

“Overwhelmed With Joy”

In Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, an angel appears to shepherds in the fields, and they are terrified! “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord’” (Luke 2:10-11). Notice, the angel is bringing “good news of great joy”! The word translated “great” is the Greek word *μεγαλην* (*megalane*) from which we get the prefix “mega” - megaphone, megastar, megachurch, etc.

It’s probably several years later when the wise men arrive in Bethlehem following a star. Matthew relates how the star stopped over the place where Jesus was. “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy” (Matthew 2:10). Again, it’s not a little bit of joy – they were *overwhelmed* with joy! The birth of the Savior produces waves of joy for the shepherds and wise men!

The note of joy is there in the Christmas narratives. But it doesn’t stop there! This theme of joy pervades the New Testament writings – in fact, all of Scripture! If you look up all the verses containing the words “joy” “joyful” “rejoice”, you’ll have a long list of Scriptures!

The Hebrew people had joy in their faith! Psalm 40:16 says, “May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you.” The writer of Psalm 4:7 said, “You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.” (There is more joy in God than in an abundant harvest and a full supply of wine)! Psalm 19:8 tells us: “The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.” (There’s joy in following God’s commands). Psalm 16:11 “In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” (Being close to God is not a drag, but a joy!). The prophet Isaiah wrote, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3).

Turn to Isaiah, chapter 35. The prophet Isaiah envisions a time when God’s people, who have been defeated and exiled into a foreign land, will return to Zion. There’s a highway – a holy highway – on which they will travel. This passage then takes on a Messianic flavor – it becomes a description of what it will be like when the Messiah comes: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God... then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert... and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 35:1-2, 5-6, 10). Isn’t that a beautiful picture of joy!

Then Jesus is born, and the angels rejoice, and shepherds rejoice, and wise men rejoice! And when people believe in this Messiah, Jesus, they get wired up for joy! Simon Peter, one of Jesus’ disciples and followers, wrote: “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 1:8. Philip, a disciple, goes to Samaria and preaches Christ, and there is a huge positive response to the gospel message: “So there was great joy in that city” (Acts 8:8).

When anyone comes to Christ and trusts Him for salvation, the typical response of that step of faith is to experience joy!

Jesus Himself was a joyful person! A lot of people don’t picture Him that way. After all, He’s “the Lord”. And “the Lord” doesn’t laugh or smile. Being “the Lord” is a big responsibility! This is serious stuff! But Jesus once said to His disciples: “I have said these things to you so that *my joy* may be *in you*, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). In the prayer of Jesus found in John 17, Jesus prays to the Father: “But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they (disciples) may have *my joy* made complete in themselves” (John 17:13). When we put our faith in Christ and He lives in us, *His joy* seeps and flows into us!

OK. But what I’ve said can easily generate two responses: ***First, most people don’t think being a Christian is a joyful proposition.*** “Oh, you go to church, and are *religious*”. (The tone suggests that’s a downer). Don’t invite any Christians to your event if you’re planning to have some fun, because they’ll rain on your party! Or this one, “Most of the people I know who say they’re Christians don’t look very happy or joyful!”

And that leads to a second response: ***Many people who say they’re Christians are not very joyful people!*** Let’s be truthful here! How joyful a person *are you*? On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being really joyful), what’s your “joy score”?

So, why are so many people who say they’re Christians just not very joyful individuals? What’s it supposed to look like if we have Jesus’ joy in us?

For one thing, joy is not the same thing as happiness, or being happy. *Happiness* depends on circumstances (happenstance): how things are going at any given moment. Depending on the weather, or the stock market, or how healthy we are, or how tired we are, or what’s happening in our family or job situation, we may or may not be happy.

Joy, on the other hand, is not rooted in circumstances, how things are going in our life. It is rooted in *God* – God’s promises, God’s faithfulness, God’s graciousness.

Some moments, some days, some periods of life, we may not be especially happy, but we can still have the joy of the Lord deep within us. For instance, if we have lost a loved one, or are out of work, or we’re going through a painful illness, if we’ve been scammed out of some money, we’re not going to be laughing and smiling a lot – but we can still stand on that foundation of joy because we know we are in God’s hands. Haven’t you ever experienced that? I hope so!

