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**Great Joy and Salvation:  
Recovering the Meaning and Message of Christmas  
Luke 2:8-14**

I'm quite certain that most, if not all of you, are as weary as I am with attempts by people in our society to *redefine the meaning of Christmas*. I won't go into detail about this, but it seems that people in virtually every walk of life, from the average person across the street, to the U. S. Government, to corporate America to Hollywood celebrities, are doing all they can to *de-Christify* Christmas. *People are offended by the centrality of Jesus Christ in Christmas. They much prefer to sanitize the celebration of Christmas and reduce it to a secular celebration of generosity and gift-giving.*

I can't control what they do, and neither can you. But we can speak truth into this insanity, and that is what I want to do today. It is inescapably clear from this passage in Luke's gospel that the angels of heaven understood perfectly the meaning and message of Christmas, and it can be summed up in two words: *joy* and *salvation*. But we must also understand how these two words relate to each other. One is the cause and the other the effect. Let me explain.

Try, if possible, to put yourself in the sandals of those shepherds who sat on a hillside that Christmas night. I doubt if they had any idea of what was about to happen.

The hymn writer tells us that it was a "silent" night, a "holy" night. But it was also, most likely, a cold night, as the shepherds huddled together seeking warmth from the fire. To them it seemed like every other night. The crackling of wood, the occasional bleating of a lamb, were the only sounds that disturbed the otherwise routine silence.

Then suddenly an angel of the Lord "appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were filled with great fear" (Luke 2:9). Unlike the shepherds, we live in an age of high-tech special effects where such happenings are a computer-generated commonplace in the movies or on TV. But for these first-century peasants it was a frightening shock as the whole of heaven burst ablaze with the blinding glory of God! The Bible literally says, "they feared a great fear." Simply put, they were scared out of their wits!

But *the announcement that night was designed to evoke joy, not fear*: "for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). Yes, Jesus is an example for us, as well as a teacher, a counselor and a friend. But above all else he is a *Savior*. *The joy of Christmas is not in toys and tinsel, not in gifts and goodies, but in redemption from slavery to sin*. The message of the season is not good food and fellowship, as much as I enjoy both! It is the good news that One has come whose death and resurrection have set his people free from guilt and condemnation.

Such glorious news is too much for one angel to utter. There is need for a heavenly host of voices to proclaim this momentous event: "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'" (Luke 2:13-14).

Their declaration to the shepherds on the night of Christ's birth was two-fold: (1) we have good news for you that will bring you "*great joy*" (v. 10), and (2) this "great joy" is due to the birth of a "*Savior*, who is Christ the Lord" (v. 11). Simply put, *Christmas is about salvation coming to sinners and the consequent great joy that fills and floods their hearts.*

Don't miss the connection between these two words and the breathtaking truths they convey. The "good news of great joy" is not just any news. This sort of "joy" does not arise from an unexpected Christmas bonus at work. This is not the sort of "joy" that one experiences when one's favorite sports team prevails. *The "news" is really, really "good" because it makes known the advent or the coming of one who alone is able and willing to bring us salvation.*

So here's what I want to do today. We won't look at everything in this famous account of the Christmas event. Rather, our focus will be on two words: **Savior** and **Joy**. And the joy is the fruit of the salvation that this one called "Christ the Lord" (v. 11) brings to us.

### *Salvation*

So what does it mean when it says we have a "**Savior** who is Christ the Lord"?

"Salvation" may well be the most commonplace yet deeply cherished word in the Christian vocabulary. Lamentably, though, this beautiful biblical term has suffered distortion by those who have sought to redefine not only the nature of salvation but also the Christian faith in general.

Thus for many "salvation" is now little more than *self-realization* or attaining some *vague sense of personal authenticity*. What we are "saved" from is *low self-esteem*, an eerie sense of *meaninglessness* and *aimlessness* in life. Others point to the need for *greater education* to save us from *ignorance*. Some conceive of salvation as *cultural refinement*. One man said of the impact of his wife on rescuing him from loneliness and despair: "She was my *salvation*."

The meaning we give to the notion of "salvation" clearly depends on *what we perceive to be the greatest threat to us personally and corporately*. In other words, the idea and experience of salvation will never have the rightful effect on our lives, namely, joy, until we grasp both what we are saved *from* and *to*.

The Scriptures consistently speak of our desperate plight apart from Christ. We are *alienated from God* (2 Cor. 5:18-21), subject to his righteous *wrath* (John 3:36; Eph. 2:1-3), and *hostile* to him (Rom. 3:9-18). We are, in fact, his *enemies* (Rom. 5:10), and *under the curse* imposed by divine law (Gal. 3:13-14).

