

## The Joy of Christmas

Other than Jesus, what's the one word you most associate with Christmas? I suspect that word might be **"joy."**

Joy to the world!  
The Lord is come!

Come, Thou long, expected Jesus..  
Joy, of every longing heart.

Shepherds, why this jubilee?  
Why your joyous strains prolong?  
What the gladsome tidings be  
Which inspire your heavn'ly song?

Joyful, all ye nations rise  
Join the triumph of the skies  
With angelic hosts proclaim:  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem"  
Hark! the herald angels sing:  
"Glory to the newborn King!"

O Come all ye faithful  
Joyful and triumphant!

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emanuel, shall come to Thee O Israel!

Oh tidings of comfort and joy  
Comfort and joy  
Oh tidings of comfort and joy

Joy...seems to be everywhere at Christmas.

But can we talk? If you're anything like me, I don't always feel much joy around Christmas... (*Claire's Christmas confession...*)

So, what I want to do this morning is to deal directly with this issue. The question before the house this morning is: ***How can we recapture the joy of Christmas?***

But first we have to ask: **What is joy?**

In Alexander McCall Smith's engaging *44 Scotland Street* series he describes what I believe to be a prototypical example that helps us understand joy. In this particular edition of the series (*Love over Scotland*, 2006), the portrait artist Angus Lordie has lost his beloved dog Cyril to an apparent kidnapping. Through a fortuitous sequence of circumstances, Cyril escapes his captor and is found by someone who happens to know Angus and where he can find him. Here's how McCall-Smith describes the reunion of Cyril and Angus at the Cumberland Bar:

Cyril bounded over the floor of the bar, a strange sound coming from his mouth, a howl of a sort that one would not have thought a dog capable of, a whoop, an almost human wail of delight. Angus rose to his feet, and with a great leap Cyril was in his arms, licking his face, twisting his body this way and that in sheer delight, still howling in between gasps of air. (p. 204)

Here, Cyril, Angus Lordie's beloved black lab, has a joyous reunion with his master.

*So, what is joy?*

Joy is the positive emotion we experience when we're reunited or connected with someone important to us. [repeat]

So, what I want to do this morning is to explore how joy really is the central experience of this season.

I want to explore the joy of Christmas, and what we'll discover, is that to experience the joy of Christmas now, joy has a past and joy has a future.

And so, I want to show you—through Psalm 126—first how the joy of Christmas past helps us experience Christmas joy now, and second how the joy of Christmas future helps us experience Christmas joy now.

## I. Introduction to Psalm 126

“A Psalm of Ascent”

A psalm sung by Jewish pilgrims as they journeyed up to Jerusalem to celebrate one of their treasured festivals.

So, this is a pilgrim psalm, a song we can all sing as we travel along in our discipleship of Jesus.

Second, I want you to see a Hebrew word that helps us see the structure and theme of this Psalm.

Note vs. 1: “When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,” and then again in vs. 4, “Restore our fortunes, O LORD.”

“Restore fortunes” is the Hebrew word “Shavot”, and it refers to a complete reversal of fortune brought about by “the inscrutable power of God” (Bruggeman, p. 302).

We have a similar concept in psychology we call a “redemptive twist” where God makes something good out of what we originally thought was bad.

*Losing the chair election in 1998...*

And what we’ll see through this Psalm and through the eyes of Christmas, God has introduced a redemptive twist at Christmas; he has completely reversed our fortunes through the Advent of Jesus Christ.

So, the Psalm is nicely divided into two sections by this wonderful Hebrew word “shavot”, and the central statement of the Psalm is found in vs. 3: “**we are glad.**” We are filled with joy. We are filled with joy because of God’s surprising goodness to us in the past, and because of God’s sure goodness to us in our future. So, let’s explore how our Christmas joy *now* is created by the joy of Christmas past, and the joy of Christmas future.

## II. The Joy of Christmas Past

Read vss. 1—3

Now, the first thing we should notice in these verses is that we respond with joy because **“the LORD has done great things for us.”**

Joy...is a response to God and his goodness.

