

The Dawning of God's Joy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 December 2024

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 01] So, for a few minutes, if you have your Bibles, Isaiah 60, page 748 of the Church Bibles, we're going to think together about the dawning of God's joy at Christmas, to ask ourselves the question, what is this joy that God wants us to have? Of course, joy is one of the Christmas emotions. You know, we're almost there, it's almost Christmas, but probably for many of us, we've already had some parties, there's been meals, maybe we've braved the Christmas market, we've put on some of our favorite Christmas movies, we have all these little joys as we look forward to the great joy of Christmas. Maybe our Christmas memories are tied up with that sense of anticipation, the excited waiting, the getting up early, the excitement of presents and families gathered. We know these joys that are associated with Christmas, but what is the deep joy that God wants to bring us that Christmas? That joy that was announced by the angels that very first Christmas, that good news of great joy. Not a small joy, not a temporary joy, but a great joy.

What is the joy? It's the joy that comes of celebrating the mystery of God with us, the mystery of the incarnation. God contracted to a span incomprehensibly made man, as one of our Christmas hymns puts it.

It's the promise of a Savior born, God with us, bringing us a joy that we can never lose. Remember Jesus' words to His followers shortly before going to the cross. In John chapter 16, He said to them, you have grief now, John 16 verse 22, now is your time of grief, but I will see you again, resurrection, and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. So the joy that Jesus brings, a joy that can never be lost, never be taken away. And then we come to Isaiah chapter 60, and it begins with this wonderful image of the coming of God, being like the darkness giving way to beautiful sunrise, of despair giving way to joy. Verse 2 is a good example. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darknesses over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you, and His glory appears over you.

And as Isaiah is invited to look, and as the people of God are invited to look, we're told that there is a joy in the coming of Jesus that causes hearts to throb, that causes faces radiant, to cause hearts to swell with joy. So for a few minutes, we're going to think about this joy that God wants us to have at Christmas as we consider the glory of the Lord Jesus in His first coming, but especially, I think, as we think about the return of the Lord Jesus. Because Isaiah 60 pictures these wonderful realities that in the coming of Jesus and in the return of Jesus, our whole eternal future is transformed.

And ultimately, He brings in new creation. We can have eternal joy, joy that never ends, because there is eternal life coming. There is an eternal kingdom that He is establishing. And so we can use Isaiah 60 to remind us, and indeed to reawaken us, to that deep eternal joy that we're brought into if we're trusting in Christ. So very briefly, I think there's three pictures that we find in this passage that we can find helpful. The first picture is of the joy of a global kingdom. So in verses 4 to 9, that's really the focus, the joy of a global kingdom. And that matters, because we place these verses in their historical context. This is a message given to exiles. So they have been taken prisoner by a foreign nation. They have been plundered, they have been ruined, and they are far from home. And so their great longing, of course, is for return, to be back in the promised land. For them, an end to darkness is about an end to that sense that they have of being separate from their God, because they can't worship Him in the temple. It's an end to the darkness of being surrounded in this foreign nation by false worship. The end to darkness for them is when they stop feeling the effects of their sin that has led them to know God's judgment and the exile. But there's a wonderful promise that comes that kings and nations will tremble at His voice, all creation will rise to rejoice, and that includes the exiled people of God. So think about the language that we have here. Verse 4, lift up your eyes and see your sons come from afar and your daughters are carried on the hip. Here's a promise. God's people will return to be home with their God. Verse 5, here's another promise. The wealth on the seas will be brought to you. To you the riches of the nations will come. This is saying that places that were formerly hostile to God and God's people will now come and bring their wealth as a sign of devotion and loyalty to the true God. Indeed, verse 7 takes it further, all Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you.

