

Joy

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Preacher: Ray Sweet

[0:00] Well, hey, good morning. My name is Ray Sweet from First Christian Church in Greensburg, Indiana. And as always, we just want to thank you for joining us today.

We just pray that God's Word will speak to you in a powerful way. And I also just want to encourage you that you can always check out FCCGreensburg.com or our FCC Greensburg Facebook page. But I want to give you a personal invitation this week. As the Christmas season is upon us, and we're talking about that hope and that peace, that joy, that love that Christ brought into this world that we can walk in every day, I would love, if you are physically able, I would love to meet you in person.

So on Sunday mornings, we have three worship services. We have an 8 o'clock traditional, which is the old hymns. And then we have 9.30 and 11 o'clock contemporary worship music being played there.

So we would love for you to join us, and we'd love to just meet you and do life alongside you. But hey, there was a little boy, as Christmas was approaching, who was a pretty ornery little guy.

[1:11] I guess as some would say, he was on the naughty list. And one day at Christmastime, he came up to his mom, and he told her about the coolest new bicycle that he wanted, banana seed and all.

But when his mom heard the price, she said, no way I can afford that. You better go pray to Jesus if you want that kind of bike. So he found himself in his room writing a letter.

That's how he prayed. So he said, dear Jesus, I really want this bike, and I promise I'll be good for a whole year. And then he stopped.

And he thought about it for a second, and he said, nah, this is God I'm writing to. There's no tricking him. He knows better. I mean, he saw what I did on the playground last Thursday. And so he crumpled up his paper, and he threw it in the wastebasket.

He started over, dear Jesus, I promise I'll be good for a whole month. And then he stopped. Well, that's not going to happen either. So he wadded up his paper again, and he threw it in the trash can.

[2:15] He started over, Jesus, if you bring me this bike, I'll be good for a whole day. And then he stopped, and he sat his pencil down. The light bulb all of a sudden had come on.

And so he tiptoed down the stairs to the family nativity scene. Without anyone seeing him, he grabbed the figurine of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

He hustled back up to his room. He closed the door. He locked it, and he quickly grabbed pencil and paper. But this time he wrote, dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mom again, bring me that bike.

Now, we're just kind of having some fun, and I think it's a good idea to laugh whenever you talk about this topic of joy. So welcome back to this series called Christmas Characters.

You know, a couple weeks back, we kicked it off with Mary and Joseph and the hope that we have in Christ. Last week in our 8 o'clock service, Jerry Holdman talked about the peace that only comes through the Prince of Peace, Jesus.

[3:24] And in the contemporary services, our kids sung all about the peace that Christ brought into this world. And today we're going to tackle a different topic, and it's the word joy.

The word that so many seem to misunderstand. See, in a lot of people's homemade thesaurus, they interchange the words joy and happiness. They think that they're synonyms, and yet they're not.

Because happiness comes and goes, while joy comes and grows. Happiness depends on what's happening around you, while joy can grow deep down to the very core of who you are, and nothing

can shake it.

In fact, I love how Robert Rainey put this. He says, joy is the flag which is flown from the castle of the heart when King Jesus is in residence there.

And so let's take a journey today to the very beginning of the Christmas story with a couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. So go ahead and start to turn probably about three quarters of the way through your Bible to Luke chapter 1.

[4 : 32] Then, that's the third book of your New Testament. So you start with Matthew, Mark, and then you get to Luke. But I think I would do you a major disservice if I didn't mention the darkness that surrounded the Jewish people during this time.

So let me read you a paragraph from John MacArthur that will simply help us to understand the context of Jesus' birth. He says, He says, He longed for the day that the Messiah would come and dispel the spiritual darkness that had held this nation in its grip for so long. And another part of that darkness was the reality that they hadn't heard from God in about 400 years.

The prophets had apparently dried up and many began to wonder if God had somehow forgotten them. Had He abandoned them? And now here's the promise that I love from Malachi 3.1.

God says, And speaking of the messenger who will prepare the way before the Lord, this is where we pick up in meeting his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

[6 : 50] While this couple is not perfect, and we're going to see that in just a moment with Zechariah, Luke shows us that this priest and his wife, who, by the way, was a daughter of a priest.

So today we would call her a priest.

Many tears, I'm sure, have been shed.

Which was pretty old for that day and age because we live so much longer now with modern medicine. The childbearing years are behind them.

