

God Gives Us Joy

From the Series, “Things God Gives Us at Christmas – And All Year Round”

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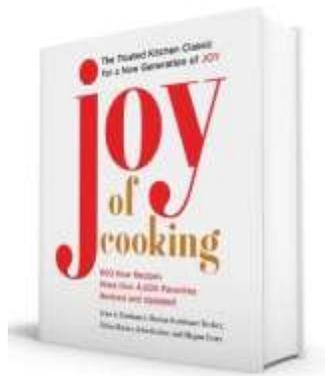
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Introduction

We’re in our series, “Things God Gives Us at Christmas, and All Year Round.” Today, we’re going to talk about the fact that God gives us joy. Joy is relatively easy to find in today’s world - Or, at least you might think.

There are lots of book on it. For example, you can find joy by cooking.



This must work - The author sold 18 million copies. The hardback today has a list price of \$40.00, and I guess it must be worth it.

The book is so popular, a number of authors stole the title. You can read about:

- “The Joy of Photography”
- “The Joy of Yoga”
- “The Joy of Hate” (that’s different)
- There’s even a book called, “They Joy of Chickens”.

Back to “The Joy of Cooking”. The problem with cooking is that you have to clean up the pots, pans and dishes when you’re done. But don’t worry, you can find joy in cleaning up after a meal. You just need the right dishwashing liquid.



Clearly, dishwashing liquid brings people joy. Incidentally, if you look at the label of this particular bottle, you'll see that it's "Ultra" Joy.

Of course, why cook and clean when somebody else cooked up joy for you?



You can always eat an Almond Joy bar. You can get a box containing 24 of these at the local warehouse club for about \$15.00. That's 62 cents a bar. What a bargain! And it must work – Almond Joy has been a hit ever since it was introduced in 1946.

So, joy is easy to find - Or, so marketers and the media would have us think.

If joy is so easy to find, why is it important that the Bible talks about joy at Christmas?

Let's find out by reading a well-known part of the Christmas story.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:1-2)

Let's skip down to verse nine in the same chapter:

And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then,

opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.
(Matthew 2:9-11)

So, we have some men who lived a long, long time ago, in a place far away. We're told that they experienced joy. And not just joy, they had "exceeding great joy".

What is joy?

The Definition of Joy

You all know how to start, right? You go to the dictionary. This is from the Oxford Online Dictionary:

joy

NOUN

A feeling of great pleasure and happiness.

So, we start with "happiness". There are some human experiences that you can't really explain. I'm sure I could go back to the online dictionary and see that someone looked at the word, "happy" and gave it some more words to explain it. Sometimes, though, you just have to say, "here's a feeling that everyone has at some point in their lives. Let's give it a word." And in this case, we just get the word, "happy". If you say you're happy, everyone has some idea of what you mean.

Now, the folks at Oxford, based on the definition we read a moment ago, tell us that "joy" is "great happiness". So, joy is lots of happiness. The more happiness, the more joy.

The Reason for Definitions

Now, why am I doing this? Why am I so concerned about definitions in this and other talks? Our series is called, "Things God gives us at Christmas – and all year round." At the beginning of Advent season to weeks ago, we talked about hope. Then we spoke about love, because God gives us love. In each case, we took a quick look at the dictionary to get us started. Why? Because lots of people are looking for hope and love. And lots of people are looking for happiness and joy. ***When you're looking for something, it's very important to know what you're looking for.***

Let me give you an illustration: I have a friend who is a mechanic. He's a very good mechanic, so he once got an award for his work. The award was a gift certificate to an expensive steak house.



At an expensive steak house, you don't just get the best cuts of meat prepared by the best chefs who specialize in serving the best cuts of meat. You get "presentation" (The food must be placed artistically on the plate to enhance your dining experience). You get atmosphere. You get the best service. Finally, you'll get a top-rate dessert to follow the top-rate meal. So, my friend and his wife dressed up and sat down, and ordered a wonderful meal, something like what you see in this picture.

