

# The Heart of Christmas: Joy

John 1:14; Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:9

To begin our discussion this morning, let's do a quick, informal congregational survey. I'm going to describe a few scenarios. If the scenario brings you joy, give me a thumbs up. If it brings discomfort, frustration, or sorrow—give me a thumbs down. Just respond honestly.

**First scenario:** the first time you ever felt the drill in the dentist's chair.

**Second scenario:** your honeymoon—or a meaningful vacation with someone you love.\*

**Third scenario:** opening a letter from the government informing you that you owe more in taxes than you expected.

**Fourth scenario:** waking up one morning and realizing—for once—nothing hurts.

**Fifth scenario:** waking up on Christmas morning and discovering there's snow on the ground.

Some of us love that... and some of us immediately think about shovels and icy roads.<sup>1</sup>

What this little exercise shows us is something we already know: for most of us, joy rises and falls with our circumstances. When life feels good, joy feels natural. When life hurts, joy feels distant.

As Christmas approaches, I can't help but feel a deep and genuine sense of joy. There is something about this season that stirs memories of some of the most meaningful days of my life. I think, of course, about Christmases past—but my heart also drifts to other moments marked by joy: watching my beautiful bride walk down the aisle, holding my children for the first time, and celebrating my graduation from university. I think about my first job and first paycheque, medical tests that confirmed a zero PSA after prostate surgery, and the relief and gratitude that came with making the final payment on our mortgage. And with Christmas drawing near, who among us doesn't feel joy at the thought of gathering with family—embracing loved ones and listening once again to their stories? Yet above all, my greatest joy comes from remembering the day I was saved and the many moments since when I have walked with God—both in quiet personal fellowship and within the walls of the church He has graciously entrusted me to shepherd. God has been so good to us. Truly, “the joy of the Lord is our strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). Praise the Lord.

And yet, as precious as those memories are, I must also confess that life often feels like a pendulum. Joy seems easy to embrace when we dwell on the mountaintops of blessing—but when our thoughts drift into the valleys of tribulation, that joy can feel much harder to hold. Scripture is honest about this reality. King Solomon reminds us that “time and chance happen to them all” (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Still, some believe that once a person becomes a Christian, life

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration concept taken from The Heart of Christmas, Sermon Central series.

should no longer be marked by difficulty. After all, didn't Jesus say, "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13)? Those words can make it seem as though the pendulum of blessing should never swing back. Yet Scripture quickly grounds us with the truth that Christ is not a genie in a bottle, but a gracious Lord who answers according to His will. He answers prayer not according to our desires, but according to His will — "if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us" (1 John 5:14). God's goodness is never in question—but our understanding of what is good often needs sanctifying.

So, what are we to say when the pendulum of life swings into the trenches of tribulation? Are we to believe that hardship is proof of weak faith, insufficient prayer, or disobedience to God? If that were true, then why would James instruct believers to "count it all joy... when ye fall into diverse temptations," knowing that trials produce perseverance and spiritual maturity (James 1:2–4)? And why would the Lord deny the Apostle Paul's repeated request to remove his thorn in the flesh, instead declaring, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9)? Is there not value in suffering? Is not God's grace enough? Is there not a powerful witness when God's people stand firmly upon the Rock of their salvation in the middle of the storm, trusting Him completely? And if we never walked through pain, how could we ever "comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)?

While Christ has made a way to rescue us from eternal death and the curse of sin, we have not yet seen the Garden fully restored. Until that day, life continues to swing between blessing and trial. But this truth should not discourage us—it should force us to examine the true source of our joy. Is not unspeakable joy found in the presence of our Creator, even when circumstances are difficult? Is it not found in fixing our eyes upon the Pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in the field, remembering that when we surrendered the right to rule our lives to Him, He gave His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)? Today, we will explore a joy that is unspeakable, unshakable, and eternal—a joy found only in the presence of the One who gave His life to set us free (Psalms 16:11).

## Joy Came Because God Came Near

How I love the writings of the Apostle James. He is direct and confrontational, yet deeply practical, action-oriented, and filled with wisdom. In chapter two, James confronts his readers with a penetrating theological question:

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save them?"

### **James 2:14**

At first glance, this question almost sounds as though James is arguing for salvation by works. But listen carefully to what he says next:

“Suppose a brother or a sister is in without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accomplished by action is dead.”

### **James 2:15-17**

James is not overturning Paul’s clear teaching that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works (Ephesians 2:8–9). Rather, he is exposing the emptiness of a faith that speaks pious words but refuses compassionate action. The phrase “*Go in peace; be ye warmed and filled*” was a common religious benediction—a prayerful expression. James’ point is sharp: true faith does not stop at prayer; it moves toward action. Those who belong to God will bear fruit (Matthew 7:16–20), loving others in tangible ways—feeding the hungry and clothing the needy—as though serving Christ Himself (Matthew 25:31–46). Apostle John echoes this same truth when he asks:

“If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

### **1 John 3:17-18**

To be born of God is to love—not merely with words, but with deeds.

And it is precisely this kind of love that God Himself demonstrated when He did not merely speak words of compassion from heaven, but sent His Son into the world to rescue, redeem, and restore us. When God looked upon creation, the truth was painfully clear: though humanity was created in His image, we had fallen far short of His glory and had become His enemies (Romans 3:23; 5:10). The Apostle Paul summarizes our condition with sobering honesty: “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). The Law, though holy and good, was powerless to save us because it was weakened by our sinful nature (Romans 8:3). Clothed only in our filthy rags of self-righteousness (Isaiah 64:6) and facing an eternal destiny of judgment apart from God, fallen humanity was helpless. And so, the question is not merely **What Would Jesus Do?**<sup>2</sup> — but what did Jesus do? Would He look upon our need and simply say, “Go in peace”? Or would He respond as His own Spirit later declared through James—seeing our desperate condition as a call to action, moving toward us in sacrificial love?