[5 : 54] They will be accepted as offerings on my altar. Here is the worship of nations now being so turned that it's being offered to God and ultimately being offered to Christ. So what God had promised to Abraham, blessing to all the nations, what God had promised to Israel in the book of Isaiah, a servant who would be a light to all the nations, those promises come true in the coming of Christ. Nations will come and His kingdom will go global. And you get the picture in these verses that here is a joy that is a shared joy. The joy of the gospel, the joy of belonging to the Lord Jesus is something that God's redeemed people get to experience. But at the same time, there are new converts who are going to be part of this kingdom, and there's going to be nations, formerly strangers to God, now devoted to the glory of Christ. That's a great picture of the mission of God to bring people in. And this chapter, I think, pictures that the climax of the story of God's growing kingdom, and obviously central to that, is the coming of Jesus and the mission of Jesus. So think about His first coming. We already mentioned it among the first worshipers, the Magi, people who come from far away to come and to bow and to bring their treasures, their gold and incense, verse 6. As Matthew, especially in his gospel, he likes to do this as he speaks about the growing kingdom. He likes to make observations about surprising people who are brought in. So God's mission, the mission of Jesus, brings in Roman soldiers.

We see it will also bring in Samaritans. It will bring in outsiders who are made kingdom citizens. And so we see that from the coming of Jesus, and then the coming of the Spirit, and the growth of the church, the church begins to go global. This kingdom that's anticipated in Isaiah 60, we begin to see it coming to fulfillment, and we're part of that. All the way until we get to His second coming, go back to the book of Revelation, where we are on Sunday mornings. We can go to chapter 7, verse 9, and we encounter another worship scene. We encounter this great multitude from every nation and tribe and people and language, and they've got their crowns and they're waving their palm branches. We sang about it in our opening hymn. This global kingdom, this eternal global kingdom, established and established around people from all nations and cultures, worshipping the God who saved through Christ the Lamb.

And so one of the joys that we have at Christmas is the joy that is shared. All of our family gatherings represent a sharing of joy together. We were talking about one of our slightly more unusual family traditions from my side of the family, from whenever I was little, our Christmas presents. We had a very low-frills approach to Christmas. All our presents would go into a black bin bag, and people would take it in turns to pull out a present and see who it was for, and we'd pass the gift to that person who would open it, then they would pick out the next present.

It's a great tradition, not very fancy, but everybody gets to share in the joy of one another. That's so important, isn't it? We enjoy giving and receiving gifts. We enjoy seeing happiness shared.

And Christmas, of course, is connected to giving, because God has given us His Son as the greatest gift. And as we discover that Jesus is the great gift to the world, then our joy is increased as we share it with others, as we share fellowship with one another. We remember what we have in common is that Jesus has saved us, and we have joy as we recognize and see Him at work around us and in our world.

[10 : 19] In verse 4, these exiles are invited to lift up their eyes and look, to anticipate people being drawn in.

Maybe to fuel our joy this season, it would be good for us to lift up our eyes and look, and to learn about what God is doing. One of the really interesting things that's been reported all around our nation this year, actually, is lots of ministers say, we're seeing more young Scottish guys becoming Christians than we've seen in decades. God is building His kingdom. The church is suffering intense persecution in different parts of the world, but is growing rapidly at the same time.

God is building His global kingdom. We've heard reports that God's Word is being translated into more languages, so He's able to spread through more people groups and is being distributed to more people so that they can hear the good news and be saved. As we lift up our eyes and look, we discover God is still building this global kingdom. And when we're in Jesus, we have the joy of being part of that.

So, that's the first joy that's recorded in our chapter here. It's the joy of the global kingdom. The second joy, here in verse 10 to 17, is the joy of a restored city of God. And to help us to think about this, to help us think about the joy of a restored city, we can turn to Paris and to Notre Dame, which just recently got reopened five years after that devastating fire. If you saw the pictures of the opening ceremony, it looks amazing. And at that ceremony, world leaders were obviously gathered for this event that became a celebration, a source of pride for the city, for the whole nation.

Emmanuel Macron had a few comments to make. He said, of it, we had the will, the hope, the daring to rebuild Notre Dame and make it more beautiful than ever. He said, Notre Dame reminds us that we are bearing the legacy of something bigger than us. So, keep that idea of Notre Dame being built back better at being a fitting legacy as we come to this section. Because what we have in this section is this promise that Christ's return promises the final completion of a rebuilt, restored city of God, much greater and more beautiful than anything that had been seen before.

