

Joy and rejoicing

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[0 : 00] We turn to Luke chapter 1 and verse 39. Luke chapter 1 and verse 39.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country to a town in Judah. And she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

[1 : 40] For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

And his mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.

He has helped his servant Israel in the remembrance of his mercy. As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his offspring forever.

Well, may God bless the reading of his word to us. And with that reading, we'll come back. So each Sunday, we as a church have been looking at different aspects of the nativity, of advent, of Christ coming into the world.

[3 : 01] And it may be fairly straightforward this evening with the reading to understand where the focus is. You'll notice around the birth of John and around the birth of Jesus, there is this expression of joy and rejoicing.

And we begin to notice why a person would find this joyful news and why they would rejoice at the fact. Zachariah is told that he will have joy and gladness when John is born, and people will rejoice at his birth.

But what I would like to do is ask the question, what causes the rejoicing? We know what rejoicing is, is an outward expression. But my focus this evening, and I want it to be your attention, is not to think so much about the outward expression of the rejoicing, but rather the inward truth that causes that outward expression of rejoicing.

You'll notice that when Elizabeth and Mary are together, and she hears of Mary being with child, and she understands what that means, that the baby with inside Elizabeth leaped for joy.

And Mary then goes on to sing this song, where it's a song of rejoicing. My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

[4 : 30] There's a whole lot of joy and rejoicing, but we need to find out why this is the case. In other words, if we want to share in the rejoicing, if we want to be a rejoicing fellowship, in the same way Mary and Elizabeth are rejoicing, we need to understand what it's causing them to respond this way to what's happening to them.

I mean, this is far from normal. Mary is with child, you know, of which is promised to her by God, and it's God-ordained, God brought about according to the promises.

Mary is filled with the Holy Spirit, and John will be the one who will lead the way, preparing the way for Jesus. Now, when we think about joy, and we think about what joy does to a Christian, we have to understand that the Christian must know what causes the joy in the first place.

Because not all things are joyful to all people to the same measure. And the point is here, is that the focus of joy is God himself.

That the very cause of any kind of joy that the Christian wants to experience or to know, must come from God himself. Now, when this is the case, and it's not any other type of joy, the joy does not disappear when other things turn up.

[6 : 01] And that's the point of the Advent story. That when you get this kind of joy, when other things come, suffering, defeat, on the run from Herod, all of those kind of difficulties of life that are going to be experienced almost immediately after this, the joy cannot disappear because the joy is rooted in something that is solid and foundational.

It's rooted in God who doesn't change, much like his love, much like how we understand hope. The reason these things remain true is because God remains true.

Now, when we have this rejoicing around the birth of John the Baptist, we ought not to forget how it ends for John the Baptist. That John the Baptist speaks truth to power.

He goes out and he declares what is right in the eyes of God and what is wrong before the eyes of men. And he has his head delivered according to the wishes of Herodias in Mark 6.

He loses his head. His head is taken from him. That was her sole desire. I want the head of John the Baptist. And we're told at the beginning that when John the Baptist comes, people are going to be rejoicing that he comes.

[7 : 25] And the question is, well, are they still going to be rejoicing when that happens? And the answer is yes. Because even that, though serious it is, doesn't take away the cause or the content of the joy in the first place.

It only emphasizes it all the more. The same with Mary saying, my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

There is no doubt that there is great sorrow when it comes to the crucifixion. But even the crucifixion cannot take away the joy once felt. Because that joy must take into consideration everything that Jesus will go through.

Everything that is going to come their way. So when we say we have joy, that joy, if it is from God, if it's rooted in the things of God, will not diminish, okay?

It will not be subject to anything that comes our way. And this is because joy, like love, needs a direct object.

[8 : 32] You cannot just say, I'm joyful, in the same way you cannot just say, I'm in love. Because it doesn't make any sense. Because the next question is, what are you joyful about?

What are you in love with? Love needs a direct object. Joy needs a direct object. And in both cases, that direct object is Jesus.

