

Good News of Great Joy

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[0 : 0 0] I want to spend just a couple minutes tonight reflecting with you all on this message that the angels pronounced to the shepherds on that first Christmas evening so long ago. And as I was thinking about that, it made me wonder, when was the last time you heard a piece of news that really made you happy? When I was a kid, the news of a coming snowstorm was kind of like that. The promise of sledding and making snowmen, and above all, of school being canceled. All of that made a coming snowstorm pretty good news for a kid. But I imagine that that news wasn't such good news for my parents, as they considered the shoveling that would need to be done and the schedules that would need to be rearranged. It once got so cold where we lived in upstate New York that my parents, and my older brother actually, woke up, had to wake up every few hours through the middle of the night to start our old cars so that their engines wouldn't freeze over in the night.

It was a lot colder than 11 degrees, which is what we were suffering through today, right? So it was good news for us kids, maybe not so good news for my parents.

But according to the angels in Luke's account, the birth of Jesus is good news of great joy for all people. Let me read that portion again, verses 8 through 11 of Luke chapter 2.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Good news of great joy for all people. That's quite a staggering claim, isn't it?

[2 : 2 2] How could a child born so many years ago be good news of great joy for all people? How could this child be the key to universal worldwide joy?

Well, let's consider what the angels have to say phrase by phrase and see if we can't come to see how that might be true for you and me. First, the angels call the birth of Jesus good news.

Now, living as we do 2,000 years after the fact, maybe Christmas doesn't seem like news anymore, right? After all, it comes every year on December 25th. Maybe it feels like old news to you.

Here we go again with the lights and the carols and the awkward family gatherings that we have to suffer through, right? But if we strip away all the traditions and all the festivities that have grown over the centuries, what about the birth of Jesus?

What about that central thing? Well, often I think we're more apt to think about the birth of Jesus maybe as good sentiment or good vibes rather than good news.

[3 : 3 3] After all, ask most folks on the street what Christmas is all about, and they'll say it's about the spirit of giving. Or it's about family. Or it's about hoping the world can be a better place.

Now, none of those things are wrong or bad. But there's a big difference between good sentiment or good aspiration or good vibes and good news, right? If someone asked you, what's the World Series all about?

You wouldn't say, well, the World Series is all about the beauty of teamwork. Or something like that, right? No, the World Series is about determining the champion of Major League Baseball.

The scores, the records, the outcome of the World Series is not sentiment, it's news. It's news. Something happened. And that's how the angels want us to see the birth of Jesus. It's news.

Good news. Because something happened. Something in history. An event has occurred in real space and time that changes the course of things.

[4 : 38] But what is it that's happened? What is the news? I mean, babies are born every day, right? What is this good news of great joy for all people? Well, the angels explain.

They say, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior. That is a rescuer. Now, do you see what the angels are saying?

They're saying that right here in the birth of Jesus, God's rescue mission has at long last reached its climax. God's mission to reclaim his fallen creation, to defeat evil, to bring forgiveness and freedom from sin and death.

That mission is now in its final stage, its climax. Why? Because the one to bring it all about has just arrived on the scene.

It's as if the enemy lines have been breached, the beachhead has been secured, and the liberation movement is underway. And so it's good news of great joy.

[5 : 44] Great joy. Now, I'm sure there are lots of things that bring you joy, right? Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens.

You know, there's a list of your favorite things. Maybe you could make your own list, right? But what is it about those things that bring you joy? You know, why is there joy in a warm fire and a mug of hot chocolate?

Why is there joy in a mathematical problem solved with elegant simplicity? Why is there joy in gathering with friends you haven't seen for ages? Why is there joy in a story well told?

Is it all merely the evolutionary byproduct of survival synapses in our brains? Is that why those things are joyful to us? Or is our experience of joy an echo of a deeper reality?

According to the Bible, it is an echo of a deeper reality. In every experience of creaturely joy, we're catching a glimpse of the source of all joy.

[6 : 56] That in and through our joy-laden experiences is the hand or the echo of supreme joy. The God of all joy. There is speaking out to us through our small joy-filled moments.

Speaking out to us the one who made all things. The God who made all things as an overflow of his eternal joy. The eternal joy that God himself is in his very nature as Father, Son, and Spirit.

It was C.S. Lewis, I believe, who once said, Joy is the serious business of heaven. So what if your life wasn't simply meant to be punctuated by fleeting joy-laden experiences?

But what if you were made to know the very source of joy? To live in fellowship with the one who is joy itself?

What if you could experience each joyful moment, not as something that's sort of fleeting and gone, but as an echo or a foretaste of an even greater joy to come?

[8 : 11] A joy that not even death itself could steal. There are lots of things that bring you and me joy, but what if we could know joy eternal? Well, that is what the birth of Jesus achieved.

How did he achieve it? Well, to answer that question, we have to ask the question, what keeps us from joy? Of course, when we try to answer that question, at first we think, well, it's all the things I don't have that keep me from joy, right?

I don't have enough money. I don't have good enough relationships. I don't have enough success. I don't have enough health. I don't have enough beauty. I don't have enough hair. You know, whatever it is. It's all these things I don't have that keep me from joy.

But remember, those creaturely things, though good in themselves, they're just an echo. They're just a hint of real joy himself, of God.

So the real question is, what keeps you and me from knowing God and being reconciled to him, the source of overflowing joy? Because if we had God himself, those other things, they wouldn't be necessary to our joy.

[9 : 29] They'd be good, but not necessary. If we had God himself and health and beauty and money and relationships, they'd be good things, but not ultimate things. If you had God himself, nothing could steal your joy.