## **Joy is Rooted in Love, Not Comfort**

The opening verse of the Gospel of John declares, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). From the very outset, Scripture affirms that Jesus Christ is fully divine. Yet the Apostle Paul explains how Christ responded to humanity’s enslavement to sin:

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<sup>2</sup> Matt Carter and Josh Wredberg, [Exalting Jesus in John](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 23.

“Who being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death – even on a cross.”

Philippians 2:7-8

While we cannot fully comprehend how Jesus could be fully God and fully man, Scripture does help us understand why He took on flesh. First, Christ had to be fully human to bear the wages of sin, which is death (Romans 6:23).<sup>3</sup> Only a sinless human could stand in the place of sinful humanity and become the propitiation—satisfying God’s righteous wrath against sin (1 John 4:10). Jesus did not overlook our depravity; He willingly submitted Himself to suffering and allowed Roman soldiers to nail Him to a cross (John 10:18). In emptying Himself of the glory that was rightfully His, Christ embraced poverty so that we might become spiritually rich<sup>4</sup>—receiving by faith the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:44–46). And this gift of salvation is never revoked. Those who trust in Christ are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, guaranteeing our eternal inheritance until the day of redemption (Ephesians 1:13–14).

The incarnation was required not only to satisfy God’s justice, but also to reveal God’s compassion. James reminds us that God, in His divine nature, “cannot be tempted with evil” (James 1:13). Therefore, apart from taking on true humanity, Christ could not fully enter into the lived experience of temptation that so powerfully presses upon our lives. But in the incarnation, God the Son clothed Himself in human flesh, and the writer of Hebrews assures us of this profound truth:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin.”

Hebrews 4:15

Because Jesus became fully human, He does not merely observe our struggle with sin—He understands it. And through Him, we not only find sympathy, but victory. We come boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Yet Christ’s compassion extends beyond temptation alone; He also sympathizes with our tribulations. When the pendulum of life swings from blessing to hardship, we may call upon “the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). Our Good Shepherd has walked the full landscape of human experience—trial and joy, suffering and loss, weariness and sorrow—and yet He obeyed the Father even unto the cross. He did so not only to save us, but so that His

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<sup>3</sup> James Montgomery Boice, [The Gospel of John: An Expositional Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Carter and Josh Wredberg, [Exalting Jesus in John](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 23.

joy might be in us, and that our joy might be full in the presence of His Father (John 15:10–11). For joy to be genuine and lasting it must be rooted in God’s grace and not in our circumstances.

## Joy That Is Unspeakable, Unshakable, and Eternal

So where does this leave us? If joy rises and falls with circumstances, it will always be fragile. But Scripture speaks of a joy that is deeper—a joy that cannot be taken by suffering, sickness, loss, or even death. Peter writes to believers who were scattered, persecuted, and suffering, and yet he says this:

“In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

1 Peter 1:6-7

This is not joy that comes from comfort, but joy that comes from Christ Himself. It is joy rooted in the assurance that our sins are forgiven, our future is secure, and our Savior is alive. It is joy that flows from knowing that even when life hurts, God has not abandoned us. We have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and promised an inheritance that cannot fade away (1 Peter 1:4; Ephesians 1:13–14).

This joy does not deny pain—but it refuses to let pain have the final word. It is joy that rests in the presence of God, even when circumstances are difficult. As the psalmist declares, “In thy presence is fulness of joy” (Psalm 16:11). Because Christ has come near—because He lived, suffered, died, and rose again—our joy is not wishful thinking. It is anchored in eternal truth.

So, I invite you to close your eyes for a moment and take a journey down a road that is only too familiar. From our temporal perspective, the pendulum of life does indeed swing between blessing and tribulation; yet Scripture reminds us that what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16–18). When we walk through valleys of hardship—when we feel perplexed, persecuted, and struck down—we remember that we are troubled, but not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; cast down, but not destroyed (2 Corinthians 4:8–9). Even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we need fear no evil, for the Lord is with us (Psalm 23:4).

In those moments, may we be still before God (Psalm 46:10) and remember that the Babe lying in the manger—Christ the Lord—has not withdrawn His grace or His presence from us (Luke 2:11; Hebrews 13:5). Instead, He invites us to persevere, to stand firmly upon the Rock of our salvation (Psalm 18:2; Matthew 7:24–25), and to walk forward with joy, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). Our earthly circumstances cannot undo the spiritual blessings we have in Christ, blessings secured before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:3), treasures laid up in heaven where neither moth nor thief can destroy

(Matthew 6:19–20; 1 Peter 1:4). And so, even amid turbulent waters, we set our minds on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Colossians 3:1–3), resting in His unchanging grace and rejoicing in hope until the day He calls us home, when sorrow and pain will be no more (Revelation 21:4).

## Conclusion

This is the joy of Christmas—not that life becomes easy, but that God has come near. Because Christ has lived, suffered, died, and risen again, our joy is no longer at the mercy of circumstances. It is anchored in a Savior who is with us now and will bring us safely home. And so we rejoice—not because the road is smooth, but because the destination is sure. This is joy unspeakable and full of glory.

**“Unspeakable joy is not found in what life gives us,  
but in the Savior who gave Himself for us.”**