

Mark 15:1–15

Good News, Great Joy

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Twenty years ago, I was taking a theology class in college, and the only thing I remember about the class was the required reading. Our professor had us read two books: (1) **Knowing God** by J.I. Packer and (2) **Desiring God** by John Piper. When I enrolled in the class, I didn't even know what "*theology*" was. I just needed the credits to graduate. But God used that class (*and specifically that book by John Piper*) to set the trajectory for the rest of my life. In his book, Piper talks about what it means to live a life that is truly happy in God. He helped me to see that my deepest longing (as a human being) is to be happy – because I was made in the image of God, and God is happy.¹ From the moment we were born, we have been pursuing happiness. Throughout the seasons of life, **people go looking for happiness in all kinds of different places: money, adventure, possessions, health, leisure, hobbies, sex, art, music, entertainment, work, career, relationships, family, knowledge, recognition, accomplishments, alcohol, drugs, religion...** All across the world, every human being is looking for the same thing: *to be happy*.

"All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end... This is the motive of every action of every man..."

~ *Blaise Pascal*

As a young man, I was looking for happiness in all the typical earthly places, and I kept coming up short. And then, in the providence of God, I enrolled in a *mandatory class* in which I was given a *mandatory book* to read where I learned that I would never find happiness anywhere (in anything) apart from God. In the opening pages of Piper's book, I read the **Westminster Catechism** for the first time, which says: "***The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.***" I read that sentence over and over and over. It was like a whole new world had been opened before me.² God made me to be happy. I was looking for the right thing, just in all the wrong places. I was made to be happy – **in God**. God used Piper's book to help me see that I would never be happy apart from Him. I was made to *treasure* God. I was made to *delight* in God.³ And the word the Bible uses to refer to this kind of happiness is "**joy**." This is what David means when he says that *in the presence of God*, "**there is fullness of joy**."⁴ He means, you won't experience deep, lasting happiness anywhere else.

So, when we sing about "**joy to the world**" during Advent, this theme is at the very heart of why you and I exist. When the angels sing about "**good tidings of great joy**," they are singing about the very essence of our creational identity. God has come to give you what you were always meant to have: *namely, fullness of joy in Him*. In the message today, we are going to see three different pictures of darkness being invaded by joy: (1) we're going to start by looking again at the Christmas prophecy in **Isaiah 9**; (2) then we are going to look at the Christmas story in **Luke 2** to see how Isaiah's prophesy was pointing to the coming of Jesus; (3) and then we will close by looking at how that prophecy unfolds in the darkness of **Mark 15** – and how it applies to our lives today.

ISAIAH 9 || We've been looking at **Isaiah 9:6–7** over the past couple weeks, but this morning we are going to look at the previous verses (1–5). First, however, in order for us to understand the significance of what Isaiah is saying in this chapter, it's important to know a little bit of the historical context. You remember that Isaiah was prophesying approximately 700 years before Jesus was born. In **Isaiah 7**, we learn that Ahaz is the king of Judah and that he is terrified of a coming invasion (7:1–2). But, instead of trusting in the promises of God, Ahaz looks to the military superpower of Assyria for help – which will turn out to backfire on him bigtime (7:17). In **chapter 8**, we read that the Assyrian army would eventually turn on Judah and rip through the land like a tidal wave – and that the destruction would be massive (8:7–8).⁵

¹ Gen 1:26 – 27; 1 Tim 1:11.

² Like the old **Mario game** when he climbs the ladder (or goes down the hole) and enters into a whole new world.

³ Ps 37:4.

⁴ Ps 16:11.

⁵ We maybe get an idea of the kind of national devastation that Isaiah describes when we look at war-torn countries across the world today: like *Myanmar, Syria, Yeme, Sudan, Afghanistan*. Countries like these are a picture of war, famine, displacement, and widespread death.

We read about the result of this devastation in **Isaiah 8:22**, “*Then they will look to the earth, and see trouble and darkness, **gloom** of anguish; and they will be driven into **darkness**.*”⁶

The last word of **chapter 8** is “darkness” ... but that’s not the last word of the story. In **chapter 9**, Isaiah prophesies about a coming day when this darkness would be replaced by “**a great light**” (**9:2**). And the **evidence** of this great light is **joy** sweeping across the land.