And yet, God's got big plans. Or to put it another way, he ain't done with them yet. And my apologies to the late Mrs. Stotts, who taught me much better English than that at North Decatur.

[8 : 23] See, twice a year, for a week, a priest would leave their station and they would serve in the temple in Jerusalem. And it just so happened to be one of Zechariah's weeks to go to Jerusalem and serve.

And to be chosen to enter the temple to burn incense was the highest honor for a priest and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But this time was even more special because God was about to show up through an angel.

So start with me here. You should be in Luke chapter 1. And let's start in verse 10. Could you imagine already the fear and awe and reverence of God being chosen to do this very special task? And now an angel is right in front of him? It says in verse 12, Now look at verse 14.

Verse 17.

[10 : 00] Verse 17. Okay, so anyone right there from home, wherever you're listening, who is this passage talking about?

Who is going to prepare the way for the Lord? Yes, John the Baptist, right? So here's the first thing I want you to see today. The joy of the Lord can meet you in your darkness.

And one of the coolest things about this couple who had walked through deep sadness, who had dealt with the intense disappointment and heartbreak that some of you understand with not being able to have children.

I love that even in this dark season for Zechariah and Elizabeth, even the spiritual darkness Israel felt with Roman rule and God's silence, joy was still available just like it is for us today.

See, Elizabeth George put it like this in her book. She said, I found it so like our God that even the names Zechariah and Elizabeth have a powerful meaning.

[11 : 28] Zechariah or even as it's been called Zacharias means Yahweh remembers or God remembers. Let me ask you this. Has life come with its twists and its turns?

I bet it has. But God remembers you. Has someone betrayed you like you never thought possible? God remembers. Have we made some decisions that maybe haven't been healthy that have left us reeling with the consequences?

God remembers you. And Zechariah, in your pain and your disappointment, even though you followed the Lord faithfully, God remembers you. And he's El Roy, the God who sees you.

And Israel, God's people, he's not forgotten you either. His timing may not be yours, but God remembers and his plans are perfect. And then Elizabeth's name means my God is an oath. What does that mean? It means my God is my promise. My God's promises are faithful and I will celebrate him. Imagine every time in her despair, when her name was spoken, it was that gentle reminder that we all need that my God's promises are true.

[12:38] My God is here. Some of you came in these doors today with your head hanging low. Some of you are listening right now on this radio broadcast and your head is hanging low.

Your will is broken. Your heart may be shattered. And listen, I'm glad you're listening because you need to hear this. Joy in Christ is lasting. It doesn't fade like a drunken binge. It doesn't dwindle like an unhealthy relationship, a fancy car, a big bank account, or a job promotion. It permeates every part of your soul. And in Psalm 30 verse 5, it says, You know this. Life has its rough times. Life has its dark seasons. Jesus even tells us in this fallen world. You will have troubles. And yet take heart because our God has overcome the world.

Be joyful because the night only lasts for so long and the morning is on its way and nothing can take that daylight. That joy from your soul that's found in Christ, your redeemer.

[13:53] And not only is joy lasting, but joy is a choice. And in Psalm 32 11, we're taught to rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous.

Sing all you who are upright in heart. And then jumping over to the New Testament, Philippians 4 4 puts it this way. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again.

Rejoice. Rejoice. Somebody listening today needs to hear this. That your situation may right now seem dark. It may look impossible through human eyes. And just like with this godly couple, you may be tempted to want to give up.

But joy meets you in that darkness. It's found in one place and his name is Jesus. And here's the greatest news. Your joy does not have to be dictated by your circumstances.

Let me say it again, just in case we need to clean out our ears, okay? Because I know sometimes I do. Your joy does not have to be dictated by your circumstances.

[14:55] And then here's the second thing I want you to see today. Joy follows obedience. As the story continues to play out here in Luke 1, we kind of see the human element as Zechariah doubts the angel Gabriel when he tells him this amazing news that his wife will bear this child that will prepare the way for the Lord.

And because he would dare question the Lord. And what he's questioning is his truthfulness. The angel tells him he will now be silent, unable to speak until the baby arrives.

And when he came out of the temple, the people were praying. And they knew something had happened. It had taken way too long. He was clearly shaken up. And he couldn't speak.

