

Pastor's Note

Hello

I want to share how joy happens in our lives. What is joy? Whenever we talk about joy we always say a lot of things about what it isn't. It's not an emotion, it's not up and down. If you're a Grinch you are not joyful. And when we think about what joy is, we tend to go to the extreme opposite. Like the fake, phony, over-hype joyful kind of person. So what is joy? What is genuine joy? We know it's not an emotion. We know it's not just based on the ups and downs of life. What does it mean to have joy? It means you have strength from God to face anything. It means you know you are blessed in everything. No matter what the circumstance God's blessings are still there. It means you are less stressed in everything because you know God's love.

Joy doesn't come from what you have. It comes from what you know can't be taken from you. That's where joy comes from. They can take your job from you but they cannot take God's purpose from your life. So you can have joy no matter what the circumstance. They can take a relationship from you but they cannot take God's love from your life. So you can have joy no matter what. They can take your health but they cannot take God's grace. They can even take your life but they can't take God's promise of eternal life. So joy is there no matter what.

That's why the Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 5:16 (NLT) *"Always be joyful."* It's only three words, *"Always be joyful."* Don't you wish it was just two words? Just, be joyful. Why the always? Really? Always? In this circumstance... in that circumstance... when I'm going through this? That's the part that can bug you. How do you have that kind of joy? The truth is if you're waiting for the perfect circumstances to have joy you're going to wait a long time. When you get perfect, you only get it for about a minute or two. Have you noticed that? Then the joy goes away. So how do you find the kind of joy that lasts through the difficulty?

How do you find the joy that lasts in this imperfect, often ugly world? That's the message of Jesus. Jesus came to bring joy in that kind of world. The world that we live in. So we're going to look at where joy comes from. And we're going to look at some people from the bible to see what they can teach us. These people all had joy. You look at the shepherds; they talk about joy. The wise men; they talk about joy. Mary and Joseph; they talk about joy. And it wasn't just for them. The joy they experienced was also for us. Romans 15:4 (TEV) says, *"Everything written in the Scriptures was*

written to teach us, in order that we might have hope through the patience and encouragement which the Scriptures give us. "Whenever you read a story in the Bible it's not just written for them. It's not just written for the story. It's written for us. It's written to give us encouragement, hope, and joy. So what happened to them, happened for us. Each of them has something to teach us about joy. First, we learn from the shepherds.

1. Joy is here.

If you're looking at one of those maps with the "You are here" dot and you're looking for a line that goes from "You are here" to "Joy" over here somewhere, that's not how joy works. If joy is going to happen in your life it's got to be on the dot. It's got to be where you are. It's not somewhere else. It's here. It's where you are, the life that you're living. You've got to find joy where you are. The shepherds discovered that joy was where they were. The Bible says in Luke 2:8-9 (NLT) *"That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them."* So here's these shepherds. It's another night as usual. They're out watching the sheep. Sheep are not that exciting when they're awake. Asleep; they're downright boring. You're sitting there watching these white lumps out there. And all of a sudden in the midst of this boring, routine, business as usual life, God shows up. Joy shows up in the midst of that kind of life.

That's where God shows up for you and me. Joy is here. There's great hope when we look at the shepherds in that God can show up in your life and my life, where we are and give us genuine joy. You're routinely going throughout the business of your everyday life and God wants to come and give you joy. You do not have to go on a vacation to find joy. The truth of the matter is we try to go on a vacation to find joy but we take the one thing on the vacation that's keeping us from finding joy: ourselves. That's where the problem is. We're the ones who are stressed out. We're the ones with the attitudes that block the joy in our lives. You don't have to leave your job or your family to find joy.

