

**ADVENT WEEK 3**  
**Rediscover Christmas**

## Finding Joy in Our Discouragements

Luke 2:10-11

Lisa Lester is a 12-year-old girl in Winnipeg, Canada. She held a smile on her face for 10 hours, 5 minutes, establishing a new world record. Lisa's 10 hour smile won the Manitoba Province Dental Association's "smiling marathon." She also is recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records as having the longest smile. [Wouldn't that hurt your cheeks to smile for that long?]

How's your smile? How joyful are you?

Long ago there was a group of poor shepherds out on a lonely hillside near the town of Bethlehem. A shepherd's life didn't have a lot to be joyful about. Still, the angel came to them and said, ***"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord."*** Luke 2:10-11 What the angel announced to the shepherds, still applies today to you and me. There is ***"good news of great joy."*** How joyful are you?

Our world, our society, have an idea of joy that is very different from the kind of joy the angels announced. In our world joy is having unexpected good news, its winning the lottery, doing something absolutely thrilling – but something that lasts only a moment. That kind of joy can do you a world of good. It helps you forget about your troubles for a while, and it lifts your spirits when we go to Disney World, or enjoy a good movie, taste a great meal, see an amazing display of Christmas lights, have a good laugh over a funny joke. There's a lot to be said for that kind of joy.

But that kind of joy can also do you a lot of harm. Being amused, having a thrill, receiving an expensive gift can also be harmful when it means – wanting the thrill of the winning roll of the dice, but ending up gambling away more than you can afford, gambling away what your family needs. Many people live for the momentary thrill – and they find it in alcohol, or sex, in working too much for the thrill of closing the big deal, or in shopping 'till you drop. That's when what our society calls "joy" is deceptive. It brings nothing but debt, sickness, broken relationships with family members and friends, a broken relationship with God, even depression and death. Our world's, our society's idea of joy is momentary. It doesn't last.

That's not the joy that the angels announced. See, REAL joy, lasting joy, is found only in connection with God. Happiness that wants God out of the picture is only a cheap imitation for joy.

You know, friends, we really NEED joy! [We really need it!] You look around at our world today, and it doesn't seem like there's much reason to be joyful.

The pandemic has been awful, and it's picking up speed. It used to be we hardly knew anyone who came down with covid19. Now, it seems, we know lots of people.

Small "mom-and-pop" stores and local restaurants are really struggling now, which means the people who depend on them to live are really struggling now.

The loneliness is getting worse because its stretched on for so long now. And for many, concern has turned to fear, and fear has turned to panic. These are difficult days. We NEED some joy!

God tells us that all of these things are because we humans are sinful. They are consequences we have brought on ourselves. Because of our sin not every child born in this world will know a full stomach, or have a home that is safe, loving, and secure. Because of our sin, not every child who is conceived will have a chance to be born. Because of our sin there is cancer, and people we know and love battle it every day. Because of our sin people grieve, and sometimes time doesn't ease that pain. Because of our sin there is hard work and toil, misery, suffering. And because of our sin, death will come to all of our lives without exception. These things and more can suck the joy right out of you. So, we NEED joy!

God knows what we're going through. God doesn't just turn His back on His creation. To people long ago who were just like us, He promised to send a Savior. The Savior to come would deliver those people from their slavery, and give them joy in the place of misery.

Isaiah was guided by God to speak about that Savior to come when he wrote:

***"The Spirit of the [Lord God] is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."*** Isaiah 61:1-3

Zechariah also encouraged people of long ago to rejoice in their coming Savior. Zechariah lived when the people came back from 70 years of slavery. The people then were poor. Their lives were filled with trouble. Enemies were trying to attack them. And Zechariah urged them to reclaim the joy that was theirs because their King would one day come to them. ***"Rejoice greatly,"*** Zechariah said.

***"Shout ...! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation."*** Zechariah 9:9

All throughout history, God's people struggled through dark days. They didn't have it easy. Life wasn't a smiling contest.

We have dark days too. Joy and gladness can seem difficult to find – and even harder to show to others. And God knows what you're going through. He's not oblivious. He knows that living in a sinful world where bodies wear out and get sick, where our minds don't always work right – God knows that living in this world can, at times, make joy seem real far away. God knows that because He, Himself lived in this world and experienced sorrow, trouble, and grief. Jesus is ***"a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. ... He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. ... He was oppressed and afflicted."***

Isaiah 53:3-4,7

A 7-year-old boy named Andy had to have his left arm amputated. On the day Andy returned to school, his 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class teacher had an unusual assignment for her students. She asked each child to tie his or her left arm behind their back. All that day the children became aware of the difficulties Andy faced with only one arm. It wasn't even easy to turn the pages of a book – let alone trying to write neatly. The paper kept slipping!

Jesus did more than just tie one arm behind His back. He didn't just come close to what you're going through. He went through it all Himself! Because Jesus suffered for you, you're not alone in your sorrow or sadness. In fact, you can rejoice and be glad through your dark days. Your God is with you. He sympathizes with you. He reaches out to you with love.

The Bible says, ***"Rejoice in the Lord always."*** Philippians 4:4

Rejoicing, even through troubles, doesn't make sense in our world where joy is pleasure, a thrill. But you can have joy, because Jesus KNOWS, He understands.

For many years, in early December, our family would take a trip to the Christmas tree farm. We'd make an event out of it. Driving a ways out into the country, bundling up for the cold, riding on the horse-drawn wagon out into the field, selecting and cutting the tree, warming up with hot cocoa after, even sitting on Santa's lap – it became an event to look forward to each year. Maybe your family does something similar.

There was a lot of happiness in the air as the day to go on that excursion would draw near. There usually is a lot of happiness when we've got something exciting to look forward to. Half the joy of going on a vacation is in the planning of the trip and the anticipation of going.