“You have multiplied the nation and increased its **joy**;
they **rejoice** before You according to the **joy** of harvest,
as men **rejoice** when they divide the spoil.”

~ **Isaiah 9:3**

The darkness would be great, but the light would be greater. And in the light, *gloom* is replaced with *gladness* (גִּלְיוֹן).

III. Growing up in northern Minnesota, one of the things I really enjoyed about winter was deer hunting. I would try to get out into my tree stand at least 30 minutes before sunrise. And one of the most magical parts of the day was watching the sunlight chase the shadows away. **As the light dawned, the shadows died**. They disappeared. There was no longer a place for them.

Isaiah says that there is coming a day when this will happen in the hearts of God’s people. A great light will come, and it will chase away the darkness. The *gloom* will be replaced with *gladness*, and it will begin in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali (**9:1**). Now, you might wonder what the significance of “**the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali**” is in Isaiah’s prophecy. Well, when you turn to the first book in the NT, and you read about the ministry of Jesus here on earth, you’ll never guess where He begins His ministry: **Zebulun and Naphtali**! Let me **read** that passage to you from **Matt 4:13–17**...

The light that Isaiah prophesied about is Jesus. **HE** is the great light (**John 8:12**). And the evidence that the Light has come is joy.⁷ 700 years before a virgin gave birth to a Son (and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger), Isaiah prophesied that a great light would come, and the **evidence** of that light would be ever-increasing joy.

LUKE 2 || This brings us to our Christmas text in **Luke 2**.

In **Luke 2:1–5**, we read about the journey that Joseph and Mary took from Nazareth to Bethlehem – which was the sovereign hand of God at work in fulfilling the prophesy of Micah that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.⁸ And then we read about His birth in **2:6–7**. In **2:8–14**, we read about the moment when the starry sky was transformed into a heavenly stage. And the scene is, in many ways, a mirror of what we just saw in Isaiah:

- The world is encased in **darkness** (*physically, spiritually, politically*).
- Those who are in darkness see **a great light**.
- And with the light is a message of **great joy**.
- And this message of great joy “*will be to **all people**.*”

This is why we sing “**Joy to the World**.” This joy is not just for *kings*, it’s for *shepherds*. It’s not just for *Jews*, it’s for *Gentiles*.⁹ It’s not just for the *insiders*; it’s for the *outsiders*. It’s for *old* and *young*, *male* and *female*, *slave* and *free*.

⁶ This national **gloom** isn’t just the **result** of not trusting God; the gloom is also a **diagnostic** of their relationship with God. Their *gloom* was a *gauge* of their relationship with *God*. The Bible talks about “**always rejoicing**” even in the midst of sorrow (**2 Cor 6:10**). You may live in the land of sorrow, but if Christ is your home, there is a kind of happiness that the gloom can’t penetrate. James talks about joy in the midst of trials (**James 1:2–3**); Peter talks about “inexpressible joy” even in the midst of grievous trials (**1 Pet 1:6–8**); Paul talks about rejoicing in our sufferings (**Rom 5:3–5**). Habakkuk describes a supernatural happiness in God even when everything else around you feels empty and barren (**Hab 3:17–18**). So, their “gloom” is not simply a result of disobedience; it’s a diagnostic as to their relationship with God. As a people, their heart does not live in God, it is seeking shelter in the world around them. **Application:** *where does your heart take refuge?*

⁷ The darkness may last for the night, but joy comes with the morning light (**Psa 30:5**). In **John 8:12**, Jesus says to His followers, “**I am the light of the world**.” And then in **John 15**, He tells us to abide in Him so that our “**joy may be full**” (**John 15:11**).

⁸ Mic 5:2.

⁹ Isa 9:1.