[13 : 14] And that city, which is nothing less than the people of God, stands as a legacy to something much bigger than us, to the grace of God and to the glory of God. When the people of God are established together, together made beautiful by the Lord Jesus to enjoy eternity with Him, that's a legacy to God's grace and to God's glory. And again, think about this from the point of view of an exile.

Because a lot of people that Isaiah is writing to, bringing this message to, they saw their city in ruins. They left us prisoners, having seen their property taken, buildings destroyed, the temple being left as rubble. Sometimes because of the distance of time, we lose the sense of what a trauma that must have been. If you have a time, read Psalm 74. It's not one of our, one of those psalms that we typically sing, but you get that sense of real trauma and distress as a worshiper reflects on what it looked like to see the temple being destroyed by foreign invaders. But we don't need to go back just to the history books to recognize the tragic scenes of cities being destroyed, do we? It's something that we see in our news cycles. There is ongoing trauma in Middle East and Ukraine and places like Myanmar.

But to think about those scenes and to think about, again, what would the longing be if you had been taken into exile? You would want to be home to that place where you would know God with us, and you would want to know that in that place you could live with peace and live with security.

And to people with those longings, God's Word comes and says, when God returns, when Christ comes, the city of God will be built back and built back better. Look at some of the details that show us this.

Verse 10, foreigners will rebuild your walls and their kings will serve you. So among those who took great delight in persecuting God's people, they will now become worshipers, and they will be part of this restoration process.

[15 : 58] Verse 10 goes on to say, though in anger, this is God speaking, though in anger I struck you, in favor I will show you compassion. And so God's heart towards His people, His compassion is shown, He shows grace, He brings them back, and He changes the attitudes of hostile nations, turning them to, to love and serve God. The picture continues in verse 11, your gates will always stand open. Now for an ancient city, if the gates were wide open, this is a picture of great insecurity ordinarily, because then anybody can come in, then foreign armies can come in. But there's a reason why these gates are always standing open. They'll never be shut day or night, so that, here's the reason, so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations, their kings led in triumphal procession.

So the gates have to be open. There is no need to worry about security, because there's so many people coming to worship. There are so many people, including leaders of nations, coming to acknowledge the greater glory of God. They can have security because the situation has been utterly transformed.

Verse 13, the glory of Lebanon will come to you to adorn my sanctuary, and I will glorify the place for my feet. So here we find another amazing scene where the best of foreign wealth and glory is now being gladly given to rebuild God's temple, His sanctuary, His home among His people. And this place is now recognized as the city of the Lord. People recognize this is where God is. This is where God dwells with His people. And strikingly, the nations want to be part of that. It's the joy of a restored city. God's grace is at work here. If you think back in your Bibles, when was the last time we saw the nations coming together on a worldwide building project. It's Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel.

Then the nations came together, the people came together to build this great tower to their own glory. But now the nations are coming together to make the temple beautiful so that God would get glory.

And key to it all is God's grace. Verse 15, although you have been forsaken and hated with no one traveling through a forgotten place, a nothing people, I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations. God transforms status. Then you will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior, your Redeemer, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. Without a shadow of a doubt, this restored city of God is a tribute to God's grace and God's glory. He is the God who redeems and saves. He is the God who is able to turn shame to honor. He is the one who brings peace in place of war. He is the one who can bring beauty out of brokenness. That's the gospel. That's the heart of God.

[19 : 27] Now, we think about that in the context of a city. We recognize ruins need to be restored. But perhaps many of us, we identify with that longing for restoration at the more personal level.

And maybe Christmas is one of those times where we feel that longing for restoration. Maybe families that are strained may be separated by distance.

May be separated by past difficulties. Or maybe it's because we feel the sadness of loss. We were made for life together. And made for life together with God.

And we have these longings to be in this place where we belong and we have peace and we have security and we know it is safe and it's forever. And God says, you find it with me and in me.

And he gives us this longing for our true home. And then Jesus comes. And he's announced as our Emmanuel is God with us. And he comes and he declares himself to be the true temple. Here is now how we go where we go to meet with God. And Jesus came so that his body might be broken and his blood might be shed.