We have joy because we have Jesus. We have love, and we know what love is, because we have God. I'm in love with God. I'm in love with God because of these reasons.

So to say that you're a loving person can be a confusing statement because love must have a direct object. It must be a source of love and an object of what you love.

So a person cannot be joyful at all without understanding what it is that is causing that joy in them. John, we're told, leaps within Elizabeth's womb.

[9 : 38] We don't know how this happens. I don't know. I understand that babies can kick inside the womb, and it can be quite uncomfortable, but there is a leaping for joy, which Elizabeth testifies to.

There is something about Jesus being in the womb of Mary that some kind of spiritual connection is clear, where John understands that what's happening with Mary carrying the Savior is a cause of joy.

There's something about this which John understands in the womb, leaping for joy, that Jesus is good news to the world.

So a person cannot really be joyful or really experience joy without them experiencing something which is causing that joy. Something has to be causing it, and this is what we get to in Mary's song.

Notice then, Mary begins her song with the very famous words, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

[10 : 47] Mary is the type of person who brings herself before God, and she is willing, she says, that let it be done to me according to your word. And her prayer, her song, is almost identical, point for point, for Hannah's prayer.

And I think Mary's, Mary's not this young girl who doesn't understand the Old Testament. She's not this young girl who's got no kind of Bible knowledge. When you look at her song and Hannah's prayer in the temple, you've got, Hannah was given a child by God on the provision that she would give that child back to the temple service.

That the child was hers, but not hers at the same time. It would be dedicated to the Lord's work. And Mary, understanding this, as she thinks about Hannah's prayer, she understands that as she's carrying the Savior of the world, okay, she's carrying this as her child, but I have to, I have to give the child over to God.

The child is in this world for a different reason. It's not just so that I can be a mother to the child. It's not so that the child can just be a son to me.

There's, there's something much, much more here. The same as it was with Hannah. Hannah prayed. She got the answer to her prayer, but the, the, the, the conditions was, the agreement was, this child would then be handed back into temple service for God.

[12 : 16] Same it is here with Jesus. And this is what Mary identifies. Mary identifies that, yes, she is blessed. Yes, she magnifies God, but she magnifies God because she understands what's happening to her.

She's thankful and then she's able to tell God why she's thankful. Her thankfulness is not like joy in the sense where I'm joyful and you don't know why.

No, she's thankful and she's able to tell God why she's thankful. It's because God made promises and I just happen to find myself, Mary says, in the long line of those promises.

That these promises that God has made, I'm in the middle of them being fulfilled in my own time. God's used other people in the past and now he's using Mary to do something that he promised that he would do.

That is, come into the world himself. Each person that God has used was used for a particular purpose. Mary understands that she has a particular purpose.

[13 : 23] She also appreciates that God was not idle before this. She understands that everything has been leading up to the Savior coming into the world.

That God, in order to be deeply involved in your life, has to become deeply involved. And this is the very center of her song. God doesn't just speak words, he must be involved.

He must come down and be involved himself. And so, in the words of Mary, she says, my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

That's the best way to draw attention to something other than yourself. My soul magnifies the Lord. And you know how magnification works. You're not drawing something, you're not drawing attention to something that is not there.

But rather, you're drawing attention to something in a way where you're making it bigger. In other words, you're magnifying what is already there. Now, the glory of God and God himself is big enough and glorious enough to take care of itself, but Mary is drawing our attention to what is happening here.

[14 : 36] She wants us to see that her soul magnifies the Lord and she has something to be joyful about. She has something that she can rejoice about.

And that is, God who saves will save her. God, my Savior. We do not believe that Mary is one who did not need saving.

We believe Mary when she says she needs saving. My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.

This is deeply personal, but when a person says this, they're saying two things. When you say that the Lord Jesus is your Savior, you're also saying something else.

And what else you're saying is this, I need a Savior. When Mary says God my Savior, she's acknowledging her need of a Savior.

