

The Gift That Makes You Really Happy
From the Series, “The Different Gifts of Christmas”
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Introduction

When I grew up, our family had a cat - A Siamese cat. His name was “Ting-a-Ling”. The picture to the right isn’t him, but it’s close. “Tingy” as we called him, was a great cat. When you grow up with a cat, at some point you come to believe that almost all cats are great. You also get to know some of the idiosyncrasies of cats.



Here’s an interesting one: Cats love boxes. If you want to make a cat happy, take an empty box, any size and leave it on the floor. Most cats will immediately try to climb in. If the box is comfortably larger than the cat, great. But a cat will climb into a box even if it’s small. It’s not unusual to find a cat curled up sleeping in a box that’s barely large enough.

Some scientists have given a lot of thought to why cats love boxes so much. (Some scientists, it seems, have a lot of time on their hands.) In the end, it’s only speculation and no one really knows why. We only know that, if you want to make a cat really happy, just give it an empty box.

We’re in our Advent series, “The Different Gifts of Christmas” Today, we’re going to talk about: “The Gift that Makes you Really Happy.” Let’s read about a time that such a gift came to the world:

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:8-11)

Look at that: “I bring you good news that will cause **great joy** for all the people...” When this message is presented, we’ll be celebrating the third Sunday of the Advent season. On this day, we light the Advent candle of Joy. We think of joy on this day because the angels announced a message of good news - Good news that was intended to bring not just joy, but great joy.

Let's ask a question here: It's been over 2,000 years since the birth of the Christ child. Let's think about the average resident of planet earth. When they think about the birth of Christ, do they experience joy? Sadly, for the average person, I think the answer is, "no". If you're listening right now, and the answer for you is, "no", let's ask a question: ***Would you like to experience joy? The kind of joy that the angels announced so long ago.***

Let's find out how you can experience that joy.

I. Definition

Let's start with a simple definition. What is joy? Let's say that "joy" is when someone is **very** happy. Lots of times, when we think of joy, we think of phrases like: "Leap for joy." In that case, you're so filled with happiness that you have to jump.

That sounds great. Now, I don't know about you, but I would get tired jumping after a while. So, this kind of joy is not a long-term kind of thing. Is there another kind of joy? Perhaps **quiet** joy? I think there is.

For now, let's say that joy is when someone is very happy. It can put a big smile on your face. It can make you jump. It can make you take a deep breath and enjoy a quiet moment.

That's joy. Now that we know what we're talking about, let's ask a question:

II. Things we normally think of when we think of joy

When we think of joy, what do we normally think about? I think that most people think about: Riches, fame, and luxury. Ah, Yes – to live in Hollywood! To have adoring fans cheer for you. To have more money than you know what to do with. To have anything a rational person would want.

This sounds great, but there are two problems with this. First, it's not always what it's cracked up to be. You can ask Britney Spears. Ms. Spears was a child star who grew into a very successful adult star. She has achieved plenty of riches, fame, and luxury. Sadly, Ms. Spears is a good example of what riches fame, and luxury can do to you when they go wrong.

To find out why, go to a web search engine like "Google" and type in her name. Then, type the word "Conservatorship" and read for a while. Ms. Spears found her life out of control because of bouts with mental illness and various addictions. She was so out-of-control, that family members had to petition to have control of her life taken away from her. She only recently won a legal battle to get control back. We wish her well, but as we said, she's a premier example of how riches, fame, and luxury can go wrong.

Now, to be honest, there are lots of people who are successful who appear to be happy in their success, but brings us to the second problem. Here it is: No matter how rich you are, sooner or later it ends. One day, we all die. Being rich might allow you to purchase a larger tombstone than the next person, but that doesn't change your final state on this earth.

One of the richest people who ever lived was very troubled by this - The great King Solomon. Here's what he wrote about it:

2 "Meaningless! Meaningless!"
says the Teacher.
"Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless."
3 What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?
4 Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.
(Ecclesiastes 1:1-2)

Solomon, as we said, was one of the richest people ever to live. He had it all. On the other hand, he saw how limited his life was. So, rather than be happy, he became depressed.

