

Joy at Christmas

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- [0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Stuart, and it would be good to keep that passage in Luke's Gospel open in front of us as we have a look at it this morning.
- These December Sundays, we've been thinking about some of the big ideas that are often spoken about at this time of year. We've looked at what the Bible has to say about love at Christmas.
- Last week, we thought about the idea of peace. And this morning, we're going to be thinking about joy. What a great thing to be talking about. Christmas and joy really seem to go hand in hand, don't they?
- Such natural partners. And one of the things that I hope we've been trying to get across in this sort of mini-series as it is in the run-up to Christmas, is not to say, look, the world has got Christmas all wrong.
- You know, our culture doesn't know what it's talking about when it comes to Christmas. What we've actually been wanting to see is that when the world thinks of and speaks about and sings songs of and decorates with decorations which talk about love and peace and joy at this time of year, that actually it is exactly right to do so.
- [1 : 1 4] It is exactly right to bring those kind of things to mind because they are a fundamental part of Christmas. And yet, so often when the world is speaking about these things, and when the world is using these words, it is thinking about a watered-down version or a shallow version of what that truly is.
- We said with love and peace that often the world is speaking about an uncertain or simply a sentimental version of these ideas, a kind of a veneer that is so easily scratched through, but that the Bible puts forward something that is stronger, something that can be relied upon, and something that lasts.
- And I think that's the same with joy that we're going to be speaking about this morning, that the classic Christmas song, Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas, we've all heard that, sung by Frank Sinatra on the radio, on various playlists and Christmas parties and whatever.
- And it begins with these well-known words, Have yourself a merry little Christmas, let your heart be light, next year all our troubles will be out of sight. That idea that we can have a merry Christmas, a happy Christmas, have a joyful Christmas, why?
- What's the reason given? Well, because for some reason the song is unable to explain, somehow next year everything will be better. You know, next year all our troubles will be out of sight.
- [2 : 5 1] That idea, you know, have a good time, enjoy yourself, be happy, have joy, put your worries away and just be happy for a bit because everything bad will somehow go away. That's a brilliant Christmas song and I really enjoy listening to it, but actually when we come to think about it, we recognize that's a little bit shallow, isn't it?
- It's a kind of wishful thinking that for some reason as the calendar ticks over to the first of January, all of our problems will just disappear and so we can all just be happy and merry and enjoy life.

We can enjoy Christmas now because that's what's going to happen in a couple of weeks and actually we know that we know that is not true and yet in so many ways that is the version of joy that is spread around at this time of year.

A joy without foundation, a joy which is just kind of covering over all of the difficulties that we just wish would go away. And we want to turn to the Bible this morning and see that actually there is a deeper joy on offer.

Now there is a joy that is really built on something and because of that, there is a joy that truly does last and that is the kind of joy the Bible speaks about and specifically in the passage that we're looking at this morning, that is the kind of joy that the angels announced to these shepherds that first Christmas.

[4 : 14] And really we're just going to hone in on verses 10 and 11 of this passage this morning. Let me read those again, do follow along if you have your Bibles there. 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 saviour who is Christ the Lord. Good news of great joy, the angel says.

Isn't that a message that we'd all love to hear? Isn't that a message that we'd all love to be able to share? And that is what the Bible is promising here at Christmas and beyond. That is what we're going to dig into this morning, this good news of great joy.

I want to look at it under three kind of questions I suppose really that these two verses answer. Who's it for? What is it? And how is it possible? So let's dig in as we work our way through those questions.

First up, who's it for? Who does this angel say that the good news of great joy he's bringing is available to? Well it's right there in verse 10, isn't it?

[5 : 25] Good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For all the people. Straight away we see that the joy that Christmas brings is something that is there, something that is offered to everyone, something that everyone is invited to.

And now it's important whenever we speak about joy that we are careful about that. Because it doesn't mean, biblically speaking, joy doesn't mean nothing ever being difficult or sad.

