

**Series: Christmas 2023 –**

**Title: THE SHEPHERD'S CANDLE: JOY**

Text: Luke 2:8-20

**What event or day tells you the Christmas season has arrived in your mind and heart?**

- November 1<sup>st</sup> – one day after Halloween – Christmas songs
- Red cups show up at Starbucks
- TV specials begin
- Christmas Movies begin
- Day after Thanksgiving
  - Black Friday
  - Outside lights go up on your house
  - Christmas tree goes up
- Home style, Décor, Cottage Style, Southern Living – Christmas decor
- Our tree

**Am I bound by the idea of a Happy and Perfect Christmas?**

The concept of an in-vogue, perfect, pristine, thematic Christmas tree stands as one poignant symbol of how the holiday unfolds for many.

It embodies our collective desire for a picturesque Christmas—a tree adorned flawlessly with ornaments, lights gleaming in the night.

- We all hope for that perfect holiday scenario. We all yearn for that flawless holiday setting. We all hope for that perfect holiday portrait.
- Reality often diverges from this ideal. More often than not, actuality falls short of our desires.
- Instead of the envisioned picture-perfect storybook Hallmark Christmas, we encounter mishaps like burnt meals, family tensions, or no family at all, and gifts that aren't quite our style.
  - I think of Peter Billingsley's portrayal of Ralphie Parker in a Christmas Story receiving a pink Bunny outfit from an aunt on Christmas.
- More often than not, our Christmas resembles an old disheveled, tattered tree rather than the pristine scenes depicted in glossy magazines.

**This mirrors and parallels life in its broader scope and canvas.**

- Life seldom conforms or adheres to perfection;
  - It's a tapestry woven with disappointments, unexpected hurdles, and moments of heartache.
  - It's rife with letdowns, unforeseen challenges, and heartaches.

**A fundamental question:**

**Must life be flawless for us to discover joy and purpose?**

- Is absolute perfection a prerequisite for us to discover genuine joy and purpose?
- Does Christmas, as we imagine it, need to unfold precisely to bring us the rejuvenation we seek?
- Or.....
- Does our insistence on perfection hinder us from embracing the true joy of the season and the marvels of everyday life?
- Does our pursuit of perfection prevent us from fully welcoming the genuine joy of this time and appreciating the wonders of what God has given?

“Man cannot live without joy; therefore when he is deprived of true spiritual joys it is necessary that he become addicted to carnal pleasures.” – Thomas Aquinas

- Cheap substitutes that:
  - Do not stand up in storms
  - Do not sustain in struggles
  - Do not suffice in sorrows

The world is in moral chaos because they have rejected the inner joy that only comes from God

**These inquiries, in my view, bring the shepherds into focus and point to their relevance in the Christmas story.**

- Their perspective can guide us beyond the pursuit of an ideal world, encourages us to move beyond the quest for a flawless world, and instead shows us how to find joy in a reality that's often far from perfect.
- They serve as a reminder to move past the pursuit of a perfection and uncover joy within life's imperfections

**Luke 2:8-10; 15-20**

*<sup>8</sup> And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around*

them, and they were filled with great fear. <sup>10</sup> And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people...”

<sup>15</sup> When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup> And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. <sup>18</sup> And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

### **Consider the Shepherds: Rejected by men, yet chosen by God.**

#### **Low rung in society**

- The shepherds occupied the lowest rung in the social hierarchy of the New Testament era.

#### **Rugged lives mostly removed from society**

- Their lives were rugged; they endured harsh outdoor conditions with minimal comforts, spending their days mostly among animals or in isolation from the wider community.
- Consequently, they were looked down upon by most citizens.

#### **Low reputation and seen as unreliable in society**

- Historical accounts and records reveal that Biblical shepherds were deemed such unreliable figures that their credibility as witnesses in court was consistently questioned.

Yet God chose these men to encounter the coming Messiah, to hear the words of the angels, and to be His witness to the people

### **Luke 2:10-11**

<sup>10</sup> “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” <sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord

### **Consider the Shepherds: Though their circumstances did not change – yet everything changed**

#### **Their Lives did not change**

Even after their encounter with the angel and baby Jesus, the shepherds didn't seek fame, acclaim, fortune, or publicity.

- Instead, it appears that while their lives were undoubtedly influenced by the events in Bethlehem, and despite the profound impact this had on their lives, they returned to the challenges and hardships of their ordinary existence and regular lives.
- But their regular lives, their daily grind was now infused with JOY

### **Their Lives Now Carried a Promise**

- Amidst everything, the angel's message that evening resonated with and carried a profound promise of "great joy" for them.

### **Their Lives Now Had seen the Messiah**

- The advent, the arrival of Christ would infuse their lives with joy that transcended their present situation.

### **Their Lives Now Experienced True Joy**

- Despite their unchanged circumstances, a lasting and enduring joy would be theirs. Though their circumstances remained unchanged, this joy would endure indefinitely.

