

Christmas Joy...answering what?

Luke 2:8-11

Intro. For the Sundays in December I've set aside our study of Matthew's Gospel to consider Christmas love / Christmas grace / and Christmas Joy. Then on Sunday the 29th, we'll consider Christmas hope. And what time will we meet for worship on the 29th? 10:30 AM! You are without excuse.

I was amused to read about a boy who wrote the following letter to Santa...*"Dear Santa, there are three little boys who live at our house. There is Jeffrey; he is two. There is David; he is four. And there is Norman; he is seven. Jeffery is good some of the time. David is good some of the time. But Norman is good all of the time. I am Norman."*

The truth is...none of us have been good all of the time. **Rom. 3:23 - ...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** We've all had dark episodes we're ashamed of. We've all said and done things we wished God hadn't witnessed, but He knows all about us. In the NT, the Greek word often translated **sin** is *hamartia*. In Greek tragedy *hamartia* meant "*missing the mark.*" It originally applied to an archer who missed the target. When visiting a church family some years ago I noticed hundreds of perforations in the aluminum siding on the back wall of their garage. Our hosts told me their boys had hung a target on that back wall and not every arrow sailed true. At least it was a back wall! But our life story is a lot like that garage wall. We've all missed the mark of God's holiness and we've missed many times. Admitting this is the first step in grasping the wonder of Christmas.

Christmas love answers WHY Jesus came. The only explanation the Bible offers for WHY Jesus came to die for us is the fact that **God is love** and He really does love us. **I Jn. 4:9, 10 - This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.** Though Satan has blinded many...the focal point of this enormous celebration called Christmas is the incarnation of Jesus and God's amazing gift of sacrificial love. Jesus came to deal with our *hamartia*...the sin problem that separated each of us from God and from life as He intended it to be. Even the name, **Jesus**, means *Jehovah saves* and points to the salvation He came to provide. **(Matt. 1:20, 21)**

Christmas grace answers the HOW of God's salvation plan. HOW could God save us when He is just and our sin problem was so deeply rooted and pervasive? The sin that infected the world by the fall of Adam and Eve reminds me of the radioactive plume that spread across Europe during the Chernobyl disaster. In 1986 that toxic cloud claimed 10,000 lives and many more after that. Our missionaries to Sweden, Mervin and Bonnie Williams, were in the path of that cloud. This lovely couple became victims of that invisible poison. But there's a difference between that radio-active plume and the spread of sin. The spread of sin was instantaneous / universal / and permanent. It spread not because of an accident, but because of man's deliberate disobedience. No one but Jesus has ever escaped its deadly effect. Here's a portion of **Rom. 5:12-17 - Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!...For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.**

These verses in **Rom. 5** tell the story of God's grace. Notice how the sacrifice of Christ is described in **v.17**...it's called, **God's abundant provision of grace.** This abundance means there's more than enough grace for you and me.

5 x's in **vs.12-18** salvation or imputed righteousness is said to be a **gift** from God...a gift to be received. In **v.15** it's called **the gift that came by the grace of one man, Jesus Christ**. Never lose sight of this...**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.** - Eph. 2:8, 9

I remember the Sunday when a lawyer in our church told me he finally got it. He had grown up in a denomination that buried the gospel beneath sacramentalism. Many were praying for him. Though he was somewhat familiar with the concept of grace, he believed salvation must require a good life...a sterling performance...a garage wall without holes. He was never certain of his salvation because he felt so much was riding on his performance. But during that week he spent considerable time thinking about the previous Sunday's message from **Eph. 2**. In the quietness of his study, God opened his eyes. With a big smile he said, "*Pastor Dean, I finally got it. My salvation has nothing to do with works. Even faith to believe is part of God's gift to me!*" Have you received God's gift? Christmas declares God's love and the wonder of His grace. The baby born in Bethlehem's manger was the embodiment of this gift from God.

So Christmas is about God's love and the grace that literally streamed from heaven that night long ago. But this AM and next Sunday I want to share the impact...the results of God's love and grace. Resulting from His love and grace proceed joy and hope. These blessings answer the **WHAT** and **WHEN** of Christ's appearing. As we consider Christmas joy we need to begin with the setting in **Lk.2**.

