

GENUINE CHRISTMAS JOY

LUKE 2:8-11

Luke 2:8-11 ⁸ *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.* ⁹ *And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.* ¹⁰ *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.* ¹¹ *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"* (Luke 2:8-11).

Most people in our culture, even those who are not familiar with this Scripture, have learned at an early age to associate Christmas with *joy...great joy... extraordinary joy*. There is something about Christmas, we have learned, that is supposed to make us happy, that is supposed to revive and refresh our flagging spirits, that is supposed to lift us out of the doldrums to a heightened state of bliss.

And this perception that Christmas is about joy is the basis for many of the traditions and activities that have become part of this season. We string lights on our homes, decorate our mantles, wear festive clothes, listen to nostalgic music, watch holiday specials, burn fragrant candles, consume delicious treats, gather with loved ones, and exchange gifts wrapped in colorful paper and tied with beautiful bows. All of these things, whether we know it or not, are intended to stimulate our senses so that, cumulatively, they will generate joy. It is our hope that they will generate *great joy*. In fact, many measure the success of Christmas by how much joy they *felt* during the season.

Please be aware that the joy I just described that is generated by these holiday traditions and activities is not the same kind of joy that the angel announced to shepherds on that holy night long ago. There is nothing wrong with these holiday traditions and activities, but we shouldn't assume that the joy they produce is comparable to the genuine Christmas joy that is the result of hearing and believing the good news.

Look again at **verse 8**, ⁸ *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

Most of us know the Christmas story so well and have read this verse so often that we do not register the slightest bit of surprise or concern that Luke makes a reference to shepherds in his account of Jesus' birth. But, trust me, if you were living in that day this reference would have astonished you, and likely disturbed you. That is because shepherds were considered low-lifers. They were among the most despised people in the land. Religious leaders lumped them into that infamous category of "sinners," along with tax collectors and prostitutes.

This was partly because shepherding was a dirty business, in more than just a literal sense. According to Jewish tradition the typical duties of a shepherd made them ceremonially unclean, preventing them from participating in the religious life of the community. Furthermore, shepherds had notorious reputations for being immoral and irresponsible. They often let their sheep graze on pastures that didn't belong to them. They had an affinity for the bottle, and they were known to bend the truth. Because of these things shepherds were considered untrustworthy—they were even forbidden to testify in a court of law.

So why would God choose to reveal the story of Christ's birth to them, in such a remote place? Why not proclaim this good news in some public gathering in Jerusalem, perhaps in the Temple courtyard? Why not to the nation's official leaders, or at least those who were respectable and "righteous," whose testimony would be credible?

But the fact that God chose to announce the birth of His Son to “sinners” like the shepherds has to do with the reason Jesus was born in the first place. Later, in chapter 5 of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus said, *“I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance...”* (Luke 5:32 NIV). Of course, the Bible also says that we are *all* sinners. But not everyone believes or admits that they are sinners. That would not have been true of shepherds, however.

Which brings us to **verses 9-10**. ⁹ *And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.* ¹⁰ *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.*

It is perfectly natural to be afraid when an angel—a radiant messenger of Almighty God—appears out of nowhere. But this angel immediately declares that what he is about to share with them ought to replace that great fear with great joy, for He has come with good news. And what is this good news? **Verse 11**, ¹¹ *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord...”*

The good news is that God is doing something big, right now, right over there. This is that day that every Jew (including shepherds and tax collectors) had been anticipating and talking about for hundreds of years. All those prophecies in Isaiah that predicted that God would one day send His Deliverer, the Messiah, to rescue His people from their troubles are right now, at this very moment, being fulfilled. All those prophecies by the lesser-known prophets are now being fulfilled, including this one from Zephaniah:

- ¹⁴ *Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!*
- ¹⁵ *The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;
he has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall never again fear evil.*
- ¹⁷ *The LORD your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
He will rejoice over you with gladness;
He will quiet you by His love;
He will exult over you with loud singing.*

Sound familiar? “The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save.” That sounds a lot like, “Unto you is born this day...a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” That mighty one who will save has now arrived and is in your midst! “In fact,” said the angel, “He is being born right now, right over there in Bethlehem.” And the angel proceeds to tell the shepherds, **verse 12**, ¹² *And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”*

In other words, “Go and see for yourselves this wondrous display of God’s glory and power and love! But be aware that when you see this baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, know that He is Christ the Lord! This is God himself, and He has now arrived on earth to fulfill His promise to save you!”