As urgent and pressing as are the many psychological, financial, and personal predicaments we face, *the most immediate and eternal danger to the welfare of your soul is the judgment of God that we all rightly deserve because of sin and idolatry*. *Salvation, therefore, is primarily deliverance or rescue from the penal consequences incurred by our rebellion against the Creator*. In sum, it is "from the wrath to come" that Jesus has saved us and set us free (1 Thess. 2:10).

The words "Savior" and "salvation" most often refer to our *spiritual rescue from well-deserved damnation*. Jesus used the language of salvation in this way (Luke 7:49-50; 8:12). Perhaps the most well-known text is the Apostle Paul's declaration in Ephesians that "by grace" we "have been saved through faith" and not because of "works" (Eph. 2:8-9; see also Rom. 5:9-10; 1 Cor. 1:18, 21; Titus 3:4-5). Paul also makes it clear that although we are saved apart from works we are not saved without them. That is to say, whereas human moral effort is by no means the foundation or meritorious cause of salvation, grace-empowered works are the fruit and consequence of it. "For we are his workmanship," says Paul, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

Indeed, the "grace of God has appeared, bringing *salvation* for all people" (Titus 2:11). But this "salvation" is not without any regard to works, for it is designed to "train" us "to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

Being saved and set free from the judgment of a holy God entails several other glorious truths. The beginning of salvation is *the new birth or regeneration or being born again* in which new life is imparted to those who were "dead" in their "trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1,5; John 3:1-8). This inner renewal is wrought through the preaching of the gospel (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23-25) and issues in repentance from sin and saving faith in Christ.

The New Testament refers to this work of the Spirit in terms of the *divine call* of God by which the elect are effectually drawn to Christ (John 6:44; Acts 2:39; Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:9). Awakened to the reality of our sin, we repent of it and embrace by faith the offer of full and final *forgiveness of sins* secured for us through the atoning death of Christ on the cross (Eph. 1:7). At the moment of our conversion God imputes the righteousness of Christ to us and declares us forgiven and forever *justified* in his sight (Rom. 3:21-25; 2 Cor. 5:21). Salvation, therefore,

becomes an experiential reality for us through faith in the alien righteousness of Christ, a faith that God graciously supplies (Eph. 2:8-9).

Those whom God thus effectually calls to faith in Christ are blessed with *adoption* as the spiritual sons and daughters of our heavenly Father (John 1:11-13; 1 John 3:1-3). In redeeming for himself a people, God *sanctifies* us both *definitively*, in setting us apart and consecrating us unto himself as his unique possession and eternal inheritance (2 Cor. 6:11), and *experientially*, by inaugurating through the Spirit a process by which we are progressively conformed to the image of Jesus himself (Rom. 8:29; Phil. 2:12-13; Heb. 10:14). The assurance is repeatedly given in Scripture that those whom God has in this way chosen, called, regenerated, justified, and is in the process of sanctifying, will in fact be preserved indefectibly for the consummation of salvation in the *glorification* of their bodies (Phil. 1:6; 3:20-21; 1 Pet. 1:5).

Just think of it: election in eternity past, regeneration or being born again, called to faith and repentance, adopted as the children of God, forgiveness of sins, justified in God's sight through faith alone, sanctified by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and one day, when Christ returns, glorified never to sin or suffer again! ***That is the salvation the angels proclaimed. That is the salvation the Savior brings to us!***

But I should also mention that the words "to save" and "salvation" are often used with reference to *the healing of the body*. The woman with the discharge of blood was "made well" (lit., "saved"; Matt. 9:21-22) when she reached out in faith and touched the hem of Christ's garment (see also Luke 17:19).

We also should not overlook the many and varied *blessings* that come with salvation. That is to say, Christ delivers us *from* both spiritual and physical destruction ***that he might bring us to God*** (1 Pet. 3:18). We are his beloved children (Rom. 8:15-17) in whom the Spirit abides as an indwelling and empowering presence (Eph. 2:22). We have been saved *unto* an abundant life (John 10:10) and the knowledge of God (John 17:3). ***Thus salvation is not only from divine wrath but into the experience of love for Christ and a joy that is inexpressible and full of glory (1 Pet. 1:8).***

### *Joy*

And what is the anticipated experiential fruit or product or result of this saving grace from our Savior, Jesus Christ? ***Joy!***

***But why joy?*** Why did the angels in Luke 2 and virtually every other the biblical author make delight or joy in God so central to our relationship with him? Is it not enough that we are "saved" simply to obey God or fear God or worship God or believe in God? Why joy? Why delight? Why does it matter so much? Why is joy the immediate and most important response of the human heart to the salvation that God brings us in Christ? There are several ways to answer that question and we need to think deeply about them.