Look at what happened in the lives of these shepherds? The Bible says *"Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared among them."* Suddenly. God shows up. That's how things happen, suddenly. We get some news, something can happen and everything can change for the worse. Suddenly you get that phone call. Suddenly you get that diagnosis. Suddenly there's an auto accident. Everything changes for the worse. But the truth is, just as suddenly, everything can change for the joy in our lives. Everything can change for the better. Right here, right now, suddenly God can do

something new. You can begin to look at life differently and see the hope. You can begin to look at life differently and see that God's love is there no matter what. You can begin to see that no matter what the circumstances, God's going to show up in your life. When? Suddenly.

2. Joy is sent.

It's not something you spend the rest of your life trying to discover. It's something God sends into your life. He sent it to these shepherds; he's sent it to us. Luke 2:10-12 (NLT) *"They [the shepherds] were terrified, but the angel reassured them. 'Don't be afraid!' he said. 'I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior... yes, the Messiah, the Lord... has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.'" So joy is here. How do I find it? How does it come into my life?*

There are a lot of different strategies. Some people try to work harder to get it. If I just work hard enough, think hard enough, if I somehow just work myself into it, I'm going to be a joyful person. If that were true the most joyful people in the world would be workaholics. And we all know that's not true. So it's not a matter of me working harder to discover it. Some people think that to be joyful you just have to ignore all the bad in the world. I'll just pretend all that stuff is just not here and then I can be a joyful person. Those people aren't joyful. They're just blissfully unaware. Joy is recognizing in the realities of life that God is here. There are other people who think that joy is some lucky circumstance. I win the lottery and all of a sudden I'm a joyful person... even though when you study the people who won the lottery very few of them are joyful. So when you look at that kind of circumstance, is that what joy is all about? This one in a million chance that somehow I'm going to experience joy? Is that where you find joy? No.

God wants to bring joy into every one of our lives and he sends it into every one of our lives. It's not found. You don't have to go find it or discover it. It is sent. You could spend the rest of your life trying to find what God has already sent... and miss it. Joy is not created from within. Joy is sent from above. The angels said to the shepherds, "I bring you good news of great joy for all people." I've always thought about the difference between good news and great joy. Good news becomes great joy when it becomes personal. If you say to me, "I won a million dollars this week." I would say "That's good news." If I got a letter saying that I won a million dollars; great joy! That's a personal experience. Joy is personal. Jesus came for you. He came for you! He came to let you know, God loves you. He has a plan for

your life. He has a promise for your life. He has a future for your life. He has a no-matter-what love for your life. Joy is personal.

When you recognize that Jesus was sent not just for the world. Yes. But for you. Then all of a sudden the good news becomes great joy. The joy gets sent into your life. I want you to notice what these shepherds did when they went and saw the child. They did what the angel told them to do. The Bible says in Luke 2:17-18 (NLT) *"After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished."* So they went and told. First, joy is sent. Then, joy is shared. You tell other people. They went and told. Notice how people responded. They didn't ridicule them. They weren't bored. They were astonished. Because this world needs good news. People need good news. You share it with other people, that's when the joy starts flowing in your life again.

3. Joy is a journey.

Joy is a process of life. Joy doesn't always happen in an instant like we want it to. The wise men started in the east. They saw this star that indicated to them that a king was being born. They left and they made this journey. When they got to Bethlehem they see this star again. When they see it again, Matthew 2:10 (NLT) says, *"When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!"* So they traveled a long way before they were filled with this joy. It was a process. It took time.

The Bible makes very clear that this is how joy happens for every one of us. Psalm 30:5 (NCV) says, *"Crying may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning."* So it starts with tears in the pain. Then out of those tears as you spend time with God recognizing that he is there; joy comes in the morning. Jesus himself taught in John 16:20(NIV) *"You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy."* You often cry your way to a place of joy. You often grieve your way to a place of joy. Recognizing that God is there with you in your tears, in your grief, and you're thankful for his presence. Out of that he brings a new kind of joy that is above the circumstance you're facing.

