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THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS

Luke 2:10-11

By

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December 19, 1999

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Christmas Message

The Joy of Christmas
Luke 2:10-11

A family during the great depression was unable to afford anything but the bare necessities. One day the news came that a circus was coming to town. Tickets cost one dollar. The little boy came running home excited and eager to get the money from his dad. The father regretfully told his boy that he could not provide him with that much money, but if he went out and worked on odd jobs, he might make enough to purchase a ticket on his own. The dad promised to match what the boy could earn.

The boy worked feverishly and, just a few days before the circus came to town, he found that he had just enough, including his dad's contribution. He took the money and ran off to town to buy his circus ticket.

The day the circus came to town, he grabbed his ticket and rushed to the main street, where he stood on the curb as the circus parade went by. He was thrilled to watch the clowns, elephants, and all of the performers. A clown came dancing over to him and the boy put his ticket in the clown's hand. He eagerly watched as the rest of the parade went by.

After the parade, the boy rushed home and told his father that he had been to the circus and how much fun it was. The father, surprised that the boy was home already, asked him to describe the circus. The boy told of the parade that went down the main street and of giving his ticket to the clown. The father sadly took his son in his arms and said, "Son, you didn't see the circus; all you saw was the parade."

That boy reminds me of many people at Christmas time. They get caught up with the carols, trees, lights, and gifts. They think that they are experiencing what Christmas is all about. But really, all they're doing is seeing the parade and missing the main event, the true joy of Christmas.

I want each of you to know the real joy of Christmas. The angel announced the source of that joy to the shepherds on that first Christmas night: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you

good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

The great joy of Christmas comes through receiving
God's gift of the Savior, Christ the Lord.

Even if you haven't received Christ as your Savior, you may have some good feelings at this season. It is a wonderful time of the year. It's always good to be with family and friends, to enjoy good food, and to exchange gifts. But I'm talking about something different, something deeper. The true joy of Christmas lasts all year long. It is the abiding joy of knowing for certain that things are right between you and God. It is the contentment that comes from knowing that you have a hope that holds constant beyond the uncertainties of this life. That kind of lasting joy comes only to the one who has personally received God's gift of the Savior.

Why did the angel describe the news about the Savior as "great joy"?

1. The news about the Savior brings great joy because it is good news for sinners.

Imagine how frightening the shepherd's experience would have been. They had been sitting in the dark night, perhaps with only the light of a flickering fire, when suddenly the sky lit up like noontime! Add to that the sudden appearance of the angel. It was enough to scare anyone!

The shepherds sitting in darkness picture the lost human race, sitting in the darkness of sin and the shadow of death (1:79). When the glory of God in His holiness suddenly breaks in on people who live in the darkness of sin, the only response is great fear. In the Bible, even when *godly* people encounter God or His holy angels, fear is the only response. When God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, the mountain shook and there were lightning flashes, thunder, a thick cloud, and the sound of a loud trumpet. The people were so afraid that they dared not come near the mountain. When the godly Isaiah saw God through a vision, he cried out, "Woe is me, for I am ruined." Suddenly, he realized that he was a sinner (Isa. 6:5). It is always a fearful thing for a sinner to see a manifestation of God and His glory.

But I fear that in our pagan culture, or even in the church nowadays, far too few know anything of the fear of God's impending judgment on sinners. We have pulled God down and made Him out to be a benign old man who is tolerant of our sins. We think that the only ones He will judge are the worst of the worst—murderers, child molesters, and the like. And, we have lifted humanity up, so that we mistakenly think that most people are basically good. As a result, we don't understand what the Bible teaches about God's terrible wrath against sin and the great danger that threatens every person outside of Christ. Thus, we don't really appreciate the good news of the coming of the Savior.

I often illustrate it this way: Suppose I were standing in a long line at the bank and you rushed in, grabbed me by the arm, and dragged me out of the bank. I probably would not appreciate it. I would shout, "What do you think you're doing?" You replied, "I'm saving you from the bank!" I would say, "That's very nice of you, but I don't need saving. I'm not in any danger. You tore my shirt, you hurt my arm, and you made me lose my place in line." I would not be very grateful.

But, suppose that a mob of terrorists had just taken me hostage in the bank and you rushed in and got me safely out of the bank. In that case, I would be most grateful, even if you tore my shirt, hurt my arm, and made me lose my place in line. Why the difference? Because in the second instance, I was in grave danger and I knew that if somebody didn't save me, I was doomed. In the first instance, there was no perceived danger.