1. The Setting of Christmas Joy – vs. 8 - And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

Notice **v.8** says this Christmas event happened **at night**. The darkness of that night long ago symbolizes conditions in the world at that time. It was **night politically**. The world was under the ruthless tyranny of the Roman Empire and ruled by a mad man. Joseph and Mary had traveled to Bethlehem to register for the world tax Caesar Augustus imposed. But the world was also dark **morally**. Someone has said "*it was the most immoral day the world has ever seen.*" It was **night** in the hearts of men and women whose lives were ruled by sin. The world was dark **spiritually** too. 400 years had passed since a prophet appeared with a word from God. Heaven had gone silent. Religion had completely failed. Mystics, legalists and false prophets roamed the landscape with nothing of substance to offer the people. As a result, the average person had given up on God. The fallout of godlessness was evident everywhere. But when Jesus came it was also **night socially**. Society at that time had only two classes...those who had and those who didn't have. There was no middle class. A few were rich, but thousands upon thousands were desperately poor...slaves to manual labor and heavy taxation. So it was **night** when Jesus came. Does any of this sound familiar? When Jesus returns, world conditions will be similar to those of the 1st century. Matthew quoted Isaiah when describing the time of Christ's appearing. He wrote, "**...the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.**" – Matt. 4:16

Notice who was first to preach this wonderful Good News...**Lk. 2:8, 9 - And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.** The first to preach this Good News was **an angel of the Lord**. I find this interesting because an **angel** will also be the last to preach the gospel in this age. **Rev. 14:6 - Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth--to every nation, tribe, language and people.**

And notice who were first to hear the Gospel...**shepherds**. The NT words **pastor** and **shepherd** come from the same Greek root word *poimeno*.

So there's an outside chance you may think these shepherds were men of outstanding character and moral refinement...you know...the way you think of Pastor Jerry. Doug Goins sets the record straight. In Journeys of Joy he wrote, *"The Judean shepherds were the lowest of the low socially...common men, a despised class with a bad reputation. Shepherds were known as thieves because they were nomadic, and as they moved their sheep around the country, sometimes they got confused about what is "mine" and what is "thine." They were all tarred with the same brush-untrustworthy and dis-honest. Shepherds were not allowed to give testimony in a Jewish court of law. Their work made it impossible for them to observe the Jewish ceremonial laws and temple rituals, so they were considered religiously unclean and unacceptable. It's pretty amazing to think this heavenly invasion came to such social outcasts!"* (Well I guess shepherds and Pastor Jerry do have a lot in common!)

v. 9 says, An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. I guess they were! The appearing of God's glory is comparable to being thrust under a brilliant halogen light and hit by an NFL line-backer at the same time. Sinners are knocked off their feet in the presence of God's glory. Even the proudest men on earth, will find themselves face down when the Lord Jesus returns...even "the Donald!" **Phil. 2:10 says, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**

As these shepherds were trying to figure out what was happening, **v.10 says, But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.** Notice ...**"Do not be afraid."** They're thinking... *"That's easy for you to say."* Uncontrollable fear is the knee jerk reaction of every human in the presence of the Almighty. Yet the Bible records 365 verses where the Lord instructed His people to *be of good cheer and to not be afraid.* That's one encouragement for each day of the year! The angel then said, **I bring you good news of great joy...**

Let's put this together...God's love and grace is streaming from heaven. The glory of God has pierced the darkness and illumined the night sky. 400 years of silence is now broken and an angel speaks on behalf of God. And to whom did he appear? To whom was this good news first delivered? The pronoun **you** refers primarily to a smelly ragamuffin band of **shepherds**...low-life nomads...a breed so renown for dishonesty their testimony was disallowed in court and their presence banned from Temple worship. So when the angel said, **I bring you good news of great joy** he was really saying, *"this love and grace from heaven is for you...for lowly shepherds...even you. We've checked and rechecked the name tags on these gifts from God and sure enough...they're for you."* This can only mean that Jesus came for anyone and everyone who would receive Him. No one is excluded.

What about the theologians...the religious leaders in Jerusalem who had the ancient prophecies? Where were they that night long ago? The sad fact is this...they didn't seem to care. Despite their indifference, Jesus came for men like Nicodemus. In love He came to save any who would admit their need and trust Him. But knowing about Jesus and receiving Him are two different things. The religious type felt no need for Christ. More often, it's the poor...the humble...the needy...outcast shepherds, who gladly receive Him. But no one is shut out from the Good News. The angel said, **I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people...**

Out of the hardness of our hearts we've drawn lines of national / racial / and social prejudice. It's an ugly thing we've done! Yet God's truth is expressed by the song we learned as children... *"Red and yellow, black and white, we are precious in His sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world."* As so clearly declared in **Rom. 3:22 - This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference!** So this first Christmas proved the radical equality practiced by the God of heaven who is no respecter of persons. The Good News is for everyone, not just those who seem worthy. The darkness was pierced by the proclamation that **great joy** had come.

2. The Substitutes for Christmas Joy – v.10 - Look again at the angel's announcement in v.10. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

The love and grace streaming from heaven that night was good news that would result in **great joy...for all the people**. Not just **joy...but great joy**...Christmas joy! At this point we need to hit the pause button and exercise some caution. There exists in all of us a perpetual tendency to equate happiness and **joy**. But the two are not at all the same. God's grace and love and Christ's mission failed miserably if we think the angel said universal happiness has arrived. I mean, how many sad stories must we hear to be convinced this can't be what the angel meant? How many times must the church phone ring with prayer requests for friends in desperate need?