Joy doesn't mean no hardship or pain in our lives. Just before December we were looking as a church through the book of 1 Peter.

And Peter writes in that letter that it is better to suffer for doing good if that should be God's will. That actually suffering might be part of God's will in our lives.

It's a big thought, isn't it? We could talk more about that if anyone would like to. But it's important that we kind of hold that intention so we're not being flippant about this joy and saying it means nothing ever being difficult for us.

[6 : 37] But at the same time, we don't forget that the Bible is able to say there is good news of great joy for all the people. That whatever our struggles, whatever you're going through, however unworthy you might feel, whatever mistakes you might have made, the Bible offers this invitation to you, this invitation of joy for you at Christmas and throughout.

What we're going to see, we're going to see the basis for this joy in just a moment. But first, it's worth how, and again, how the Bible is able to kind of decouple, we might say, our earthly circumstances and our joy.

And that's such an important thing. The world tells us that we can have joy if there are certain things in place in our lives.

And, you know, those things will vary depending on the different voices that we listen to. For some, it will say, you know, to have joy, you need power, you need money, you need influence.

And they will be seeking after those things with all they have. And there will be plenty of YouTubers or influencers telling people, particularly young people, how to get after those things because that is where joy is found.

[7 : 57] For other people, that list might be family, relationships, love. Those are the things you need. Those are the things that bring happiness. There will be other alternatives, other lists out there as well.

But the world says if you have these things, then you can have joy. And yet, of course, the reality is we can't all have those things.

There are no guarantees in our world of any of those things. If those are where we look for joy, if that is what we need for joy, or if that is where we are pointing other people to find their joy, you just need this relationship, you just need this next thing, then actually we don't have good news of great joy for all the people.

We have news of possible joy for some of the people. But even there, it's dependent on holding on to what we already have. It's that shallow joy. It's that circumstantial kind of joy that we spoke about earlier that the world so often offers.

And yet the Bible's message of good news and great joy is for all the people. And it's an amazing promise. It's even thinking in this reading here that the first people who had this news delivered to them were the shepherds up on the hills.

[9 : 16] Shepherds were very much on the bottom rung of society in New Testament times. They were not well off. They were not well educated. They were not considered trustworthy.

They had a really questionable reputation. They were as far as you could imagine from the high flyers and the influences of the day as you could imagine.

And even after they go and see these things, even at the end of our passage, what happens to them? Verse 20, and the shepherds returned.

That actually their physical, in a worldly sense, that their situation is exactly the same as it was before. And yet we're told there is joy for them as they praise and glorify God.

And similarly today, the Bible offers joy for all people, regardless of background, of social status, even of how we see ourselves, not by changing our worldly status, but by offering us something far, far better.

[10 : 22] That's an incredible encouragement and incredible invitation, I hope, this Christmas. I'm aware we've not yet spoken about the grounds of this joy. We're going to get there. But before we get there, it's good for us to grasp and to see from the Bible that the gates are open to that, as it were, that this invitation is for you this morning, whoever you are, and whoever you know as well.

For us as a church, as well as an encouragement, this is a good reminder and perhaps challenge for us as well, isn't it? That we have this incredible good news for all people.

And we want to make sure that we are sharing that, that if we find joy in what the Bible promises, if that has been revealed to us, that it's not just something to keep to ourselves. It's not just something for people like us.

But as we've just seen, it's something for all people. And we get to join in that message of proclaiming joy to the world around us. It's not always what people think about when they think about Christianity, the idea of joy.

But we have this privilege of changing people's perceptions of that through sharing, as the angels were able to, good news of great joy for all the people.

[11 : 42] So who is joy for at Christmas? The Bible says this joyful invitation is for everyone. And yet to really make sense of that and to see how that's possible, we need to continue and look at our second question.

We've seen who it's for. Secondly, what is it? What is this joyful news for all the people that the angels brought and which remains at the very heart of Christmas and at the very heart of Christianity?

And we see the answer to this question as we read into verse 11, where it says, Here's what it is. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour.

