

“THE JOY OF JESUS CHRIST”
Isaiah 35:1-10, I Peter 1:3-9, Luke 1:39-56
December 14 & 15, 2019

“The king of a particular country traveled often, but one day a man living near the palace remarked to a friend, ‘Well, it looks like the king is home tonight.’

“How do you know?” asked the other.

“The man pointed up toward the royal house. ‘Because when the king is home,’ he said, ‘the castle is all lit up.’”¹

What a great description of what the joy of the Lord does in our own lives. When King Jesus lives in us, when He abides in us and we let Him rule in our hearts, our own lives light up with His great joy and people around us can see it even from a distance. Our lives transform from living in the darkness of the world to rejoicing in the light of Jesus Christ.

The **PRESENCE** of the Lord changes everything in our lives and we are able to see the possibilities all around us for real life. We can see the drastic changes that take place as we look closely at the Old Testament lesson today of Isaiah 35. This chapter is in stark contrast to chapter 34 where the Lord brings punishment to the people for their rebellion of His will and His ways. Chapter 34 tells us of how God designed to abandon everything and make desolate all the countryside, because the people had rejected Him. Where once lush vegetation had grown, the rebellion and rejection brought destruction. Where once people flourished, now they have been exiled, leaving the cities and villages destitute and overcome with the wilderness. Where once the flocks of sheep and goats and cattle grazed happily, now because of the rejection of God by the people, there is only barren ground, turned to sulfur, inhospitable. Isaiah 34 is the description of what we can expect of any country or nation that rejects the Lord God and lives in stark contrast to the ways of the Lord.

And then along comes Isaiah 35. In the midst of this stark wasteland, hope begins to shine. Suddenly there are **FLOWERS** in the wastelands blooming among the thickets and thorns. The desert

¹ Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 497)

begins to rejoice, for the joy of the Lord is again residing in that place. Beauty sparkles among the rocks and the dry ground. Marvelous fragrance begins to fill the air where once the sulfur pinched the nose and burned the eyes.

And with the change in vegetation, the desert will sing because the birds and the reptiles replenish the area, singing their songs and creaking and croaking praises to the Lord. They all shout for joy at the new life that is given when the Lord is in it. The ground is transformed from a caustic environment to that of fertile and productive soil that brings forth the harvest of grain and the return of animal life. And the splendor of the Lord begins to shine forth His greatness and power.

Then, as the people begin to once more turn to the Lord God, **STRENGTH** is given to the weak to allow them to work and dance and rejoice in all that the Lord is doing. Those who were debilitated by ailments and limiting conditions, new strength is given so that everyone might be productive. Even the discouraged gain confidence again and hope begins to come alive, for God has come to bring rescue to those who put their hope in Him. The enemies are vanquished, defeated and turned away, removing them from the presence of the people of the Lord. Abundant life returns to the people.

And not only that, but the **BLIND** will see again and the **DEAF** will hear the glory of the Lord as He revives the land and calls the people to Him again. The eyes of the people will be restored to see what is right and good so that they can turn and follow the Lord. The ears of the people will be opened to hear the truth of God's Word, so that they may obey and follow all that God has called them to do. The minds of the people will be restored to peace, and logic and reason will once more direct the people to the ways of the Lord.

Then, the lame will leap and the mute will shout at all that the Lord is doing. Those who could not bear weight on their feet and legs will once more begin to find the power within their muscles to dance before the Lord in praise and joy. And those who were unable to speak, those without a voice in their society, will be able to express their gratitude and praise. They will lift up their voices in songs and hymns and spiritual songs out of joy for what the Lord has done for them. Because they trust in the

Lord God, because they follow His ways and obey His commands and worship Him as their God, they find the transformation of the Lord at work in them from the top of their heads to the very soles of their feet; from the inside of their hearts to every facet of their life. Instead of rejecting the Lord God and all of His ways, the people once more put their hope and trust in Him, and He blesses them.

Do you hear the joy in all of this? Where once there were dry gullies, **STREAMS** will once more flow in the desert. Where there once was no moisture, where there was only dust and ash and rocky ground, water begins to restore the land so that springs produce creeks and streams and they flow once more into lakes that produce grasses and reeds. And the cycle continues so that the land is once more revived and the people can return home.

Even the hopeless find new **LIFE** when they turn away from their false religions and their pagan gods, to worship the One True God. They will begin looking at their land as a place to live and work and have their being in grateful thanksgiving for what the Lord has done. And there will begin to be a movement of the people back into the land once evacuated, establishing the **ROAD** of Holiness, where the people of God can return once more without fear of bandits, or robbers, or murderers. They will not even fear the dangers of wild animals, since the Lord their God will protect them.

