

The Way of Joy

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[0 : 00] I'm going to read scripture for us now, the passage that David is going to preach from, which is Luke chapter 10, verses 17 to 24. If you've got a church Bible, it's on page 868.

If you don't have a church Bible and you'd like one, they're just on the table at the back, so feel free at any time to get up and grab one. So Luke chapter 10, verses 17 to 24.

This is a word of the Lord. The 72 returned with joy, saying, Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name. And he said to them, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I've given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. In that same hour, he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you've hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.

Then turning to the disciples, he said privately, blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. My name is David, not Derek, and I'm one of the ministers here, and we're working our way through the section of Luke's gospel.

[1 : 51] We turn tonight to Luke chapter 10, verses 17 through 24. Some years ago now, I went on a mission trip to southern Malawi. It was quite the experience. I was certainly well pushed out of my comfort zone.

Very different culture, very different culture, very different climate, very different churches, a very different way of life altogether. And perhaps one of the most striking features of the trip that we made was this very stark contrast between the material poverty of the people and the richness of their faith and joy in the Lord Jesus Christ. Here were people who in one sense materially had nothing, and yet in another appeared to have everything spiritually. Despite their material circumstances, there was this remarkable, unmistakable note of joy and delight amongst God's people there.

I think over past years, a number of different social commentators have commented and noted that here in the West, we seem to be living in an increasingly joyless culture for all our great material wealth, unrestricted freedom and choice, expressive individualism, pursuit of pleasure. And yet, strangely, all these things appear to have left many people deeply unhappy and unsatisfied. There is, I think, an emptiness, a hollowness at the heart of our culture. And yes, I'm not saying that people don't enjoy themselves. There isn't joy and pleasure to be had. Indeed, it's sought in all manner of different pursuits. But what is pursued is often a kind of joy that never lasts. Tonight, as some of you will know, is Burns Night, so I've got a quote from Robbie Burns. Don't often do that, but here it is.

But pleasures are like poppies spread. You seize the flower, the bloom is shed. Or like the snow falls in the river, a moment white then melts forever. The notion that lasting, enduring, fulfillment, and joy can be found in our me-centered lives has proved to be a moral and spiritual dead end.

We live in a culture that has rejected the faith of our Christian forebears and has abandoned the very thing that can give our lives real meaning and joy. For the bold and, I would say, audacious claim of the Christian faith is that there is only one source of true and lasting joy. It's not to be found within us, but without. It is to be found only in God, in Christ, and in tethering our lives to Him. Christian discipleship is the way of joy in a joyless culture. That shouldn't really surprise us, because on any reading of the Bible, you can't help but notice the number of references that there are all through the Scriptures to delight and joy and exultation and rejoicing.

[5 : 41] Shout to the Lord, all the earth, says the psalmist. Paul, the great apostle, rejoice in the Lord always. I'll say it again, rejoice. Biblical faith is consistently presented in Scripture as something joyful. One of the great themes, actually, of Luke's gospel, often referred to as the gospel of joy.

I was going to go through a number of references here, but that would keep you here far too long. In thinking about joy, an important thing to remember is that we're not considering it simply as an emotion. Joy is an emotion, of course, but it's not simply an emotion. Emotions are often rooted in our circumstances. They're frequently fleeting and superficial. They don't last. They come and they go. We're happy or sad. We're up, we're down. There's lots that we enjoy in this life, but that sense of joy doesn't last, doesn't endure. When we're thinking about joy, we're viewing it more in terms of an affection. Affections, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, strong inclinations of the soul that are manifested in thinking, feeling, and acting. Our affections are much deeper rooted in the mind and the heart and will than our emotions. So, when we're speaking, often speaking about joy, we're not speaking about our circumstances or whether things are going well, good or bad, things going on in our lives. We're speaking about a deep-seated sense of joy and satisfaction and delight that inhabits and overflows from the heart of the believer despite circumstances. A habitual sense of joy. Joy with a capital J, real joy. Corey was speaking last week in the morning service about that verse in James, one verse, to count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds. And it's the theme, I think, of joy, real joy that dominates the verses before us this evening. Challenging, searching words that ask us to reflect on just where we are looking for joy. Are we traveling the way of discipleship? Are we really traveling the way of joy? I want to look at the text this evening under three heads, the first of which we'll call the joy of discipleship, the real joy of discipleship from verses 17 through 20. The 72 return with joy, saying, Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name. He said to them,

I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I've given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

So, the context here, you will recall, is the conclusion of the mission of the 72 that Chris looked at last week. These men had been sent out to proclaim the arrival of God's kingdom, to prepare the way for Jesus. This mission proved a great success, and they returned to Jesus full of joy.