That’s the good news! But why is it good news of “great joy”? The angel gives a couple of reasons. First, this is good news of great joy that will be for *all* people. Not just good,

upright, religious, law-abiding Jews, but even those who were labeled “sinners,” like the shepherds themselves. It was good news for those who had failed so often that they had given up trying to keep God’s law. It was good news for those on the fringes, those who were marginalized and ostracized, those who were outcasts because of their bad behavior. Listen to what Zephaniah wrote in the same passage we read earlier:

*¹⁹ Behold, at that time I will deal
with all your oppressors.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.*

But it didn’t stop there. This good news of great joy was also for people who were absolutely despised by the Jews—Samaritans and Gentiles. People to whom they would never speak and people with whom they would never socialize. People whom they considered to be morally despicable, unworthy of God’s attention and favor.

Again, one of the reasons this good news is of great joy is because it is for everyone! No one is excluded. Every single person is invited to benefit from this Savior who is Christ the Lord. And that includes you.

But there is something else. For the shepherds, this was not just a *general* announcement and invitation. It was personal. Look at **verse 11** again. “*For unto you is born this day...*” The angel emphatically declares, “Look, you shepherds may not amount to much by the world’s estimation. You might have been made to feel insignificant and unimportant. You might think that your lives are of little concern and consequence in the grand scheme of things. But God wants you to know that this Savior who is Christ the Lord that is being born today is for *YOU*. Yes, *YOU*!

God knows who you are! And you are of inestimable worth to Him; indeed, you are *loved* by Him. So much so that He has come into this world and taken on human form for your sake, so that you might experience the full measure of His blessings and benefits.

I would submit to you that what made this good news of great joy for the shepherds is that they suddenly realized that they, personally, were the objects of God’s attention and affection and favor. What could produce greater joy?

Sometimes when my granddaughter, Charlie, comes to our home, we are right in the middle of playing a game or putting together a puzzle, when she, without looking up at me and for no apparent reason, blurts out, “Grandpa, I really love you!”

What do you think that does to me? It produces in me pure joy. Extraordinary joy! I don’t think there is any greater joy than being singled out and given the undivided attention and affection of someone you really care about.

Magnify that experience exponentially when it comes to getting God’s attention and affection and favor. When you discover that the God who made the universe, the God who parted the Red Sea, the God who appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, the King of kings and Lord of lords...when this God singles you out and reveals to you that He loves you and wants to be friends with you and dwell with you, you naturally and spontaneously experience great joy.

So, how do *you* get to experience this great joy? First, I need to tell you that you don’t experience it by pursuing it as an end in itself. That is one of the things that makes this joy different than the holiday joy we try to generate during

the Christmas season. We decorate with holiday lights and holiday ornaments, we watch holiday specials and listen to holiday music, we go to holiday events where we eat holiday foods and drink holiday beverages, we wear holiday clothes, we spend holiday bonuses on holiday presents. And we hope that in so doing it will stimulate our senses to the degree that we will feel holiday joy.

But the joy to which the angel referred is not something that comes from sensory things or experiences. It comes from responding to the “good news” that He announced—the good news that a Savior is born who is Christ the Lord. This joy is the by-product of hearing that good news and believing it. Let me say it another way: You experience this great joy when you personalize and internalize the truth that God sent His Son into this world to be your personal Savior. He came to save *you!*

Save you from what? When an angel appeared to Joseph to tell him that his fiancée had conceived the Son of God, by the Holy Spirit, he told him that when the child was born, he was to call His name Jesus, which means “salvation,” for He would save His people from their sins.