Depending on the translation you prefer, the Bible has the words **happy** and **happiness** about 30 x's while the words, **joy** and **rejoice** over 300 x's. In the original languages, **happiness** and **joy** are distinct and different words. A dictionary defines happiness as "*a state of well-being, a pleasurable or satisfying experience.*" Note in that definition that happiness is essentially a state or feeling resulting from an experience...an emotional high. As the word itself suggests, *happiness* is based on happenings...on pleasurable events and circumstances. As we know from experience, there's nothing static or fixed about circumstances. Because they're so fluid, our moods typically fluctuate with them.

Against all odds, we have an extended family in our church who on two separate occasions won brand new automobiles. (I won a cheap Mr. Coffee, coffee maker one time, but that's it. Remember those early drip coffee makers?...they worked fine if you don't mind plastic-flavored coffee). But this family actually won two new cars...a Buick Park Avenue and a Saturn. Imagine their excitement! They were pinch-yourself happy! You'd think two-time happiness as profound as this would never wear off. But it did. In fact, their happiness started to wane the moment they found out how much sales tax they'd have to pay to claim their prize! Years later, those winnings are just memories. That's thing about happiness...it's momentary...it's temporary. It doesn't last. It comes and then it goes.

The other day my mother called and said my cousin John had been promoted to manager of a Lowe's store in Ohio...a position he had his sights on for some time. But in that same week, John was diagnosed with possible colorectal cancer...the same cancer that took his father's life. She then added, "*Isn't that so much like life? The highest experience of happiness can be eclipsed by sadness within the same week!*" She's so right! Tim Keller wrote this... "*What the world calls happiness is getting control of your life so that you keep your circumstances favorable.*" I say, "*Good luck with that!*"

So God sent an angel to make a profound announcement...**I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people**. How are we to understand this? What does it mean? Was God shifting the table and changing everything? Was He at that moment eliminating all misery and the wide range of unhappy circumstances? Was the angel even talking about happiness...or is joy something deeper, more substantial and durable? And while we're thinking about it, why is Christmas itself often so disappointing and painful? Though this holiday is supposed to be the "*hap...happiest season of all,*" why are we still surrounded by so much that is imperfect and broken? Before we attempt to answer these questions, let's take a moment to think about the main characters in the original Christmas story and what the angel's announcement meant for them.

First consider the shepherds. Did their circumstances change for the better? From that night on did they roam the countryside singing to their sheep, "*everything is awesome!*" What changed for these rugged men? Well, for one thing, the monotonous routines of shepherding were suddenly interrupted. The Dean of the Chapel at Duke University is credited for having made this observation... "*Christmas is a delightful disruption of the way things normally go. I mean, one moment you're tending sheep in the middle of the night, the next you're being scared out of your wits by an angelic choir.*" OK.

That's something. God gave them an unexpected break in their routines. And aside from this paranormal disruption, the shepherds were also the first to meet the Christ child. Now that's really something! And who would have guessed these shepherds would become action figures in nativity sets all over the world? **Lk. 2:20** says, **The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.** This may have been just a magical moment for them...like winning a new car. Or maybe their lives were changed forever by the love and grace they collided with that night. We don't know. As circumstances go, I suspect not much changed. I mean, they weren't promoted. They were still lowlife with a fantastic story and a reputation for stretching the truth. We hope their spiritual lives took a sharp upward turn. But the looks and comments of disbelieving friends may have silenced their praise and made them wonder if that night ever happened. That's how it is with happiness based on happenings. The thrill tends to wear off. But however their story unfolded, changed circumstances must not be what the angel meant. They were still stinky shepherds.

What about Joseph and Mary? We know some difficult days were ahead for Mary. After giving birth in a stable, many in her neighborhood would suspect her child was illegitimate. There would be whispers...and don't you hate them? Friends would struggle to believe her explanation. Then Joseph and Mary with the baby Jesus would liquidate the Magi's gift of gold to flee become refugees in Egypt. Still later in life, Mary would watch her Son be rejected / falsely accused / and then crucified as a common criminal. This is what Simeon meant when he said **"...a sword will pierce your own soul too."** - **Lk. 2:35b.** So life didn't magically become ideal for Joseph, Mary or Jesus. In fact, we have no idea what happened to Joseph after his other children were born. Though the angel's words were exhilarating to be sure, he must not have been talking about new and improved circumstances. **Great joy** must mean something other than happiness.

