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Living Into the Spirit of Joy

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Luke 2:7-18 (ESV)

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

Well, I wonder today, friend, if you've ever gotten a bit of news in your life that has just radically changed your life. That's what happens in our text today. That's what has happened many times in human history. For almost everyone who's ever lived, at some point in their life, they get some news that shakes them to the core, adjusts the course of their life, radically changes who they are, where they're headed, what they're like, how they think.

And in our text today, we see that very clearly. We're talking about making every effort to live into these gifts of Christmas. Second Peter, chapter one, verse five, tells us we're to make every effort to add to our faith. If we have some sort of faith in Almighty God, we're supposed to add to our faith knowledge and the virtues of Christ, these characteristics of Jesus.

We've talked about the characteristic of hope. Jesus was a man of great hope, of great optimism. He had an unquenchable spirit. With all that people brought against him, all the persecution he experienced, all the harsh words he experienced, all the lashings that he took on — he just kept going in great hope for what lay ahead for him.

And he was a man of peace. He lived in peace. He was asleep when the storm raged on the waters. When they were out in a boat, he was in peace as he headed towards Jerusalem. Certainly, he felt all the human emotions that you and I feel, but he lived with a supernatural peace.

And you and I can live in this supernatural hope, this supernatural peace. And today, we're talking about living in the gift of joy. When Jesus came into the world, he came into the world not only to give us the forgiveness of sins, but hope, peace, and joy. And these things we can walk in now, experiencing these supernatural gifts this side of heaven.

You know, my family has already started to open a few gifts, and we've opened some gifts that'll be helpful. I was given an upgrade in my phone, and that'll be a helpful tool for me. My wife was given an upgrade in her coffee maker at home, and that'll be a helpful tool for her. But I can guarantee you this: none of the gifts that we receive in the physical realm of our lives will enhance our lives like these spiritual gifts.

If we learn how to unwrap and live into these spiritual gifts, they will radically transform the way we live, and they will be more and more meaningful to us as the days go by. These gifts are gifts that we really should concentrate on unwrapping, walking in, and making every effort to add them to our faith.

And the gift that we are focusing on today is this gift of joy.

When I mentioned earlier about news changing our lives, I remember about 30 years ago when my wife announced to me that she was pregnant, and that news just shook me to the core. I just had no idea in my heart that I was already a father of a little one in my bride's womb. I mean, that news changed my life, and it's been changing my life ever since.

And that kind of news broke into the world some 2,000 years ago, when the angels announced to the shepherds that unto us, to all people — this was not just news for my wife Chris and me — this is for all people everywhere. Unto us a child was going to be born. A Savior was coming into the world. This one was to be in the city of David, and he was going to be Christ the Lord. And this was good news of great joy for all people everywhere.

And so God ushered into the world with His Son the gift of joy for you and me, for all people of all time, anywhere. The gift of joy for us to walk in. And this is something God wants us to

experience. This is something He designed for us — to walk in a joyful, excited spirit. A spirit that is overflowing with just a sense of pleasure, happiness, and confidence in God.

If you and I are going to make every effort to live into this joy — the joy of Christmas, the spirit of joy that God ushered in with His Son, this fruit of His Spirit that comes when we abide and walk with His Son — we're going to have to cooperate with Him, work with Him, to experience what He has for us.

We're going to have to go to the Scriptures. As we see people who experience this joy, they do a number of things in their lives. And the first thing we see in many places in Scripture is that people who experience God's joy take God at His Word. They listen to what He says, and they believe it.

We aren't going to walk in true joy. I mean, happiness has to do with circumstances around us, but joy is something that comes forth in our heart regardless of what's happening around us. And we aren't going to live in joy in this world without a confidence outside of ourselves. It's just not going to happen.

Friends, this life is filled with too much pain, too much suffering, too much hurt, too much heartache, too much loss, too much grief for you and me to live in a constant state of happiness. But if we understand God's promises — what He has told us to be true about Himself and about our lives — if we walk with Him, follow Him, and cooperate with His Spirit, then we're going to experience something supernatural: a joy in our hearts, a hope in our hearts, a peace in our hearts.

But if we can't trust someone beyond ourselves, then the trajectory of life gives us only fleeting opportunities for happiness, for joy. We might even call them moments of just happiness amidst a journey with a dismal ending. But if we understand God's Word and we hear clearly from His Word what God intended for us, we will start to experience an anticipation of what lies ahead — and then a joy in our hearts, a real joy, a real overflowing of this joyful spirit.

We see this in Mary when she was told she was going to be with child. She believed what God said to her through this angel, and she burst into song just on the faith of taking God at His Word. We see this with John the Baptist's father, Zechariah. When he came to believe what God had told him — after a little encouragement, after a little reprimand — and he came to faith, he broke into song himself. He prophesied, *“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.”*^{*} And he wrote a whole song. It's recorded for us in Luke, chapter two.

When we believe God, take Him at His Word, and trust what He has said, the goodness of His promises can break forth in our hearts. No matter what the circumstances are in our lives, we

can experience joy because we have confidence in someone outside of this world. We can take God at His Word.

When Jesus said in Matthew 6:33 that if we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, God will take care of every need we have — if we believe that — we can live in joy no matter what our circumstances, because we know we're in God's hands. He is the Great Shepherd, the Great Provider, the one who takes care of His people, the one who shepherds them along.