[20 : 58] That he would pay the penalty for sin so that you and I could have a restored relationship with God. So that we could have that deep reconciliation with God. Peace in our hearts.

Jesus came to give us life and life to the full. He came that his joy might be in us and that our joy might be complete. And he is working that restoration program out in his people.

And that will ultimately be completed when he returns. Again, we go right to the end of the Bible, and we have that promise in Revelation 21 of the joy of a wedding. And we have Jesus, the bridegroom.

And the bride? The bride is the new Jerusalem. It's the people of God. A bride made beautiful by Christ Jesus, that we might live with him forever and enjoy that restored communion that will never be lost. And so Christmas gives us a promise of that joy. Here is the one through whom we can know a love that will never end. He gives us the promise of his presence forever, anticipating a joy that is unbreakable. And that takes us to the third picture in this wonderful chapter. It takes us to the joy of new creation. So we're asking the question, what joy does God want for us at Christmas?

You know, we enjoy many good things. Our God is good and kind. We get to experience so many good things. And it's like he sets up that trail of breadcrumbs that will lead us to the greatest joy, joy of eternal life, knowing God. With the promise that when Jesus comes again, we will see his glory in full display. And in that moment, for the people of God, we will experience and we'll never lose the world we all want. And this chapter helps us to look ahead to that future glory. Look at some of the ideas that we have in this last section. Verse 18, no longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls salvation and your gates praise. A people saved by God, living in a world without violence, without war, without injustice. Verse 20, your sun will never set again, your moon will wane no more. The Lord will be your everlasting light and your days of sorrow will end. When we live in God's presence, there will be no sadness, there is no suffering. Verse 21, then all your people will be righteous and they will possess the land forever. This was the great hope and promise that God's people longed for, that we could live in God's land, in God's place, with God forever. When Jesus comes again, there's no more insecurity.

[24 : 35] There's no prospect that our joy will be removed. Verse 19, the sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you. Why? Because there's a greater glory.

For the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. This has never been seen in history. No society has experienced this kind of life, nor will we ever. No amount of progress, no amount of education, no amount of technology will ever secure it, but Jesus will, and Jesus does. Look at how this chapter ends. Having made all these wonderful promises, it ends this way, I am the Lord. In its time, I will do this swiftly.

God is committed to bringing this total renewal, to bringing in the new creation, the new heavens, and the new earth. And He promises to do it, as He says in verse 21, for the display of My splendor, so that we would see and be satisfied forever in the glory of our God.

God is an incredible prospect. Some of us, maybe in our past, some of us this year perhaps, have written wish lists for Christmas. Maybe we write letters to Santa. Some of us are maybe realistic, and we set our bar low. Some of us are really optimistic, and we shoot for the moon.

But if we could collectively write a list of, here are the great longings of humanity, you know, that goes more than beyond the latest gadget or whatnot, what would we include on that list?

[26 : 41] Surely we would include world peace. Surely we would include living in a place where every human being is valued and has dignity. Surely we would write down that people want an end to sadness and pain and death, and we want all relationships marked by love and joy.

Those are the great longings in every human heart. Now, if we imagine, and with John Lennon, there's no heaven. If we imagine there's no intervention from God, if we imagine that things just keep going, that He never comes to be one of us, then those lists, those longings, they're just pie in the sky. But when the angels announce good news of great joy for all people, because a Savior has come, because Christ has come, and when the Savior declares, I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in the darkness, but have the light of life. When the Savior dies, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and when He rises again in victory, now what we have is guarantee of unimaginable, unbreakable joy coming for us, those who are in Christ in the new creation.

That list, that will be our reality for all eternity. So, there is deep joy, lasting joy, eternal joy in Jesus. So, as we consider Him, may it be a joyful Christmas for us all. May this be a season in which we look up, see what God is doing, look up to remind ourselves how great our God and Savior is, that the gospel would cause our hearts to throb and swell with joy.

knowing that He is the Lord, and in His time He will do it swiftly. Let's pray together.