

# Joy for All People

## Luke 2:10

**Series:** The Good News of Christmas (2019)

**Preaching Date:** December 22, 2019

**Worship:** Joy to the Word

**Key Sentence:** Those who celebrate the coming of Jesus receive a joy that fulfills their longing and sustains their waiting.

### **Outline:**

I. The promise of joy (Isaiah 12:1-3, Isaiah 35:1-6,10, Isaiah 61:10-11)

II. The presence of joy (Luke 1:39-55, Luke 2:9-14)

III. The practice of joy (1 Peter 1:6-9, James 1:3-5, Philippians 4:4-7)

**Isaiah 12:1-3** You will say in that day: “I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. <sup>2</sup>“Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” <sup>3</sup>With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

**Isaiah 35:1-6,10** The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; <sup>2</sup>it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.

<sup>3</sup>Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. <sup>4</sup>Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” <sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup>then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.

<sup>10</sup>And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

**Isaiah 61:10-11** I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. <sup>11</sup>For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

**Luke 1:39-55** In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, <sup>40</sup>and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, <sup>42</sup>and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup>And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup>For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

**Luke 2:8-14** In the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup>“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

**1 Peter 1:6-9** In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, <sup>9</sup>obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

**James 1:2-4** Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup>for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup>And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

**Philippians 4:4-7** Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup>do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

## Joy to the World

### Luke 2:10

C. S. Lewis wrote some of the most insightful Christian works of the twentieth century. From *The Chronicles of Narnia* to *The Screwtape Letters* to *Mere Christianity* to *The Problem of Pain*, his work addresses the deepest needs of the human soul through fiction, allegory, and accessible philosophy. As you read Lewis, you find a couple of threads running through his writing, and one of the key threads is joy, which he would also call longing. When he wrote his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised By Joy* in 1955 he revealed that this joy or longing was the center of his spiritual journey from atheism to faith.

The thing that's probably already intrigued you is this equating of joy with longing. The actual word Lewis used was *sehnsucht*, a German word that might also be translated "yearning." What Lewis means was that he saw, in his own life a longing for something more than his mundane and in some ways tragic circumstances, and he found this longing for "what was" or "what might be," the most rewarding experience of his mental life, desirable, pleasurable, and so he called it joy. The concept pervades his writing. Maybe his best known quote on the subject comes from *Mere Christianity* "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world." I think Lewis means that real joy, as opposed to pleasure or happiness, is the foretaste of a heavenly reality in stark contrast to the sadness and brokenness of this fallen world. It is a feeling created by nature or circumstances or experiences or Scripture of "what might be," or "the way it ought to be," or for the Christian, the way it really is.

Now I probably don't understand Lewis as well as I should. I do think joy as longing is a reality, a pang that pierces you when you when things momentarily appear the way they ought to be, whether in a perfect sunset, a line from a story, or the flawless marriage of words and music in song. But I don't think this idea captures enough of the whole story, because joy isn't just a longing, a promise that consoles your soul. It is a promise that at least in part has already been fulfilled, at least in Jesus. It is a reality that doesn't just make you hope for something more later, but a reality that sustains you even in the difficulties of now. So today I want to look at a handful of Scriptures, centered on Luke 2, which show us that God has promised joy, that Jesus is the presence of joy, and that difficult circumstances are the practice field of joy. We'll see that those who celebrate the coming of Jesus receive a joy that fulfills their longing and sustains their waiting.

We'll begin in the Old Testament, in Isaiah, who literally has whole chapters devoted to the promise of joy, always set against the background of lament or longing. For example, Isaiah 12 promises joy, but it culminates four or five chapters that show the pride and arrogance of Israel and of her tormenters, the promised judgment of such sins, and the promised rescuer from the line of David. Isaiah 11:1, a famous Christmas verse talks about the shoot that shall come forth from the stump of Jesse, King David's father, a branch from his roots that shall bear fruit. This righteous branch, Jesus, promises the joy of salvation.