It's for *the one who sits in the palace* and for *the one who sits on death row*. It's for the **mom** who feels like she has absolutely nothing left to give. It's for the **dad** who feels overwhelmed with the pressures of life. It's for the **teenager** who wonders if anyone actually sees them. It's for the **child** who is afraid of what's hiding in the darkness. It's for the widow who feels the ache of an empty chair at the table. It's for the **man** who thinks he's already blown every chance God would ever give him. It's for the **woman** who feels like she has nothing left to live for. The light of the world has come, and there is no darkness so deep that His joy cannot reach.

MARK 15 || And this brings us to our passage in **Mark 15** where we see a picture of joy piercing through the darkest night of human history. **Isaiah's prophecy of joy** was spoken into a world of darkness. **The angels' Christmas message of joy** was spoken into a world of darkness. Yet, no darkness in the history of humanity compares to the darkness in **Mark 15** as the Son of God is about to be crucified for the sin of the world.¹⁰ The last word we hear in our story today is Pilate giving permission for Jesus "*to be crucified*" (**15:15**). That's the darkness of this story.

Earlier the night before, Jesus was betrayed by His friend and abandoned by His disciples. During the night, He was illegally tried, falsely accused, and unjustly condemned. His accusers spit on Him, blindfolded Him, and beat Him – while Peter cursed and swore that he didn't even know who Jesus was. Under Roman law, the Jews didn't have the authority to enact capital punishment, and so, when the morning came, they bound Him and led Him away to Roman governor who did have the authority to put Jesus to death. The governor's name was Pilate.

READ **Mark 15:1–10**

From the time that Jesus was arrested to the time that He was nailed to a cross, He endured six separate trials & interrogations. He was brought first to Annas (the former high priest)¹¹ – probably sometime around **2 AM**. Then, when Annas was done questioning Jesus, He was sent to Caiaphas (the current high priest),¹² and that mock hearing probably lasted until around **4 AM**. Both of those hearings were illegal, and so (*for the sake of appearance*) they held a formal trial early in the morning, probably around **5 AM**. It doesn't appear that this trial lasted long because they had already come to their decision earlier that night. "They [had] all condemned Him to be deserving of death" (**14:64**). But, since they did not have the legal authority to enact the death penalty, they "*delivered Him to Pilate*" – which, by the way, was exactly what Jesus said would happen.¹³ Jesus actually appears before Pilate twice. First, they brought Him early in the morning, probably around **6 AM**.¹⁴ But Pilate didn't want anything to do with Jesus, and so as soon as he learned that Jesus was a Galilean, he transferred Him to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch (or the "*quarter ruler*") of Galilee. That was probably around **6:30 AM**. Luke tells us that Herod was excited to see Jesus "because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him" (**Luke 23:8**), but Jesus didn't do a single thing or say a single word to Herod. So, Herod mocked Him and then sent Him back to Pilate, probably sometime around **7:30 AM**.

By the time we get to **Mark 15:6**, Jesus has been accused, abused, mocked, maligned, and humiliated nonstop all night and all morning. Now He's back in Pilate's court, and (*for political reasons*) Pilate still doesn't want anything to do with Jesus. He wants to release Jesus, but the Jewish religious leaders are insistent that Jesus should die, and they have the power of making life really bad for Pilate. So, Pilate comes up with a **plan** to *release Jesus by giving the crowd an impossible choice*. There was a custom across the land for the governor to offer full amnesty (a full pardon) to a prisoner and let him go free. It was a way of showing a display of mercy to the citizens (*as a political move*). And so, his plan was to force the crowd to push for Jesus' release by giving them a choice between Jesus or Barabbas (**15:6–10**). Barabbas was a **convicted murderer**, and Jesus was a **celebrated miracle-worker**. "*One of these two men is going to be released into your midst today; which one do you want?*" Just several days earlier, when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowd had been shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (**11:9–10**). Pilate is banking on the assumption that nothing has changed since then. The religious leaders obviously hate Jesus because they were "envious" of Him (**15:10**), but what reason would the crowd have to hate Him? So, he gives them a choice between a *murderer* and a *miracle worker*.

¹⁰ John 3:16; 1 John 2:2.

¹¹ John 18:12–14, 19–24.

¹² Matt 26:57–68.

¹³ Luke 24:7.

¹⁴ John 18:28.

“But the chief priests stirred up the crowd, so that he should rather release Barabbas to them.”