For some reason that I'm not sure of, my friend decided to bring his children. His seven-year-old daughter ordered a burger and fries. His five-year-old son ordered a hot dog. I'm sure that the burger and fries were high quality. However, I'm not sure his daughter could tell the difference between an expensive steakhouse burger and McDonald's. I'm sure the hot dog was a very good hot dog. However, as it turns out, his son wasn't crazy about it. He was expecting Oscar Meyer. Gourmet hot dogs just aren't the same.

Here's the point: *If you don't know what you're looking for, you may miss it when you see it. And you may accept something much less valuable.*

Can we push the illustration a little further? I remember a while back enjoying the Wednesday night special at an Outback Steakhouse. A few tables over was a large family with a toddler. He was very upset about something. I couldn't help but think that, here we were, in one of the richest nations in history. An average family can go to a steakhouse and enjoy food that people in some poor countries can only dream about. This little boy was surrounded by wealth and good food. And he was sure that he was being cheated somehow.

The point? *If you don't know what you're looking for, you may find that in fact, not only do you miss it, but you're offended by it.*

Back to Joy

Let's get back to the idea of "joy" and dig deeper. We just looked at the definition of happiness and joy. How about looking at the opposite? The opposite of happiness is sadness. The opposite of joy is misery. Misery is lots of sadness. The more sadness, the more misery.

Here's where things get hard. In life, many people are looking for happiness and joy. But sometimes, we're content if we can just escape our sadness and misery, if only for a moment.



A Lot of people in our world are much sadder than they realize. And this leads to a bigger problem than just being sad. When you're sadder than you realize, you become **vulnerable**.

Vulnerable to what? The world has come up with all kinds of substitutes for joy. There are the obvious one, of course.

- The bottle.
- The smoke.
- The needle.

All these things involve putting chemicals into your body that go to your brain. Once there, those chemicals activate all kinds of mechanisms that produce feelings anywhere from pleasure to euphoria. When that happens, the sadness goes away - **But only for a short while**. It comes back later. Then you need more chemicals.

Sometimes it's more subtle things. It can be the refrigerator door. You've all heard of "comfort" foods; the foods that make you feel good when you're down. But, there's only so much you can eat. Then those feelings come back. And now, we've put on some weight, so now we feel sad about our weight.

Then there's a whole list of activities that are fine in themselves, but if you're not careful, you can get lost. For some people, it's work. Should you find a good job and work hard? Of course. But for some, their career takes up more and more time. At some point, people lose track of the "why" behind their ever-increasing hours.

Many people have inside of them a hidden feeling: The feeling that something is wrong – maybe terribly wrong. I could go on for a long time about all the activities that are fine at first glance. But if you're not careful, they can become a place to run from the feelings inside of us that won't go away.

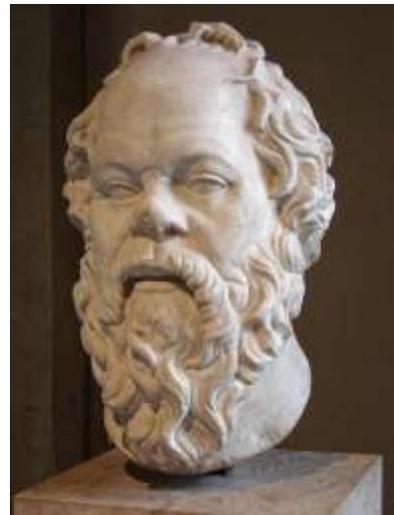
Let's get back to those wise men we read about.

Where do we need to look for Joy?

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:1-2)

Who were these men? In our next series, we’re going to discuss the book of Matthew. The series will be entitled, “The King and I: Matthew Introduces us to the King of the Universe”. We’ll be looking at this story in more detail then. For now, let’s say we have some very educated men who are searching for something. They’re the “Wise Men”, also known as “the Magi”.