[15 : 33] When you say I belong to the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you're acknowledging at the same time I am under authority and I am in need of salvation.

And this is what Mary's doing here. This is a very careful choice of words, a very deliberate set of words so that we understand what she is acknowledging.

We are meant to see what she's acknowledging on the other side of what she's actually saying. God is my Savior. Therefore, I am in need of a Savior.

She hasn't said it, but she has said it when we read it carefully. As she continues, she picks up on some of the promises of old, promises made to Abraham and how in the minds of some people this can be a cause of uncertainty.

Not because God's promises are uncertain, but because as Christians, as God's people, we can believe that God may not keep his promise. We know that that can't really be true, but the truth doesn't actually convict us of its truth.

[16 : 41] We're not swayed by it. There's no discipline of that truth within our lives. In other words, it's a bit like what I was saying this morning. Don't tell me what you believe, but tell me about what you believe about what you believe.

Where's the disciplines that come with that belief? How does that belief actually look? And so, to believe a promise means that you're going to live a certain way rather than a different way.

to give you an example, when God had Bethlehem, the house of bread, under judgment, and Elimelech took his wife and his two sons off when they should have stayed where they were, but in a lack of faith, he moved out and it all went wrong.

But it's always going to go wrong. But those who stayed within, when they come back, and Ruth comes back with Naomi, don't call me Naomi, call me Mara because I'm bitter, what do we actually find in those moments?

Well, people are recognizing who she is. In other words, they've stuck with God through thick and thin, through the difficulties, and they didn't die in the famine. But the reason why Elimelech left was because if we stay here, we're going to die.

[18 : 06] The trouble was, he left and he died. It's difficult to trust in the promises of God, but when you trust in the promises of God, it looks like something.

There's a discipline of truth. There are the disciplines of belief. It actually looks like something down on the ground. So when God calls us here, in many ways, to imitate Mary, to be thankful, two things become apparent.

One, in order for me to be truly thankful, I need to know what I'm being thankful for. Children need to learn this. I can remember having to learn it over and over again growing up.

When you're told by your parent to go and say thankful to someone else who's given you a gift, and you're not quite sure that you know thankful to express a form of thankfulness is what you ought to be doing because it's what everyone else does.

But it's not really the true source of thankfulness because to be really thankful is to really acknowledge what it is that you're thankful for. So when we're thankful to God, we shouldn't be doing it simply because everybody else is doing it.

[19 : 17] We should know why we're doing it. Okay? I shouldn't have to encourage you to give your thanks to God as though you don't know the reasons why you should yourself.

They should be automatically there. And that's the sign of maturity. That's the sign of you being able to recognize what you have received and what your response ought to be.

Now, of course, with all immaturity, that takes some time to grow up. Children learn that because they don't really recognize the difficulties or the cost involved for how they've got what they've got, how they've managed to receive this.

They don't see the pressures behind, let's say, especially at Christmas, of how all of these things just happen to be there. And so their thankfulness cannot be a true measure of how much hard work you've put in because they're not at the stage where they can appreciate that kind of hard work.

And in the same way, when a Christian is immature, their thankfulness to God is immature. It's not quite fully developed because we haven't really come to understand all what God has done.

[20 : 28] But when we do, our thankfulness is mature thankfulness. Our thankfulness is a real demonstration of understanding the lengths at which God has gone to for us to then be thankful back.

She moves on, does Mary, by acknowledging in verse 50 that if the central claim that I'm making is this, that joy has a direct object and that direct object is Jesus.

Therefore, whatever happens in any generation, joy ought to be able to continue. Jesus is suffered, he suffers, he is rejected, he is crucified, he dies, he's buried, and all of that we know is not something that we should rejoice at, but at the same time, we rejoice at it.

It's not something that kind of automatically brings joy, but it is the very thing that causes our joy, because it's within the promises of God.

And this is where we have that strange mix of, I can't really be joyful at the crucifixion of Jesus because it's horrible, but at the same time, the crucifixion of Jesus is my joy.