Now fast forward with me. His time in Jerusalem ends. Zechariah goes home, unable to speak. Next, Elizabeth, beyond childbearing years, becomes pregnant.

The baby grows month after month. And listen, it's not miraculous in the sense that like Mary was conceived through the Holy Spirit. No, this was her and her husband, okay? The baby grows month after month.

[16:02] And now the day has arrived for his birth. There's excitement over the promise of this child. Great joy fills their circle of family and friends as the day comes where he arrives.

Now pick up with me. Fast forward a little bit to Luke 1 verse 59. Luke 1 59 says, Now guys, listen, let's stop there for a second.

Before we beat up the people around them, listen, this is what you did in their culture. You named the child after his father or maybe another prominent man in the family.

That's what you would do. So this was kind of weird. This was kind of crazy. Verse 62, Then they made signs to his father to find out what he would like to name the child.

He asked for a writing tablet. And to everyone's astonishment, he wrote, His name is John.

Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.

[17:13] You know, some of the most miserable people, Some of the most joyless Christians are those who continue down a road of disobedience to the Lord and his word. And yet we're human, right?

It's so easy to do. And I'm not making excuses, but Romans 3 23 is clear that we all have missed the mark. We've all fallen short of the glory of God. We've all sinned against him.

And it's only by the amazing grace of Jesus Christ on the cross through his resurrection, When we place our faith in him, that we can be redeemed from the destruction of our sin.

We are forgiven. We are justified. We are made pure before God the Father because of the blood of Christ. So for a believer, we never become loosey-goosey or cavalier about our sin.

Romans 6 1 and 2 is clear when it says, What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means. What's he saying there?

[18 : 13] He's saying because we're a follower of Jesus, Because we have surrendered our life, been baptized into him, Do we just go back to the sinful life and do whatever we want? He says, By no means.

We are those who have died to sin. How can we live in it any longer? But guys, when we do make that mistake, which we all do, We humble ourselves before God.

We ask for his forgiveness. We learn from our mistakes, Ready to show obedience the next time that we're put to the test. And here Zechariah is with another chance.

Here he is with another chance and he hits it out of the park. Okay. When people they loved, people who even meant well, Were pressuring them to follow the cultural norm. When they were insisting this child be named after his father, Because that's just what you did in this culture.

When that would have been a privilege to have a son named after you. Zechariah boldly proclaims that he will follow God in obedience and name this child John.

[19 : 18] No matter whether it seems crazy or not. And Psalm 119, 2 and 3 puts it like this. Joyful are those who obey his laws and search for him with all their hearts.

They do not compromise with evil and they walk only in his paths. See, joy isn't found in our own wisdom. Joy is found in Christ and walking in obedience to him.

Now, speaking of names, the name for this baby boy, the name John, This baby who will grow in Elizabeth's womb, Who was born, who will be the forerunner to prepare the way for the Messiah Jesus, The man who Jesus will later call the greatest born of a woman.

The name John means God is gracious. And I don't know about you, but I'm thankful that God has not given up on his people Despite their rebellion, despite their neglect towards him, Despite the religious trap of appearing godly on the outside, But in the words of Jesus, being a whitewashed tomb on the inside, Despite the greed, hypocrisy, power trips, wrongful intentions of the heart. Listen, God could have kicked the dust off his sandals and moved on. And yet, even the act of sending John the Baptist into this world to prepare their hearts for Jesus Was gracious beyond anything merited by their behavior.

[20 : 38] And as we come again this Christmas season before our God, As we come and do weekly Advent readings, As we come and sing the Christmas worship songs, As we come and pledge our hearts to the Prince of Peace, I wonder if maybe we're more like the Pharisees that we read about in the Gospels Than we like to admit.

It's easy just to go through the motions. It's easy to find our comfy sin that we like to justify and make excuses for While we point at others' sin. It's easy to get busy doing stuff for God that we neglect our relationship with God.

It's too easy to fall into an equal parts mixture of the American dream And the Gospel with my comfort often winning out. It's easy to do life my way and beg God to bless my disobedience. And yet, even in this, our God is gracious to call us back to Himself. He calls us back to obedient hearts because in this we discover joy in Christ.

And I love these words in John 15, 11. He says, As the Father has loved me. This is what Jesus says. He says, As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love.

[21 : 52] If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, Just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in His love. So there was a condition there. If you keep my commands.