~ Mark 15:11

This is an extraordinary accomplishment on the part of the chief priests to convince an entire crowd to turn on Jesus in this moment, and you can't help but wonder how they did it. Did they *threaten* the crowd? Did they *bribe* the crowd? Did they *spread lies* about Jesus to the crowd? We don't know. The Bible doesn't tell us. What we do know is that this was ordained by God before the foundation of the world.¹⁵ Just as God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that **He might unleash His wrath** on the land of Egypt, so He is working through the hardened hearts of this crowd to bring about the crucifixion of Christ so that **He might unleash His wrath** for our sin on the cross. Why did the crowd yell “Crucify Him”? Because God had predetermined for the crucifixion to take place since before the world began.

READ Mark 15:12–15

This is unspeakable darkness – not only because of what is happening, but because of who it's happening to. The body of Christ has been torn to pieces, and now He is heading to the cross. Now, maybe you're thinking to yourself: *where is the joy in this passage?* There are two ways to answer that question: here in the darkest day of human history, (1) there is a **picture** of joy in the *present*, and (2) there is the **promise** of joy in the *future*.

The picture of joy in the present is that moment when light dawns into the darkness of the nearby prison cell where a murderer awaits execution. This is one of my favorite moments in the entire gospel! Imagine that you are Barabbas. You are chained in your prison cell, awaiting certain death for the crimes that you have committed. From the darkness of your prison, you can hear the crowd in the distance, but you can only hear what they're yelling. The first thing you hear them shouting is your name, “**Barabbas**.” And then the second thing you hear them shouting chills you to your bones. You hear the crowd cry, “**Crucify him!**” And then, moments later, you hear the prison door open and the sound of footsteps as the guards come to get you. They open your cell, and your heart explodes with panic. And then, what happens next makes absolutely no sense to you at all. One of the guards unlocks your chains and says, “*Barabbas, you're free to go.*” What? “*You're free. Somebody else took your place today.*” One moment, you are chained in the darkness expecting to be nailed to a cross, and the next you are walking out of the darkness – fully pardoned and fully free. Why? **Because Jesus took your place.** You deserved death, but **the Son of God took your place.** What is this? This is a picture of “*good news and great joy*” for sinners like Barabbas. This man deserved to die, but his record was wiped clean instead – because somebody else took his place.

The promise of joy in the future is what we read about in **Hebrews 12:2**, “*Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross...*” As Barabbas was walking out of the darkness – clinging to this picture of joy in the *present*, Jesus was walking into the darkness – clinging to the promise of joy in the *future* – the joy of glorifying the Father in purchasing the salvation of all who are called by God. As Barabbas was going free, Jesus was going to the cross to pay for that freedom – and for your everlasting freedom. And when God gives you the eyes to see the depths of His love for you in the sacrifice of His Son, the result is “joy inexpressible.”¹⁶

APPLICATION

1. Lasting joy is only found in Christ. He is the light, and He is the joy. Look to Christ.
2. The joy of Christ is not a joy that comes *after* darkness, but a joy that *enters* into darkness. We have this thought that joy is attached to our circumstances – that joy is a feeling that comes in the good times, but that's not the way the Bible talks about joy. It doesn't wait for the darkness to leave; joy is the all-satisfying delight in God that invades the darkness. Stop seeing the darkness in your life as evidence that God is distant. Rather, see it as the stage that God loves to use to shine the light of supernatural joy through you because *God gets the most glory when joy survives where it shouldn't*.
3. The joy of Christ is personal. When God spoke of joy in Isaiah, it wasn't abstract; it was specific and personal. When the angels sang of “joy to the world,” it was personal. They appeared to a specific group of shepherds when they said, “*For unto you is born this day...a Savior.*” When the guards walked into the prison, their good news was specific for Barabbas. When the Bible speaks of joy, you can write your name next to it.¹⁷

¹⁵ Acts 2:23; 4:27–28; 1 Pet 1:18–20; Rev 13:8.

¹⁶ See also: 1 Pet 1:8.

¹⁷ **Benediction:** Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy ... (**Rom 15:13**).