### **God desires Joy over Happiness**

#### ***chara*: joy, delight**

Original Word: *χαρά, ἄς, ῆ*

- "extend favor, lean towards, be favorably disposed" – properly,  
Joy = the awareness (of God's) grace, "grace recognized"
- ("rejoice because of grace"),<sup>i</sup>
  - Matthew 25:21 N-AFS
    - GRK: *εἰς τὴν χαρὰν τοῦ κυρίου*

#### **Joy -enter into the joy of your master.'**

- KJV: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.
- INT: into the joy of the master

#### **Matt. 25:21**

*'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'*

#### **Joy is the serious business of heaven. - C. S. Lewis**

What becomes apparent in the angel's proclamation is a distinct separation between happiness and joy, often mistaken as interchangeable concepts.

- Here, the angel elevates the notion of joy to a different realm.
  - We commonly link happiness to external conditions—assuming that if everything is going well, happiness will follow suit.
  - Similarly, we often confine joy within the same limitations.
- However, the angel's message to the shepherds—and a significant point for us all to grasp—

**Joy entails discovering inner contentment, peace, and hope that remain constant regardless of daily circumstances or experiences.**

The marvel of Christmas lies in the revelation that Christ's arrival wasn't intended for us to find fleeting happiness but to encounter enduring joy through a relationship with this child. ("grace recognized").

I'd like to propose today that not only do everyday individuals struggle to discern and differentiate between happiness and joy, but as Christians, we grapple daily with distinguishing these two concepts as well.

- In my conversations and interactions with fellow believers, and in my personal pursuit of following Jesus daily, the prevalent pursuit seems to be happiness.
- Our sense of purpose, well-being, and perspective on life often hinge on external circumstances.
- Similarly, when we discuss our feelings about God, those sentiments are usually tied to what God is or isn't doing for us in our external lives.
  - **How often do you hear people mention that they feel blessed by God?**
    - More often than not, this sense of blessing is linked to positive occurrences in their lives—financial stability, harmony at home, good health—leading to happiness and a positive view of God.
  - **How often do you hear people mention that they feel distant to God or abandoned by God?**
    - More often than not, this sense of brokenness is linked to negative occurrences in their lives—financial instability, disharmony at home, bad health—leading to depression and a negative view of God.

Now, let me clarify, I firmly believe that our "blessings," as we term them, originate from God.

- However, I want to caution against the gospel being primarily focused on our pursuit of happiness.
- The essence of the scriptures is predominantly centered on discovering joy and sharing that joy with the world.

Diagram:

<b>Joy</b>	<b>Happiness</b>
State or Condition	Emotion
Constant	Temporary
Internal	External
Comes from God	Comes from Environment

Happiness is a feeling based on circumstances

Joy is an attitude that defies circumstances

**Now, the question arises:**

### **How do we attain this enduring joy?**

- Where does it originate? What serves as its wellspring?
- We're aware that many, even among those who identify as Christians, attempt to derive joy from various sources.
- Yet, it often proves fleeting. The transient joy sought from external sources fails to sustain us during challenging times.
  - For instance, if one finds joy in wealth, what happens when employment is lost? If career ambitions provide joy, what if circumstances prevent continued work?

### **How do we cultivate a joy that surpasses situations and isn't contingent on our circumstances?**

- Joy is found in the choice to enter into His grace through contentment, peace, and hope in God, irrespective of life's circumstances.
- Joy is found in the choice to affirm that due to God's love, presence, and guidance, we find inner peace.
- Joy is found in the choice to recognize God's goodness and mercy even when surrounded by adversity.
- Joy is found in the choice to be continually aware of God's presence amid life's fluctuations.
- The angel presented this profound gift of joy to the shepherds, transcending everything else around them.
- Joy is found in the choice of acknowledging our sense of being blessed by God even in the absence of tangible external evidence to support such a claim.

Look at those again. Each one has three consistent words:

Three Words: Found – Choice – God

Authentic joy emanates from God.

### **The Father – The Filling**

#### **Romans 15:13**

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*

### **The Spirit – The Fruit**

#### **Gal. 5:22-23**

*<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*

### **The Son – The Fullness**

#### **Jn. 15:11**

*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*

### **Psalm 16:11**

*You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

### **Joy is from God and is found only in God.**

It is found when we are given by the Father, through coming to Jesus, so that we may gain the Spirit who produces the Joy that we long for and need.

### **The Question is Will You Enter In?**

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<sup>i</sup> Cognate: 5479 *xará* (another feminine noun from the root *xar-*, "extend favor, lean towards, be favorably disposed") – properly, the awareness (of God's) grace, favor; joy ("grace recognized").

[The etymological link between 5463 */xaírō* ("rejoice because of grace"), 5479 */xará* ("joy because of grace") and 5485 */xáris* ("grace") – i.e. that they are all cognates – is observed by LS (p 1,976), Zod (Dict), CBL, Wigram's Englishman's Greek Concordance (Ed. Ralph Winters), Word Study Greek-English NT (Tyndale, Ed. Paul McReynolds) – see also DNTT (2,356) and TDNT (9; 359,60).