[21 : 46] The resurrection of Jesus is my joy, that this is what's causing it. And Mary understands that these promises that eventually lead to Jesus being crucified, dead, buried, risen again, are made a long, long time ago.

And God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. Here she's acknowledging Abraham, the promises that God made.

And the promise that God made to Abraham was this, that I will be with you God, and the God of your children after you. And this is where Mary brings in this phrase, generation to generation.

In other words, not one generation, but generation to generation. I will be your God and the God of your children after you. Now when Abraham believed the promises of God, I want to point out to you that he believed all of them.

There's the challenge for us all. That when we believe the promises of God, we need to believe all of them. And the reason we need to believe all of them is because by believing all of them, we are acknowledging to God who he is.

[23 : 09] If we only believe half of them, we're not really believing in the God as he has revealed himself to us. And when Abraham believed God and it was a credit to him righteousness, he believed all the promises of God, including the promises concerning his children.

This isn't just from me, but this is from my children also. Peter does exactly the same. When he goes on to explain the gospel, he uses the same language.

He says, these promises is to you and to your children. There it is again, generation to generation. The promise made to Abraham continues, not only to the moms and dads, but to the children also, to those who are far off, as many as the Lord calls to himself.

So when Abraham believed the promises of God, he believed all the promises, including those that applied to his children. And what it means is this, that there's only one way to come to God, and that's by believing.

There's no other way to come to God other than by believing him. And that means that we are to believe in a God who makes these kind of promises for our children.

[24 : 22] That's the God that you believe in. It includes that we believe in the kind of God who extends these promises not just to us, but to our children and to our children's children.

In other words, if we don't believe that God is particularly inclined to save the rest of our family, we don't actually know the kind of God that we've come to. We don't know.

We have perhaps over the years reduced salvation down to such a personal me and my commitment, and you have to make your and your commitment. That's true, but the God that we are to come to, believing, is the God who is inclined to saving the rest of our family, from generation to generation.

That is the God that we come to. And if we believe that God isn't particularly inclined to save the rest of our family, then we're not believing in the God that we are presented with in the text.

And that's a source of joy, not believing, but believing in that type of God who makes those promises, not just to us, but to our children, to our children's children. So we approach God believing, and of course, in result, have the joy that comes from that.

[25 : 39] We don't give up because God doesn't give up. Moving on then, knowing God and knowing his promises are almost the same thing, because God is the very source of all the promises that he makes.

The reason they will come true is because God is eternally true. The reason they will not fail is because God cannot fail, that they're rooted and solid in God himself.

That's the source of Mary's joy. That's the source of Mary's rejoicing. That is what Elizabeth is, and that's where the joy is here, that God is keeping his promises, and we're seeing it with our own eyes, if I can put it that way.

But part of those promises, you'll notice in verse 51, has a war-type mentality to it, that God is going to show strength. He's going to scatter the proud, he's going to bring down the mighty, and then he's going to exalt the humble.

That this is what God is going to do. That Mary's song that she sings understands that God isn't going to just speak words, he's going to back those words up with actions.

[26 : 53] That he's going to come down and do something about injustices, the injustice that the world actually lives under. And so I want to point out to you a really, really important observation here.

One that may not be easy to see, but if I can illustrate it, hopefully you'll get it straight away. Imagine it like this. When God involves himself, he involves himself personally.

He comes down, we have an advent, he gets involved, he does what he does in the world through the people that are his, and he can do it without his people.

He is able to hold the kings and the politicians hearts within his hand and direct them like streams of water. This is the God that we believe in and belong to.

So God doesn't stand idly back, he's involved, he's willing to go to war with the proud, with the mighty, who destroy and want to destroy his people, who want to wreck and ruin his world further than sin, has already done it through these people.

[28 : 07] So let me give you an example of the observation that we ought to make here. Imagine a husband and wife that have gone out for the evening. Perhaps they've just had a meal or they've gone to the cinema and on their way home, let's say they're walking either back to their car or back to where they live.

