

God's Gift -- the Great Joy of our Salvation Luke 2:8-20

Introduction

The Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, when he was a young man he did not believe in God. He was an atheist but interestingly he said he felt *"very angry with God for not existing."* As a young professor at Oxford University, however, at 31 years of age, Lewis became a Christian. He wrote that he came *"kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction looking for a chance to escape."* But the Lord had won his heart. He describes what happened: *"I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."*

Lewis was dejected and reluctant because he imagined if he surrendered his life to God he would lose his freedom and have nothing left to enjoy. He thought there could not possibly be any connection between God's salvation and joy. Well, he soon discovered that the very opposite was true. When he put his trust in God, he found the true *source* of the greatest joy.

He tells of his journey to faith in a book entitled: *"Surprised by Joy"*. He discovered, to his surprise, that joy was not to be found in a place or in things, like money, or pleasure, or success, or fame, but it was to be found in a Person, and that Person was Jesus Christ. This is the message of Christmas. Great Joy is found in a Person and that Person is Jesus, the Saviour.

Of all the wonderful promises contained in the Nativity story, the one that seems to be missing the most today is "great joy." How many people do you know that would describe their life as being full of GREAT JOY? And yet that is the proclamation by the angels to the shepherds. The Saviour of the world would bring good news of great joy for all people. The angels declared joy. Mary and Joseph were amazed with joy. The wise men were filled with joy. The shepherds returned with rejoicing in their hearts. Even John the Baptist had leapt for joy in Elizabeth's womb. I am sure we all could make a long list of reasons for the lack of joy in our lives. That list would most certainly include aging, sickness, stress, setbacks, suffering, struggles of life, sin in our own lives, and that of the world around us. The biggest mistake we often make is to think that happiness and joy are one and the same. In the Bible that is not the case.

Happiness depends on the circumstances of one's life. If my life happens to happen the way I want it to happen, then I am happy. Right? The word joy on the other hand is a relationship word. Being part of a family, for instance does not change if you become sick or poor or lose your job or homeless? No, not at all! The Bible tells us that that the shepherds returned with joy in their hearts, but did the circumstances of their lives suddenly change because of this good news for all people announcement? Not at all! When they returned after seeing the baby Jesus, they were still financially poor. They were still considered the lowest class of the Jewish Religious and socio-economic order. Their sheep still smelled bad and required constant care. They returned to the same wife and kids they had before Jesus was born, but still they were full of joy! Their response illustrates a secret to joy that many miss. So how can we then live not being that happy about the circumstances of our lives, and yet still have joy. Our scripture this morning gives us some hints as to how this happens.

1. Personal Significance

The first key to understanding God's gift of great Joy is to understand our personal significance. It is to ask "how important are we to God? True, the Scriptures warn us against thinking too highly of ourselves, but you must also understand who God created you to be. You are not an accident. God created you on purpose. Notice in this message what the angel said to the shepherds, "has been born to you." Imagine what this truth meant to the shepherds. God's amazing love was for them. They may not make the front page of the Jerusalem Times, but they made it into the pages of Scripture! They were special because God loved them. God cared for them, just as God cares for you and me. When we take the time with someone to listen to them with the uninterrupted focus of our attention, allowing their thoughts or concerns heard, they can sense that they're special. Guess what? God thinks you are special. To prove His love God sent His Son!

2. Trusting the Promises of Scripture

The second key to experiencing great joy is to move, trusting the promises of God. The instructions issued to the shepherds were to go to the city of David, the town of Bethlehem. Did they just receive that good news and go back to tending their sheep? No, they got up and went to Bethlehem. The birth of Christ in Bethlehem was a fulfilment of numerous prophecies about the Messiah. Jesus Christ is not only the fulfilment of Scripture;

He is the Word of God. We encounter His guidance, peace, and joy through the precious promises of His Word. But those promises are made for us to act upon them. We can trust the promises of God when it says, "You are loved. God will never leave you. He has a plan for your life. Though you go through the valley of the shadow of death, His goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life." Today, you and I can rejoice because no matter what the circumstances this is the day that the LORD has made. C.S. Lewis said that, "God must find our prayers very weak indeed when compared to all the promises offered to believers."

3. Pardon From Sin

The next key is knowing that your sin is forgiven.

