer – being "squeezed into the world's mould" – or being *transformed* by inward, conscious and considered renewal, by the Holy Spirit (today's memory verse!)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12:1-2)

One key difference, which is ever so important to realise in the individualistic society we live in, is that God does not intend us to live solely for ourselves. No, here is the principle, which, as far as I can see, runs down through nearly the whole of the rest of this chapter. It is lost a bit in the English translations that split up v9 onwards into short sentences.

Let me show you what I mean. First, the basic principle:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

(Romans 12:4-5)

How is that going to play out? You can see Paul's first application, and it's clear that it follows on because of the *ing* ending of the word. There's not even a full stop between them in the original:

... individually members one of another[, h]aving gifts that differ according to the grace given to us ...

(Romans 12:5-6)

There's not even a "let us use them" in the original, that's just understood. Paul just goes on to list some of those gifts. Let me rearrange this on screen for you.

***... one body in Christ, and individually members one of another,
having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us,
if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;
if service ...***

(Romans 12:5-7)

And just about all of the rapid-fire bullet points later are *ing* words in the original, too. So I'm thinking that they really are just further applications, a whole long list of them, of what it means to be "one body in Christ, and ... members one of another". Let me undo the good work of the translators a bit more, to show you what I'm trying to get at here.

***... one body in Christ, and individually members one of another,
having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us,
if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;
if service ...
love being genuine,
abhorring what is evil; holding fast to what is good
loving one another with brotherly affection
outdoing one another in showing honour, ...***

(Romans 12:5-7, 9-10)

The pattern breaks when you get to

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

(Romans 12:14)

Not “blessing” – but I suspect that that is because it is close enough to an actual quote from Jesus. And today's main focus verse *also* breaks with that pattern, and I confess I'm not entirely sure why. But I'm still entirely sure that we need to see *all* of these what look like little one-liners as expressions of what being one body in Christ is meant to look like.

If we are really one body in Christ – if we want to know what that quite theological expression, “one body in Christ”, actually means, hey, look, it means living like *this*:

... liv[ing] in harmony with one another, not be[ing] haughty, but associat[ing] with the lowly, never be[ing] wise in your own sight.

(Romans 12:16)

And, specifically, for today, to ...

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

(Romans 12:15)

Although it seems, in one sense, to fracture unity, having such opposites present, it *doesn't*. It contradicts *uniformity*, the insistence that everyone should be the same little carbon copies of each other, for sure, but that is exactly how the underlying unity of the body is manifested, in *differences*:

... we, though many, are one body in Christ, ... [h]aving gifts that differ ...

(Romans 12:5-6)

And experiences that differ. And tastes that differ. And political views that differ. And life situations that differ. In most parts of the country, having skin colours that differ. But *one body in Christ*.

Different emotional levels as we meet here together today, perhaps because of how this last week has been – or how much sleep you got last night. Perhaps because of some of you are Tigger and some of you are Eeyore. Perhaps because you have grasped again something of the amazingness of grace, or because you've lost sight of it a bit.

Different. But *one body in Christ*. And therefore called, as we meet together – and as we continue to share the life of Christ together during the week, in our homes or workplaces around the area – called to

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

(Romans 12:15)

Can I just share a few thoughts that have spun off this apparently simple verse for me this week. Because it may look all very fine and noble, and we would surely nod our agreement. But it's actually not totally simple to put into practice, is it?

■ **Choose to rejoice**

I just say this because sometimes I feel – and maybe you do too – that it can be a bit of an effort to rejoice. There's a couple of aspects here I think we could tackle, one more congregational, and the other more individual. We certainly shouldn't be thinking only in terms of meeting together in this building for “a service”, but it *will* also apply here.

So it could simply be that someone is wanting to sing praise to God. Yes, it is possible to be too cheerful. Proverbs reminds us of that:

Whoever blesses his neighbour with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing.

(Proverbs 27:14)

But there are times, perhaps, when we need to speak to ourselves, and rouse ourselves a bit. If Scripture calls us, for example, to

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

(Hebrews 13:3)

that suggests something *active* in the way of remembering. Not just “don't forget”, but do something to keep those people in your minds and your hearts and your prayers, most likely. What would you need to *do*, *in order to* remember them?

And what do you need to do, *in order to* rejoice. Maybe it's specifically choosing to remember something, to think it through again:

My soul ... is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ...

(Lamentations 3:20-22)

And so when someone perhaps says,

Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!

(Psalms 34:3)

maybe you need, at that point, to *choose* to do so. Can I suggest that, if you can, you *stand* when we're singing a song. Can I suggest that you stand *before* that first note, instead of letting the song start like a wet Monday as people finally heave their weary frames to the upright. Can I suggest that you join in, when we're singing a song, instead of simply letting your eyes travel over the words on the page. Can I suggest that you actually sing, instead of mutter. Can I suggest that, unless you have a particularly dire voice, you breathe deep, and sing *up*, instead of looking mournfully at the floor.

Folks, at those times, *choose* to rejoice. Let those words of Scripture condensed into songs of praise lift your soul. It will do you good to recapture a bit of actual *excitement* about not just theology in general, which, honestly, you can take or leave, but Jesus Christ and the gift of his grace and the wonder of being adopted into the family of your Almighty Heavenly Father. *Choose to rejoice!*

And, I also mentioned, on a more individual level. It's not all about what you do in a church service. What if someone bounces over to you and shares something they have found exciting or encouraging? Perhaps an answer to prayer – they do happen, you know?

It is all so typically sadly British that we can think a bit of exuberance needs to be toned down, and therefore we respond with more of a grunt than a smile.

At times, it can be difficult, yes. You might be able to contort your face into a smile – and at times that will be all you can do:

Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief.