Personally, when I was younger, there was a phrase that I heard very often that I don't hear very often now. But I still hang on to it because I think it has some value in this world that's filled with many opinions, old wives' tales, and ideas about life. You and I can choose what we want to believe, who we want to listen to. If we choose to listen to what the Scripture says to us and believe what the Bible has revealed to us, God has told us it will be transformative.

If we transform our minds with the Bible, God will transform us and put His gifts within us. And so the phrase went like this: *"Jesus said it, I believe it, that settles it."* He's the one I'm going to listen to. He said it, I believe it, that settles it. He said if I seek Him first, He'll meet every need I have. That settles it. I believe it, and I'm going to live into it.

When Jesus said in John 14:2 — what we know from John's gospel — that in His Father's house there are many rooms, and He has gone to prepare a place for us and will return to take us to be with Him when our time comes, we can trust that. When we listen to that promise and believe that promise, there is a joy for what lies ahead. We know we're going to a better place, a place in Paradise that He described as His Father's house, where there are many rooms.

The Scripture has told us — if we receive it and believe it — *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind can conceive what God has prepared for those who love Him."* If we believe that, friends, we can live with joy in our hearts. He'll take care of us. He's got a better place ahead for us.

When God's Spirit told Paul that Almighty God is in all things, working for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose, He promised us that. If we believe that — even if we're in the midst of difficult, hard circumstances — our faith in that promise can help us have joy.

I mean, this spirit of happiness and joy is beyond the circumstantial. It's something supernatural that comes to us from outside this world, in the midst of any circumstance. To live into it, friends, we have to take God at His Word. We have to believe what He said to us.

We really shouldn't be surprised at this because He's told us that without faith — a confidence in the unseen, a trust in what He's revealed to us — we cannot please Him. But with faith, we open up our hearts to the work of the Spirit, who can stir in us this presence of joy.

To live in that, we have to continue to trust God, take Him at His Word. And then secondly, we have to release all offenses. There's no use trying to live in joy when we're harboring bitterness or hard-heartedness against our fellow man in some way. If we have bitterness there, if we have unforgiveness in our heart, the spirit of joy will not flow freely. It just won't flow.

What if Jesus had taken offense at the many things that were done against him while here on the earth? What if he had maybe started the first sort of *"Sorry for me, Me Too"* movement? What if, in the Scriptures, we read quotes from Jesus saying things like: *"Well, you feel like the religious leaders of your day have mistreated you? Well, me too. You wouldn't believe how they mistreated me. As a matter of fact, they tried to run me out of many cities. There were many times they tried to kill me. I had to sneak out in the darkness of night."*

Or what if he said this: *"You've been mistreated by the justice system in some way? You feel like you've been wronged? Well, me too."* What if Jesus had quotes like this: *"I got 39 lashes on my back, just one short of the number that they thought would kill a person. For what? For being perfect. Me too. I've been mistreated by the justice system. As a matter of fact, the justice system then put a log on my back and told me to carry it up a hill, where they were going to slaughter me for being perfect, for actually being just perfect in every way."*

But Jesus didn't do this. There were many offenses against him, but he didn't harbor bitterness. He didn't scream about it. He didn't whine about it. He trusted in his Heavenly Father to work out his good plan through his life, even in the midst of enormous mistreatment, great harsh things done against him, and even a crucifying of him for absolutely no valid reason at all.

Yet God used it all. If you look at the life of Joseph, if you look at the life of Moses, if you look at the life of Esther, and Mary, and Elizabeth, and Peter, and James, and John — all these people — they had many offenses against them. They were mistreated in many ways, but they kept releasing their grievances to God. And he then worked in their lives to bring about good.

Jesus, *for the joy set before him,* not holding an offense, *endured the cross.* From the cross, what did he say? *"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."*

Let me get even clearer on this point, friends. We need to take God at His Word. Trust in His promises. Release offenses that have happened to us if we're going to walk in joy. And on a deeper level, we need to stop trying to control things. It's not wrong to speak out against injustice, to share from our perspective how things are going that feel unjust. But no matter what happens, friends, we need to release offenses to God.

Stop trying to control situations. Put our faith in him and let him work in the midst of all things to bring about good. Stop trying to control anything outside of ourselves, and just manage ourselves in self-control, in faith, in hope, in peace, in joy, in love — all of these things. Then God works on our behalf.

So if we're going to live in the spirit of joy, friends, we've got to take God at His Word, anchor our soul in His promises, and release offenses no matter what has been done to us. Then the joy of God can come into us as we look and think differently about life and anticipate the future goodness of God in our lives. Look forward to what he has ahead for us.

It's very difficult to be a pessimist and live in joy. God wants you and I to look ahead, trusting in him and in his future grace. If we learn to do this, train our minds to think forward with a big God, it changes the way we live and gives us a spirit of joy in the present.

If you have a deep river of negativity that runs through your mind consistently, it's very powerful. And Jesus said, **"Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks."** Our mouth then directs our lives. James said it's like a rudder on a ship, like a bit in a horse's mouth, or like a little fire that sets a whole forest ablaze.

But if we change our thinking, friends — **"As a man or woman thinketh in his or her heart, so do they become,"** Solomon said. If we think optimistically with the idea of a big God who cares about us, who has promised to work all things for good, and we release offenses, then we become transformed. As we transform our mind, he promises to supernaturally transform us by the power of His Word.

The Holy Spirit has told us that the Word of God, these promises of God, are His sword — the sword of His Spirit. And that sword can help you and I live supernaturally in the joy, peace, and hope of Almighty God.

Father, help us walk in these things. Help us make every effort to add to our faith these virtues. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.