Before we get into what they were searching for, we need to look at other “wise men” of their era. You’re looking right now at a marble statue of the famous Greek philosopher, Socrates. He lived a good 400 years before the time the Magi began their search. The Greek philosophers are a surprising group of men. If you were asked to guess what they all did, you would think of men standing on a platform waving their arms and saying very sophisticated, wise things.



They did some of that, or course. But often, they engaged in **mathematics**. Socrates was preceded by another lesser known man, Pythagoras. If you recall junior high math, you may remember the Pythagorean theorem. It has to do with the angles and lines of triangles.

You may be asking, “What has this to do with the Magi and the Christmas story?” And as always, I’m glad you asked. Many of the Greek philosophers believed that all of life could be related to math. You could start with things around you, relate them to math, and then build principles of life from that. If you kept at this, eventually, you could describe ultimate reality.

Socrates took this to a level that challenged the leadership of Greece in his day. The leaders of Greece wanted to worship the ancient Greek gods. They wanted all Greek citizens to follow along. Socrates protested. Socrates believed Greek gods were clearly myths, and because mathematics and philosophy seemed to be the answer, he taught his followers that you didn’t need deities to be a good person.

That might sound familiar. Perhaps you have friends who believe that you don’t need “religion” to be moral. That goes all the way back to Socrates. But people who believe this don’t realize that Socrates developed this idea in a vacuum. He was just looking at the Greek gods around him. He was unaware of something happening just a few hundred miles away in the land of ancient Israel. Over there, people were following what we today call Abrahamic religion:

Belief in one true God, the creator of the heavens and the earth. Because Socrates didn't know about Abrahamic religion, he thought all religion was insufficient.

Now, let's fast-forward 400 years and get back to the Magi. These were highly educated men. They were searching for something. They may have spent their whole lives search through a quest for knowledge. They may have had access to the writings of the Greek philosophers as well as other thinkers of their day. Here's what's important: *If they did have access to the ancient Greek philosophers, apparently, they found the Greeks to be insufficient.* We know that because they weren't sitting at home being content to play with math and philosophy. They clearly didn't believe that the answer to their search could be found on the earth. They didn't believe that you could start on the earth and reason your way to ultimate truth.

Because of all this, they looked up. They looked up to the heavens. They looked up to the stars.

There's a familiar line from science fiction: "Space – the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise". Imagine instead of "Enterprise", you heard, "These are the travels of the Magi."

These men were searching for something. When these men took their search to the heavens, they saw something amazing: They saw a very special star.



The Source of Joy (as well as hope and peace)

Why is this all important? Recall that we started our series in the Advent season by discussing hope and love. We've learned in our discussions that hope and love are both words that can have different meanings, depending on where you find them. People use these words one way. In the Bible, they're used differently. ***The difference is the source.***

When hope and love are found on earth, they can be good things, but they're limited, just like the humans who experience them. When hope and love are found in God, they take on all the

qualities of God. God is infinite, so his hope and his love are unlimited. God is eternal, so his hope and his love last forever, unchanging.

It's the same with joy. We learned the truth about hope and love by looking at the Holy Scriptures; the Bible. Sometimes though, God is gracious. If people are looking for something that he wants to give them, he can answer them in very unusual ways. The Magi looked to the heavens. God gave them a very special star. When they saw that star, they knew in their hearts that it would lead them to what they were looking for: A great king. And so, they felt great joy. And they were not content to sit around feeling good. They packed their bags and followed that star.

Let's read again:

And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.
(Matthew 2:9-11)

These men looked to the heavens, and they found what they were looking for.

Now understand, the star led them to a child. The Wise Men didn't need to see armies. They didn't need to see a palace. They knew what they were looking for. The minute they saw him they said, "Yes!". Then, they fell down in worshipped the great king.