(Proverbs 14:13)

But can we just forget ourselves for a moment? Can you share someone's innocent joy? Is it not good that God has blessed them in that way ... even if he has not blessed *you* in that way? Folks, do we want to contradict God's word that

... if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.

(1 Corinthians 12:26)

Is *your* sorrow always going to be allowed to trump someone else's happiness? Or will you *choose* to rejoice?

And yet, there's the other half of that verse on screen, too. Let me fill that in for you

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.

(1 Corinthians 12:26)

Just as back in Romans 12. We may need to *choose* to rejoice. We need also to

■ ***Permit distress***

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

(Romans 12:15)

Folks, remember that following Jesus Christ is not wall-to-wall, 24/7 jollity. So we really do need to make room for sadness in our church. It might be uncomfortable for the rest of us, yes. It's one thing for happy people to radiate enthusiasm, but it's also possible for unhappy people to radiate a kind of stifling blackness and bleakness, as if they feel nobody else should be happy because they are in such a low way.

I'm not saying that it's good for someone to become so self-focussed and introverted that they behave in this way. But getting out – and certainly including *to church* in that – can be one of the best ways for someone like that to be drawn out of that constricting shell.

Do you not think that we actually have far more difficulty with handling distress than happiness? There aren't many people who feel embarrassed about smiling or being excited, but there is something we feel *humiliating*, I think it actually is, about showing deep unhappiness in public.

And I feel that myself. I don't think it was quite so strongly emphasised when I was growing up, but there was still something of that feeling of "big boys don't cry" around. Especially men, I think it is, will go to great lengths to avoid being thought to cry. It is somehow still thought vaguely shameful to not maintain that "stiff upper lip". So I have sniffled, and I feel a certain trepidation in even saying that, but I don't think I have ever *wept* as such as an adult.

So maybe I am not the ideal person to be saying this, but *Scripture* does, and therefore I must.

We need to permit sadness in Christians. If someone starts to sniffle here, the rest of us should not stiffen. They should not feel that they need to stifle things.

There are all sorts of things to rejoice over. We're far more comfortable talking about "counting your blessings". But there are plenty of things to be godly sad about, too, yet we would never dream of naming *them* one by one.

Why cannot we "count our sorrows" as openly? Or at least feel that we can talk about them with someone we trust? Do we simply fear appearing weak; might that be it? Is there some kind of pride which means that we'll be OK *giving* support, but not *receiving* it, certainly not *asking* for it?

Folks, it is given equal exposure in this verse. We *must* permit weeping. We must at times even *expect* weeping. Are we prepared to take that human risk, to open up, to appear vulnerable. Do we yet have the kind of trust between us that would permit that to happen?

Folks, what eats away at you most, deep inside your own soul? Does anyone know, but God alone?

...

■ **Value both**

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

(Romans 12:15)

I'm probably just starting to repeat myself now, so I'll try not to prolong these last couple of points.

It's obvious that we should encourage rejoicing. But I've only said that we should *permit* weeping. I'm not trying to encourage it quite as completely. It's a different beast. But I think we need to value both as part of our humanity which God is in the process of redeeming.

Our circumstances in life are not perfect. That's obvious enough. There will come a time when our circumstances will change, and the time for tears will be gone.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes,

and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

(Revelation 21:3-4)

But until that time, we are not redeemed *from* this world into some abstract world of emotionless sterility. God is not removing our feelings, but refining them. We're being taught to think *and feel* in terms of eternity. Our emotions are being tuned, not turned off. They are still part of us. They are still *meant* to be part of us. They are still meant to be part of the relationships *between* us. They always was how it was meant to be.

And therefore what *better* place for us to be *real* like this than in fellowship with the family of God? Where should be safer for us to share, than with the people with whom you are being prepared to share eternity, in the presence of God himself, where

***... in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.***

(Psalms 16:11)

Folks, this is not just a place and a people where you can come to *think* about God stuff. It is a place and a people where we should be sharing in the life that comes from God himself, just as Jesus promised:

"I am the door of the sheep. ... If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

(John 10:9-10)

And that will include the highs and lows of life here, and everything in between. Moments of mountain-top joys. Seasons of sadness. The regularity of routine. Times when the heart races. Times when the heart breaks. And everything in between. As children of God in a foreign land slowly making their way home together.

■ **Cross the divide**

And the biggest ask, I would imagine, for people at one end of this spectrum to relate to those at the other.

Can someone who has just been appointed to the job of their dreams come alongside someone who has just been forced to retire early because of their health?

Can a couple who have just lost a child to cot death come alongside the couple who have just been to see their newborn twelfth grandchild?

Can we cross that divide, can we

Rejoice with those who rejoice, [AND] weep with those who weep.

(Romans 12:15)

Folks, remember that Jesus has done both. He has been there, at both ends of that spectrum. We probably recall that prophecy of the Suffering Servant, from way back:

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;

(Isaiah 53:3)

At a funeral service, we might be reminded of the shortest verse in the Bible. Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus:

Jesus wept.

(John 11:35)

And yet there is also ...

But of the Son he says, "... You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."

(Hebrews 1:8-9)

And we're told of

... Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

(Hebrews 12:2)

That's why I said here, can we *cross* that divide? Can we see that other side, can we *teach* ourselves to understand that person who thinks and feels so differently from ourselves, and *be* there for them, in the name of Jesus? To

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

(Romans 12:15)

even if our hearts are perfectly in tune with neither, but, in the name of Jesus, as if you were Jesus himself ministering to them. Bring the reconciling *cross* of Jesus to bear on that relationship. Just as one day, you might need precisely the same yourself. Just as you would then desire – or be desperate – for someone to do to you, because you are *both* disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We will rejoice at each other's happiness and endeavour with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other's burdens and sorrows.

That's a big, noble promise. Let's make it into a prayer.