

LOOKING FORWARD TO JOY

Leader pages on pp. 110-113

THE POINT:
JESUS HAS COME, GIVING US MUCH CAUSE FOR JOY.

LUKE 2:4-14

⁴ Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David,

⁵ to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant.

⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

⁷ Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

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⁸ In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock.

⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people:

¹¹ **Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord.**

¹² This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger."

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¹³ Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!

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MEMORY VERSE

KEYWORDS

House . . . of David (v. 4)— Because of Joseph's ancestry of the line of King David he was required to go to Bethlehem to register for the census.

Shepherds (v. 8)—Shepherding was a major occupation in ancient Israel. Jesus called Himself the "good shepherd."

Glory of the Lord (v. 9)—The term for glory (doxa) has a wide range of applications and can refer to dignity, glory, honor, praise, and worship.

In the highest heaven (v. 14)— The glory is to be given to God in the highest heaven (hupsistos). Heaven is the dwelling place of God.

WHAT MADE THE ARRIVAL OF JESUS SO JOYOUS?

Michael Jr. is a Christian comedian. He has a gift to make people laugh. His performances bring joy to all those that attend. His comedy draws attendees from different age groups, life situations, and cultural backgrounds. He sees laughter and joy as an entry point to get people to think about deeper things. Once at a comedy show in California, Michael Jr. experienced the power of joy in a very real way. A gentleman came up to him after the show visibly in tears. He told Michael Jr. that he was a wanted criminal. That night, the gentleman decided to turn himself in and asked Michael Jr. to call the police on his behalf. Before being driven off in the police car, the man allowed Michael Jr. to pray for him. Indeed, joy can open our hearts to hear from God. Allow the joy of this season to bring a smile to your face and draw you into the deeper things of Christ. What part of the story of Jesus's birth brings you joy? How can you share that joy with others?

Experienced by the Parents //

Luke 2:4-7

Throughout history, humanity has celebrated Jesus's birth with some of the most beautiful music and works of art ever created. Today,

we celebrate with LED lights, choreography, and fanfare, but when we look at the story, we encounter one problem after another. It all begins with the government. Ronald Reagan famously said, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'"⁵ "Joy" and "Government" don't seem to go together, do they? A census was in place.

Unlike our censuses today, the government didn't come to you. You went to the government. Joseph and Mary had a road trip ahead of them, and that was a problem because Mary was pregnant. In fact, Mary's pregnancy would be the source of great scandal and consternation among a people who had been known to stone people for far less offenses. Yes, that was a problem. The next problem was that she was going into labor in the middle of the whole ordeal. Problem. And there was no room in the local inn. You guessed it. Another problem. But in the end, there was joy. A baby was born.

There's nothing like a baby to bring joy. It doesn't really matter how many problems there are on the way, the joy of new life is clearly personified in the arrival of a baby. And of course, it wasn't just a happy moment for Joseph and Mary. It was the



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most important, joyful, exhilarating event for billions of others to come. We all celebrate with joy because even though there were lots of problems in the story, His birth solved the greatest problem in the world: lostness.

Thus begins the mystery and joy of Christ. He came to experience it all. The stench of farm animals and the chill of the night air became the first sensory experiences for God in flesh. He knew all about bandits, debtors, conmen, and herdsmen. He knew how it felt to be rejected, mocked, followed, and cherished. It's so true that He came to experience life from the grand to the dubious, and He did it so we could know that we are not alone. The journey from Bethlehem to Calvary cast God's love like a net over the horizon of mankind. And I'm so thankful that I was captured by His mercy.

We've all encountered people who say: "Oh, I don't need God's mercy. There's no problem here. I'm too busy to celebrate this strange, ancient story. And I don't need that radical grace. That's nice, but I'm all good."

These are the people that find it impossible to get into the kingdom of God. They are convinced that they are better than most. They can handle their problems their own way. They believe they can get by with a little slice of grace, but certainly they don't need the super-sized grace of the cross. Martin Luther put it this way, "The gospel tastes best to those who lie in the straits of death, but the hardened class who live in their own holiness, build on their own works, and feel not their own sin and misery, do not taste this food."⁶

When we come to the realization that we are all a mess without the tenderness and mercy of Christ, then we are saved and can sing with joy to the world:

"He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove; the glories of His righteousness, And wonders of His love."