This is that “in-spite-of joy” that the Bible describes. The Apostle Paul, for example, describes some of the hardships of being a follower of Jesus: “We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known, as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet

not killed; as sorrowful, *yet always rejoicing...*” (2 Corinthians 6:8b-10). This is the reason why Christians we read about in the New Testament are able to *rejoice* even when they are being *persecuted* for their faith in Christ, because our joy in Christ does not depend on outward circumstances, but on God.

This in-spite-of joy is eloquently described in Habakkuk 3:17-18: “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.”

So, if this kind of steady, amazing joy is possible, how do we get it? ***It begins in a relationship with Christ.*** We can be a church member, religious, believe the right doctrines and creeds, be a decent person, but not have a relationship with Christ. That relationship begins when we turn from our sins and self-focused living and accept the gift of salvation He offers, and when we turn our life and will over to Him. There’s a joy that comes when our life is changed by Christ. Our sins are forgiven. God gives us eternal life through His Son Jesus!

Joy *grows* as we nurture our relationship with Christ, through prayer, and worship, and Christian fellowship, and serving. If we really are a Christian, and not feeling much joy in our faith, it’s good to ask: How’s my prayer life? Am I regularly in the Word? Am I availing myself of opportunities the church offers for study, fellowship, worship, serving?

Secondly, joy grows in obedience and submission to Christ. One of the biggest “joy-killers” is willful sin, disobeying what we know to be God’s commands and will. If I’m doing something I know to be wrong, or not doing something I know God wants me to do, it will cut into the joy I could be experiencing in Christ. That’s just the way it is. Joy grows as we obey Christ and sincerely seek to do His will.

In the New Testament, joy is often associated with the *Holy Spirit*. Actually, joy is listed as *one of the fruit of the Spirit*. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, *joy...*” (Galatians 5:22). In other words, as we allow the Holy Spirit to dominate our desires, our thought life, our behaviors, rather than the sin-nature in us, *joy* comes as a by-product of that submission to the Holy Spirit.

Then too, if joy is to mark our life as a follow of Jesus, it’s important to focus on the joyful and positive side of life. This may seem to contradict what I’ve said so far – that joy comes from Jesus – it’s not something we manufacture on our own. But I believe we must cooperate with God! In other words, I can choose to be the kind of person who always thinks the worst, and focuses on the negative side of things. I can *practice* being unhappy and gloomy in my outlook. Somebody has said, “Some people bring joy wherever they go. Other people bring joy *whenever* they go!” Abraham Lincoln once said something like this: “I reckon that a person is just about as happy as he makes up his mind to be” So, it’s like this: Joy is rooted in God; Jesus gives us His joy when He lives in us. But we can cultivate that by developing a mind-set, an attitude, that focuses on the good and positive things of life.

I would say this, too: ***Being a joyful Christian is certainly a better witness to the world.***

Joy is contagious! Pastor and author Joe Harding tells of eating in a restaurant with another couple. Some high school students were in a corner booth. These students started laughing about something; the laughter just got louder and louder. He soon became aware that some people were listening to their laughter, but trying to stop. And the more they tried to stop, the more giggles and laughter convulsed their entire bodies until the booth was almost shaking.

Then something began to happen. Laughter moved from one booth to another. People started to smile, then they too began to laugh. Dr. Harding said, "I saw it coming toward us! Soon we found ourselves caught up in the whole atmosphere of laughter and joy. We didn't even know what we were laughing about! But our conversation was interrupted as we smiled at each other and then broke out in laughter. It was an amazing moment."

More people are won to Christ by joyful, fun-loving believers than by crabby Christians! I read once that in Nicholas County, West Virginia, there's an ordinance that says no member of the clergy is allowed to tell jokes or humorous stories from the pulpit during a church service. (Wouldn't you like to know what's behind all that?)

Now the joy of Christ in us is more than just laughing and telling jokes. But Christians, above all people, ought to be joyful, just like the shepherds, just like the Magi (the wise men), because a Savior has been born, and He lives in us!

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