The rescued will travel home again to establish a new kingdom of the Lord in that place where once there was only desolation. The ones who have trusted in the Lord will be given new life, new hope, and a great joy in their hearts. They will be singing and shouting for **JOY**, free from sorrow and grief, for they have allowed the King to once more reside in them. The light of the Lord, the glory that only He gives, will prevail in the hearts and lives of the people as they put their complete trust and faith in The Lord Their God. As they give up their foolish and rebellious ways, the Lord revives them again, brings His joy back into their hearts and they are once more able to flourish under His care and under His love. The days of pain and grief have ended, and the days of laughter and rejoicing have returned.

Do you see the great joy of this chapter in Isaiah? What once was destitute and destroyed and brought into ruin and rubble because of the rejection of the Lord God, has now flourished and been

restored to its prior glory. When the Lord God is present, when God lives in your hearts and lives, He brings His glory to you and fills you with joy. And everyone sees it! When the King is home, the castle is all lit up, and the people all around are influenced, with His presence and His power, His authority and His majesty. When the Lord is at home in us, we are all lit up with His joy and His love. When we follow the Lord we have hope and peace and newness of life and abundant joy.

And we hear this even more in the New Testament lesson of 1 Peter 1:3-9. We heard today how JESUS IS OUR REASON FOR JOY because He makes all things new as we put our faith and trust in Him as our Savior. As we let Jesus become the King of our life, when we let Him move into our lives and reside in our hearts, great joy lights up our entire lives and we become a light to the nations of the love of Jesus.

You see Jesus is our AVENUE to new life. We hear that in verses 3 & 4 of I Peter 1, “...*Because of His great mercy He gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope, and so we look forward to possessing the rich blessings that God keeps for His people...*” Our faith in Jesus Christ not only brings us *new life*, but *rich blessings* as well. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). Jesus is the alternate path in our world today that is the only way to find God’s blessings. We could pursue and chase after all that the world has to offer, but nothing else in all the world will bring us the blessings of God – only Jesus. Joy is found in Him alone!

Peter reminds us that we live in a broken and sinful world that brings trials and troubles to us each day. Even when we have faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior, we face struggles and hardships. This is not to punish us for our faith, but to refine us and build up our faith in Jesus.

You see, when the things of this world become so engrained in us, we begin to lose our focus on following God’s ways. We tend to become rebellious to God’s commands when we have all we need and have nothing to worry about. So God allows us to have trials and struggles in order that we remember that our lives are nothing without Him with us. God allows the struggles and sadness we suffer to purify us so that we let go of the dross and garbage of the world and trust in His love and care.

As we give up our dependence upon the world to meet our needs and satisfy our desires, the Lord begins to fulfill our lives with His joy as He supplies us with His great blessings.

So Peter tells us to be glad, even in difficult times. Remember how gold and silver are refined – they are put to extreme heat so that all of the impurities within the ore come rising to the surface and can be removed so that all that is left is the pure, precious metal. That is the process that our struggles and trials take us through as we believe in Jesus Christ. As the heat of our world begins to pile up against us, the things of this world we no longer need in our lives become vividly clear to us, and we are invited to let Jesus take them away so that our faith becomes strong and our lives become pure and holy. And then we are able to endure whatever the world puts before us so that we might live in joy as a witness to the love of Jesus and the difference that HE can make in us when we trust in Him.

Your BELIEF in Jesus brings great joy; He gives Salvation to all who trust in Him and follow Him and live a life that is pleasing to Him. Peter puts it well when he says, *“Then you will receive praise and glory and honor on the Day when Jesus Christ is revealed. You love Him, although you have not seen Him, and you believe in Him, although you do not now see Him. So you rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express, because you are receiving the salvation of your souls, which is the purpose of your faith in Him”* (1 Peter 1:7b-9). Allow the struggles and trials and hardships of your life to purify your faith and increase your love and trust in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And as we do that, we see that JOY IS CONTAGEOUS! Today I want us to learn from Mary’s example as we see it in Luke 1:39-58. Remember, Mary has just been invited to do a very difficult task – to become the mother of the Son of God without yet being married to Joseph. She was pure and holy, obeying the laws of the people of Israel, yet God blessed her with the task of bearing a child as a virgin. The possibilities of ruin and destruction and death were prevalent, but as Mary trusted the words of the angel, Gabriel, and allowed God to use her to do this great thing, not only did she find peace in her life, but she is able to experience great joy, too. Listens to what she does after receiving her “work orders” from the Lord. (READ Luke 1:39-58)

Mary has been told by the angel of God that Elizabeth is 6 months pregnant, even in her old age. It was a blessing from the Lord, and a fulfillment of God's plan to bring about the Messiah. She is Mary's cousin, living near Jerusalem where Zechariah serves as a priest before the Lord. So Mary leaves Nazareth and visits Elizabeth. As a young woman, possibly even in her teen years, Mary must have had to convince her parents about going on this trip. No one else knows yet that she is pregnant, so it could be that upon hearing about Elizabeth's condition, she asked to go help with the preparation for the birth of the baby. For whatever reason, Mary goes to be encouraged by Elizabeth and to tell her what the Lord was doing in her life. So Mary **SHARES** joy with Elizabeth by being with her.