What is this good news of great joy? It is the good news that a saviour has been born. And again, notice it's unto you. It's to each one of us.

This saviour has come. Now here's a kind of thought experiment for you. Imagine someone suddenly burst in through the back door there of the church in full kind of army gear, maybe with a big machine gun, a huge bloke, and shouted to all of us, Don't worry, I'm here to save you.

[12 : 57] How do you feel? How do you respond to that? You might well be surprised. Maybe you'd be a bit relieved. You think that's good. I'm ready to go home now. That's okay. But I don't think we would be overjoyed, would we?

We wouldn't think, Oh, what great joy that brings. Why not? Well, because we don't really need saving here and now, do we? There's nothing here in this room for us to be saved from.

We're not in any kind of major danger that we need that kind of rescue from. And yet imagine that same scene. Imagine that same soldier bursting through the door.

If you'd spent your last five years in a prisoner of war camp, or if you'd been kidnapped and taken from family and held hostage, or if you were in a situation where you rightly feared for your life each and every day.

How different would our response be then? Wouldn't there be tears of joy and celebration? Wouldn't the message that that soldier spoke be the greatest news we could imagine hearing at that time?

[14 : 05] What is this joy? It's the joy of being rescued. The joy that a savior has come, the Bible says. The problem for us is that so often we think we're in that first situation.

We think we are sitting comfortably. Things are going smoothly. We are in control of our lives. We don't really need any help, thanks. Actually, the Bible would say we are in the second.

The Bible would say that we are slaves to sin. The Bible says, as we saw last week, that without intervention we lack peace with God, our creator.

The Bible would say that we are ultimately on a path toward death, an eternal separation from God. That we might feel like we're doing fine, but actually we desperately need that savior.

And so the great joy of Christmas is that that savior has come, and that means that our biggest problem, our separation from God, has been solved.

[15 : 13] That our biggest need, our forgiveness from our sins has been met. The author, Don Carson, famously puts it like this.

He says, If God had perceived that our greatest need was economic, he would have sent an economist. If he had perceived that our greatest need was entertainment, he would have sent us a comedian or an artist.

If God had perceived that our greatest need was political stability, he would have sent us a politician. If he had perceived that our greatest need was health, he would have sent us a doctor. But he perceived that our greatest need involved our sin, our alienation from him, our profound rebellion, our death.

And he sent us a savior. Not that any of those other things are unimportant, health and culture and government, but the salvation that we need to bring us back to God is the greatest thing.

That is the number one priority. And that is what is met for us in Jesus. That's one of the key distinctives that sets apart Christianity from any other religion or any other way of viewing the world.

[16 : 25] It's that our salvation, the thing that we need the most, ultimately that forgiveness and that right standing before God, that is not based on what we do, but the gospel says that is based on what God has done for us.

And that's a really humbling thing, because it means stopping and admitting that actually, yes, I need that rescue, that I am not right with God in my natural state.

That gap isn't just a little something that I could make up if I try a little bit harder, or if I make the right resolutions in 2025, and if I keep them all.

No, it's that recognition that it is a gap that I cannot bridge myself. It's a humbling thing for us to admit that, when our whole world is eager to say, you can do anything and be anything that you please.

And yet, if we're willing to humble ourselves and accept that, the message of Christmas and of the gospel is something that brings great joy, because it is not a weight being imposed upon us, it is not a checklist that we're measured up against, it's not another standard for us to try and match up to, but rather it is a gift.

[17 : 38] A saviour has come. It is freely given. That gift we can simply receive, and that brings us joy, because it meets the greatest possible need that we have.

And so who is joy for? It's there for everyone. That's the message of the Bible. What is this joy? It's the joy of knowing that a saviour has come. Unto you is born in the city of David, a saviour.

That's not a salvation that we earn or deserve, but one that is given to us through Jesus, the one who came at Christmas. If we humble ourselves, accept our need, and put our trust in him.