The Bible says that if you have not received Jesus Christ as your Savior, whether you realize it or not, you are in the greatest imaginable danger—eternal danger. If you should die without Christ, you will have to stand before a holy God against whom you have committed many offenses. The Bible says, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). After death it is too late to repent. No amount of good works or good intentions on your part will help in the day of judgment. And so, like these shepherds sitting in darkness and suddenly seeing this blinding light, you should be terribly frightened at the thought of God's holy presence.

Against that backdrop, the message that the Savior has been born is the best of all possible news, because it brings the promise of eternal life to those who are under God's judgment. So the news that a Savior has been born who will deliver all who receive Him is truly "good news of a great joy."

2. The news about the Savior brings great joy because it is true news.

Good news is only good if it is true. If I told you, "You've just inherited a million dollars," and you said, "Really?" I replied, "No, I'm just kidding." You wouldn't rejoice. That news is worthless because it's not true.

The news that Jesus Christ is born as the Savior is nothing more than a sick joke if it is not true news. If it's just a nice legend that warms our hearts every Christmas, then let's eradicate it once and for all, because it is offering hope for eternity where there is none. But if it is true news, then we must believe and act upon it.

Luke wants us know that this news is true. In Luke 1:3, he states that he had investigated everything carefully from the beginning. His gospel was the fruit of careful research. Most scholars believe that Mary, the mother of our Lord, was Luke's direct source for the information in the birth narrative. Luke 2:19 reports that Mary "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." To doubt the veracity of these events recorded by Luke is to pit your word against that of a woman of integrity who was personally closer to these events than anyone else.

The witness of the shepherds further confirms the historical accuracy of these events. There was no reason for them to fabricate a story about seeing the angels. Mass hallucinations of this sort are highly unlikely. Verse 20 affirms that the things that the shepherds heard and saw were "just as had been told them."

The things that they heard and saw—a common couple and their baby in a stable—were not the sort of things one would fabricate. If people were going to make up a story about the birth of a Savior, it would have sounded more like a fairy tale, with a palace in Jerusalem, not a stable in Bethlehem. The Savior would have had magical or mythical qualities. But there is none of that. Rather we find the straightforward reporting of events as they happened.

Certainly there are miracles: the virgin conception of Jesus in Mary's womb; the appearances of angels. But these events are presented matter-of-factly, not in a way that sounds like make-believe. Unless one arbitrarily rules out miracles by assuming that they cannot happen, there is no reason to doubt these reliable eyewitness accounts.

The truth of the narrative is further confirmed by the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Luke states that Jesus was born in the city of David. Micah 5:2 prophesied 700 years before that Bethlehem would be the place of Messiah's birth. In Luke 1:67-79, Zecharias' prophecy shows how the birth of John the Baptist fulfilled many of Isaiah's prophecies and would be followed by the coming of Messiah. Luke 3:23-38 demonstrates that Jesus' lineage goes back through David, thus fulfilling God's promise to David a thousand years before.

Francis of Assisi built the first Christmas manger scene in 1224. His purpose was to get the people thinking of Christ as a person who really lived, rather than as a mysterious, fictional deity. People in our day need to understand what Francis was trying to get across, namely, the historical truth of the Christian faith. Our culture promotes the idea that if you want to believe in Christianity, that's O.K. for you. But it's not for everyone. Whatever you believe is true for you, and whatever I believe is true for me. But there is no such thing as absolute truth in the spiritual realm.

But if Jesus was born in history to the virgin Mary, if He fulfilled prophecies made hundreds of years before His birth, and if the events surrounding His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension are verified by hundreds of reliable eyewitnesses, then you cannot shrug it off as a nice story that is true for some but not for others. Jesus Christ is the Savior who was born in history, the living God in human flesh. If God has so acted in history, then it is really good news. If it is all legend, then it is terrible news, because it is purporting to be God's revelation to man on the matter of our eternal destiny.

So the news about the Savior brings great joy because it is good news and it is true news.

3. The news about the Savior brings great joy because it is news of Christ the Lord.

He is a unique Person! Consider the uniqueness of this Savior born in Bethlehem.

**He is the Christ.* Christ is Greek for “anointed one” (the Hebrew is “Messiah”). It means that God the Father sent and anointed Jesus for His mission of salvation. He was anointed as prophet to preach the gospel, as priest to offer sacrifice for sins, and as king to reign. He alone is able to reconcile sinful people to God through His life, His sacrificial death and His resurrection.