But upon her arrival at the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit reveals to Elizabeth what God has done in Mary. She is so filled with joy that she calls out to Mary, *"You are the most blessed of all women, and blessed is the child you will bear! Why should this great thing happen to me, that my Lord's mother comes to visit me? For as soon as I heard your greeting, the baby within me jumped with gladness. How happy you are to believe that the Lord's message to you will come true!"* (Luke 1:42-45).

The Holy Spirit lets Elizabeth in on the big secret – Mary is pregnant with the Son of God! Yet she comes to Elizabeth's home. What a blessing of great joy Mary has brought into the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. And not only is Elizabeth moved with joy, but the baby in her jumps in her womb with the joy of the presence of the King. That whole house lights up with the joy of the Lord because the King has come to reside there.

Now, who is Elizabeth's baby? That's right, this is John who would be called the Baptist, because he would grow up to become the harbinger of the Messiah. He would prepare the people for Jesus, convicting them of their sin, baptizing them into a new life, and inviting them to let God create them a new creature in Jesus Christ.

But I love Elizabeth's statement, *"Why should this great thing happen to me, that my Lord's mother comes to visit me?"* (1:43). Elizabeth understands that Mary's child is the LORD! Yes, the

King, the Lord of All, has come into their house. And Elizabeth **GIVES** joy back to Mary by rejoicing in the presence of the Lord whom she carries. She confirms Mary's decision to do the work of the Lord and delights in her younger cousin doing this great thing. They both know what might happen. They both know the danger involved in this difficult appointment that God has given to Mary. So Elizabeth gives joy to Mary in order to encourage her to keep on following the will of the Lord. And even the infant, John, leaps for joy at the presence of His Lord and King.

But it is Mary's great response and song of praise to the Lord that gives us joy in our lives. She praises the Lord for counting her worthy to do this great work. She recognizes that she has no power in herself that would enable her to do this great thing. She thanks the Lord for using her, an unknown, powerless, yet faithful person, to accomplish the greatest task given by the Lord (Luke 1:46-49).

And because of her faithfulness in following the Lord God, everyone who lives after her knows her because of her willingness to do the work of the Lord. She proclaims a great truth, "*...from one generation to another He shows mercy to those who honor Him*" (1:50). That involves us, too! When we honor the Lord, He has mercy upon us to live for Him in all our ways. When we proclaim the glory of the Lord and live according to His Word, God honors us, even as unknown and powerless and vulnerable as we are! Yet, our faith in Jesus brings honor back to us from the Lord our God.

You see, it is not by the mighty that God works His will. It is not through the proud that He accomplishes His work. It is not through the leaders of the nations that God brings about the fulfillment of His plan of Salvation for the world. It's not in the rich and famous that God brings about the saving of the world. It is through those who humble themselves under the mighty hand of God, those who submit to His will and follow His commands that bring about the completion of the work He has called us to do (1:51-52). It is in those who give up on the ways of the world and give in to the mysterious work of the Lord that bring about God's calling of the people back to Him.

Mary and Elizabeth experience the blessing of the Lord, and their joy **SPREADS** to the rest of the world through each one of us as we follow their examples and submit ourselves to the work of the

Lord. Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months encouraging and being encouraged to bring about the great thing that God had called them to do. She may have been there when John is born, seeing the beginning of God's great plan of Salvation. What great joy for all of them! Then, Mary returns home with all that joy in her life, and that's when everyone recognizes the difference in Mary, that the King was at home in her, growing to maturity so that He could become the Savior of the World. Though the journey became much more difficult at that time, Mary remained faithful and showed the light of the Lord to all the people in Nazareth.

So NOW IT'S OUR TURN to shine the light of Jesus Christ to those around us. As we remember this account of the humble nature of the coming of the Savior of the world to us, we can receive **JOY** into our own lives and find the presence of the King within us. We can let His presence light up our lives with joy so that those around us can see that the King is home within us. As we diligently seek to follow His ways and obey His commands and live a life that is different than the rest of the world, Jesus shines through us to touch the lives of those around us.

Then, we can share joy with **OTHERS** that they also might experience the presence of the Lord Jesus. We can encourage them to follow God's ways so that He might honor us AND THEM and show His mercy to us in the midst of our own struggles and trials of life.

You see, we live in a world that has contorted and misinterpreted this great season we call Advent and Christmas. The world says this season is all about gift giving, about decorating, about parties, about spending thousands of dollars on things we really don't need. The world has tried to make this season all about shopping and eating and traveling and everything EXCEPT what it is really about. So there is really little lasting joy that we receive.

But you let the joy of **JESUS** show this Christmas and I guarantee you that it will transform your lives as you let Jesus come live in you, and make His home in you, and let His light shine through you into the darkness of this world. Let Jesus be the center of this celebration and you will find lasting joy for the rest of your life as you let Him live in you. To the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.