***(1) Joy in God matters profoundly because more than any other human response or experience, joy clearly and thoroughly reveals the worth and value and splendor of whatever it is that evokes it. In other words, joy or delight is the single most effective means for glorifying and magnifying God.***

***Deep durable delight in God is how he is most glorified and honored in you.*** God is most glorified in you when you are most pleased and satisfied and fascinated and enthralled with the splendor of his beauty that can be seen in the face of Jesus Christ. That's joy!

When you experience and express joy in God, perhaps in the midst of indescribable suffering or hardship or loss, others stop and ask: "What must this God be like that he is deemed worthy not simply of acknowledgement but delight, not simply recognition but rejoicing?"

"Joy is the clearest witness to the worth of what we enjoy. It is the deepest reverberation in the heart of man of the value of God's glory" (Piper).

All Christians affirm that we exist to glorify God and that whatever else we may think about spirituality it involves, at minimum, a commitment that he be magnified in our lives. But *how* is God most glorified in us? *Where and in*

*what way* is God's glory most clearly revealed? *Through what mechanism* or *means* do we bring him the honor that we all agree he deserves? I believe the consistent answer of Scripture is that ***God is most glorified in us when our knowledge and experience of him ignite a forest fire of joy that consumes all competing pleasures and he alone becomes the treasure that we prize.***

I'm not suggesting that understanding the nature of God isn't essential. Of course it is! Theological ignorance won't take us very far, at least not in the right direction. Excitement uninformed by truth invariably leads either to idolatry or fanaticism. ***If we don't know the God we enjoy we may end up enjoying the wrong god!*** But knowledge alone isn't enough. For evangelicals who've been raised to believe that theological precision is an end in itself, this may be a hard pill to swallow. For others who've reduced Christianity to obedience, it may sound self-indulgent.

My point is simply that ***passionate and joyful admiration of God, and not merely intellectual apprehension, is the aim of our existence*** and thus ***the essence of true spirituality.*** If God is to be supremely glorified in you it's critically essential that you be supremely glad in him and in what he has done for you in Jesus.

Jonathan Edwards made this point in a sermon titled, "Nothing upon Earth can Represent the Glories of Heaven." Said Edwards: "God created man for nothing else but happiness. He created him only that he might communicate happiness to him" (14:145-46).

By *happiness* I don't mean laughter or fame or fortune. When I speak of human happiness or delight or joy I'm not talking about physical comfort or a six-figure salary or emotional stability or the absence of conflict or sexual gratification or any such earthly or temporal achievement. That's not to say such things are inherently wrong. In their proper place they may well be expressions of divine benevolence. But we greatly err if they become foundational to human happiness. We should be grateful for them, but happiness is still within our grasp despite their absence.

The happiness for which we are eternally destined is ***a state of soul in which we experience and express optimum ecstasy in God.*** Happiness is the whole soul resting in God and rejoicing that so beautiful and glorious a Being is ours. I'm talking about the ineffable and unending pleasure of blissful union with and the joyful celebration of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a joy of such transcendent quality that no persecution or pain or deprivation can diminish, nor wealth or success or prosperity can enhance.

***God created us and sent his Son to be born of a virgin and to live a sinless life and to die a sacrificial death in order to glorify himself by enriching us with the joy that flows from a saving encounter with the splendor of his Son.*** So the goal of our creation was not simply that we might be happy, but happy in beholding God's own eternal excellencies. Not in beholding our own accomplishments. Not in the enjoyment of our own sensual appetites. Not in the development of a healthy self-esteem or in the acquisition of a four-bedroom home with a three-car garage.

The *joy* which the angels proclaimed should never be thought of in terms of "feeling good about yourself" or living in the lap of luxury or self-indulgent smugness or that superficial psychological giddiness that comes from reaping the material comforts of western society.

In his excellent book, *The Joy Project*, Tony Reinke explains the endless quest of men and women today to find joy. Where they think it will be found reveals how deceived and clueless they are about true joy:

"We conclude that the barriers to abiding joy are the unhealthy choices that clog our lives. The root problem, we think, is that we're stuck in a rut of predictability and laziness, so we must unstick ourselves. We turn to self-improvement. We make new resolutions. We scour the Internet for list-blogs that promise lasting change with easy effort. We buy productivity apps for our phones. We resolve to become more "chill" parents, sexier spouses, better friend-winners, and more purposeful people-influencers. We need to sit less and walk more. We need to sleep more and eat less. We need to get to the gym a few times a week to lose fat and build muscle. We purge fast food, drop the carbs, and fork down more vegetables. We drink more water, less coffee, less soda. We buy organic, fair trade . . . gluten-free, free-range. We pay off credit card debt and build our savings. We clip coupons. We invest money in a new retirement plan. We set aside some funds for a future vacation. We clean out the garage. We purge our closets of junk. We buy apps to track our progress and planners to micromanage our days. We commit to staying on top of our e-mails,

checking our phones less often, watching less television, visiting the library more, and reading our neglected stacks of books. We chase a long list of changes to sharpen our daily routines [and] to tweak our daily habits” all from the misguided belief that the desperately-desired and long-awaited joy that our hearts crave so deeply will be waiting for us at the end of the line.”