Your life right now may be filled with sorrows and troubles. But you're going on a trip that's OUT OF THIS WORLD – really!! God has promised that an eternity in heaven is prepared and waiting for you. Heaven is God's gift to you because Jesus already paid for it with His dying on the cross and rising again to forgive all your sins. Heaven is guaranteed for you. Nothing can take it away – not even life's problems and pain. Because of where you're going, that gives you something you can always look forward to. The troubles you are going through is not all there is for a person who trusts in Jesus. Because you're heaven-bound, you can look forward, you can have joy – even through life's troubles and trials.

Your Savior, Jesus, was born on the first Christmas. He came to win heaven for you and save you from hell. That's the news you and I need to be reminded of so we don't become too discouraged. This is the news of comfort and joy that **remains** even through the storms of life. No matter how discouraging your life may feel right now, because of Jesus you can look forward to joy of heaven. And heaven will remain for ever and ever. No one and nothing can change that joy or take this certainty away from you!

So, what JOY is yours when you peek into Jesus' cradle!! What JOY it is to know that in Jesus all your guilt and shame is gone and heaven is yours!

Like a prisoner who is released from jail and is so happy on the day he gets out that he can hardly contain himself -- you and I have been released from hell and sin. What JOY we can have now -- because heaven IS coming. All this joy is possible because of the baby Jesus.

There's an old story told about a grandfather who found his grandson jumping up and down in his playpen, crying at the top of his voice. When the little grandson saw his grandfather, he reached up his little chubby hands and said, "Out, Gramps, Out."

It was only natural for the grandfather to reach down to lift him out. But as he did, the child's mother stepped up and said, "No, Johnnie, you are being punished -- so you must stay in."

The grandfather was at a loss to know what to do. His grandson's tears and chubby little hands were tugging at grandpa's heart. But the grandfather understood the mother's firmness in correcting her son. So the grandfather climbed into the playpen with his grandson.

Zephaniah the prophet wrote: **"Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart ...! The Lord, the Kind of Israel, is with you."** Zephaniah 3:14-15

THAT'S a reason for joy!!! Jesus is here, with us!! What greater reason to rejoice can we find? Shouldn't we shout out and be glad? Christ is here, with us, right now. He has taken away our sin. He has defeated the devil and death by His resurrection. He has made us a home in heaven. AND ... He is with us! Among us -- right here, right now!

You know the shepherds had great joy when they went to Bethlehem on the first Christmas. They found Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus. Then they returned to their flocks, but their joy was so great, they couldn't keep it to themselves.

God's people -- you and I -- are still in the business of spreading that same joy. We are to repeat the joy -- and repeat it and repeat it and repeat it. We are to tell everyone we know the true and joyful story that the Son of God born in the manger, came to save us from the misery of hell. He came to give all who will let Him, the Joys of eternal heaven.

We should want to tell others so they can know this joy too! That's what real love for another person does.

Jesus said that there is joy in heaven over one person who repents. Every single person who gives up living for just temporary thrills, and instead finds lasting Joy in Jesus -- every person who learns to love and trust in Jesus because they've experienced all He give to them -- that person, too, gets the joy that we know. We want everyone to have what we and thousands and thousands of Christ-followers have had throughout the ages -- JOY in the forgiveness of sins, JOY in knowing that heaven is coming, JOY through the trials and sorrows of life, JOY in Jesus forevermore.

This has been a difficult year. A year filled with discouragements and, for many people, not a lot of happiness. If this Christmas season doesn't seem to have a lot of joy, then let me challenge you to return to joy.

You see, in the Bible, the word "rejoice" is the verb form of joy. It's the action of feeling or expressing joy and delight.

And if you look a little more closely at the word, you'll notice that it begins with re-. Think back to grammar class or just think of other English words that start with re-, and you'll re-member that this prefix means once more, or again, or a return to. So to rejoice is to return to joy. It's a return to our source of joy; it's a return to Jesus.

Friends, this is the only way we can find true delight and satisfaction. And I believe the process is the same for all of us, whether we are feeling the happiness and joy of this season or not. Whether everything is going our way, or nothing is going our way. None of us can conjure an unending supply of

feel-good happiness all the time, no matter how optimistic or positive our natural outlook is. Sooner or later, we all have one of those days, or weeks, or years. And this year especially, the reality is that, we all have them way more often than we'd like.

That's where the re- comes in. That's where we must return regularly, daily, constantly to Jesus, our source of joy. It's why rejoicing is our process of refueling our tank, restoring our strength, and renewing our spirits. It's reconnecting with our Savior. And it's in this way that the apostle James's words make sense, when he encourages us, ***"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything"*** (James 1:2-4, NIV).

I've got to admit, sometimes that's the last thing we want to hear when we're hurting. Joy can feel so far away when we're grieving or depressed or afraid. But let me encourage you that James isn't necessarily saying be happy *about* our trials and problems. He's saying we can find joy *in* them when we see the bigger picture beyond them. The bigger picture that God is working for our good in every situation. That bigger picture starts at our source in Jesus.

Friends, let's rediscover Christmas this year by embracing joy, no matter what we're going through. Let's remember each day the source of our joy. Let's seek our happiness, not in the seasonal trappings and traditions around us, but in returning constantly to our source of joy. Let's continue rejoicing, in spite of the pain and challenges we are facing. Let's heed the good news of the angels that will bring great joy to all of us: A Savior has been born, our Messiah, the Lord, and He will carry us through and complete His work in us no matter what.

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come," we sing. Let's proclaim Him to the world, just as the shepherds did long ago -- so that all may hear and believe that this baby born in Bethlehem is Christ Jesus, our Savior, and our JOY! Amen.