As Eugene Peterson notes, “Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship, it is a consequence... Joy is a product of abundance, the overflow of vitality.”

We experience joy because we encounter God and his goodness. But does that leave us helpless to wait for God’s redemptive goodness? No, again hear Peterson: “We can decide to live in response to the abundance of God, and not under the dictatorship of our own poor needs. We can decide to live in the environment of a living God and not our own dying selves. We can decide to center ourselves in the God who generously gives and not in our own egos which greedily grab.”

Joy...is a response to God’s goodness, and as we’ll see, he is always good to us.

The second thing I’d like you to notice is that there are 3 aspects of God’s redemptive act of restoration that help bring joy back into our lives:

1) God’s restoration is like a dream; it’s almost too good to be true (vs. 1).

--it’s seemingly impossible

--it’s beyond explanation

--It’s beyond what we could anticipate or hope for...

2) After this restoration we see a response of pure joy and gratitude

-vs. 2a

3) Note that the nations are dazzled by Israel’s great restoration

This celebration is not limited to Israel. **All** the nations see their great redemption.

And then Israel responds to these aspects of joy in vs. 3... (*read vs. 3*)

Now for me, one of the most curious aspects of these verses is that the Psalmist never really tells us what this great act of God is...

Most scholars think that he's referring to the return of the exiles after their captivity in Babylon. But I think the author very intentionally leaves the description of this act of restoration general and vague. **Why?**

I think it's because the psalmist wants us to be able to insert our own experience of God "restoring our fortunes" into the psalm. And in this, it is quite appropriate to read Christmas into this psalm. For in the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is the ultimate restoration of our fortunes—our ultimate "shavot." For our God has chosen to become like us, to be *with us*, to "move into the neighborhood"—in Peterson's translation of John 1.

And **that**...is a "restoration" we never could have dreamed of—almost too good to be true...

For how did God restore our fortunes? By descending, by stooping to become like us, by entering this world in the most surprising and humble way imaginable...

In G.K. Chesterton's words:

A mass of legend and literature, which increases and will never end, has repeated and rung the changes on that single paradox; that the hands that had made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle.

G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, p. 169

Or, in one of my favorite Christmas quotes, hear the dark observation of Fredrick Buechner:

The child born in the night among beasts. The sweet breath and steaming dung of beasts. And nothing is ever the same again.

Those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of Him again. Once they have seen Him in a stable, they can never be sure where He will appear or to what lengths He will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation He will descend in His wild pursuit of man.

...For those who believe in God, it means, this birth, that God Himself is never safe from us, and maybe that is the dark side of Christmas, the terror of the silence. He comes in such a way that we can always turn Him down, as we could crack the baby's skull like an eggshell or nail Him up when He gets too big for that.

Yes, this birth, this advent, this incarnation, was a descent almost too much to imagine, something we could only dream of, something almost too good to be true, for indeed this birth means that God will never cease in his “wild pursuit” of us...of you...

And when we really see Christmas as this unthinkable divine descent, when we really see this birth as God’s wild pursuit of us, to restore our fortunes with him, we will again experience the joy of Christmas, then again, “our mouth will be filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.”

Mild he lays his glory by,  
born that man no more may die,  
born to raise the sons of earth,  
born to give us second birth.

Hark the herald angels sing,  
Glory to the newborn king!

And when we see the both the depths and the delights of Christmas, when we celebrate with joy the true magnitude of this birth, the nations will declare as in vs. 3:

“The LORD has done great things for them.”

When we celebrate the joy of Christmas, even the unbelieving world will see that our God has done great things for us...

Have you ever noticed how non-Christians still want to participate in the joy of Christmas?

While denying this miraculous incarnation of God, they still want to celebrate the joy of the season, and they go to all kinds of lengths to find joy in things other than this wonderful descent of God to restore our fortunes...

*Why?* It’s because God made us all—believers and unbelievers alike—for himself, and we all crave—whether we can consciously admit it or not—for God to be with us. Yes, at Christmas, when we celebrate the joy of God coming to be with us, even the unbelieving nations will see that “The LORD has done great things for them.”