WHEN DID THIS PASSAGE BECOME MORE THAN JUST A STORY TO YOU?

Birth Announced by an Angel // Luke 2:8-12

As the familiar narrative continues, so many implications surface. We've heard and read the story so many times that it's easy to forget the surprises along the way.

Here's one: It would seem like God would alert the real authorities of Jesus's birth, like princes, theologians, philosophers, doctors, and the guys with letters behind their names. Instead, He sent the angels with great numbers and fanfare to shepherds. Shepherds had no social standing. They should be last on the list. What's



DIGGING DEEPER BETHLEHEM

Bethlehem is located "five miles southwest of Jerusalem." Several Old Testament accounts took place there.

- Jacob's wife, Rachel was buried near Bethlehem (Gen 35:19).
- It was also the home of the Levite that Micah asked to be his father and priest (Judg. 17:7-13).
- In Ruth, Elimelek, Naomi, and their two sons were from Bethlehem (Ruth 1:1).
- This was also where David lived and was anointed by Samuel (1 Sam 16:1-13).

While we are likely to remember that Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus, it is interesting to note that Micah 5:2 prophesies that the one who will rule over Israel will come from Bethlehem and that Matthew 2:1-12 and Luke 2:4-20 confirm that this was indeed the birthplace of Christ.

Is there a "Bethlehem" in the area you live? A place only known for one thing. How will you view it differently in light of what you've read?



more, the ones that worked the night shift were even a notch lower. You can't possibly send the heavenly host to them. But God certainly did. What a total affront to the upper echelon of the Jewish culture. Not those guys! Yes, those guys. They're unacceptable. At the very least, Mary should practice social distancing around them.

Perhaps, the subtext here is that God has a total and complete disregard for our manmade, status quo, pecking order. In fact, He seems to show up in greater glory around the poor, the marginalized, the less esteemed, and the uncelebrated. In another way, one must wonder that during such chaos from the royal census, the traveling, and the trove of details that concerned the masses, maybe, just maybe, the shepherds abiding in the fields were the only ones who were available to get this historic, angelic message.

A small village like Bethlehem, overrun by the rabble and ruckus of visitors, stands in stark contrast to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. Perhaps they were the only ones who paid attention.

Are we paying attention? Are we so focused on the to-do lists, entangling relationships, financial worries, and chasing our own self-assigned agendas and dreams that we are missing the big picture right in front of us? There's nothing quite like a silent night to open the door to divine conversations and holy revelations. It's what our spirits want, but our feet have other plans.

The joyful concept tucked inside the The Gospel is for everybody. God saw the powerful, the rich, the literate, the graceful, the independent, the philosophical, and the artistic. He pondered the announcement and decided that those random shepherds would do just fine. He came to them. And He came to me. And that's why they call it good news. It's fo' eeeev-body!

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT THAT THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS'S BIRTH IS FOR ALL PEOPLE?

Birth Celebrated by His Creation // Luke 2:13-15

After the angel brought the news of Jesus's birth to the shepherds, the floodgates of heaven opened, and a host of angels poured out of the open sky. Luke described it as a heavenly host. The word host that Luke used is the same word used to describe a multitude of military personnel. God sent the best and brightest of His color guard to herald the news. We see the same word used in Revelation 5:11, "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels around the throne, and also of the living creatures and of the elders. Their number was countless thousands, plus thousands of thousands." We can assume this wasn't a handful of cherry-picked angels hovering above these gobsmacked shepherds. These men witnessed an ensemble of heavenly riches and ranks. One angel would have done the job, but God chose to pull out all the stops.

It was all for God's glory and for the world's peace. Peace and joy are inextricably linked in this announcement. If we want joy, we must relish God's peace. If our hearts long for peace, we should dig down deep into the joy of the Lord. As John said in 1 John 3:1, "See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God's children—and we are!"

He implores us to behold the great love that was lavished upon us that we would be called the sons of God. If it sounds over the top, it is. This isn't a teaspoon of glory. It's not "a little dab'll do ya" glory. It poured from the heavens like a great tidal wave. And this is just the beginning of the story. The shepherds received a preview of God's

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coming attractions. The blind would see, the deaf would hear, the dead raised, and even greater, a way would be offered for humanity to experience eternal fellowship with God.