Whatever the case may be. And as they do, three men jump out, the type of men that you find in Proverbs chapter 1.

You know, those who lie in wait, simply waiting around to cause trouble. And they notice that the wife has a handbag and the man has his hands in his pocket as they walk back either to the car or to home.

And they say to the woman, either give us your purse and all your money or we will attack you. And as they begin attacking the wife and searching for her money, the husband says, I want you to know, dear, I am really, really against violence.

I want you to know that I even voted to bring down violent crime. That I want you to know I am really protesting here about what these violent men are doing.

[29 : 21] How would it be with you if that happened and the man kept his hands in his pocket? Is that the kind of actions that we expect God to have?

That he speaks these words of truth, words which we can actually agree with but does nothing? Is that the kind of God that we actually believe in?

God is not that type of God. He doesn't say, I'm simply against this. This is not according to my law that I've given you. I've given you ten commandments and you're not keeping them.

I'm really upset with what you're doing but then stands there and does nothing. Pastors, in particular, have to be particularly aware of this problem and they have to guard their own hearts from doing it and they have to be ones who take their hands out of their pockets immediately.

I've known plenty and this isn't the time or the place to go into it but it might be worth making the point of those pastors who can certainly preach against things but you never know who they're talking about.

[30 : 28] You never know what they're, you know they're addressing bad things but you're never quite sure what those bad things are. And this could be because they built their own little ministry empire with their ministry apps and they speak about these things but they never actually address them.

While the church which has been bought with the blood of Christ where most recently evil has been called good and good has been called evil and this is happening in the church and all along pastors have had their hands in their pockets.

They're protesting from the front, I'm really against this. This shouldn't be happening but they're doing nothing. How is it with you if you had men like that in the church or if the church itself was actually like them?

It's one thing to say that we're against this but it's altogether another thing for something to be done. When we come before God and God's actions in the world, okay, he doesn't stand there with his hands in his pockets.

He says, he will bring down the mighty from their thrones, he will scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, he will exalt the humble, he will bring some down and exalt others up.

[31 : 45] God is a God of action, he's the one who addresses the people in this world with a great deal of care but he also goes to war. Mary, when she rejoices in God her saviour, understands that this isn't simply a personal salvation where she's able to receive the forgiveness of sins.

No, this is about God saving the world from bad people. This is about God saving everything from those things which ruin everything.

God goes to war, he makes war with sin and he defeats it at the cross. He brings down the mighty rulers that dictate people and keep people poor war and the kind of things that we see in the world.

God is currently at this moment dealing with them and it's their job to be patient with that. Mary is speaking as though it's already happened because of the certainty of it happening.

That's the type of God we believe in. Because these things clearly haven't happened yet but Mary is speaking about them as though they have because of the certainty that we have in God of them happening.

[32 : 58] That's what it means to believe in the promises of God. That's the source of our joy. It's a joy where God deals with not only people who need forgiveness and who are humble who need to be exalted by God to be lifted out of the downtrodden life that they live but he is the same God who does that also brings these mighty people down that the rest of us can't even touch.

No one in this world is untouchable. No one. And God brings some down who are too high and some up who are too low. That's the God that we are presented with here.

So here's the exhortation as we finish. The joy that we have in Mary's song and of course between John and Jesus at the birth of Jesus is a joy that comes with God's involvement in the affairs of men.

God is going to sort everything out. Everything out. God is going to deal with all sin. God is going to bring absolute forgiveness. The joy that we have is that we belong to a God who can do this and a God who will do this.

He won't only just save us from the sin that we're in and forgive us our sins. He will deal with all the enemies of God's people. He will deal with all his enemies.

[34 : 24] God fights and God wins. Jesus goes to the cross and the victory is his. He wins. And we who belong to God rest in this mercy.

And we who belong to God recognize that this is something joyful because it's solid. And the reason we can rejoice is because it comes from a God who does this for us.

That's the exaltation. I can't do it but I belong to a God who will do it for me. Amen.