**He is Christ the Lord.* The same word is used in Luke 2:9 and 23 to refer to God. The Savior born in Bethlehem is God in human flesh. If He had been only a man, He could not have saved us, because His death would not have had merit beyond Himself. If He had been an angel, He could not have borne human sins. But He was Christ the Lord, God! God alone is great enough to deal with the problem of our sins.

**He is a man.* He was born in Bethlehem. He did not descend from the sky. He was conceived miraculously in Mary’s womb and went through the stages of development just like any human baby. What a wonder! As a man, the representative Man, He could bear the sins of the human race.

As God in human flesh, Jesus Christ is unique in all the world. He alone qualifies to be the Savior of the world. If you doubt the uniqueness of Jesus, I invite you to read the gospel accounts with the prayer, “God, if Jesus is God in human flesh, reveal that to me and I will believe and obey You.” You will discover that He can be nothing other than fully God and fully man united in one person. That makes the news He brings good news of a great joy.

4. The news about the Savior brings great joy because it is for all people.

The angel said that this news was not just for the shepherds, but for “all the people” (2:10). No doubt these Jewish shepherds understood that to mean all the Jewish people. But there is also no doubt that Luke would have his readers know that the good news is for Jew and Gentile alike, for any and all who will call upon the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:11-13).

It is a fact of history that the gospel applies to all and it transforms all who believe. Savage cannibals have been converted into peaceable missionaries through the good news of Christ. I read of a skeptic who was on a South Sea island. He was mocking Christianity. A local tribesman said to him, "If the missionaries had not brought us the gospel and we had not believed, we would have eaten you for dinner by now!" Wherever it goes, the gospel transforms sinful hearts. The gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). Put your name in verse 11: "there has been born for *you* a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Conclusion

I read a touching Christmas story about some poor country children who were eagerly awaiting their father's arrival from his job at a foundry in the city. Every year when he came home for Christmas, he brought with him presents and goodies to eat and a fresh Christmas tree. But this year, the dad had been laid off and there were no presents and, most disappointing, no tree.

The kids still held out hope that their dad would come up with a tree. The dad promised that he would do what he could. He went into the garage and emerged some time later carrying a two-by-four, about five feet tall, with holes drilled on each side. He went down the street to a neighbor whose property was bordered on three sides by a row of evergreen trees. He asked permission to cut some of the branches, which he brought home and inserted into the holes in the two-by-fours, making a "tree."

He was trying, but by no stretch of the imagination could this be called a Christmas tree. While the kids were trying to deal with their disappointment and the little girl who grew up to write the story was looking out the window and praying, there was a knock at the front door. The woman and her son from the property down the street with the trees were standing there with the tallest, most beautifully shaped Christmas tree that the children had ever seen. It filled the doorway. The woman also kindly presented the children with a number of small presents that meant a lot, since it was all that they got that year.

Every year that she was growing up, the woman who wrote the story saw a gaping hole in the row of evergreen trees around

her neighbor's property and she remembered that act of kindness and how God had answered her prayers. (From a story by Irene Lukas, *Guideposts*, Dec., 1976.)

Now I want to ask you a question: How would the neighbor have felt if she had cut down her tree for that family, and when she brought it over, the family said, "Oh, thank you, but we can't accept that. We really aren't interested"? And they politely shut the door. Don't you think that the neighbor would rightfully have felt hurt? And by refusing the gift, that family would have missed the great joy of that Christmas. A gift only brings joy if it is received.

How do you think God feels after sacrificing His own Son so that you could have eternal life and be spared from judgment, only to hear you say, "Thank you, but I can't accept that; I'm just not interested"? It doesn't matter how politely you turn down an offer like that. Any refusal of such a sacrificial offer is an insult at best. The world may give you superficial happiness, but it won't last. The only way to know the deep, abiding joy God wants you to have is to be reconciled to Him by receiving His gift, the Savior, who is Christ the Lord. It's the greatest gift you could ever receive, but it only brings great joy if you accept it. Will you accept God's gracious gift to you right now?

Discussion Questions

1. John Piper states, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." In light of this, why is joy an essential quality for believers?
2. What is the difference between joy and happiness? How can we increase God's joy in our lives?
3. We are commanded to "rejoice always" (1 Thess. 5:16). Is it wrong, then, to be sad? Is depression sin? Defend your answer with Scripture.
4. What would you say to someone who said, "If Christianity works for you, that's great, but it's not my thing"?

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