

Introduction: Seriously? Seriously! How many of you can relate to the folks in that video?

Here's what I'm wanting to be serious about this morning:

Like the folks in the video, you probably already have your plate full, especially this time of year with all the expectations heaped on top of you by the culture in which you live, your family as well as the financial pressures, school pressures, relationship pressures – all producing the stress, worry, and anxiety mentioned in the video. I am NOT wanting to add another layer to the busyness of your life!

- So, is it possible that this thing called "joy" that is given such prominence at Christmas, is something far different from "another layer added to life?"
- Is it something more than just an emotion we sing about at Christmas time?
- Is it something you can experience deep within your being?
- Is joy something that not only can be yours at Christmas, but throughout the year?

The answer to all of those questions is a resounding "yes!" To which you might reply, "Seriously?" And my response, from Scripture, would be, "Seriously!"

I'm inviting you this morning to think with me about this "joy" thing and what it's really all about.

Let me start with a couple of basic truths:

- Satan – the Devil – is our enemy and the hater our souls.
- God, our Creator, is our friend and the lover of our souls.

- Satan – loves to provide counterfeit alternatives to what God has provided for us to have fellowship with Him.
- The more important God's provision is to having fellowship with Him, the more deceptive, distorted, and destructive the counterfeit alternative is that Satan provides.

And one very important provision God has provided for us: JOY!

In fact, a study of Scripture would demonstrate that God has offered Himself as the Source of joy. Another study of Scripture would demonstrate that from Adam onward, mankind sought to find joy in a myriad of other ways – none of which could, or can, ever fully satisfy.

Solomon, in Proverbs, in two different places warns us, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." (14:12; 16:25)

One solution to dealing with such possible distortions is to answer the question, "What does God say about . . . in this case, joy?" Then, upon discovering the answer, focus your life on living based on God's perspective.

So although man abandoned God, God did not abandon His creation. He lovingly and patiently has pursued us, providing us the opportunity to know Him and His joy in our lives. He has provided a way for us to answer that question, "What does God say about joy?"

First, God says He is the source of joy.

Psalm 16:11

You will show me the path of life;

In Your presence (is) fullness of joy . . .

Real joy has to do with your relationship with God. We will come back to that, but it is important for us to understand that first and foremost, real joy is found in God.

Second, to better understand what God has to say about joy, I would tell you that throughout the Old Testament, joy was often associated with God's promise to redeem His people, setting them free from bondage – not just temporarily – but forever. Redemption, reconciliation, and a kingdom ruled by the Lord Himself, are part of that promise.

Here are two passages from the prophet Isaiah that speak of the Messiah and His future kingdom . . .

Isaiah 55:12

For you shall go out with joy,
And be led out with peace;
The mountains and the hills
Shall break forth into singing before you,
And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Isaiah 61:3

To console those who mourn in Zion,
To give them beauty for ashes,
The oil of joy for mourning,
The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;
That they may be called trees of righteousness,
The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.

The nation of Israel's ultimate joy was wrapped up in the person of Messiah. And for those who were paying attention, trusting God to fulfill His promises, their joy was anchored in the anticipation of the Messiah's first advent. An advent that according to the prophets could be at any moment.

So it comes as no surprise that in the story of the Nativity, joy surrounds this magnificent event.

Look with me in Luke 1

- Luke 1:11-17 – In these verses, the angel announces to Zacharias the miraculous conception and birth of a son to be named John. Look at v. 14. The joy of which the angel speaks in v14 was not the immediate expression of Zacharias, but as we will see in a moment, joy certainly became the expression of his heart.
- Luke 1:28 – Mary is encouraged to rejoice by the angel, Gabriel. Joy is to be hers as she is to bear the Messiah.
- Luke 1:44 – The pre-birth response of John to the presence of Mary, is "pregnant" with application – but most of all it suggests that joy is connected to Jesus' presence
- Luke 1:47 – Mary's source of joy: the Lord as Savior
- Luke 1: 67-79 – Although joy is not mentioned in this passage, what Zacharias says is the basis for true joy. Listen to his words of praise in vv 76-79. God's promise would be fulfilled!

The joy associated with John's birth was directly related to the birth of Messiah for ultimately the joy of Israel and the joy of the world would be dependent on the Christ.

Keep reading . . . Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem and Jesus is born. Then we read in verse 8 . . .

"I bring you tidings of great joy . . .!" Great joy! Whenever a child is born, there is usually "great joy." Yet the "great joy" of the angel of the Lord was much further reaching than simply the announcement of a birth.

The “great joy” was the fulfillment of God’s promise that through Messiah there would come forgiveness, freedom, and reconciliation. And it was for ALL PEOPLE! The way to have a relationship with God was now “with us.” Emmanuel!

At the heart of the Christmas story is the message that God took on flesh to dwell with us so we could know Him, so we could experience His forgiveness from the penalty of sin and freedom from the power of sin. And being forgiven and free, He equips us to live a life of purpose that finds joy and fulfillment in our relationship to Him.

Christmas was not God’s idea to add another holiday to your calendar that would add stress, anxiety, worry, and financial burdens.

