

Followers of the Way

JOY – FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH

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Luke 1:26-45

Only three weeks to Christmas Day! It is such a JOYFUL time of year. Many retail shops are using interesting slogans regarding JOY. Two I have noticed this year are, 'tis the season to spread the JOY!' And 'Share more JOY this Christmas.' I wonder are we experiencing real JOY this Christmas and are we going to share it with others? The word JOY or words in connection with JOY like JOYFUL, JOYOUS are used 235 times throughout the Old and New Testaments.

JOY is a quality and not simply an emotion, grounded upon God Himself and indeed derived from Him. The Psalmist David in Psalm 16:11 says, 'You have made known to me the path of life; You will fill me with JOY in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand.' JOY is a divine dimension of living not affected by circumstances, people or events in our lives. It springs from the presence of God in our lives and anticipates the JOY of being with Jesus for ever in the Kingdom of Heaven.

JOY is related in the Old Testament in terms of noisy, tumultuous excitement at festivals, sacrifices and enthronements. Nehemiah revealed in 8:10, '...the JOY of the Lord is your strength.' Spontaneous JOY is a prevailing feature of the Psalms, where it is a mark of both corporate worship and of personal adoration. In the New Testament, the Gospels record JOY in connection with the proclamation of the Good News of Salvation. In Acts, JOY marks the life of the early Church and accompanies the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples. This JOY is not that of selfish self-interest in who I am, rather it is the JOY of knowing God.

We all love to receive good news which brings JOY to our hearts. We are going to look at two women who received Good News which brought JOY to their hearts; Elizabeth and Mary. The Gospel writer, Luke, was a Doctor and he wanted to be sure that he would get all the details correct in his narrative of the Gospel, so in order to do this he interviewed Mary. Luke informs us firstly of the visit of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah about the forerunner to Jesus, John the Baptist, who would prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

It is interesting to realise here that the last promise of God in the Old Testament was given in Malachi 4:5 where the prophet says, 'See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.' Then there are 400 years of silence, followed by the fulfilment of prophecy. God had given Gabriel the great responsibility of bringing this Good News to both Zechariah and Mary, and was preparing them for the coming of the Messiah.

Elizabeth was the wife of Zechariah, a priest, and Elizabeth was the daughter of a priest. They were upright in the eyes of the Lord and observed all His commandments and regulations. They had longed for a baby and had prayed about this for a long time, but the Lord chose not to answer their prayer immediately. It must have been very difficult for them, especially when in those days it was considered such a disgrace to be childless.

Zechariah and Elizabeth remained faithful to God and continued serving Him. They waited patiently for a long time until Elizabeth was well past normal child bearing age. Then the angel said their 'prayer had been heard.' This is an interesting statement! We may at first read the text and think that this is referring to his prayer for a child. Remember Luke tells us, '...they were both well on in years.' Also notice here the prayer is singular. They would have prayed many times for a child over the years but the angel here refers to the prayer Zechariah offered in the Temple.

It's most likely his prayer was similar to that of Simeon in the next chapter, for the redemption of Israel. This is the prayer that has been heard and is going to be answered. How amazing that Zechariah and Elizabeth have a part to play in that answer! The angel Gabriel went on to say that this baby, 'will be a JOY and delight to you and many will rejoice because of his birth.' He would be the forerunner of the Messiah.

Understandably, Zechariah found it difficult to believe at first, and because of his unbelief he was not able to speak until John was born! Unlike Zechariah, Elizabeth exercised her faith and trust in God and believed the wonderful news at once. I'm sure she spent much time in prayer thanking God for His answer. Her heart was full of great JOY. May we exercise patience in our prayers and continue to pray earnestly and persistently.

A few months later the angel Gabriel was sent to Nazareth to visit Mary who at this time was pledged or espoused to be married to Joseph. In those days families got together to arrange marriage between their sons and daughters. They could get engaged at a very young age and be married at around 15 or 16. There was an inter-mediate stage known as being espoused. This was where the couple was as good as married except for the wedding ceremony. They were fully committed to each other, but there was never a consummation until after the ceremony. Mary and Joseph were in the period of espousal.

The angel said to Mary, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' At first Mary was astounded at this greeting and wondered what it could mean. The angel then said, 'Do not be afraid Mary, you have found favour with God. You will give birth to a Son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus.'

Matthew 1:21 tells us the meaning of the name Jesus, 'He will save His people from their sins.' We learn from this name about the mission of Jesus. The angel goes on to say in Luke 1:32, 'He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever...'. Throughout the Old Testament it was promised that the Messiah would sit on the throne of David, and to establish it in righteousness and in judgement. It was going to be an eternal reign.

Mary was still astounded, confused and puzzled and wondered how this could be, as at this stage she and Joseph had not gone through the wedding ceremony. She then proceeds to ask a very sensible question to the angel Gabriel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel answered and said that, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.'

This was not going to be any ordinary conception, rather it was miraculous and of divine origin. He also tells her that her cousin Elizabeth was going to have a child as well. He concludes his salutation with these wonderful words, 'For nothing is impossible with God.' Even though I'm sure Mary was still very puzzled at this astounding news she humbly replies, 'I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said.' When she would ponder over the fact that Elizabeth in her old age was going to have a baby, then this would be an encouragement for her to realise that her God was the God of miracles.

David Guzik in the Enduring Word commentary says, 'The conception of John the Baptist was miraculous, we should expect an even more remarkable conception of the Messiah.' May we learn from Mary's acceptance of God's plan and respond with a glad and willing heart when He speaks to us, knowing we do not need to fear, as He promises to be with us.

Even though it would take some time to come to terms with this news, I'm sure Mary's heart must have been full of JOY. She really wanted to share this Good News with someone. She decides to make preparation and visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Mary recognised and appreciated the godliness and wisdom of Elizabeth, as well as having confidence in her as a true friend. Isn't it so true, when we receive good or bad news we want to share it, but we don't just share it with anybody, we prefer to choose someone who we know will listen and be able to offer wise advice and who will, if asked, keep our news confidential.

When she arrives at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, she greets her and immediately the baby leaped in Elizabeth's womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She felt very honoured to have Mary visit her and share this amazing news, and so in a loud, and I'm sure excited voice, says, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?' Luke 1:42&43

Elizabeth tells Mary that her 'baby in my womb leaped for JOY.' Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months.

Jesus fulfilled His mission and brought salvation to the world. Jesus gives JOY to those who put their faith and trust in Him to be the Saviour and Lord of their lives. Faith in the resurrection of Jesus gives JOY to those who have lost Christian loved ones. It also gives comfort and hope. This fact alone should give all of us motivation to share the Good News of Jesus.

All around us, there are those who have no faith and no JOY. We who have received God's inner JOY, through Jesus, have the responsibility to share it with others. When we bring JOY to others, it gives us JOY.

As we prepare for this Christmas season, remembering the birth of Jesus and eagerly awaiting His second coming, may our hearts be full of JOY.