Isaiah 12 *You will say in that day: "I will give thanks to you, O LORD for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. <sup>2</sup>"Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation."* <sup>3</sup>*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.* There's the good news of Christmas, right there. God has every reason to be angry with us, because every one of us rebelled against him. We've long since determined to put ourselves in charge of our lives. And having shaken our fists at God – read Isaiah 8 – we should shake in fear of his anger. But God has turned away his anger by the sacrifice of Jesus, and comforts our fears. Instead of judgment he comes in rescue so that with joy we draw water from the wells of salvation. That image, water for a thirsty soul, says that our longing, our sehnsucht, will be fulfilled, and in that fulfillment is joy. The chapter ends with a joyful reminder of God's big idea. Verse 6 *"Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."* The presence of God is the fullness of joy. He is our God and we are his people and he is among us.

These promises pervade Isaiah. Chapter 35 is another whole chapter devoted to the promise of joy. In the first verses the land rejoices at its promised restoration. *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; <sup>2</sup>it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.*

In the middle verses, though, it is we ourselves, the weak, feeble-kneed and anxious, who rejoice in God's good provision. Verse 5 *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup>then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.* Who else but Jesus has ever fulfilled these promises? The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and jump for joy, and the tongue of the mute sings for joy. And in our longings for the way it ought to we recognize our blindness, our deafness, our need, and in the coming of Jesus we get that foretaste of all these needs being met, and we sing for joy.

At the end of Isaiah 35, that joy is in our redemption and the promised of return to the presence of God. Isaiah 35:10 *And the redeemed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.* Our longing is for the sorrow and sighing of this world to flee; our joy is in the ransom and rescue and redemption of the Lord. Even the promise is joyful.

Then in Isaiah 61 we hear the promise in the voice of fulfillment, and in two word pictures that image our longing. Isaiah 61:10 *I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. <sup>11</sup>For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.*

The first word picture is of the garments of salvation. I exult, I rejoice, not just because God has saved and rescued me but he has clothed me in righteousness as for a wedding. The garment of salvation prepares me for the wedding supper of the Lamb yet to come. The second word picture is of the earth bringing forth young plants and a garden sprouting up. God has made you and me the garden, and a harvest and praise springs up before him as a result.

But the voice of fulfillment is heard at the beginning of verse 10. It's in something called a prophetic past tense: I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness. The prophet looks forward to the day when this promise will have been fulfilled, and that evokes a certainty of joy. I will rejoice, my soul shall exult for "the Lord has clothed me. The Lord has covered me." For us, then, joy happens now because salvation has already happened to us. Righteousness has already been given to us through the finished work of Christ on the cross, and we rejoice in a renewal already won.

So Isaiah shows us the promise of joy, and as Lewis said, it evokes in us this pang of longing. But in Jesus we also have the presence of joy. As we celebrate Christmas we see such a fulfillment that we jump for joy. One of my granddaughters, whom I won't name because her parents don't use her name on social media, recently visited and gave Gail and I an early Christmas present. When Gail opened it this granddaughter was so excited about giving this gift that she could not contain herself and literally stood by me jumping for joy. That's the innocent recognition that a really good thing is happening and it's going to be a blessing as it happens. In Christmas we see that kind of joy.

It all happens in Luke 1 and 2. We first read about an angelic appearance to the priest Zechariah, announcing that his wife Elizabeth will conceive in her old age. They will have a son whom they'll name John. John the Baptist. Then the angel appears to Mary, the virgin of Nazareth, and announces that she too will have a son, this one conceived by the Holy Spirit. He will reign on the throne of his father David. Then Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, who was her cousin, now in her sixth month of pregnancy. That's where we pick up. Luke 1:39 *In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, <sup>40</sup>and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, <sup>42</sup>and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup>And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup>For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."*