So who's it for? What is it? Thirdly, finally, the last question in these verses, verse 11 in particular answers, how is it possible? What is the source of this joy?

Where does it come from? How is it possible? And the answer to that question is right at the end of verse 11. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

[18 : 49] Who is Christ the Lord. There's good news, there's joy, because a saviour is coming. But really, as soon as the scale of that joy, then kind of blows off the charts, as the angel reveals who this saviour is, who is Christ the Lord.

It is God himself, who is coming to save his people. That's how this salvation is going to be possible. That's how this joy is going to be possible. The Christ there, that word it uses, that would have been a title that would have been known and anticipated by the people, the Christ or the Messiah.

That means the anointed one, the rescuer that God had promised he would send, and that the people were waiting for. So the angel is not speaking to a vacuum. They're expecting something.

The Christ coming from the city of David, being a descendant of the great King David. Again, that was something that would have been expected and looked for. And yet the Christ being the Lord himself, I think is something that would have blown these shepherd's socks off.

And perhaps it's something we're so used to hearing at Christmas, but it's something that should just amaze us as well. The incredible truth that what we are celebrating in the midst of all the decorations, and the parties, and the presents, and the busyness of Christmas.

[20 : 11] Is actually the God of all creation. The one who made all things, stepping down into our world to save us.

Ross has already given us a C.S. Lewis Narnia quote. I've got another one for us as well. This is from the last battle, the last book in that series, where Lucy says this, In our world too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.

Perhaps we get so used to the baby in the manger, those humble beginnings, that we forget that it is the one who created our universe, coming down into our universe.

And it is good just to stop and to take that in for a moment. Because that is how this joy is possible.

It's only possible because God himself came. God didn't send an assistant, or a helper, or even an angel to carry out the gospel.

[21 : 17] But he came himself. Jesus was Emmanuel, God with us. Why does that matter? Well, it reminds us that only God was able to save us.

And that remains the truth today. It is only God and trust in him, and what he has done through Jesus, that is able to save us. That's how it's possible. Our human situation was beyond human help, beyond any other sort of intervention.

But God himself took on flesh to make that salvation and the joy that it brings possible. It reminds us as well just of the depth of God's love for us, doesn't it?

That he himself would come to rescue us. That he himself would come, leaving the perfection and the glory of heaven to go through the struggles and the pain of a life on earth.

That he himself would come, not just to live this humble life, but also to walk that path all the way to death, death on a cross where he would lay down his life in order to be our savior.

[22 : 25] That we could have that forgiveness that we need. And so if we're tempted to ask that question, how much does God love me? Or if, as we were speaking of earlier, when we hear that this is good news for all people, our mind tends toward thinking, well, I don't know if I'm really part of that or he doesn't really mean people like me.

Well, the ultimate evidence, the ultimate answer to that question is to remind ourselves that God himself came to save you. That the joy for all people absolutely does include you if you put your trust in Jesus as your savior.

God is not a distant God who, if we're very good, we might find a path towards and he might give us some reward. No, God is the God who came to be with us, who came as a savior to save us from sins.

So that joy, a certain joy, an eternal joy, a joy that doesn't ignore our circumstances but isn't based on them. And a joy that is able to continue through whatever the world throws at us.

So that that joy might be there for anyone and everyone who will turn to him. God himself coming is how this joy was made possible.

[23 : 42] Okay, we're going to finish in just a minute. But first is to say, and you know, I've said this before, I'm sure I'll say it again. You know, Christmas for a minister can be quite a hard time to think of what to say in a church.

You might think it's obvious. You just talk about angels and shepherds again. But there's always this temptation to want to say something new. You know, what is the new thing about Christmas that no one has ever thought of before?

What is the new way of looking at the Christmas story that no one's ever done before? What is the new angle? It's hard to think of new things, especially if like me, you're someone who's like creatively challenged, I think would be the word.

I'm not a kind of a new ideas kind of person. And so it might well be, and it's good to face up to this, I think, might well be that we've not said anything this morning that is new to you.

