

# ROOM FOR JOY

By

Curtis Dickinson

What was the basis of the joy the angel promised when he said, “I bring you good tidings of great joy?”<sup>1</sup> Was Jesus to give everyone a new home? A fat bank account? Jobs, with health insurance, security, and retirement benefits? None of this! He gave tasks that cost time, money and sacrifice and demanded self-denial rather than self-aggrandizement.

The great joy the angel promised was not to be that produced by Christmas festivities. This celebration did not come into existence until centuries later. Rather, it is the joy of sin forgiven through the Savior, and all the benefits connected to being reconciled to God.

Is the angel’s message relevant? Take away the tinsel, the lights, the carols, the frenzy of shopping, giving, and parties, and where is the joy? Can we have joy while enduring physical suffering or financial loss? Can we have joy in the face of grim prospects of living in a police state?

Jesus was born under the administration of a corrupt and oppressive government. Suffering, death, corruption and poverty were on every hand. Still, the angel said, “I bring you good tidings of great joy.”

Paul, Peter and their brethren lived in a nation that was self-destructing through evil rulers and a populace which loved to be entertained by the slaughter of Christians. Yet, from their letters one gets the notion that they were at peace, with hearts filled with joy. Paul tells his readers to rejoice, as he writes cheerful letters from prison. Peter comments on the fact that his persecuted brethren “rejoice with unspeakable joy.”<sup>2</sup>

The world has not changed, after all. We live under similar conditions, in a once-great nation, now destroying itself through self-serving criminals in legislative offices, and a populace devoted to sports, sex and luxury. But among Christians of today something is lacking. As J.B. Phillips wrote, there is a “deep abyss which separates modern religion from Christian faith.”<sup>3</sup> Too often joy in believers has to be generated by “exciting” programs and events in our assemblies, and is not generally seen as a Christian characteristic.

**GIVEN BY GOD.** It isn’t that people do not seek joy. In fact, those who make joy a goal in itself never reach it, but find their efforts produce frustration and ashes. Things that they think might bring joy are turned into idols, receiving the adoration that belongs to God. They may be harmless and legitimate things, such as clothes, a house, or a hobby, but when given priority in the expectation of joy, they become the object of one’s life. This is idolatry, and instead of joy, it brings discontentment, sorrow, and condemnation.

Joy is the gift of God to those who seek Him and His righteousness. It is the by-product of faith and a life entrusted to God through Jesus. In all of Paul’s teaching he never instructed anyone to seek joy, but rather prayed, “Now the God of hope fill you will all joy and peace in believing...”<sup>4</sup>

**THE JOY OF HOPE.** Early Christians challenged the world with their faith that life was more than political security and physical safety. They sang as they were

imprisoned and as they were forced into the arena with wild beasts and gladiators. They could face such atrocities with an inner peace and joy because they knew they still had a future.

Today the Roman Empire which persecuted them is but a memory, while Christian faith still lives, and those who fell asleep in Christ as martyrs will one day be awakened at the command of Jesus, to experience the final triumph in the glorious realm of the new creation.<sup>5</sup>

Joy is possible only as one views the world in the context of God's purpose. We see the world in the doldrums of crime and disaster, with the foundations of civilization crumbling. But from the view of the Eternal, it is seen as winding down to its end, to fulfill its role in God's plan. His people are being marked with His seal for eternal glory.<sup>6</sup> Every obstacle, every burden, every trial and every moment of suffering is a step in spiritual progress toward the image of God.

We rejoice that instead of being carried along with ease and comfort by the world, to its oblivion, we are being carried by God, against the flow, in another direction. Instead of living in the fear that our work will be destroyed by inflation or depression or some other circumstance, we rest in confidence that our treasure is in heaven where it is safe. The world cannot take away your work for God, your holiness, or your hope. Nothing of eternal value can be taken from you against your will.

Christians so often are employed in deploring the evils around us that we may forget that we were also doomed to death because of sin, until we were forgiven on the basis that Jesus died for our sins. The world is asking the question: Is there a future? Is there an ultimate goal which we can reach? The answer, because of Jesus, is Yes, Yes. Whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.<sup>7</sup>

The thing that brings fear and sorrow, and puts a grim expression on the face of the world, is its mortality. All are dying. Whether from war, or starvation, or disease, or from some other cause, all die. Everywhere you look there is death and decay and all the grief and pain that such produces. Jesus is the one who gives life. According to the record, every funeral He attended was broken up when He raised the dead. All who are joined to Christ, and only those who are in Him, will share in His immortality.

It was in a time of gross evil that the apostle Paul described how the apostles were being persecuted and "delivered unto death for Jesus' sake."<sup>8</sup> Then he adds, "Knowing that he that raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also with Jesus, and shall present us with you"<sup>9</sup> ... "for our light affliction, which is for the moment, works for us more and more exceedingly and eternal weight of glory."<sup>10</sup>

The assurance that glory awaits in the world to come is greater cause to rejoice than any earthly treasure or event. After the seventy had been sent out by Jesus, they "returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us.'" Jesus noted this great power he had given them, but said, "Nevertheless, in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."<sup>11</sup>

Without hope life is futile, fun and pleasure are empty gestures of the moment, and suffering becomes pointless and cruel. But with the bright hope of the gift of immortality in the glorious eternal world to come, joy overshadows all tribulation.

**JOY NOW.** There are many who have become so obsessed with prophetic speculation, especially the sensational interpretations of TV evangelists and authors like Hal Lindsey, that they have put everything on hold until the predicted events take place.

They are no longer concerned with being the salt of the earth and the light of the world, but are just waiting for the “rapture” to take them out of the troubled world. They expect to experience joy eventually, when the crisis has passed, but not now.

To others, politics and national concerns take priority over all else. The state becomes the chief concern. We must take heed lest we render to Caesar that which belongs to God, and let the state take God’s place.

We are instructed: “Whether you eat or drink or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God.”<sup>12</sup> It is in serving God and knowing that nothing done for God is in vain that gives us joy in spite of contrary conditions.

Joy is realized in ratio to the awareness of God’s presence. “In His presence there is fullness of joy.”<sup>13</sup> It is a rare person who will not go out of his way to be in the presence of one who is famed for great power and mighty deeds. Why shouldn’t one find the greatest joy in the presence of his Creator, the one who is the source of all beauty and harmony, and the essence of love, mercy, grace, kindness and faithfulness? Although unseen to us, we are not unseen to Him. He sees every tear. He hears every sigh, and not one pain is felt but that His power is there to use it for the accomplishment of His marvelous purpose.

Faith is based on truth. When we believe the claims of Jesus and trust ourselves to him, it is called faith, and results in salvation and a changed life. Joy has the same basis. It is not that which is produced by an exciting song-service or an emotion-laden sermon. Rather, it is the recognition — whether in quiet or the most turbulent times — of the reality of Christ’s claims and promises.

There was no room for Jesus in the Inn. Today we must make room for the joy He gives, that the world may believe the good tidings.

#### REFERENCES

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| 4. Romans 15:13  | 10. V. 17                |
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| 6. Revelation 7:4  | 12. I Corinthians 10:31  |
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