This is all familiar to us, so I just want to call your attention to the joy. Elizabeth is six months pregnant with John the Baptist. When Mary greets Elizabeth the baby jumps. Later Elizabeth explains "when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." Just as my granddaughter jumped for joy at the giving of a gift, so John the Baptist jumped for joy at the gift of the Messiah. Later in the Gospels he'll point to Jesus and say, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." But here he's a six month baby, six months after conception. He can't say anything. But he can still show his joy by jumping. He can know the presence of joy in the presence of Jesus. The promise of joy has been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

I like this little image. In childlike faith the coming of Jesus can cause us to jump for joy. This is true at Christmas, but even more through the whole story of the his incarnation, sacrifice and victory. Oh how tempted I am to ask y'all to get up and jump. That would be really embarrassing for most of us. But I will ask you this. Spend enough time contemplating the miracle of that baby, the Word made flesh, God with us, that in your own private place, just go ahead and try it. Try jumping for joy. I read a testimony on the Internet just this week that said the physical act of jumping for joy fed the internal reality of joy.

There is joy in Mary's response as well. Luke 1:46-49 *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

Mary's words are a paraphrase of the Isaiah verse we just read. Mary was immersed in Scripture, and when she wants to express inexpressible joy that she's feeling in this unbelievable blessing, she turns to Scripture. It's not our main point but it's hard not to notice that joy often receives its voice and its pattern in the words of Scripture. But the main thing to notice is that her joy is real and sustained, a present joy based on God's present blessing, "he has looked on my humble estate." "He who is mighty has done great things for me."

There is another well known place in the Christmas accounts that the presence of joy is highlighted. It's the story of the angels and the shepherds, Luke 2. You're very familiar with this story. Remember that in verse 10 the angel says "*Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*" Notice that while this joy is for all people in the future, it's for these shepherds right then, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord." I defy you, as you read this text, to prove that these glory-to-God-in-the-highest angels did not jump for joy in sharing this news. It doesn't say that they did but prove to me they didn't. Furthermore, prove to me that the shepherds, after they had seen the baby Jesus, didn't jump for joy as they returned "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." It doesn't say they did but prove to me they didn't jump for joy.

And prove to me that we shouldn't. There is something so right about a child-like faith that rejoices in the moment goodness happens. Last week Gail gave me an early Christmas present, a livestream performance of Andrew's Peterson's "Behold the Lamb of God." It was fantastic. There were lots of moments of joy for me in watching it, and there are lots of moments of jump-for-joy depicted in it. The very first song reflects the joy of God's promise fulfilled, saying "So gather 'round, remember now, How creation held its breath. How it let out a sigh, and it filled up the sky with the angels. Son of God, Son of Man. So sing out with joy for the brave little boy, Who was God, but He made Himself nothing. He gave up His pride and He came here to die. Like a man."

Joy is not just the pang of a longing. It's also the experience of a longing fulfilled. Both these things form the foundation for the practice of joy. Joy needs to be practiced in real life, and real life is sometimes really hard. God is not unaware of this. In fact it is in the midst of our longing, in the midst of our suffering, in the midst of our hard situations that joy is most profound and most needed. The New Testament is shockingly consistent in connecting joy to suffering and trials. It teaches that the practice of joy is key, not only to weathering those trials, but to growing through them. So I want to look at three places where this connection is made, to learn about the practice of joy in a fallen and longing world.

Look first at 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:6-9 *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, <sup>9</sup>obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* Peter just said that we’ve been born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead and that we are guarded by faith until the final salvation of the last days is revealed. In this living hope and guarded faith you rejoice. Even in the waiting, in the midst of suffering, you rejoice. Yes, you and I are grieved by various trials. Hard and sad things happen to us, and all around us. How is joy practiced during such times?

Peter gives two very practical and clear ways. First, though you have not seen him you love him. That’s it. Our relationship with him captivates us no matter what’s going on around us. Filled with love for him there is much room for joy and little room for sorrow or anger or fear. Second, though you have not seen him you believe in him. You cling to him by faith. We rarely, if ever, understand the reasons for what we go through. God’s counsel, over and over and over again, is “trust,” “have faith,” “only believe.” As we lean into him in the hard places we experience joy. How many times in my life as a pastor, in hospital rooms, funeral homes and living rooms have I heard people say “well, through it all I’ve had some great moments of joy. I can’t explain it, but I’ve just felt God’s joy welling up in me.” So, two of the practices that lead to joy in the midst of a fallen and longing world are loving Jesus and trusting him.