They're excited. You know, if they're being interviewed in footballers' parlance, they were buzzing, you know, that things had gone so well. They'd embarked on this mission, perhaps with more than a little trepidation, and now on returning, they are over the moon. They are astounded. Even the demons have been subject to them in Jesus' name. And notice how Jesus responds to all this excitement and joy.

[9 : 46] He speaks to His disciples. He seeks to encourage them. He tells them that He has seen Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Verse 18. Nobody actually really can tell you what that verse actually means, and I'm not going to try tonight. But I think what He... He wants them to understand that this trainee mission that they've been embarking on is a sign of the overthrow of Satan, a reminder to us that the mission of the church in proclaiming the gospel is to herald the overthrow of the powers of darkness in this world. And Jesus tells them that they will witness yet more astonishing things than these. This is just the beginning, He says. A spiritual battle, conflict lies ahead of them.

I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, yet nothing shall hurt you. For all his power and guile, Satan will be bound and overthrown.

And then Jesus adds these telling words. Do not rejoice that the spirits are subject to you. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven. So, what is Jesus driving at here? What does He mean?

What is He teaching His disciples? There's a very famous story told about Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, one of the most influential preachers of the 20th century. And at the end of his life, he was dying of cancer. And one of his friends and former associates who was with him asked him, in effect, this, how are you managing to bear up? You've been accustomed to preaching several times a week. You've begun important Christian enterprises. Your influence has been extended across the world through books and tapes. Now you've been put on the shelf. You're reduced to sitting quietly, sometimes managing a little editing. I'm not so much asking how you're coping with the disease itself.

How are you coping with the stress of being out of things? And Lloyd-Jones responded by quoting these very words of Luke 10 20, Rejoice not that the spirits are subject unto you, but rejoice rather because your names are written in heaven. Why did he do that? Because he was telling his colleague that he is not tying, he wasn't tying his sense of joy, well-being, identity to power or influence in ministry.

[12 : 45] Because that influence in ministry was being taken from him, had been taken from him. Don't tie your joy to something that will fade and pass away. It's always a mistake to try and tie our sense of joy and identity and meaning to human success, to rejoice only in our achievements, our talent, our gifts, our abilities, even our ministry successes. Because these things will not last forever. They are temporal. So, what are you tying your sense of joy to? Your money, your business, your family, your body, your appearance, your academic achievements, your ministry.

In the end, they will all let you down. They will all falter and fail. They are, in one sense, idols that will come crashing down. There's a story told of an old lumberjack who was instructed to remove a copse of trees, and off he went with his axe. And he noticed that in one of the trees, a bird trying to nest there, make its home there. And he didn't want to damage the bird, so he kind of whacked the tree with his axe and shook the tree, and the bird would move on to another tree, and he would chop that one down. And eventually, the bird would move to another tree, and they'd chop that one down. And so were not. The same thing happened again and again and again. He kept moving the bird on until it eventually found a safe place on a rocky ledge. And friends, we need to understand that every tree is coming down. Family, friends, health, job, hobbies, home, car, every tree in the forest is going to fall. And we need to find safety and security in the rock. We must find our joy there.

We sometimes sing, rock of ages, cleft for me. Let me find myself in thee. And Jesus is telling his disciples here and us that we must tie our sense of joy, identity, and purpose to the gospel. We're not to rejoice in the idol of success, or indeed any other idol for that matter. We're to rejoice in what God has done for us in the gospel. We are to rejoice in the grace of God. We're to rejoice for the best of reasons, that our sins have been forgiven, that by God's gracious initiative. Our names, our very names have been written in heaven. We are to be constantly framing our lives with the hope of the gospel. Whatever our immediate circumstances may be, one day they are going to be swallowed up by our ultimate circumstance, that through Jesus Christ we belong to God forever.

And nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We need to prepare for the time when our gifts and abilities and successes will be as nothing. They will be taken from us. And that's an important lesson to learn, especially as we grow older. Our ultimate sense of joy in this life is not to be rooted in our usefulness, our achievements, our ministry successes, no matter even how spiritual those things are. Our sense of joy is to be found in Christ and that our names are written in heaven. God has written them there. Nothing can erase your name from the book of life because it is written indelibly in the blood of Jesus Christ. And so, the joy of the disciple is to be found in Jesus and in the salvation that is ours in Him. So, let me ask you tonight, are you rejoicing in the gospel?

And the good news that tonight, if you're a believer, your very name is written in heaven. We sometimes sing those words, don't we? My name is graven on His hands. My name is written on His heart.

