

## SESSION 3

# Embracing Joy



### QUESTION 1:

*What are some traditions that bring you joy at Christmas?*

## THE POINT

We can experience great joy because Jesus saves.

## THE PASSAGE

Psalm 95:1-3; Luke 2:4-14

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

The Christmas season is evident in so many ways: trees and lights, gifts and wrapping paper, choirs and carols, and adorable preschoolers acting out the Nativity story. Alongside these cherished old traditions have come new ones like ugly Christmas sweaters and non-stop Hallmark® Christmas movies.

So many of us relish these annual traditions because they take us back to our childhood. Christmas is also a reason for long-distance families to gather together. We find joy in these moments. Yet, many of us struggle to find joy in these same traditions since they only serve as reminders of the ones we used to celebrate with: deceased parents, spouses, or other family members. Or the broken family that used to be together.

Our joy should not be tied to the outward trappings of Christmas. When family members return to their homes and we take down the decorations, we often put away our joy too. But our true joy should rise out of the reason and purpose behind Christmas, a purpose often lost in the array of Christmas trimmings and lights. We can embrace a joy year-round—even when life is hard. It's a joy that rises out of life in Christ.

## Psalm 95:1-3

**1 O** come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

**2** Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.

**3** For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

Who doesn't want to be happy and joyful? Those feelings are often the driving force behind what we do. Grandparents give their grandchildren gifts that are fun and will fill them with happiness. Adults are no different. We may need a new vacuum cleaner, but a new 65-inch TV would really make us happy!

There is a distinction between happiness and joy. Our English word *happiness* is rooted in coincidence, chance, and good luck. In this sense, happiness is based on our outward circumstances. Happiness comes and goes depending on if the sun is shining or if our team wins. But from a biblical perspective, *joy* is independent of outside events. It can be raining hard as you listen to sports guys on the radio talk about how poorly your team did, but you can still experience joy.

The difference comes in where we look for joy and happiness. Joy is wrapped up in God. Circumstances change—and change often—but God never changes. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Heb. 13:8). When we consider all God has done for us, we are drawn to trust Him—and that leads to joy.

In Psalm 95, we see the character and work of God.

► **The rock of our salvation.** While a rock makes us think of God as unshakeable and immovable, this image is also a reminder of when the Israelites were in the wilderness and desperate for water. At God's command, Moses struck a rock and life-giving water gushed out (Ex. 17:1-7). The rock is God

Himself, and He has proven repeatedly that He will provide what we desperately need.

- ▶ **A great God.** He is almighty and all knowing. Nothing is beyond His knowledge or power.
- ▶ **A great King above all gods.** No other “gods” come close to the One true sovereign Lord of the universe. A god is not much of a god if he can’t rule supremely. Because our God reigns over these “gods” they are proven to be frauds and not gods at all.

This psalmist called for us to “sing” and “make a joyful noise” to the almighty God because He works on our behalf. The psalmist repeatedly referred to God as “the LORD,” which in Hebrew was the name *Yahweh*, the name by which God revealed Himself and entered into a covenant relationship with His people (Ex. 3:14-15). Those who trust God and enter into a relationship with Him are recipients of His salvation, His care, and His provision.

When we focus on ourselves, joy is absent. When all we see are our problems, joy is absent. We see no way out and no solution within ourselves. But when we look to God, we see the One who carries us through regardless of outward circumstances or our own internal deficiencies. He saves us from our troubles. He saves us from our sin. He saves us from ourselves. Then we find true joy.

When we reflect on the goodness and greatness of God, we’re compelled to thank Him and joyfully praise Him. Joyful praise is something believers should do in private as well as with others. Notice that the psalmist repeatedly called to the people: “Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving” and “make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.” Joyful praise is contagious.

We turn our attention to the events of Jesus’ birth to see the way He truly was “the rock of our salvation.”

## **QUESTION 2:**

***What are some ways salvation from God brings joy to your life?***

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## Luke 2:4-7

**4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)**

**5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.**

**6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.**

**7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.**

We never tire of a good story. Even though we may have heard it a hundred times before, we gladly listen to the family patriarch tell it again at the family reunion. Many of us will read a suspenseful book or sit through a romantic movie multiple times because we love the story. The same could be said of the events of Christmas; we gladly read again the history Luke recorded because this true account touches us like no other story can.

Jesus wasn't just born anywhere; He was born in "the city of David, which is called Bethlehem," a fact foretold by the prophet Micah eight hundred years earlier.

**"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Mic. 5:2).**

Joseph traveled with Mary 85-90 miles south of their hometown of Nazareth. Such a trip would take anywhere from four to seven days of hard travel in those days, but God orchestrated events through an empire-wide census that would require Joseph to be in

Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-3). This census affirms another important fact about Jesus: He would be “of the house and lineage of David.”

- ▶ “And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam. 7:16).
- ▶ “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth” (Jer. 23:5).

Men were required to participate in the census, but nothing indicates women had to go. Mary could’ve stayed in Nazareth for the rest of her pregnancy. Perhaps she wanted to get away from the gossip that likely was continually circulating about her in Nazareth. Although Mary and Joseph were betrothed and considered husband and wife, they were not yet living together in a fully consummated marriage (Matt. 1:18,25).