Look next at **James 1:2-4** *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup>for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup>And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.* Count it all joy. James implies that you will meet trials of various kinds. Persecution is one, but there are trials in all of life: relationships, poverty, sickness, mental anguish. You will be tried.

But James says “count it all joy.” “consider it all joy.” Don’t miss that this is a mental exercise, a mental discipline. When faced with a trial, though it may originate on the lament side of the spreadsheet, you chalk it up on the joy side. Why? Not because of the trial but because of the outcome. Tested faith produces steadfastness, the ability to endure under pressure. And steadfastness allows God to shape your character, so that through the trial you become perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. That’s tremendous. You embrace trials with joy because they are going to shape you into the person God wants you to be.

When we consider the issue of joy in suffering it's always good to listen to the words of someone who has been there, someone who has shown tremendous joy in tremendous suffering. Someone like Joni Eareckson Tada. A few years ago when she realized she'd been paralyzed and in her wheelchair for fifty years, she said "There is a statement I have repeated again and again through the years: "I would rather be in this wheelchair knowing Jesus than on my feet without Him." It's still true. The joy, hope, and peace I experience, not in spite of but because of my disability, is so much more fulfilling and satisfying than having feet that walk and run, and hands that hold, touch, and feel. All things, even walking or not walking, find their end in Christ. To be with Him in life is everything. I wouldn't trade what I have in Christ for any other situation."

Finally, consider Philippians 4. *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your reasonableness [or gentleness] be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup>do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

You might be surprised to know Paul talks as much about joy and rejoicing as he does about grace. In fact there is a strong connection between the two. The Greek word "chara," inward joy, and the word "charis," grace, have the same root. A person who has experienced God's grace can rejoice. Notice exactly what Paul says, "rejoice in the Lord always." This reminds us that being "in Christ" is Paul's cherished description of a believer's life. As J. Stewart put it, "The heart of Paul's religion is union with Christ." It's all about relationship with him. We are in him for protection, for nurture, for comfort, for strength and for joy. So, life's struggles both with external circumstances and inner anxiety can be endured by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. We should, thus, add prayer to our list. We find joy by loving Jesus, by trusting him, by considering the good outcome of our difficult circumstances and by relationship with him, especially through prayer. As we bring our anxieties to him, God gives us peace. He guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. And by implication he gives us joy. Sometimes it's the jumping-for-joy immediate variety, but often it's choosing joy in the midst of hard circumstances, feeling the pang of what is yet to be. Those who celebrate the coming of Jesus receive a joy that fulfills their longing and sustains their waiting.

As I close, I want to go back to C. S. Lewis for a moment. Remember that the story of Lewis' life was not one of ease and success. He lost his mother at a young age, he served in the horrible trench warfare of World War I, he cared for a fallen comrade's irascible mother for many decades, he lost his wife to cancer.

Yet he found joy, the longing experience of what was yet to be and what ought to be. He illustrates this at the very of the last book of the Narnia series in a way that never fails to give me personally, that pang of joy over what is yet to be. You'll experience it differently, but this is one of the places I consistently feel that pang, that joy that comes from knowing that what ought to be will be.

So Edmund and Lucy and the others in Narnia have been thrown through the door of a shed by their enemies, but what they find inside is not a dark hole, but a whole new world, a new Narnia where all of their old friends live again, and where, as they go further up and further in to this beautiful land they finally come to Aslan himself. He tells them that at the start of this last adventure they had not just come to Narnia but died in the old world. Then he says "The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning." And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before."

The joy that we celebrate at Christmas is the joy that fulfills our longing and sustains our waiting.