[17 : 24] I know that while in heaven He stands, no tongue can bid me thence depart. The joy of discipleship. And then secondly here, we'll call it the joy of Jesus. The verses that follow from verse 21, through to verse 22. They're amongst the most striking in Luke's gospel. It's the only time in the gospels where we read of Jesus rejoicing. In that same hour, He rejoiced in the Holy Spirit.

One commentator calls it the most exultant description of Jesus in all of Scripture. And the word rejoiced, there is a kind of muted, somewhat colorless translation of a Greek word, Moffat. It translates it, thrilled with joy. B.B. Warfield comments, the word is a strong one, conveys the idea of exuberant gladness, a gladness which fills the heart. It's a word that communicates a fullness of joy.

In other words, here is Jesus literally bursting with joy in the Holy Spirit. It is a cry of joy on the lips of Jesus. In that same hour, He rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. When I was a child, we used to drink something called Cremola foam. And if you're of a certain age and generation in Scotland, you will know what Cremola foam was like. It came in a little tin. It contained colored crystals of various flavors.

And the crystals were dissolved in water, and they created a sweet fizzy drink. When you added the water to the crystals, they would fizz and foam, and then they would kind of overflow the glass.

And Jesus' joy here appears to be like the Cremola foam of my childhood, an exuberant outburst of joy that bubbles and overflows with a spirit of thanksgiving and worship and delight. It just can't be contained. And what is it that brings Jesus such joy? What is the cause of this exuberant cry of delight? Well, as I said, this is an unusual passage in the Gospels. In fact, in Luke's Gospel, it's actually more reminiscent, isn't it, of John's Gospel. It takes us into that relationship between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It's profoundly and explicitly Trinitarian. Jesus the Son rejoices in God the Father and in God the Holy Spirit. The joy of Jesus is a joy that takes place in the very heart of God. Father, Son, and Spirit is relational. It's God-centered.

[20 : 26] Spirit. Jesus is enjoying and taking delight in the Father and the Spirit. Here is the joy and delight that God has in Himself that radiates from the very being of God. Not an emotion as such, but a reflection of God's perfect self-sustaining fellowship. And Jesus rejoices in the Spirit, and He gives thanks to the Father. And as He delights in God as His Father, as a man, so that should be true also for us as His followers. The Son brings us knowledge of the Father, and that's a relationship that we are to enjoy.

The catechism puts it, doesn't it? Man's chief end to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. The psalmist says, in your presence is fullness of joy, and your right hand pleasures forevermore.

The great British American theologian Jonathan Edwards once wrote these words, God is the highest good of the reasonable creature. The enjoyment of Him is our proper end, and is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven fully to enjoy God is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Better than fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of any, or all earthly friends. These are but shadows. But the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain.

These are but drops, but God is the ocean. And Jesus the Son delights Himself in the Spirit, and He goes on to express His thanks to the Father for this great work of salvation that is being accomplished through His ministry, through His life and death and resurrection. I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth.

You've hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to little children. Father, yes, Father, for such was Your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. And that's how Jesus refers to the Father here as Lord of heaven and earth, a reference, of course, to His power, His omnipotence. And in this work of salvation for those who have rejected His glory and turned away from Him, we're told that He gives insight to the humble, not the proud. He is sovereign in whom He gives salvation to. He reveals the truth to His people. And Jesus here rejoices in this great truth. To some, His salvation remains hidden and obscured. Because it's not a matter of education or intellect. It's hidden from those who are wise in their own eyes. It cannot be seen by those who stand on their pride and refuse to humble themselves.

[23 : 57] It's obscured for those whose vision is captivated instead by idols. It's revealed to those who are willing to become like little children, those who have been humbled under the mighty hand of God, those who come to trust and rely on God rather than themselves, those who despair of themselves and accept His salvation as a free gift of His grace.

Notice how Jesus speaks here about that revelation. Revelation. I think generally speaking, theologians talk about two kinds of revelation. They talk about general revelation, a knowledge of God that is available to everyone. That's the revelation of God that we have in creation, maybe in conscience, and that moral sensibility that is built into our humanity. But of course, men and women have rejected that revelation of God.

People would rather worship anything rather than their Creator. The truth of God has been exchanged for a lie. And that being the case, we might well ask, how can anyone know God?

And that's why theologians speak about another kind of revelation, special revelation. And in that, God directly illuminates the hearts and minds of His people through the work of the Holy Spirit.