Now I've taken you down this long road for a reason. There's method to my madness. It's important for us to understand that the **great joy** of Christmas isn't about pleasurable circumstances at all. If we think Joy to the World means continuous happiness for everybody at all times, we've set ourselves up for enormous disappointment. Joy is something far deeper and more durable.

3. The Substance of Christmas Joy - v.11 - Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.

The **great joy** the angel was talking about is defined here in **v.11**. It isn't based on circumstances that tend to be so fickle and fleeting. Happiness is an emotion people seek, but joy is a divine gift given. *Joy is directly related to God and the firm confidence that all is well, regardless of our circumstances.* (Repeat) Joy is based on a relationship with God made possible by **a Savior, Christ the Lord.**

And why did we need a savior? Listen to a paragraph written by Dr. Henry Morris before terrorism and cyber warfare was ever a problem. *"When God's six-day work of creation was complete, everything in the world was 'very good'. There was nothing out of order, no pain, no suffering, no disease, no struggle for existence, no disharmony, no sin, and above all...no death. But things are not 'very good' in the world now! In the physical realm, everything tends to run down and wear out. In the living world, each animal is engaged in a perpetual struggle against other animals and against disease, as well as the universal process of aging and death. Culturally, one civilization after another seems to rise for a time, then decline and die. In the spiritual and moral realm, each individual invariably finds it easier to do wrong than right, easier to drift downward than to struggle upward. The world is full of hatred, crime, war, pollution, selfishness, corruption...evil of all kinds. Something has gone wrong with God's perfect creation."* We know this is true. The world has so many problems our leaders don't know which gnarly crisis to tackle first. So here's what we'll do...we'll fix the climate. Once again let me say, *"Good luck with that!"*

The source and substance of the joy the angel proclaimed isn't the result of a program or policy or even changed circumstances. The source and substance of **great joy** is a person...a savior. The angel said, **Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.** With the few remaining minutes, let me give you a short summary of what the angel's announcement really meant and what God's love and grace results in for those who believe.

1. Notice the angel said that Jesus was **born in the town of David**. The fact is this...the first appearing of Jesus, including his birthplace in Bethlehem, fulfilled more than 300 specific promises God made to humanity. We've considered many of these promises in earlier studies. But the point is this...in a world of broken promises Christ's appearing proves God is completely trustworthy. Great **joy** results for those who know there is someone we can turn to...someone we can rely on...someone who is faithful over the long haul...someone who has promised He will never leave us or let us down. Our circumstances may be all over the map, but there is a God in heaven who is true to His Word. **Psa. 4:7, 8 - You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.**

2. By the appearing of Jesus, God has re-established contact and assured us of His love. Heaven had gone silent for 400 years. People who actually knew God were a tiny minority...a remnant. The silence was broken by Jesus who was sent to reopen lines of communication between God and man. **Heb. 1:1, 2 - In the past God spoke to our fore-fathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe.** In John's Gospel, Jesus is called **the Word**. This name literally means *the communication*. Like a phone call from a loved one we haven't heard from for a long time, God broke the silence by sending His Son to declare His love and grace. It's a study all its own...but one of the greatest blessings Jesus frequently spoke of is the blessing of being able to talk to God!

3. Whether we admit it or not...every problem in our lives and our world is directly related to sin. Sin is that toxic cloud that infects us all and creates such ugliness. Jesus came to decontaminate us...to remove sin from our lives. By His perfect life, He kept the law we are unable to keep. He obeyed it for us! By His substitutionary death, He took our guilt and paid the death penalty our sin demanded. By His resurrection and through the power of the Spirit He sent, we have power to live a new life. The good news is that God has sent us a Savior who is **the way, the truth and the life**. So born to you, is the sin remover...the life restorer...the joy giver. And this joy Jesus gives is permanent and unaffected by whatever circumstances may come. In **Jn. 15:11** He said, **I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.** Beyond new and improved circumstances or momentary happiness...the appearing of Jesus brought a salvation that is indestructible and eternal. And just as Jesus promised His disciples, a better day is coming when the tables are turned and all adversity is removed. In **Jn. 16:22** He said, **Now is your time of grief, (not every Christian wants to hear this) but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.** We'll discuss this further tonight at 6 PM, but the impact of God's love and grace is **great joy**.

Before we leave this scene in Luke's gospel, it's imperative for us to see something more. The angel said, **"a Savior has been born to you..."** It is not enough to accept the fact that Christ appeared 2,000 years ago. It's not enough to believe Jesus came to die for the sins of the world. It's not enough to say He came for someone else. **To you** is intensely personal. A person can never be saved until he/she says, *"Christ came for me. He bled and died for me. He rose from the dead for me. I believe God's word is true and I claim Christ as my savior from sin."* Jesus spoke of God's faith requirement many, but no statement is clearer than **Jn. 6:40** where He said, **"For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."** If you haven't done so already, I urge you to look to the Son and believe in Him!