

## Joy to the World: the Lord Has Come

Although there has been only one Christmas and the rest are anniversaries, we like to sing with gusto Isaac Watt's hymn, based on Psalm 98, "Joy to the Word! the Lord is come." Christmas is a joyous feast day, the celebration of God's great mercy! Yes, there are still those who celebrate it with childlike faith. They are over-awed by the story of Jesus' miraculous birth and the simplicity of the manger. Yet for many it is no longer a day of great joy, a day of meditating on the wonder of the Incarnation. I am thinking of liberal "Christians" who no longer believe the reality of the Christ child, the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary and the appearance of angels. Nevertheless, they claim to love and to honour Christmas. But there is nothing to celebrate if Christmas is no more than a sentimental holiday commemorating a nice uplifting myth, promoting peace and goodwill to all mankind! Why make a fuss about a myth?

Why celebrate Christmas with abundant joy? Do we understand the meaning of the word joy? It is not a good feeling or a sense of excitement when you inherit a good sum of money, or the honour bestowed upon you by people, or a reward you receive for work well done. The Biblical definition of joy goes much deeper. The Gospel is the good news of great joy (Isa. 52:7,8). The New Testament proclaims the Good News of the Christ who came and is coming again. In Christ, God's grace has appeared in all its glory. In the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, there is the wonderful announcement to the shepherds by an angel: "Do not be afraid, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10,11). The prophets of old had already anticipated the joy that would be caused by the birth of the Messiah. Isaiah said that it would be like joy in harvest time (Isa. 9:3). Note that the good news of the Good Shepherd's birth was announced to shepherds, to people with whom He would love to mingle later in His ministry. God, in His sovereign wisdom and goodness, bypassed the proud Pharisee and the sceptical Sadducee. Jesus' birth was announced to men who did not count in their society. All romanticism aside, these men from the hill-country of Judea were classified as belonging to the lower classes. They were looked down upon as people of dubious reputation and unworthy of public trust. Nevertheless, God chose them as the first witnesses of His Son coming to earth. By this act these outcasts were enlisted in the royal service of Christ's kingly rule.

Christmas reminds us that the first characteristic of being a Christian is that of joy. Many of us wouldn't think of joy as an important characteristic of the twice born. We would most likely refer to love or holiness or to something else. Interestingly, nowhere do we read in the New Testament that Jesus laughed. The prophet Isaiah describes the coming Messiah as "a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering" (Isa. 53:3). Yet Jesus prayed that His people might "have the full measure of my joy within them" (John 17:13). That most of us do not think joy is a primary characteristic of the Christian faith probably shows how far removed we are from the experience and spirit of the early Christians, who celebrated their faith. Joy for them was something gigantic and sadness something special and small. The British writer and apologist G. K. Chesterton points out that "joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian." The great 19th century Princeton

theologian Charles Hodge observed that fellowship with God is the highest of pleasures. Joy and peace are the result. He described joy as one of the fruits of the Spirit, an accompaniment and evidence of spiritual life, the oil of gladness, which makes us active in the service and praise of God. I wonder whether we experience this real joy in the Lord. I don't doubt that we are far more joyful than we would be if we were not in Christ. I also don't question that there are churches where joy in Christ is evident. But I believe Dr. James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000), prolific author and radio pastor, is correct when he remarked in one of his books, "In most churches, if one were to observe them impartially week after week, I wonder if joy would be visible."

If the Gospel is a message of great joy, why then are we often gloomy, discouraged and negative? Persistence in sin may rob us of joy. When sin takes over, joy departs. When we walk away from the Lord, He will hide His face, and how can we then expect joy? Sin is a hard and joyless taskmaster. You may say, "But my circumstances are discouraging." Indeed, personal trials can dampen our joy. The news about wars, terrorism, and economic downturns is a downer. Life is for many full of sorrow. They mourn the loss of a loved one or suffer a serious-lingering illness. Expectations are not met. Ideals are shattered. For many, life seems to be a failure, judging by the standards of the world. There is so much suffering in our time, especially among Christians in many different parts of the world. And as we read the Bible, we notice how it does speak about sorrow, tears, and hardships. Yet it is precisely in discouragements that we can praise God by being joyful. The apostle Paul, who suffered so much for the sake of the Gospel, wrote to the Corinthian church, "I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds" (2 Cor. 7:4).

One outstanding characteristic of Christian joy, which is often overlooked and also the most paradoxical is clearly affirmed in the New Testament, namely, joy in suffering for Christ's sake and even martyrdom. Yes, Christians can be joyful even in times of persecution (Matt. 5:12). Not because they enjoy being beaten, jailed, or tortured, but because they experience the grace and peace of God in the midst of their trials. The apostle James even said the persecuted saints counted themselves thankful they were allowed to suffer for the Lord's sake (James 1:2). The apostle Peter wrote, "Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed" (1 Pet. 4:13). Joy, yes, for to suffer for the sake of our Lord is to share in His glory; the more pressing the hardship, the nearer approaches the hour of deliverance. The joy of the Gospel is indeed different from the pursuit of happiness the secular world is so busily engaged in.

How joyful are we? I have heard men and women sigh on December 26 and say they're glad Christmas is over for another year. But it isn't over! "Unto you is born a Saviour!" It's just the beginning. The Christ born in the city of David and Who had a manger for his first bed will come again in glory. We live in joyful expectation of His return. C.S. Lewis observed about the Christian's hope: "Most people, if they had really to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world." Christians live in the anticipation that the best is yet to come. In our youth we counted the nights we had to sleep before the big day arrived when we could

go on our holiday. The anticipation of the trip brought joy. We anticipate a glorious future when the Lord, who came on Christmas Day, will come again to usher in the new heaven and earth. That's why the apostle Paul could testify, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). No wonder Christians can wish each other "a merry Christmas." They know the true meaning of merriment. They are joyful in the Lord. They can "sing a new song to the Lord God for all the wonders he has wrought; his right hand and his arm most holy the victory to him have brought. The Lord has shown his great salvation, to Israel his love made known; he has revealed to every nation his truth in righteousness alone" (Ps. 98).

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