



December 11, 2022 – “Songs Of Joy” – Acts 16:16-34

OPEN

There is a rich tradition of joyful Christmas carols that come from our country's European roots. “Angels We Have Heard On High” was originally the French carol “Les Anges dans nos campagnes” (1842). The lyrics of “Joy To The World” was written by English hymnwriter Isaac Watts (1719). “O Come, All Ye Faithful” was first written in Latin, possibly dating back to the 1600s.

Joyful celebration is found throughout the Advent themes. First, we reflected on **hope**. “Listen! Your watchmen raise their voices, they shout joyfully together; for they will see with their own eyes when the LORD restores Zion. Be cheerful, shout joyfully together, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 52:8-9)

The second theme was **faith**. Mary and Joseph lived with fearless faith, as they opened themselves to God's grace and guidance. Mary expressed praise in a joyful song – The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55).

Today we focus on the **joy** of the shepherds who lived on the margins of society. They heard “good news of great joy” from the angels and went to worship Jesus. Then the shepherds “returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Luke 2:20)

The BBC produces a unique show called “[The Unexpected Star](#)” hosted Michael McIntyre. An elaborate scheme is devised to ultimately bring an individual to the Theatre Royale stage in London. Initially stunned, the “unexpected star” gives a performance at the close of the show. In a way, the shepherds became “unexpected stars” as they were filled with joy following their discovery of the infant Christ.

DIG

Consider another story in **Acts 16:16-34**. This story of joy expressed moves beyond an initial discovery of Jesus. What we observe in the experience of Paul and Silas is sustaining joy in the Lord. Their story unfolds in four phases.

[A] Persecution – vv. 16-24

The promise of Christmas is that authentic joy can be present despite difficulty. Paul and his team had an impact in Philippi. They cast out a demon from a slave girl which angered her owners. Then the crowd reacted in anger. Not only was there great opposition and misrepresentation but flogging followed. Then Paul and Silas were jailed. Even in such circumstances, James 1:2 teaches us to embrace trials as an opportunity to progress in Christian character. The command is literally, “all joy count”!



The ruins of Philippi



The site of the jail

What's the lesson? We must learn to welcome persecution and difficulty as an opportunity to make spiritual progress. For the Christian, every experience becomes a “safe space” to celebrate God.

[B] Jubilation – v. 25

The promise of Christmas is that God sustains us, joyfully, through difficulty. We are commanded in I Thessalonians 5:16-17, “*Be joyful always. Pray continually*”. This is what Paul and Silas did! In his book **Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy With God** (Penguin, 2014, 5), Timothy Keller comments,

Prayer is both conversation *and* encounter with God...We must know the awe of praising his glory, the intimacy of finding his grace, and the struggle of asking his help, all of which can lead us to know the spiritual reality of his presence. Prayer, then, is both awe *and* intimacy, struggle *and* reality.

When life is in shambles, is this what you naturally do: “*Prayer and praising, voices raising, worshipping God on high*” (verse 3, “We Three Kings”)?

Though not our natural reaction to difficulty, we are assured that God meets us in our worship of Him (“enthroned on the praises of Israel” Psalm 22:3). No, jubilation in persecution is not a normal reaction.

If we encounter someone perpetually happy, despite problems, we call them a “pollyanna”. This comes from the title character of Eleanor Porter’s 1913 novel for children. To count it all joy when we have trials, we cannot just hope that we can put on an act like Haley Mills in Disney’s 1960 adaptation of *Pollyanna*. We must obey by the grace of God.

What’s the lesson? We must not pray and praise because of the presence or absence of problems. Prayer and praising is based upon the reality of Jesus Christ in our lives. Joy is nurtured when we come to experience the greater value of knowing Christ (see Philippians 3:7-11).

[C] Emancipation – vv. 26-30

The emancipation of Paul and Silas was shocking...physically and emotionally. Consider, however, how calm Paul and Silas remained. In contrast, the earthquake and open prison doors sent the jailer into an emotional tailspin, to the point where he was ready to commit suicide.

However, Paul called out with authority (“*a loud voice*”) urging the jailer not to harm himself. Freedom from our difficulties will not always come in such sensational ways. However, we can be sure that there will always be the calm, secure presence of Jesus available to us.

When Iron Gates Yield (Moody Press, 1955, 11) is the story of English missionary Geoffrey Bull, who had just started ministering in Tibet in 1950 when China invaded. He was captured by the People’s Liberation Army and labeled as an imperialist spy. Bull languished in prison for three years, subjected to many abuses and brainwashing. He wrote his book “*to declare [God’s] grace, His faithfulness, and His power, wholly sufficient for every extremity of service and trial.*”

What’s the lesson? We must foster joy in the difficult places of our lives. We may not know when we will experience emancipation from the pain. But we can always experience deeper communion with God.

[D] Celebration – vv. 31-34

Eventually, there was a time of celebration. First of all, Paul and Silas had the opportunity to share the Gospel story with the jailer and his entire household! Further, the jailer washed the wounds of Paul and Silas. What is more, the jailer and his whole household were baptized.

What a celebration ensued! “*And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and was overjoyed, since he had become a believer in God together with his whole household.*”

What’s the lesson? We must not doubt that there will be times of celebration. As we endure, and express the joy of the Lord, we will in God’s time see the result of our labor.

REFLECT

How do we move on from the initial joy of meeting Jesus to living in sustained joy? First, we must be sure that we are in a true relationship with God, by faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We cannot grow deeper in joyfully relating to God if we do not have a relationship with Him to begin with.

What happened in ancient Israel under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah? The people of God needed to repent and renew their relationship to Him.

Having heard the word of God, the people in Jerusalem were weeping. Ezra and Nehemiah urged them to see that day as “*holy to the Lord*” and they commanded them, “*do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*” (Nehemiah 8:10)

Take some time to reflect, worshipfully on the story of Paul and Silas. Listen to the song [I Bless Your Name](#)

*Jesus our Lord, the thought of Thee
Unlooses prayer and song;
Oh, by the blessed thought of Thee,
We would be borne along*

*Bear us along to realms of prayer,
To regions yet undreamed;
Oh, let us meet and commune there –
Redeemer and redeemed.*

- Amy Carmichael