As we see, when the average person thinks about joy, they think about riches, fame, and luxury. But those things are limited. They don't always bring happiness. When they do, they don't bring it for long. Is there something more? Yes! There is. And that's what makes Christmas so wonderful.

Eternal Joy

The world offers us limited happiness. But God offers something much, much more.

11 Those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.
(Isaiah 51:11)

Look at that: "Everlasting joy". God offers people everlasting joy - eternal joy. Earlier we asked, "How can we experience the Joy that God offers?" Here's how.

III. Steps to enjoying joy.

Let's talk about the steps to enjoying joy.

Realize that God's joy is different.

The first step is to realize that God's joy is different. Let's go back to cats and boxes. As I said, some scientists have tried to figure out why cats like boxes so much. Here's one theory: The cat thinks the box is a cave. For an animal, a cave is a great place to live. It's strong. It protects you from outside forces, like bad weather and attackers. For cats though, there is a problem: A box isn't a cave.

For humans, this is easy. If we put a picture of a box next to a picture of a cave, we can tell them apart. Box – Cave – Box – Cave. We have no trouble telling the difference. Cats, however, are not on the same level as humans. The cat notices that there are just a few features in a box that vaguely resemble a cave. Then its little brain fills in the gaps. So, the little kitty gets fooled.

Now, humans are much smarter, right? Well, let's think about this. Take something common like money. One day, you get a dollar bill (or, insert your local currency). You find that you can buy something with it - Something that makes you happy.

- An ice cream cone.
- A hamburger.
- Whatever.

Because it made us happy, something goes off in our brains. If one dollar makes us happy, then surely more dollars will make us happier. Joy as we said is when someone is really happy. So, we reason, lots of money leads to joy.

But as we said earlier, having riches isn't always what it's cracked up to be. Maybe money buys a little happiness. But it may buy something else. Maybe money makes us a target for criminals. Maybe in extreme cases we wind up like Britany Spears. And, as we said earlier, all the money in the world won't make us live forever.

So, we need to understand that God's joy is different than the world's joy. The world is full of things that **look like** they will bring us joy, when in fact they're just a small fragment of the real thing.

In fact, God's joy may appear at first to be the opposite of what you'd expect. How does that work? Let's read:

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.
(James 1:2-3)

Sometimes, God gives us things that look at first to be painful and illogical. However, he tells us there is benefit even to those things. Those things can bring joy.

Let's think about an example: Imagine that you're asleep. You wake up, and you see a man standing over you with a knife. That would be terrifying! But now imagine that you see other details - You're in an operating room. The man standing over you with the knife is a surgeon. As it turns out, you became very sick and passed out. You're fortunate that someone called an ambulance and now, a skilled surgeon, along with a whole team of experts, is going to repair the problem that made you sick.

You thought at first, that you were experiencing something painful and meaningless. As it turns out, there may be some pain, but the pain is caused by a caring professional who's going to leave you better than you were before.

That's how it is with God. He is the caring Master who can use pain to bring about better things in our lives. Because of this, we can consider it joy when we have painful experiences.

So, the world is full of things that look like they will bring us joy, when in fact they're just a small fragment of the real thing. And sometimes, they look like the opposite of what we'd expect.

The Greatest thing is God himself.

So, what is the real thing? The real thing is God himself. Realizing that is the next step to enjoying joy.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."
(Isaiah 12:6)

The greatest source of joy, real joy, is the Holy One of Israel. He is the one true God. And more, the one true God can be "among you". That's why it's so important that Isaiah also recorded the following statement:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

We're told here that one day, a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son. His name will be "Immanuel". Immanuel is a word that means "God is with us."

So, the greatest joy comes when God gives us himself. There is no greater gift. And that's what God did on Christmas day over 2000 years ago. Jesus was the Son of God visiting the face of the earth.