The *joy* proclaimed by the angels on that first Christmas night, the joy that God offers to all of us in Christ Jesus, is a ***deep (not superficial or merely surface), durable (sustains you in the worst of times, no less than in the best of times) delight (not merely duty or following God out of a sense of moral obligation) in the splendor of God (not in the stuff or goodies or achievements that occupy so many today) that utterly ruins you for anything else.***

It is a whole-souled savoring of the spiritual sweetness of Jesus that drives out all competing pleasures and leads the soul to rest content with the knowledge of God and the blessings of intimacy with him. This is the kind of *joy* that, rather than being dependent on material and physical comfort, actually frees you from bondage to it and liberates you from sinful reliance on worldly conveniences and gadgets and gold.

***(2) Joy in God matters profoundly because apart from our souls relishing the breathtaking beauty of Christ and resting in the all-sufficiency of his grace and goodness, we don't stand a chance against the world, the flesh, and the devil.***

***The key to living a successful, sin-killing life doesn't come primarily from trying harder but from enjoying more.*** I'm not saying that you can be a successful Christian without trying. I'm not advocating passivity. What I'm saying is that enjoyment empowers effort. Pleasure in God is the power for purity.

The biblical authors' commitment to our joy in Jesus was motivated, at least in part, by the fact that ***Satan was no less committed to their joy in the passing pleasures of sin*** (cf. Hebrews 11:25). The diabolical strategy of the enemy is to seduce us into believing that the world and the flesh and sinful self-indulgence could do for our weary and broken hearts what God couldn't. This is the battle that we face each day. We awaken to a world at war for the allegiance of our minds and the affections of our souls. The winner will be whoever can persuade us that he will bring greatest and most soul-satisfying joy. That is why we must labor and pray and strive so passionately and sacrificially for joy in Jesus.

***(3) Joy in God matters profoundly because unlike so many other affections in the soul or activities in life, joy engages and expresses the totality of our being.***

You can understand something without rejoicing in it. For example, I understand a little of how a car operates, how the engine works. But even the thought of looking under the hood of a car makes me physically sick! I find absolutely no joy in it.

You can make a decision in life or exercise your will in regard to some matter that you profoundly dislike, in which you find no joy. I'm thinking of a decision I might make to eat the squash you serve me lest I cause great offense. I'll do it, but I certainly won't enjoy it!

But when you truly rejoice in something you must both understand it and choose it. Joy requires the engagement of every faculty of soul and spirit and mind and heart. Joy gives expression to the whole of who you are in a way that nothing else can. Only joy requires everything within us to reach its consummate expression.

***(4) Joy in God matters profoundly because there is no such thing as hypocritical joy!*** There is no such thing as insincere joy. You can pretend to have joy when you really don't (as when I'll pretend to enjoy the squash you serve me at your home). You can fake having joy, but ***you can't have fake joy***. There's something pure and sincere and genuine about joy that isn't the case with any other human emotion.

#### *Conclusion*

Perhaps the greatest mistake you could possibly make in processing and responding to this message is to think that an emphasis on joy breeds passivity or leads to a safe and self-absorbed lifestyle or an approach to Christianity in which the believer is so obsessed with the condition of his heart or his emotional state of being that he neglects his

family or ignores the needs of his neighbor or becomes coldly indifferent toward the lost or retreats in isolation from the hurts and needs of others.

It is deep delight and joy in the all-satisfying beauty of Christ that stokes the white hot flame of passion for the plight of the nations.

It is deep delight and joy in the all-satisfying beauty of Christ that energizes the will of a man or woman to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to preserve a marriage that is falling apart.

It is deep delight and joy in the all-satisfying beauty of Christ that empowers the human heart to overcome addictive behavior and sustains the soul in its fight against sin and temptation.

It is deep delight and joy in the all-satisfying beauty of Christ that enables a weak and broken soul to persevere when a job is lost or a child rebels or a promise is shattered or a dream comes to naught.

It is deep delight and joy in the all-satisfying beauty of Christ that encourages the timid and fearful heart to engage and confront the Christ-less culture in which we live with the good news of the gospel of the cross of Christ and the life and forgiveness and hope that can only be found through faith in Jesus.

It is deep delight and joy in the all-satisfying beauty of Christ that will sustain a church through adversity and bind the hearts of its people together in unity and love and mutual affection.

***This is the joy that is ours for the taking, now and forever, because God has sent to us his Son, a Savior, who is Jesus Christ, the Lord! Joy to the world, indeed!***