The long-prophesied Messiah stepped onto the world's stage and the shepherds couldn't just stand there trembling in their sandals. Their first reaction should be ours during this season of Advent. "Let's go!" They didn't treat this as a nonchalant FYI from above. When the angels left them and returned to heaven, they didn't just look at each other and say, "Hmm . . . Good to know." They wanted to be active participants in the story. That's just what true believers do. A glimpse of glory divine compels us to run to Him immediately. This season we get to follow in the footsteps of these first witnesses once again. Christmas allows us an opportunity to celebrate at the foot of the manger and experience the transcendent power of Christ's presence. When we take time to do that through this season of Christmas, the joy is unstoppable and can lead us into a deeper relationship with Christ.

HOW CAN THERE BE PEACE ON EARTH WHEN THERE IS SO MUCH CONFLICT TODAY?

DID YOU KNOW?

The shepherds demonstrate the importance of seeing something for yourself. After hearing the message from the angels, the shepherds responded, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us (Luke 2:15b)." They were not going out of doubt or questioning God. Their belief was reflected by their actions. They wanted to go see the baby because the Lord had made it known to them. While Advent is a great time to share the gospel message with unbelievers, it is also a great time to encourage believers to dig deeper into their faith. Be a community of shepherds and invite a newer believer to experience Jesus for more deeply and to come with you to Bible study, to Sunday school, or discipleship groups. May this Advent season be a time for them to experience Jesus more deeply for themselves.

Biblical Truth: Once we encounter Christ, our lives are never the same (2 Cor. 5:17).

Who can you experience Jesus with this Advent season?

LIVE IT

Why is it important for us to be reminded that true joy is only found in Christ?

For the Christ-follower, joy grows from our fellowship with God regardless of circumstance, status, or fears of the things we'll face in the future. Even when it's dark and we don't know how our hopes could be realized, Jesus makes all things new and all things possible.

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- **Reflect:** Spend a moment reflecting on your salvation. How did that decision bring you joy? If you haven't received salvation, you'll never have a better time than now. Go to the inside cover page for more information about how to become a Christian.
- **Celebrate:** Write a note, give a gift, and share a story with someone you know. In so doing you could bring joy through an encouraging act of kindness.
- **Give:** 2 Corinthians 9:7 reminds us that God loves a cheerful giver. Give sacrificially to the needy. Make plans to give more than you've ever given to mission work. A great place to start is the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for world missions.

DAILY READINGS

1. THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS // LUKE 2:10-11

Many people celebrate the Christmas season without any idea of what it all means. It's the time when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But some people don't realize that in the birth of Jesus, the sovereign, all-wise, all-knowing, all-powerful God who created heaven and earth came from heaven to earth in flesh. They don't realize that He came down because of His great love for the world, but people are separated from God because of their sinful hearts. They don't realize that God allowed His Son to be crucified in our place, so that we would be restored to a right relationship with Him. The joy of Christmas is all about the acts of God to redeem humankind.

At Christmas, let us remember that the Lord of all was born so that we could have a relationship with our holy and loving Father.

2. DAILY JOY // PSALM 118:24

Each and every day that we wake to a new sunrise, we should rejoice. What else can we do? God has given us a new day and with it, a new opportunity to live for Him. We have been given the power to succeed in our work and to overcome whatever we face because we have Christ Jesus living within us. Each day should be filled with joy because we have a God who cares enough to see us through. God is our Deliverer. He has delivered some of us out of many difficult situations. God is a Way Maker. He has opened doors that were previously closed. This day that God has made should be lived honoring and glorifying Him.

We should not rejoice only when things are well, but joy should fill our hearts every day, no matter what meets us at sunrise.

3. JOY THAT OVERFLOWS // PSALM 16:11

"In your presence is abundant joy." David wrote these words about God's abundant joy because God had been with him through the ups and downs of his life. His joy overflowed as our joy should when we think of the goodness of God. This overflowing joy goes so much deeper than anything the world has to offer. It is

far more wonderful than any human emotion.

It bubbles up from our spirits and fills us, then it flows into our lives touching everyone with whom we come in contact. Only God can give us this kind of joy. It is a joy that strengthens us to stay on top of all the circumstances of our lives.

The joy that we have did not come from the world. It is a gift from God that the world cannot take away.