God shines His gospel light into dark hearts and minds. He opens the eyes of the blind so they can see. He does for us what we could not do for ourselves. And this is what Jesus rejoices in, this great divine work of revelation and salvation. Remember how Paul, when he writes to the church in Corinth, he says, and towards the end of chapter 1 of that letter, 1 Corinthians, consider your calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many powerful, not many of noble birth. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

[26 : 12] He chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. He chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And I think that's the point here. God reveals Himself to those who know they're nothing, to those who are considered weak and lowly and foolish. He saves and rescues little children.

And if we want to enjoy God and enjoy the salvation that He offers, we too must become like little children. And Jesus said that, didn't He? Except you become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of God. And of course, this cuts across every instinct of our hearts, because we want to be thought clever. And we want to be respectable. And Jesus says, no, the kingdom doesn't come to the self-sufficient. It comes to the self-empty. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father.

No one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. The Father's sovereignty, God's sovereignty and salvation is tied to the Son. All things relating to this work of salvation have been given over into His hands.

The Father and Son share authority. Jesus speaks with the authority of the Father. There is no sense of Jesus the Son being inferior to the Father. He is equal to the Father. He is one with the Father. He is the one in whom all the fullness of God has been pleased to dwell. And to deal with God, one must deal with Jesus. He is the Word made flesh. He is the image of the invisible God. He is the mediator of this great salvation. He alone is our true source of knowledge about God, because God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. A saving knowledge of God comes only through Jesus. We don't find it anywhere else except in the Son. And the joy of Jesus is found in His relationship with the Father and with the Spirit.

It's linked to this great plan of salvation that is unfolding all across the world as He redeems and purchases a people for Himself. And so, this is why there is rejoicing in heaven over every sinner who repents.

[29 : 07] The joy of discipleship. The joy of Jesus. Thirdly, finally, quickly here, we'll call the last two verses here, the joy of the kingdom. Turning to the disciples, He said privately, blessed are the eyes that see what you see. I tell you, many prophets, kings desire to see what you see, did not see it, hear what you hear, and did not hear it. I think there is a hint of joy here in these verses as Jesus turns to His disciples privately and blesses them. They should feel happy, honored, because they are seeing things that all the prophets and priests and kings of the Old Testament long to see. They are seeing God's kingdom. They are witnessing with their own eyes God's promised King and His mighty works. The whole revelation of the Old Testament converges upon Jesus Christ. It doesn't converge on a new law or doctrine or another institution. It all focuses in on the person of Jesus Christ. And what Jesus is now doing here in Luke's gospel is the great hope and anticipation of the entire Old Testament. All the Old Testament saints long to see it.

And Jesus' disciples are blessed to be part of this new work of God instituted by Jesus. They're part of this coming kingdom. And they're blessed in a way in which the Old Testament believers were not.

Sometimes the disciples were all kind of guilty of looking back to the Old Testament greats, Elijah, Moses, so forth. And Jesus says, no, this is about me. Seeing Jesus, seeing the King is the joy of the kingdom. Coming into a relationship with God's Son, God's Messiah, is the great blessing of the kingdom.

And entering the kingdom, seeing the King becoming a Christian is always a matter of joy. It is to know the forgiveness of sins. It is to delight in God. It is to discover He is our greatest joy. He is the one who fulfills all that we long for. Beware forms of Christianity that have been distorted into something moralistic and utterly joyless.

C.S. Lewis wrote, Let me ask you tonight, what brings you joy?

[32 : 20] What brings you the greatest and deepest happiness? That is our God. And when we put it that way, idolatry and false worship are soon exposed. Friends, the joy of Jesus can be ours. The joy of knowing God can be ours. The joy of forgiveness and salvation can be ours. It can all be ours.

How? By trying hard. By becoming religious. By being a good moral person. By turning over a new leaf. No, no, no, no, no. It's not a new leaf we need. It's a new root. It is a new birth. We need Jesus Christ to come and live inside us by the power of His Holy Spirit. We need to believe in Him. We need to trust in Him. We need to cast ourselves on Him. We need to welcome Him into our lives that we might become children of God. And that's a gift that we can only receive with empty hands and by faith alone.

John says in his gospel, yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God. Jesus said, except you become like a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. That's when you put your trust in Jesus Christ, you become not just a child of God, you become a disciple, following Jesus on the way of joy. Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You that the gospel is not simply information for our minds. It is rather You, You, Yourself, making Yourself known to us in the person of the Son. We thank You that to know Jesus is to know You, and to know You is eternal life. We pray tonight that the same Spirit, in whom Jesus rejoiced, may move upon us in power that we might behold something of the glory of Jesus Christ and experience the love of You, our Heavenly Father. May You set us together once again, or perhaps even for the first time, on the path of discipleship and the way of joy.

We pray this in His name. Amen.