



Advent: Joy

Bottom Line: Jesus Christ offers us joy that persists through our longing, waiting, and difficult seasons of life.

How would you define joy? How is it different than happiness?

We've discussed this many times before at FBCnl, but it's an important distinction to make: happiness is dependent upon our circumstances, whereas joy persists despite our circumstances. When we celebrate the joy that Christmas brings, we are referring to the indestructible delight that we have in Jesus. The grace that God showed us in sending Christ into the world is constant through every trial and season of life, so no matter what our situation, in the good and the bad, we may not always be happy, but we can always have joy.

Can you share about a time when you were joyful, even though you weren't happy?

We can see an example of the joy that the birth of Christ brings in the stories of Elizabeth and Mary in Luke chapter 1. Elizabeth and Mary both had angels come and declare to them that they would give birth to two very important people: Elizabeth would conceive John the Baptist, and Mary would conceive Jesus, the Messiah. Both were prophesied and foretold in the Old Testament. What is important to note is how serious an issue childbearing was for both of these women.

Elizabeth was a barren, elderly woman in a time when childlessness was considered a disgrace. She had lived her whole life in a state of shame and regret that she was unable to conceive. When she found out she was pregnant, she didn't complain about God's timing, and she didn't lament how difficult bearing and raising a child at such an old age would be. Instead, Elizabeth rejoiced that God had "taken away [her] reproach among people" (Luke 1:25). She had joy despite her circumstances because she realized that her situation was part of God's plan to show himself faithful to His promises. What she had longed for had finally come.

What are you longing for? What does it look like for someone longing for the same thing to maintain joy while they wait? How can our waiting increase our joy? Is your joy diminished by the possibility that you may not ever receive what you're longing for? If so, how does that show that your longings and joy may be misplaced?

We may be longing for loved ones to come to salvation, we may be longing for marriage or companionship, or we may be longing for a baby, like Elizabeth; these are all good things to desire, but when we realize that these are not ultimate things, and that our hope for *eternal* joy is not diminished by our lack of them, then we can maintain joy while we wait for them, and can be content even if we do not receive them.



For Mary, carrying a baby was just as serious of an issue, but for different reasons. Mary was a virgin who was betrothed, or engaged, to Joseph. Becoming pregnant out of wedlock would have ensured a divorce from Joseph, difficulty finding another husband, and a lifelong stigma as an adulterer. Yet Mary never voices any concern over the possibility of these troubles. Instead, she humbly submits herself to the Lord as His servant (Luke 1:38), trusting Him with her future. She allows for the joy of God's promise to override the potential problems of her situation.

What do we demonstrate about God when we maintain trust and joy in Him despite our circumstances? How does our status as servants of God help us to maintain joy? How much more knowing that we are no longer servants, but children of God?

Read Luke 1:39-50

What takes place in these verses is important in understanding how we can maximize our joy this Christmas season. C.S. Lewis said, "we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not only expresses but completes the joy." Our joy in something (or someone) is incomplete until it results in an expression of praise. That's what Elizabeth and Mary are showing us here. Elizabeth sees Mary and is keenly aware that she is carrying the promised Messiah. Overwhelmed by God's faithfulness, Elizabeth bursts into praise. Mary, likewise, responds to Elizabeth's praise with a song. Their joy in God overflowed into praise and worship.

Do Elizabeth and Mary's interactions with one another teach us anything about how joy and being in community are related?

Mary and Elizabeth had a lot in common; they shared similar situations, similar faith, and had received similar promises from the Lord. By celebrating together, they were able to encourage one another and feed off one another's joy, increasing their own. The same thing happens when we choose to gather with like-minded believers and share our lives with one another.

Do you agree with the quote from Lewis that praise completes our joy? Why or why not? How do your habits of praising God line up with how much joy you say you have in Him? If someone were to examine your conversations, your text messages, your social media posts, etc., what would they assume you delight in?

What are specific reasons that Christ is a source of joy in your life? What things in your life are distracting you from delighting in Him? How can you make the joy you have in Christ more evident to the people in your life?