

# JOY TO THE WORLD!

*The promise still holds*

By

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To many people in this age of skepticism, stress, and government- induced anxiety, the message of the angel, “Good tidings of great joy,” may seem like bitter irony.

It isn't just the prospects of another unnecessary war, or the fact that millions have lost their savings and even their jobs, that has people in the mood of pessimism. The fact is that what we are now witnessing is the disintegration of a civilization, the death throes of a culture.

Under such conditions, can we believe that Jesus really gives joy? The answer is, yes we can, if we believe and act upon that which the angel said is the source of the joy. The angel did not promise joy on the basis of better health or greater wealth. It had nothing to do with fixing all the social problems or eliminating a corrupt government.

The message was, “Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). The two clauses are connected by the word “for,” which in this case has the meaning of “because.” People would find great joy in Jesus because He is the savior in whom there is forgiveness of sin and salvation from sin and death.

Many who had looked forward to the promised Messiah had visions of a powerful ruler who would overthrow the oppressive Roman Empire and establish a political government where they might recapture the affluence and glory known in the days of David and Solomon. But those with spiritual insight had different expectations. One of those was Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. When John was born Zacharias prophesied that his son would “go before the face of the Lord to make ready his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people in the remission of their sins” (Luke 2:76-77).

There is no more fullness of joy than that which is found when a person realizes the gravity of his sin and the assurance that it has been forgiven. David sang, “Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then will I teach transgressors their ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee” (Psalm 51:12-13). David sought the original source of joy, the “Joy of salvation.” His court was supplied with jesters and his life of luxury was secured in kingly power. But something was wrong at life's core. “For I know my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me” (Psalm 51:31). He knew that joy would evade him without assurance of his standing before God. “Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart,

O God; and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:9-10). He knew that real joy could be found only in salvation.

When the Ethiopian eunuch came to understand the full import of the death of Jesus, he asked Philip to baptize him. “And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, for he went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:39). At last he was free from sin that had entangled him and the fear of death that he faced, thus the rejoicing.

In the early days of the church the news concerning Christ was sufficient to revolutionize and fill whole communities with enthusiastic joy. The pages of Acts vibrate with the excitement and joy of the “good news” as it motivated the church of that first century. It was filled with what J. B. Philips called a “gay unconquerable courage.”

Yet in these accounts we find nothing resembling the planned joy-producing factors that often pack modern church programs. The source of joy to these Christians obviously was in the simple but profound fact that their sins were forgiven and they were no longer under the burden of guilt and condemnation.

Why do we not observe this same triumphant joy among Christians today? The difference may be in the fact that we are not conscious of the terrible significance of sin. We see the purpose and purity of God's plan ridiculed and the commandments of Christ blatantly violated all around us, but we do not call it sin. Elected leaders commit gross crimes and excuse them as mistakes in judgment. Adulterous relationships are labeled “affairs.” Sports idols and principle television stars flaunt their evil lifestyles and receive awards and accolades from the fans and the media. One might ask, “Just how wicked does one have to be to qualify as a sinner?”

The modern church is largely to blame for this dumbing-down of the significance of sin. One will hear preachers tell people that to be saved all they need to do is to say a little prayer and “receive Jesus into their hearts.” The biblical command to repent is skillfully avoided, lest people be made to feel guilty of sin.

Yet it is just this consciousness of sin that motivates one to the repentance that is essential to being put right with Almighty God. When a woman, known for her sins, washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, he said, “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much; but to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little” (Luke 1:47). It may be safe to say that **the height of joy in salvation is in ratio to the depth of one's sorrow for sin.**

When Peter preached to the crowd on the Day of Pentecost he caused them to realize for the first time that they were guilty of sin, sin for which Jesus had died. Luke records that they were “pricked in their heart,” and asked, “Brethren, what shall we do.” It was only then that Peter told them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins” (Acts 2.37.38). Peter's message was good tidings of great joy, joy that the sharp pain in their conscience could be relieved by the forgiveness of their sins.

The “glad tidings” of the gospel focuses on rescuing man from the grip of death in which all are held as long as they remain in sin. It is only as one recognizes that he has sinned and come short of the glory of God, Whose image he is to reflect, that the message of Christ's coming is good tidings of great joy. The real joy comes when our sins are all laid on Jesus, when we repent and are baptized into Christ's death, so that we may know that our sins are forgiven and he has met the penalty of death for us.

Jesus told the story of the prodigal son, who sought joy in riotous living but found it not. In the depths of despair and hopelessness he “came to himself” and realized that he was no longer worthy to be called his father's son. But his father, in mercy and love, welcomed him home and blessed him as his son. (Luke 15). Like that prodigal son, millions, including myself, have come to the Father as unworthy sinners and received His extreme mercy and forgiveness through Christ the Savior.

The artificially contrived joy sought in the fun centers of our society only leaves people hollow and spent, with a greater yearning for joy than ever. Such imitation joy is deceitful and temporary. But the joy that salvation in Christ produces is grounded in eternal truth that abides under all circumstances. This is the joy promised by the angel.

This is a treasure that cannot be bought. It cannot be earned. It is granted solely by God's grace. It is one of those priceless treasures that cannot be taken from you against your will. Thieves may rob me of my goods, but they cannot touch this treasure chest, which God has given, in which is found the joy of salvation.

I could be reduced to abject poverty, but still there would be the rich deposit of joy that my sins are forgiven, God is my father and Jesus is my brother.

Disease may invade my body and take away my health, but there will remain this wonderful joy that in Christ my sins are forgiven and therefore death will have no power over me, for He will raise me up and give me immortality and eternal life.

When the shepherds of Judea were confronted with God's messenger they “were sore afraid.” This was not because they were greater sinners than other men. Theirs was a healthy-minded fear felt by men who are aware of the reality and presence of God, God who called man into being and to whom man must give account. The words, “fear not,” came as a great relief, and soon they were “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.” (Lk.2:20) The great joy they experienced was genuine because their fear of judgment was genuine.

The birth of Jesus has meaning only to those who sense their need of salvation from sin. The way to find pure and lasting joy is to find it in the good tidings of the gospel; the good news that in Christ our sins are forgiven and we can enjoy the presence of God here and now, and forever.

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