Joyful, ***all ye nations***, rise,  
join the triumph of the skies;  
with angelic hosts proclaim,  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

### III. The Joy of Christmas Future

So, we have seen that our Christmas joy now is profoundly impacted by the joy of Christmas past: God himself has come down to dwell with us. But our Christmas joy now, has not only a past, but also a future. Look at verses 4-6 with me:

*(read vss. 4—6)*

In this season of Advent, we celebrate not only that Jesus has come, but that he is coming again to “restore our fortunes”—to bring us “shavot.”

And this passage has some vivid and beautiful images that encourage our hope of Jesus coming again.

The first thing I’d like you to notice is that the psalmist does not ignore the fact that we have difficult times and seasons of loss in our life... As Eugene Peterson observed:

“Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow.”

-E. Peterson, (p. 96)

Winter is indeed a time of death and longing for life, for as farmers know better than the rest of us, “planting season is one of loss, sadness, and deprivation” (Bruggeman, p. 301).

And yet, and yet, as the farmer intimately knows, the spring and the summer are coming, and we shall reap with joy.

➔ We move from weeping to joy because of the anticipated restoration of our fortunes from our God.

In vs. 4 the psalmist asks God to restore our fortunes “like streams in the Negeb!” This would have been a vivid image for Israelites. The streams of the Negeb are largely dry creek beds, but when God brings the rains, they suddenly and surprisingly turn into raging rivers. We may feel quite dry in our spiritual life now, because the joy of Christmas past seems so far from us. But as we weep in that felt distance from God now, we look forward to those dry creek beds raging with living water again, because our Lord Jesus has promised that he will come again.

But...we still sow in the midst of our spiritual drought. Yet we rejoice because we anticipate that God will once again surprise us with an abundant harvest. Amazingly, surprisingly, unthinkably, Jesus restored our fortunes by descending to be with us, and we rejoice now, because he has promised us that he is coming to dwell with us again.

So how does the joy of Christmas future encourage our Christmas joy now? We rejoice now because we anticipate and long for something coming that is so far beyond anything that we could dream of or hope for: Jesus' second Advent; Jesus' second arrival; his second coming. And there we will experience, once again, that God is fully with us, Rev. 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and **God himself will be with them as their God**. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

That, brothers and sisters, is shavot. That is **THE** restoration of our fortunes.

So..., how do we experience Christmas joy now? We experience joy because we are reunited with someone very important to us, and we experience Christmas joy because Christmas means that we have been reunited with God himself. We experience Christmas joy now because in the miraculous birth of Jesus, God has restored our fortunes because he has chosen to be with us, and we experience Christmas joy now because we joyfully long for and confidently anticipate when Jesus will come again, and we will see him face to face, and he will wipe away all our tears, and death will be no more, and we will reap sheaves of joy because our God will dwell with us.

I close with the story I described earlier of Alexander McCall-Smith's description of the reunion of Angus Lordie and his beloved dog Cyril. As McCall-Smith concludes this scene, he turns his attention to others who have witnessed this event in the Cumberland Bar, and to two young men who at first viewed the scene somewhat cynically, but then seemed to see the important message portrayed by this interaction:

A young man with his friend...were silent for a moment, as were many in the bar who had witnessed the reunion, for they had all seen something which touched them to a greater or lesser extent. And at least some felt as if they had been vouchsafed a vision of an important truth: that we must love one another, whatever our condition in life, ... and that this love is a matter of joy, a privilege, that we might think about, weep over, when the moment is right (pp.204-205).

This love, is indeed *a matter of joy*. But brothers and sisters, as beautiful and meaningful as this story is, the meaning of Christmas is not just about the reunion of a beloved dog and his owner. The true meaning and the true joy of Christmas is about the reunion of God with man. We experience shavot—the joy of our restored fortunes—because at Christmas, we celebrate the fact that we have been reunited with God himself—God has chosen to be with us—God himself has chosen to dwell with us...

And wonders, wonders, of his love.  
Joy to the world!  
The Lord is come!

Would you pray with me?