Realize that this joy is for everyone.

What more do we need to do to enjoy joy? The next step to enjoying joy is to realize that this joy is for everyone.

Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.
(Psalm 47:1)

Who can shout for joy? Everyone! All nations! It doesn't matter:

- who you are
- or where you came from
- or where your parents came from.

This joy is intended for everyone. All nations - All people.

Believe in Jesus

The next step is the most important step: Believe in Jesus.

8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9)

The angels said that God was going to send something that would bring "Great Joy". Peter says it's "inexpressible and glorious joy". This is getting better and better! Let's take this apart.

"Though you have not seen him..." This is reminiscent of a conversation that Jesus had with the apostle Thomas. Many have heard the name "Doubting Thomas". That's him. After Jesus died and rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples. For some reason, the apostle Thomas wasn't there. Later, when he came back, the other disciples tried to tell him what happened. He didn't believe anything he heard - He thought they were all nuts. Here's what he said:

"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25)

Guess what? Jesus appeared a short while later to Thomas. Here's how the conversation went:

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." 28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:27-28)

So, Thomas believed after he saw. But, how about us? We weren't there - We didn't get to see any of that. Because of this, Jesus added something for you and me.

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29)

Peter may have overheard that conversation. So, he tells us: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; even though you do not see him now, you believe in him". It's possible to believe in Jesus even if you haven't seen him. If you believe in Jesus, you will be on the path to inexpressible and glorious joy. Here's why: When you believe, you receive something amazing: "...for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:9) When you believe in Jesus, you receive the salvation of your soul.

At this point, someone will ask: Why do you need to receive the salvation of your soul? The answer to that question is found all over the Bible. Let's look at just one instance. The apostle John was given a vision of the end of time. Here's what he saw:

11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. 14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. 15 Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

Consider what we've just read: "...Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life..."

You want to have your name written in the book of life. How do you get your name there? That's one of the things that happens when you believe in Jesus. Your name is written in the book of life.

Warning: There's a scary statement coming. If your name is not written in the book of life, you are in danger. We're told that there will be a judgement someday. Anyone who's name is not written in the book of life **will be thrown into the lake of fire.**

If you believe in Jesus, at least two things will happen. First, you will not be thrown into the lake. Instead, next you will see something else that the apostle John saw in his vision:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:1-4)

John tells us that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth. In that world, God will live with his people. That’s the highest fulfillment of “Immanuel”, God is with us. In that world, there will be no death or mourning or crying or pain. God himself will wipe every tear from the eyes of his friends who live in that place.

When you believe in Jesus, that is what you will see. And that is joy.

Let’s pull this all together.

Conclusion

Today we’ve learned about joy - The joy announced by the angels on that Christmas day so long ago. A joy not like any you can find on earth. Not the joy of riches and fame and luxury. They’re not what they’re cracked up to be. And they don’t last for long.

This joy is different. This is **eternal** joy. This is the joy of knowing how to see the one true God walking in your life. This is a kind of joy that can carry you through painful events in your life. This is the joy of knowing that you’re free from the final judgement. Instead, you can have a place secured in God’s eternal kingdom.

It’s possible for us to experience the joy that the angels announced. The main thing that we all have to do is believe in Jesus.

Would you talk with us? We’d love to tell you how to experience eternal joy. There’s important information at the end of this article that will tell you how to contact us.

Sometimes people believed this a long time ago, but the vision has grown dim. Again, talk with us. We’d love for you to experience God’s joy again.

Once you understand God's joy, there's one more thing you can do to enjoy it.
Tell everyone!

4 In that day you will say:
"Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done,
and proclaim that his name is exalted.
5 Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things;
let this be known to all the world.
6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."
(Isaiah 12:4-6)

We hope that everyone who hears this will learn how to experience God's eternal joy.
Then, let's proclaim it to the world, just like the angels did so long ago.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church
www.TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site
PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:

PeaceWithGod.net