Joy is a process. And people that try to find instant joy always end up doing the wrong thing. They look for the quick fix and all of a sudden they're worse off than they were before. Because what they're looking for is not joy; they're just looking for an adrenaline rush. And an adrenaline rush isn't going to get you anywhere. What you need is lasting joy. That is the journey of life. God, how are you going to work in this circumstance? What are you going to do here? Psalm 148:13 (NLT) says, *"Let them all praise the name of the LORD. For his name is very great; his glory towers over the earth and heaven!"* God is in the midst of life. No matter what

circumstance you're facing, God towers over that circumstance. No matter what struggle you're facing, God towers over that struggle. That's the journey of joy.

When you recognize He's crying with you, He's grieving with you, even through the pain you begin to recognize; God towers over this. He towers over this problem. He is greater and he's going to last longer. That's the journey of joy. This happened to the wise men a long time ago but it reminds us that it's part of our lives today. In a journey the most important thing is the first step. So how do you take the first step on the journey today? Recognize God is with you; that's the first step. He's with you in whatever you're facing right now!

4. Joy is scary.

Joy is often scary at first. Listen to what Simeon has to say at the dedication of Jesus. He was there when Jesus was dedicated at the temple. He recognized that Jesus was the Messiah and here's what he had to say. Luke 2:34(NLT) *"Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, 'This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, [That doesn't sound good.] but he will be a joy to many others.'"* So here's this guy Simeon telling the honest truth about joy. There are some people when they hear the truth about Jesus they're going to fall. Other people, they're going to have great joy.

As you see the story play out you see the reality of it. The people who fell were those who were already in power. The people who felt like they already had it made or had something they had to hang on to. So kings like Herod, they fell. Religious leaders like the Pharisees, they fell. Because they were hanging on to what they already had. It was the people that recognized that Jesus came to give them something they never had. Those are the people that found great joy. The same thing is true today. You and I need to realize that sometimes the scary thing about joy is that you have to let go of the thing that you're holding on to. The thing you thought would give you joy. You have to let it go in order to grab on to the joy that only he can give. And that can be scary.

You can build your whole life on a plan of education or a career, or a marriage, or a family or whatever. And think that's the thing that's going to give you joy. But it's not happening. It's not coming. So you keep trying a little bit more and building a little bit more. But then Jesus comes and says "I want you to have a great family, I want you to have a great career. But that's not where joy is going to be found. The joy is found in connecting with me and in your relationship with me. And by the way even if you have a terrible family and a rotten career, you can still find joy because you still

can connect with me." That's where joy is found. For many of us there's this scary moment... I don't know another way to picture it but you're hanging off the side of a cliff and there's a branch hanging out of a crevice in the cliff wall. That classic picture. You're hanging on with all you've got to the one thing you think is saving your life. Whatever it is, you believe it's going to bring you joy. Whether it's family or career or intelligence or reputation or whatever it is.

Then here comes Jesus. He comes along and throws you a rope and says, Grab on. I want to give you joy. But to grab on you've got to let go. You've got to let go with at least one hand. And that's a scary moment. If you're hanging on with all you've got to something, thinking it's going to give you joy, then that's when there's this moment of fear knowing you've got to let go of it to grab on to the thing that only he can do in your life. But when you face that fear, when you let go and grab on to what he has, all of a sudden you experience a rush of joy like you've never experienced in life before. So my question for you is, what's your branch? What's that thing you're holding on to for dear life hoping it's going to give you joy?