4. FOREMOST, LOVE // 1 JOHN 4:8

The most important element between a parent and a child is not food or shelter. It is love. Similarly, the most important element between a believer and God is not obedience or service. It is also love. When we have a deep, all-encompassing love directed toward God, then the rest of our walk with Him is easy. It may be challenging at first to produce this type of love, because of the junk inscribed on our hearts through the media and entertainment we absorb. But those things can be, or rather, they must be replaced. Our hearts are made clean when we understand the love that defines our God. It is immeasurable, and it is focused toward us.

God is love and when we welcome His love into our hearts and lives, incredible healing takes place.

5. A LIFE OF LOVE // EPHESIANS 5:2

Words that define biblical love cannot be used to define the world's love. The world's standard of love is primarily conditional while biblical love extends to enemies and strangers. We love because God has called us to be like Him. He is a God who loves the whole world and proved it when He sent Himself to die on the cross for our sins (Rom. 5:8). Jesus showed us how to love like God. He embraced all who came to Him—cheaters, prostitutes, lepers, everyone. The love of Christ reflects the kind of love God wants us to have. For many of us, we have a long way to go, but God's love compels us to press on day by day seeking to live a life of love.

Use Jesus as a model for living a life of love. Incredibly, He loved those who nailed Him to a cross.



The True Joy of Christmas

BY MARK CROSTON

As a child, there was no happier time in all the year than Christmas. Buying a fresh Blue Spruce Pine for our Christmas tree. Hanging the lights in and outside the house. Decorating the house with all the Christmas trinkets. Visiting Santa Claus at his home at the mall or one of the downtown department stores. We would all get our assignments to help our mother prepare the Christmas feast. I would especially enjoy baking rolls and desserts. I was not as thrilled with picking the greens or peeling the potatoes. The church sermons, plays, concerts and parties only added to the excitement. We would watch our favorite Christmas specials, that we had seen so many times we could repeat most of the lines as they were spoken. We could hardly sleep on the night before Christmas, particularly if we had not found all the hidden presents around the house. We would wake before dawn, but we were not allowed to get out of bed until the prescribed time, and then it was Christmas!

In addition to these memories, there was a Christmas when we could not afford presents, when we did not have a tree, when we did not hang out the lights. There were the Christmases during my time in college. It seemed like every year I would have finals that went right up to the day before Christmas Eve. The tension of my finals consumed me and by the time I relaxed, Christmas was over. Maybe the worst were the Christmases when friends and loved ones died, including the year my wife of twenty-six years died in the weeks before Christmas.

We add a lot to Christmas and life adds even more, but none of these can ever eclipse the true joy of Christmas. The true joy of Christmas does not come from what is happening, but from what has happened. Jesus, his life, and the gift of salvation through him are the true joy of Christmas.



The angels declared it in Luke 2:8-11, “In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Here’s what we need to remember. Christmas is all about Jesus and nothing can ever upstage Him in the celebration. Call it a holiday, but holiday is just the compound contraction that means Holy Day. Call it Christmas but know that “Christ” is Jesus and “mas” means worship. So, every time we say Christmas we are saying “worship Jesus!” Call it Xmas, but X is the Greek letter chi, a frequent abbreviation for Christ. So, every time we call it Xmas we are still crying out “worship Jesus!”

Focus on giving, you’ll see the wisemen. Focus on singing, you’ll hear the angels. In the shape of the candy cane, we see the shepherd’s staff. In the red color of the candy cane, we see the blood of Jesus that brings us salvation. In the three stripes of the candy cane, we see the Holy Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit! In the taste of the candy cane, we remember that the Lord is good, sweeter than honey in my mouth (Ps. 119:103).

In the lights, we see His star. In the Christmas color green, we see the eternal life He offers. In the Christmas color white, we see His purity. In the Christmas color purple, we see His royalty. In the Christmas color gold, we see His riches. In the Christmas color red, we see His blood. In the Christmas gifts, we are reminded of His generosity. In the Christmas tree, we remember Him on Calvary’s tree.

All this being said, the true joy of Christmas is not based on good times or bad; the presents we give or the gifts we receive; the foods we eat or the family and friends we share it with. So, in this season, if your life is going great or if you are in a season of suffering, experience the true joy of Christmas. Allow Jesus to give you peace, purpose, pardon, and power.

“Joy to the world, the lord has come. Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room and heaven and nature sing!”⁷ Jesus is still the reason for the season.

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