The angels declared that a Saviour is born. The saving work of Christ is not a political revolt or an economic revolution; it is the forgiveness of sin. King David said in Psalm 32:1, "Happy is the one whose transgression is forgiven and whose sin is covered." Sin consists of the unrighteous deeds that we commit and those things we omit to include in our lives. Sin separates us from a Holy God. Sin causes pain and suffering. The pain can be physical consequences or emotional trauma created by living a life in disobedience to God's will and plan for our lives. For people who have not trusted Christ as Saviour, the words of the hymn we've just sung, Joy to The World summarise what needs to be done, "let every heart prepare him room." For you and me who know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. David in Psalm 51:12 prayed "restore to me the joy of your salvation." When we continually remember that glorious day when our sin was forgiven, that keeps joy in your heart by the Spirit of God who both saves and sustains us. Jesus is the Saviour of the world, and His salvation produces great joy.

4. Participation in Christ's Family

The fourth key to the God's gift of Great Joy is to know we are never to be alone in our Christian journey. God has placed us in a family of believers who support us, encourage us and pray for us. While Mary received the angel's message by herself, it did not take Joseph long to take her as his wife, to support her and stand by her. While we do not know how the rest of her family reacted to the news of her pregnancy, we know Elizabeth was there for her. Even after the birth of the baby, Mary and Joseph were not alone, because angels told shepherds about what happened. These shepherds are described as rejoicing together over what they had experienced. A wise man once said,

“Friends double our joys and divide our sorrows.”

Developing these positive and supportive relationships are critical to us following Christ and experiencing great joy. Believers in Christ are described in Scripture as members of the same family, parts of the same body, and stones of the same building. Without significant relationships, you will never possess the promise of great joy.

Together these 4 keys point to great joy. Joy found in a Person – in Jesus the Saviour. Again, many people confuse happiness with joy. We feel happy when we eat good food, get paid, receive a bonus, or when we meet up with friends, or go on holiday. But feelings of happiness come and go because our happiness depends on what happens! And sometimes happiness turns to disappointment and despair. But joy is different. It is far deeper. It does not depend upon the circumstances or the situation.

In fact, this is what Jesus’ Right hand man and Rock of the Church, the Apostle Peter seems to be saying to the suffering and persecuted believers to whom he writes in his first letter.

Despite all they are suffering Peter writes, *“In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”* 1 Peter 1:6. It seems almost a contradiction, doesn't it? How can we “greatly rejoice” while at the same time having “to suffer grief in all kinds of trials”? Well, the reason is “joy” does not depend upon the circumstances. It does not depend upon what happens – good or bad. Joy is far deeper. It flows out of a relationship with the One who never changes, the One who never lets us down, the One who never leaves us or forsakes us – our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I ask you, do know this wonderful Person? Do you know the One who is the source, the fountain of true joy? Peter goes on to say to those scattered and suffering believers to whom he was writing, *“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, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”* 1 Peter 1:8-9

The message the angel announced that first Christmas, the “good news of great joy”, is the same message Peter is talking about. It is the message of God's gift of salvation. When God sent Jesus, He sent us the Saviour.

If we surrender our lives to Jesus we will discover, that together with Jesus, God gives us the gift of great joy. Like Peter and those early believers, we will begin to experience something of what it means to be "... filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy".

Does this mean we'll have no more trials, or struggles, or temptations? Does it mean we will never be sick or sad? Does it mean we will never face hardship, or persecution or bereavement? Of course not! Peter was writing to suffering, persecuted believers. Yes, there are times we cry, times we grieve, times we suffer but despite this Christians experience deep-down joy.

This is why, as one Christian thinker Pierre de Chardin put it, "joy is the surest sign of the presence of God." Looking grim and having a long, miserable face is out of place for a Christian. If we have no joy, if we can't smile or laugh, we are missing the heart of the gospel.

Bible commentator William Barclay puts it this way: "The Christian is a man [or woman] of joy. ... A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, and nothing in all religious history has done Christianity more harm than its connection with black clothes and long faces."

The Bible is full of joy. It is full of gladness, rejoicing and blessing. Joy is mentioned all through both the Old and New Testaments. But everywhere true joy, true blessing, true deep down happiness, is linked to being in a relationship *with God*. It is linked to being obedient to His Word. When the Lord is present in our lives, and when we live in obedience to Him, His joy fills our hearts.

Challenge:

Is Jesus living in your heart? Have you found this wonderful gift of joy about which the angel spoke that first Christmas? It can be yours as you surrender your life in obedience to the One who is the fountain of true joy, the Lord Jesus Christ. It can be yours as you invite Him into your heart and life as your Saviour and King.

Conclusion:

Great joy is God's Christmas gift to you. If you haven't yet, please do fully open God's Gift- the Great Joy of your salvation!