Mary likely went because she wanted her soon-to-be husband to be by her side during the latter days of her pregnancy. This was no typical pregnancy. Mary certainly knew she was a virgin (Luke 1:34), and an angel had confirmed this truth for Joseph (Matt. 1:20). No one had “traveled this road” before, and who better for Mary to be with than someone who also knew the miraculous nature of what was happening to them?

Jesus’ birth took place in the most humble conditions because “there was no guest room available for them.” We often give an unknown innkeeper a bad rap for sending Mary and Joseph away, but nowhere in Scripture is an innkeeper mentioned. In fact, an inn may not have been there at all, at least none like those that come to mind in our American culture. The word *inn* means “guest room.” Larger homes had adjoining rooms where guests could sleep. Luke used the same word in Luke 22:11, when Jesus sent his disciples to inquire about “the guestchamber” where they would observe the Passover. Joseph likely had relatives in Bethlehem, but because of the census, all the homes’ guest rooms were full.

In one-room homes, the animal's feeding troughs were typically in the family's living area. Although the animals likely stayed outside, accommodations were made in the wall for an animal to stick its head in to eat from the trough. Jesus' first crib was an inglorious feeding trough. The young family stayed in the living area where the animals ate.<sup>1</sup>

In his novel titled *The Prince and the Pauper*, Mark Twain told the story of a young prince who met a poor boy his age who bore an uncanny resemblance to him. They decided to change places temporarily to see how the other half lives. Jesus didn't come to earth out of curiosity, to see how the other half lives. Jesus came to earth with a set plan and purpose: to bring us salvation.

### QUESTION 3:

*How would you sum up the good news of Jesus' birth?*

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## Luke 2:8-14

**8** And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

**9** And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

**10** And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

**11** For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

**12** And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

**13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

**14** Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

For citizens of Bethlehem who might have even known about the birth of this baby, nothing was especially unusual about it, except the “unfortunate” fact the baby had to sleep in a manger. Another group was about to be given the ultimate birth announcement. Shepherds quietly watching their sheep were interrupted by the sudden appearance of an angel standing in front of them. They certainly would not have mistaken the angel for someone who just walked up, because “the glory of the Lord shone round about them.” The shepherds “were sore afraid”—as I’m sure we would be too. Angelic appearances seem to have that effect on people!

Fear has a positive place in our lives when it is a reverential and humble fear of God, but when He sends His angelic messenger to us, being afraid seems normative. In the events leading up to the birth of Jesus an angel appeared to Zechariah and to Mary, and both of them were afraid. And both received the same comforting word the angel gave to the shepherds: “Fear not” (Luke 1:13,30).

The angel proclaimed “good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” The impact of that announcement may be lost on those of us who are so familiar with the Christmas story, but these were breathtaking words for these shepherds. Many scholars believe that, by this point in history, shepherding had lost the noble status it once held when Abraham, Moses, and David kept sheep. These shepherds were outcasts because others saw them as dirty and dishonest. These were the “down and outs” who couldn’t catch a break. They were overlooked by others, but not by God. This “good tidings of great joy” was for them too.

#### **QUESTION 4:**

***How does Jesus’ birth mean joy to the world?***

The good news proclaimed the birth of the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus was acknowledged even at His birth as Savior and Lord. We would see the culmination of His role as Savior and Lord at His

death, resurrection, and ascension, but even at His birth, Jesus was hailed for the mission He would carry out.

Such a joy-filled promise of hope and salvation could not be contained. After the angel's announcement, he was joined by a great chorus of other angels proclaiming, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Can we do any less? Christ came to earth to bring us peace and salvation; He has graced us with the very thing we do not deserve—and that is cause to embrace and express great joy.

#### QUESTION 5

*What are some ways we can share Christ in a way that reflects the good news of great joy?*

### ENGAGE

*Use the template below to write your own psalm of praise to God.*

Lord, You are great and mighty!

I see Your greatness in \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I feel Your power when I \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

You have proven Your faithfulness by \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

You are worthy of praise because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Help me, God, to share my joy with \_\_\_\_\_

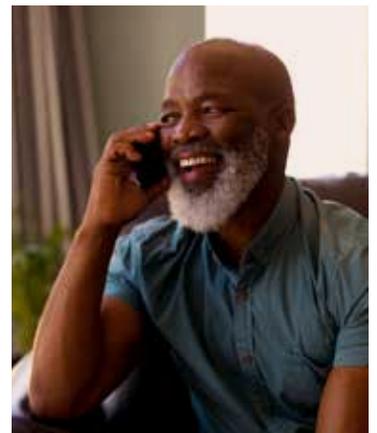
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## LIVE IT OUT

How will you embrace and express joy during the season of Christmas?

- ▶ **Accept.** Christ came to forgive you, restore you, and give you hope and a future. If you have never trusted Christ for salvation, do so now. Talk to your group leader or read the inside cover of this book to help you understand how to become a Christian.
- ▶ **Praise.** Make praise a regular part of your prayer time. Don't let your joy in Christ fade; instead, continually praise Him and remember all He has done.
- ▶ **Share.** The greatest gift you can give someone this Christmas is the good news of why Jesus came to earth. During this season, plan to tell someone in your family or a lifelong friend who is yet to believe about the salvation and joy you experience because of Christ.



### END NOTES

1. Argile Smith, "Where Was the Manger?" *Biblical Illustrator*, Winter 2011-12, 40-43.