5. Joy is a difficult choice.

Mary sang a song about joy. Luke 1:46-48 (NLT) *"Mary responded, 'Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed.'"* So she's got a lot of joy. But this is not where she started out. It was a decision she made that got her here. Look where she started. Luke 1:29-30 (NLT) *"Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. 'Don't be afraid, Mary,' the angel told her, 'for you have found favor with God!'"*

Confused, disturbed, and afraid. That's where Mary started. And you'd feel that way too. A teenage girl and you're told you're going to have a virgin birth. "How am I going to explain this? Who's going to understand this, God? This is not going to go well with Joseph." She's confused, disturbed, and afraid. But then just a few verses later she's joyful. What happened? She made a difficult decision. She decided to trust God instead of trusting in herself. The thing about joy is, it often scares you at first because you've got to let go of the familiar and make this decision to trust God instead of trusting yourself. Joy is found on the other side of the difficult choice to trust God instead of trusting yourself. I don't care how long you've been a follower of Christ it's always easier to trust yourself than to trust him. Because yourself is right here. I don't care if this is something brand new to you and you're trying to figure it out, there's this moment in your life where you have to decide, I'm going to trust Jesus instead of

trusting myself. Jesus is actually our example in this, by the way. He decided to trust the will of the Father so he could experience joy. Hebrews 12:2 (NLT) *"...Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne."*

He didn't want to go to the cross. But he trusted God that on the other side of that difficult choice was going to be joy. There's the joy he experienced, the same joy we can experience in life. This difficult choice, the choice to trust God, it brings joy. How do you have joy? You make the difficult choice to trust God and to forgive rather than live a life of bitterness. There are a lot of people in the world that have a lot less than we have here. But they have a lot more joy. They realize joy isn't dependent on things. They can look at the internet. They can realize what they don't have. They're making the difficult choice to trust in God's supply rather than comparing themselves to everybody else.

When it comes to health issues, there's a lot of good doctors, a lot of good things happening. But you can't always get good medical care depending on your circumstances. So people face a lot of difficult circumstances with their health. But you see many Christians who have joy because they're not just worried about their own health. They're caring for and making a difference in everyone else's life. They made the difficult choice to trust God. The place of joy is right out there on the edge of their lives. When they know they're not going to find it in things. They know they're not going to find it in trusting human nature. But they've decided, "I'm going to trust God."

We can feel like we're almost there. If I were a little more healthy. If my job were a little bit better. If I had just a little bit more money. Whatever. If I just got that "little bit more" then I would have joy. No we wouldn't. That's not where joy is found. Some little bit better entertainment. Some little bit better job. Enjoy the entertainment, have a great job. But the truth of the matter is joy is found in trusting God instead of trusting yourself. That means you can experience joy today. If joy was a little bit better in one thing than it is in another thing, then you could have more joy than I have. But that's not the kind of joy Jesus came to offer. Every one of us is equally able to experience this kind of joy.

In fact Jesus taught us he wants us to experience this joy. The night before he died he's talking to his disciples. Here's what he teaches them about joy. In John 15:11 (NCV) *"I have told you these things so that you can have the same joy I have and so that your joy will be the fullest possible joy."* So Jesus knowing he's going to die the next day, knows he's

going to be resurrected three days later, he's teaching his disciples about joy. He wants them to know what's going to happen. He says what I want for you is, I want you to have the fullest possible joy. And that's what Jesus wants for you; the fullest possible joy. That's what he's working to do in your life. So my question to you is how can you help make that happen? He's working to bring this kind of joy into your life. How can you cooperate with him?

You can stop chasing after what God has already sent. You can take the first step of realizing that God is with you. You can let go of that branch. That's what a lot of us need to do. Let go of that thing you thought would bring you joy. You can make the difficult decision to trust God instead of trusting yourself. The truth is you could choose to be a discouraged person for the rest of your life. There's a lot in this world to be discouraged about. You could choose to be an angry person the rest of your life on this planet because there's a lot to be angry about. You could choose to be a bitter person. You could choose to be a cynical person the rest of your life, there's a lot to be bitter or cynical about.

But the good news is you can choose. You can choose to be a joyful person. Because there is a lot to be joyful about. The good news of God, the good plan of God, the good grace of God, the goodness of God in your life, you can choose to be a joyful person. That choice you can make right now. And that choice is made just in connection to him. Don't miss the best life has to offer. Find God!

Merry Christmas,

Scott