So what keeps us from God? Well, the thing that ultimately keeps us from God is what the Bible calls sin. And the nature of sin is that we human beings put ourselves in the place of God.

We reject God and put ourselves in God's place, try to run life our own way and try to find our happiness and everything and anything that isn't God. And this rejection of God leads inevitably to misery.

Cut off from joy itself, from the God of joy. Now every joy that we experience is fleeting and it can't satisfy.

But here's the good news of great joy. God doesn't leave us there. In love, God unfolds a plan that stretches across millennia of history, a plan to reconcile us to himself and to restore us to his joy.

[10 : 41] A plan that comes to fullness with the birth of the king in a manger. Why a manger? It seems kind of foolish, doesn't it?

The king of the universe born into a manger. I mean, a king born where animals feed. But what seems like foolishness to us is in reality God's utter wisdom.

You see, humans have put themselves in the place of God and the result is separation from God and misery. But in order to undo this woe, God puts himself in the place of humanity and the result is reconciliation and joy.

The Messiah wouldn't come to be praised. He would come to serve. He came and the life that he lived is the one that we ought to have lived.

And the death that he would eventually die is the death that we deserve to die. He put himself in our place so that our sins could be forgiven and so that all who admit their sin and trust in him would be reconciled to God and no everlasting joy.

[12 : 00] And as the angels say, this is good news of great joy for all people. All people. It wasn't just good news for Mary and Joseph or the shepherds on the hillside or the Jewish people in the first century.

This was good news for everyone. High and low, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, man and woman, young and old, you and me. All people.

But how could that be? How could the particular event of one child's birth so many years ago mean good news for all people? How could the life and death of Israel's long-awaited king mean reconciliation and joy for all people?

Well, listen again to what the angels say. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. The baby born on Christmas Day so many years ago was not just another baby.

The one God who created all things, the Lord of heaven and earth, that's who took flesh that night in Bethlehem. The one God who made all things and all people.

[13 : 14] The one God who sustains all things and all people. He took on human nature, your human nature, my human nature, and He dealt with our human sin once and for all.

You see, there's one Lord of the whole world. So what Jesus did, He did for the whole world because He's the God of the whole world.

And the question is, have you embraced this good news of great joy as good news for you? Now, maybe you don't feel like you need rescuing.

Maybe the things you've built your life upon, built your joy upon, maybe they seem to be holding up just fine. But friend, no created thing will last forever.

Whatever good thing you're basing your joy on, it isn't going to last forever. Beauty will fade. Health will fail. Relationships will end. The only sturdy foundation for joy is the joy of God.

[14 : 23] And God has opened the way for you to be reconciled to Him in Christ. Perhaps you don't think you need Christ to be reconciled to God.

Perhaps you think you can have God without Christ. But friend, let me ask, what other approach to God really offers you what Christ offers you?

Many religions offer good advice or good laws or good rules. And if you keep them, then they say you'll have God. But only Christ offers you good news.

Christ says, I'll keep the law for you. Even more than that, I'll go to the depths for you. I'll be born in a manger. I'll carry the weight of your failures and your flaws.

And I'll love you to the very end and offer my life for yours. Friends, it comes down to this. Either we will stand before God on the basis of our own record and righteousness or on the basis of Christ's record and righteousness.

[15 : 29] There's no third way. If we try to stand on our own record, the end will be misery because we could never be good enough for a holy God.

But if we stand on Christ's record, the result will be joy because his record is more than sufficient for absolutely everyone who trusts in him.

Perhaps you think you've heard all this before and you're wondering what real difference it makes in your life. Well, think about it.

It means that even if you don't get what you really wanted for Christmas, you can still live the day after Christmas with unshakable joy.

I'm speaking metaphorically, of course, right? What if you never get the big promotion? What if you never get financial security?

[16 : 30] What if you never get to have children of your own? What if you never get the success you've worked so hard for? Yes, those things will be disappointing, but they can't ever possibly steal your joy if you know Christ.

Do you want to have joy in the midst of trial? Joy in the midst of sorrow even? Joy that doesn't ebb and flow based on your circumstances and what you happen to find under the proverbial Christmas tree of your life?

If you want to have that kind of joy, it's right here. Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Lord, good news of great joy for all people and for you if you'll take him. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, on this night when we remember the most holy and wondrous and mysterious of nights so many years ago, we pray that your spirit would come and give us eyes to see and hearts that are receptive to this good news of great joy that Christ has brought for us.

[17 : 52] Father, you have spanned the infinite gap between heaven and earth, between holiness and sin. you've spanned that gap for us so that we, creatures, sinners, far from you can be brought home and know everlasting joy.

Move in our hearts, God, that we might take hold of Christ and live and breathe and know that joy. We pray this in his name.

Amen. Amen. Still hear me?

Ah, you can. Now we get to do something fun. You should have gotten a candle on your way in. Yeah? I hope you did. So for many, many, many generations, Christians, oh, look at that.

I forgot my notes. Give me a second. Oh, I'm just going to make it up because I didn't bring it up with me. For many, many generations, Christians have lit candles on Christmas Eve.

[19 : 10] Why do we do this? Why do we light candles on Christmas Eve? Well, you know, in the Middle Ages, it was dark, so they lit candles. Why do we keep doing it? Well, listen to what Isaiah has to say.

Looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.

The coming of Jesus, the coming of the Messiah, the incarnation of God in the flesh, was spoken of throughout the Old Testament into the new as light coming into the darkness. You remember the opening of the Gospel of John, don't you?

Speaking of Jesus, John says, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we've seen his glory. Glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

[20 : 23] Amen.