That's called obedience. Now watch this, okay? This is the call to obedience. And when we heed that, when we live that, it leads to joy.

Verse 11, I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. How? When you keep His commandments.

Now for any of you who are parents to more than one child, you can probably giggle thinking about how different your kids are from one another. Last week in church, I was enjoying our children's Christmas musical.

I got a chuckle out of watching these 30 plus kids just do an amazing job. And I got especially a laugh out of watching the difference between my two oldest kids who were in the program.
[22 : 50] One is a little more nervous in that setting and rightfully so. Public speaking, I don't know if you know this, is the number one fear people have before death. It can be intimidating standing before a crowd of people.

I get it. I just picture all of you on Sunday morning in Purdue gear and that kind of calms my fears, okay? But my son did a fantastic job of going against his natural instinct and smiling and enjoying the musical.

We were so proud of him. And then there's my six-year-old daughter who is pretty free-spirited up there and doesn't seem to be quite as nervous. And I couldn't help but watch her fidget back and forth as she played with her dress and whispered to her neighbor and smiled really big and even danced around more than many of them did.

And later that evening, I thought to myself, what a wonderful expression of joy from both of them. And honestly, all of our kids, they were just praising the Lord with everything they had because they get something that us adults often forget in the hectic craziness and even pain of life.

They get the joy. There's a joy in worshiping him. There's joy in his presence when we approach his throne in obedience. And, you know, one thing that has stuck with me over the years is an old sign.
[24 : 10] It was huge that used to, it doesn't anymore, but it used to hang at Blount Christian Church in Maryville, Tennessee. See, this is where my wife went to church when she was in college.

We went back there a couple times, especially earlier in our marriage. And they were known for this huge sign that everyone could see from the road. And it was just kind of this outline of Jesus laughing.

It was Jesus just, it looked like he was busting out laughing. And although I'm not usually a fan of pictures of Jesus because they often look very European and not Jewish as he actually would have been.

But I was drawn to this because it was an awesome picture of Jesus laughing. It just exuded joy. And this Christmas season, I hope those of us who know Christ and who can so easily get bogged down and depleted by adulting, I hope we can step back and let the Lord take hold of these hearts. Instead of getting caught up in the world's ways of doing Christmas, I hope we can learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth what true joy looks like when we focus on our Messiah, Jesus.

[25 : 22] Because listen, in him, in Christ, is the only place where true, lasting joy is discovered. Pray with me.

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for these words of life that you have spoken over us through your word, that you have breathed from you to us, your children.

You use these words to teach us, to correct us, to rebuke us, to train us in righteousness. And Father, I'm so thankful that in a world that tells you that everything is okay, whatever you want to do is okay, just do what you do, you're a God who speaks truth and who's not afraid to step on our toes or even encourage us when we need it the most.

So thank you that you're always calling us to yourself. Thank you that you are holy and righteous and full of compassion and grace and you are the perfect judge at the same time.

And we come and we adore you. We worship you. And Father, I thank you for this message of joy that we don't have to trudge through life going along with the dreariness that our circumstances dictate that we can have a joy deep in our core that guides us every step of the way.

[26 : 43] And Lord, I pray over my own heart and I pray over each person listening because I know I struggle with this sometimes. And I just pray that you will meet us in that and you will just show us how to walk in that joy that you so freely give.

We love you, Jesus. Thank you for your words of life. We pray this in your precious name. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. And God's people said, amen and amen.

Hey, today I've been talking all about joy that Christians can have. And maybe you're listening to this and you're just being completely honest and you're saying, listen, I'm not a Christian and I'm not walking in that joy.

And yet I would love to have that conversation. If that's where you are, we here at First Christian Church of Greensburg, Indiana, once again, my name is Ray Sweet. We would love to come alongside you.

We would love to do what others have done for us and open up the word of God with you and show you the truth of his word that will set you free. Show you what it looks like to surrender your life to the Lordship of Christ and be transformed by his amazing power.

[27 : 52] And so if that's a conversation you want to have, maybe just have some questions about the Lord, please reach out to us. You can do it in a couple different ways. You can call us in the office Monday through Thursday, 8 to 430.

And that number is 812-663-8488. 812-663-8488. Or you can email me at ray at FCCgreensburg.com.

Hey, God bless you. I hope you're having a wonderful Christmas season and I hope you have a great week.