Christmas is about God coming to earth as a savior for our sins. That is good news that brings joy to all who turn to him.

[24 : 38] If that is new to you, I'm so, so glad that we've had the chance to kind of lay that out for you. And I'd love to talk more about that and answer any questions you might have on it.

But I'm sure for many of us, you know, we will have heard this before. You could have given me that summary 25 minutes ago. We've not even particularly said, you know, now go and do this.

Or, you know, now here's how you put it into action. But actually, I think the more Christmases that we have, and in some ways, the more busy life constantly seems to get, the more I'm okay with that, that we just keep on coming back to this same fundamental Christmas story.

You know, Christmas in so many ways is an emotional time, isn't it? It's a time of sentiment. It's a time when we feel things and everything is kind of geared that way and it's often kind of portrayed through a soft focus to make us feel these emotions.

And so I think at that time, there's real value in being reminded of the truth of the gospel, the good news of the gospel that lies at the very heart of Christmas.

[25 : 48] that in Jesus, God himself has come to rescue us. Those are the facts that we want to keep hold of and those facts don't mean that Christmas isn't a time of emotion and of feelings.

That when we kind of have those times of yearnings over the next couple of weeks, it's right that we have those. And really, the whole point of these kind of services through December has been to say that it's these facts that give rise to these emotions and these feelings that we're seeking after.

That there is love at Christmas and the source of that love is God himself. He has demonstrated that love through sending his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

There is peace to be found in a busy world because through what Jesus has done, we can have peace with God, the greatest peace of all that we need.

And there is joy. There is good news of great joy for all the people because to us is born a saviour who is Christ the Lord. That salvation from our sins, that forgiveness that we need is available.

[27 : 02] And so we can have that relationship with God and that relationship that brings joy. In the gospel, we can truly experience these things in the present. We can have what Christmas is kind of pointing towards but never quite reaches because in the gospel we have the foundation of that.

And it also, it's good to remember at Christmas, we don't have the full package just yet. As we think about love and peace and joy, at the moment we have those things in the midst of suffering and struggle.

And yet at Christmas, it's good to look forward again that as we remember that Jesus has come, we remember that he will come again, that he will come again as the victorious ruler over all things, that he will welcome us home into his perfect new creation where there will be perfect love, perfect peace, perfect joy.

And we will be able to share that with him because of his work in his first coming, that first Christmas, that a savior has come. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the Christmas story which at its heart is the gospel story. We thank you that in your love for us you came as our savior and that we might be forgiven and be with you now and forever.

[28 : 26] We thank you, Lord, that that is good news. It's not a weight that bears down on us but rather it is a gift to bring us joy because in you we have all that we need.

Lord, I do just pray particularly this morning for those for whom it feels that joy is out of reach for them or that your love is not a love that includes them or that this is all just good news but for other people.

Lord, I just pray right now that you would be at work in their hearts, in all of our hearts to show us that this is good news for all the people from every background with every different history and in every different situation the good news that a savior has come bringing a salvation that is needed by all and a salvation which is freely offered to all in the gospel.

I pray as well that we would be generously offering that good news to others too as you have graciously shared it with us. And Lord, the rest of this Christmas season and beyond and for all of our lives Lord, we ask that we would never just grow used to or stop being amazed by the wonder of the gospel and all that you've done for us.

Please plant that truth in the joy that it brings deep in our hearts that it might overflow in our lives in a genuine love for you and for one another. We pray that your love and your peace and your joy would be at the heart of our lives this Christmas and beyond.

[30 : 00] And we thank you that these are not feelings that we just have to gee up within ourselves. These are not just things we have to imagine nor are they things that are based on our earthly circumstances but they are things which are found because of the truth of the gospel because of what you have done for us and so in response we are able to live as your people and give you the glory that you deserve.

We pray that we will do that with all love and with all peace and with all joy this Christmas period and beyond. And we pray these things in Jesus name. Amen.