Sin is wrongdoing, sin is selfishness and self-centeredness, sin is disobedience to God’s laws. And sin is the ultimate joy stealer. Because sin produces guilt and shame. Sin makes us feel small and insignificant. It makes us feel powerless and worthless and hopeless. And try as we may (and we *do* try) we cannot truly escape those feelings, because that guilt and shame keep accumulating and compounding as we continue to sin, making us even more miserable.

But unto us is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Jesus came to save us from our sins, to forgive us, to relieve us of the guilt and shame, to reconcile us to God, and restore us to a relationship with Him that was broken because of our sin.

And the way Jesus saved us from our sin was by offering Himself as a sacrifice—by dying in our place. The Bible says that when Jesus hung on the cross He bore our sins in His body and was punished by His own Father so that we would not have to be punished. Because the wages of sin is death—which is more than just physical death; it is eternal separation from God in a place called hell. But God was willing to funnel His anger toward our sin onto the body of His own Son, who had never sinned, and punish Him instead of us, so that we might be saved from sin’s penalty.

And when you hear this and you believe it, when you internalize and personalize it, you cannot help but be filled with great joy—a joy that is not conditional or transitory like holiday joy, but a joy that is present at all times, even when our circumstances are difficult and unpleasant, even when we experience terrible loss and sorrow and suffering.

That’s because genuine Christmas joy is rooted in our relationship with God. It is based on God’s unconditional love for us. It is based on His unqualified forgiveness of our sins. It is based on His complete removal of our guilt and shame. And it is based on our hope—His promise that we will live in His presence forever in heaven.

And so, the way to experience this great joy is *not* by trying to generate happy feelings by doing things that will stimulate our senses. It is not by trying to alter our moods and circumstances so that we feel “up” all the time. It is by internalizing and personalizing the truth that I have a personal, loving Savior who has made a way for me to have everything I need.

Peter says as much in the first chapter of His first letter. He says in **verses 3-9**. *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an*

inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Notice the difference between this kind of joy and the happiness the world strives for. Not only is it not based on good circumstances or good feelings or good health or good times, but it is present even in the midst of pain and grief and trials. That's because real joy is rooted in our relationship with the Lord. It is based on God's unconditional love for us, His forgiveness, His friendship, His favor, and our future hope. When our joy is rooted in our relationship with the Lord we are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy even in terrible circumstances, even when everything is falling apart, even when our hearts are broken.

Do you know that joy? I'm not asking if you're always in a good mood. The joy of the Lord is not a mood. I'm not asking if your circumstances are pleasant and comfortable. The joy of the Lord is not circumstantial. I'm asking you if the joy of the Lord is the attitude that radiates from your inner being, even when you're sad and stressed and suffering.

One way that you will know that you possess the genuine joy of the Lord is if you are compelled to share the good news with others, so that they can also possess it. That's what the shepherds did. Look at **verses 15-18**. ¹⁵*When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."* ¹⁶*And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.* ¹⁷*And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.* ¹⁸*And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them (Lk. 2:15-18).*

Most of us will be spending time this season with at least a few loved ones who don't know the Savior yet. May I make a suggestion? Instead of spending all your time together talking about the merits of the pandemic restrictions, or the efficacy of the COVID vaccine, or the political solutions for our nation, tell them the good news of great joy—that 2,000 years ago a Savior was born for them, who is Christ the Lord. That message is just as powerful and just as relevant for them as it was for the shepherds.

Genuine Christmas Joy **Luke 2:8-11**

Main Idea: The birth of a Savior who is Christ the Lord is good news of great joy for everyone.

Introduction: Christmas Cheer vs. Christmas Joy

The Shepherds (8)

The reputation of shepherds

God's choice of shepherds

The Angel (9)

The glory of the Lord shines around the shepherds

The shepherds are terrified

The Announcement: "Good news of great joy" (10-11)

What is the "good news"?

God's plan is being implemented right now!

"A Savior is born who is Christ the Lord"

Why does the "good news" produce great joy?

It is for everyone!

It is for *you*, personally!

The Application

How do you experience this "great joy"?

What do we do with this "good news"?