Seriously! You see I would not ask you to add another layer to your already busy, anxious, worry-filled life. But I would ask you to think about what the FIRST layer should be.

Experiencing true joy has to do with your relationship to God and your trusting His promises, especially about the future.

Our celebration of Christ’s birth is about the Lord’s first Advent to earth. Yet even within that first Advent are hints about his second in Zacharias’ praise in chapter one and then later in chapter two with the words of Simeon and Anna.

And just as Zacharias & Elizabeth, Mary & Joseph, along with a host of others anticipated the first Advent of the Lord, we who live two millennia later, await His second Advent.

And the degree to which we believe what Scripture says about the Lord’s second Advent will have an impact on our experiencing true joy.

Now why do I say that? Great question! To understand God’s perspective on joy, let’s look at two passages in John’s gospel.

John 15:11 These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.

John 16:22 Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.

Both of these passages are part of what we call the Upper Room discourse. Jesus is in the upper room with the 11 disciples. Judas Iscariot has left. Jesus is preparing the 11 for what is about to happen by giving them their marching orders for the rest of their lives. He has also assured them that He will return for them from Heaven where He is going to prepare a place for them. But until then, He tells them, this is the way you should live.

And in the midst of those instructions, Jesus makes the two statements we read. The joy He wants them to have in full measure is His joy. And it is a joy that no one can take from them.

What I understand from those statements is that when I trust Christ as my Savior, I have the opportunity to experience the joy of Christ to it’s fullest. The condition: abide in Him.

The context of 15:11 is the extended metaphor Jesus uses of the vine and the branches. He uses that metaphor to picture the relationship there is between Him and those who trust Him as their Savior. And the key phrase He repeatedly employs is “Abide in me.” So when we read, “These things I have spoken to you . . .” He is referring to how we are to cultivate and deepen our relationship with Him by abiding in

Him. And one very real result of just abiding: you will experience true joy. A joy no man can take from you!

One pastor wrote – “Maybe the real point behind the ‘Christmas story’ is that the experience of JOY has nothing to do with what is going on around us - in other words, nothing to do with our circumstances - and everything to do with getting on the same page with what God is doing.” ~ Dave Smith

Obedience to Christ’s commands, allowing God to work in us to conform us to the image of Christ; abiding in Him – that will cause you to experience true joy.

And among a number of wonderful motivations for living such a life, there is the motivation that we will see Jesus again! He is coming again! He will establish His kingdom! He will rule and reign with righteousness! He will reward those who have lived faithfully for Him – those who have been abiding in Him.

It is that motivation which Peter, James, and Paul used to encourage believers who were persecuted unjustly, who had to endure intense scrutiny for their faith. Just two verses, both within the context of looking for Jesus to come again to judge righteously.

James 1:2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials . . . Why? (v 12) . . . he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

I Peter 1:6-8 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise,

honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory . . .

As a believer, you HAVE the opportunity to experience true joy. And it is the joy of Christ! But it is your responsibility to cultivate it. Develop it.

How? Abide in Christ and His Word

How? Study the Scriptures – more than casual reading although that is a great start. Meditate, reflect, spend time alone with God and His Word getting to know Him better as you get to know His Word. They are inextricably linked.

The Scriptures are alive and powerful. Yet the Scriptures are not independent of the person of the Trinity. And it is this relationship with the person of the Trinity that you are to pursue passionately.

Fellowship is another part of this. Not just the “around the brunch table” kind of fellowship, but the fellowship that provides for mutual accountability between brothers in Christ and sisters in Christ. That is what you are to be passionately pursuing.

And there is a component of joy that is “to all people.” Here is the passionate pursuit of others - those who need to hear the Gospel, to know that God has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. (John 3:16)

One student of the Bible put it this way: If I am not joyful then I am either not doing what God wants me to be doing OR I am not accepting what God wants for me. If you’re lacking in joy, ask yourself, what are you putting above Christ in your affections.

Abiding in Christ is the way for you to experience true joy.

Conclusion:

Joy is not another layer we add on at Christmas so we can be in tune with the season. Joy is a gift from God that finds its source in Him and His Word. As we know Him by faith, and abide in Christ, walking "in the light as He is in the light" we will have fellowship with one another.

In the year Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there were people of all ages and all backgrounds that were anticipating Messiah's birth. Joy was part of their life already as they were trusting God to fulfill His promise of redemption.

The biblical narrative tells us their names were Elizabeth and Zacharias, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna. There were the shepherds and later the wise men. And I'm sure there were more. These were people experiencing life with all of its stresses, anxieties, worries and financial burdens. But they were people first and foremost characterized by joy as they heard and understood the good news.

So today, why not be like Elizabeth or Zacharias, or Joseph or Mary? Perhaps you relate better to being like Simeon or Anna?

True joy is yours to experience as you abide in Christ. One day that joy will ultimately triumph as Christ comes the second time. Reflect on that truth as we close the service with a reminder of Christ's first advent and our opportunity while we wait for His second Advent to spread the ". . . tidings of great joy which shall be to all people."