The Wise Men learned something extremely important. The source of eternal joy can't be found anywhere on earth. It's only found in heaven. It's only found in God.

There are things that God gives us at Christmas time, and all year round. One of those things is joy. Let's read a few things the Bible says about the joy that God gives us.

Biblical Passages on Joy

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

We've said that one of our problems is sadness. Life goes wrong sometimes. When things go wrong, people often feel sad. God changes that. God gives us strength. Trials and pain may come, but people who follow God can face the pain with joy.

Why is that? How can that be?

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

Here's a man who says that everything he might have depended on in life has failed. And yet, he finds joy. We're on the way to the answer. Having things that go well in life can certainly make you happy. And there's nothing wrong with that. But in the end, that's not where ultimate joy lies. For this man, his ultimate joy is in God. He says, "I will be joyful in God my Savior".

Perhaps you've never heard this before? Maybe you're saying, "How come this doesn't work for me?" The prophet Isaiah tells us about our problem.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)

The Wise Men were searching for Jesus. They were moving towards him. They were following when God led them. But we, Isaiah says, have turned to our own way. We don't follow God. We don't seek him. We follow our own ways. That doesn't lead to the eternal joy of God.

But that's not the worst problem for people who turn from God.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. If you don't seek God a lack of joy will be the least of your problems. According to Jesus, people who don't follow him will experience the wrath of God. (John 3:36)

How do you avoid that - How do you avoid the wrath of God? Where do you start? Jesus said it right here: **believe**.

What should you believe? Well, a number of things, but let's start with the most important. Humans have all turned away. You need to turn back. Like the Wise Men, you need to seek Jesus. You need to come to him.

Here's what the apostle Paul said about first steps.

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
(Hebrews 11:6)

So, believe that God is there. He exists. He's real. That's why you can't find eternal joy or eternal anything unless you start with God.

Next, believe that God is good. He is a rewarder of those who seek him. That's how it was with the Wise Men. They searched for him. They found him.

Next, you need to know about one of the greatest acts of joy in all time.

... looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

We were told earlier that we are in danger of God's wrath. That's because disobedience is called sin. Jesus paid the price of our sin by dying on the cross. And he didn't so because he was forced to do so. He did so because he saw a vision; a vision that brought him joy. He saw all the people who would be saved because of what he was going through. He loved those people. The thought that they would be saved from the wrath of God brought him joy.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

There are things that God gives us at Christmas, and all year round. One of those things is joy.

Are you looking for joy? You just need a few things.

1) You need to know what you're looking for. The Wise Men, they knew what they were looking for, and they discovered where to look. There are lots of things on earth that can bring joy, and many of them are fine. Some though, are traps and distractions. None of them bring lasting, eternal joy. Stop looking for anything on this earth. Like the Wise Men, you need to look up to the heavens, to God.

2) You need to seek God. You need to believe that he is good and that he rewards those who seek him. That's what happened with the Wise Men.

3) You need to believe Jesus died for your sins. If you receive him, he will feel joy. "For the joy set before him, he endured the cross".



One last thing: We've covered a lot today, and we've only barely begun to discuss what the Bible says about joy. The joy we're talking about is the joy we'll see someday in heaven. Because it's real there, we see parts of it here on earth during our lives. We can experience joy in worship. We can experience joy in serving God. But it's not a feeling that we feel all the time. We're not saying that you'll feel a sense of ecstasy every minute of your life. You can jump for joy

like the woman in the picture here, but at some point, you come back down. ***But this is still tons better than what the world as to offer.***

Where do you start? Come visit us at Trinity Church of Teaneck. We'd love to tell you more. You can find all the info you need by visiting our web site TrinityTeaneck.org.

Or, visit Billy Grahams' web site: PeaceWithGod.net

So, this Christmas, consider receiving God's gift of joy. It's found when you seek God. Just like the wise men, he will lead you to his son, Jesus Christ.