

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“JOY”

Matthew 1:18-25

○ “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” So declares the angel of the Lord in Luke 2:10.

Not measured joy, not moderate joy – “**great joy**”! Extravagant, brimming, abundant joy, such as Ebenezer Scrooge possesses in the end.

☑ Most of the theology embedded in A Christmas Carol is distinctly unbiblical, especially in regard to the spirit world, eternity, salvation and damnation. Still, Dickens got some things right, and his classic is a wonderful story despite its flaws.

You remember it: Ebenezer Scrooge is a cold-hearted materialist who despises humanity. Decades ago he sacrificed the love of a good woman on the altar of greed. For years he has snubbed every invitation to friendship from his only living relative. Confronted with the plight of the poor, Scrooge retorts that they should die quickly and decrease “**the surplus population.**”

On Christmas Eve four spirits haunt Scrooge. They warn him that by his hatred and greed he is condemning himself to eternal torment.

Ebenezer’s soul is liberated, his mind is enlightened, and his heart is warmed. Dizzy with joy, he dances around his bedroom: “**I don’t know what to do! I am as light as**

a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man.”

Ebenezer’s outward joy is the fruit of dramatic inward change that inspires him to set right many wrongs. He becomes *the* best employer, best neighbor, best uncle, and best friend who brings great joy even to strangers on the street.

Charles Dickens taps into our thirst for real joy. The joy of Scrooge is so contagious, I feel it every time – and the guy is only a work of fiction!

Aren’t we longing for “**great joy**”?

I am not talking about incessant elation. The Creator has made us to experience the full range of emotions. Besides, our bodies cannot sustain extreme euphoria for long. Neither can we fulfill all of our responsibilities if this is all we feel.

I am talking about a profound joy that is not generally so intense, but has much deeper roots and involves body, mind, and soul; spiritual joy that enhances our delight in happy circumstances and buoys us up in hard times; joy that imbues us with wisdom, courage, and perseverance; joy that redeems loss, deprivation, and suffering, turning them into avenues of growth.

Isn’t this what we want?

☑ Our desire echoes in our seasonal songs: *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, *Holly Jolly Christmas*, and so on. It echoes in our seasonal greetings: “*Merry Christmas!*” and “*Happy Holidays!*” And no wonder: even many secularists associate

Christmas with joy. We expect it to be **“the most wonderful time of the year”** – or, if we have been let down one too many times to *expect* it, we *hope* it will be; or at the very least we think it *should* be.

Yet the joy of Christmas is, at best, ephemeral. Like the sparkling crystals that form on the branches of trees and shrubs under the right atmospheric conditions, turning out landscape into a breathtakingly beautiful (but transitory) wonderland, our seasonal joy is here for one shining moment – then it is gone.

Often it *isn't* at its best. Up close the glimmering lights and shimmering trees are more gaudy than exquisite. The sweets leave you a little sick. The gifts don't completely satisfy. The family get-togethers are not quite as uplifting as the ones in the Hallmark commercials.

☑ For some of us it is worse than that. (“Depression at Christmas”) 45% of survey respondents dread Christmas, 65% say it makes them feel lonely, and 57% of people with depression report that the holiday intensifies their misery.

The angel brought **“good news of great joy that will be for all the people,”** including *us* – **“great joy.”** The first Christmas was a historically unique event, never to be repeated; but the **“good news”** that brings **“great joy”** is timeless. It is available to us.

? *How can we experience that joy? How can we be filled with it?*

☐ To find out, let's turn to Matthew 1:18-25. This is the account of Messiah's birth told from Joseph's point of view. He will be our model of joy today.

○ {Lk 1:46-47} Why not Mary? She famously said, **“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my**

Savior.” Why Joseph? Not a single syllable of the words he uttered is recorded.

○ {Lk 2:10} Why not the angel? That glorious entity inspired awe when he heralded the good news of great joy. Surely, Joseph inspired grave disappointment, harsh criticism, and condescending pity when he told his family and friends that Mary was pregnant.

○ {Lk 2:11} Why not the shepherds? They were the direct recipients of the **“good news of great joy,”** and they saw the **“great company of”** angels. Joseph's angelic visitation was not nearly as spectacular, and the angel laid a heavy burden on his shoulders.

○ {Lk 2:25-26} Why not Simeon? The Holy Spirit promised **“he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah,”** so when the Holy Family came to the Temple for purification Simeon was ecstatic. For him, Christ's birth meant resting in the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream; for Joseph, it meant fortifying himself to take on unexpected responsibilities.

○ {Mt 2:9-10} Why not the wise men? Scripture specifically states that **“When they saw the star”** “[stop] **over the place where the child [Jesus] was,”** **“they were overjoyed.”** Scripture gives not even the barest depiction of Joseph's emotional life.

Mary, the angel, the shepherds, Simeon, the wise men all speak of joy. Joseph does not.

Those individuals and groups make their joy palpable in their respective narratives. Joseph does not.

Each one of them presents us with an obvious paradigm of Christmas joy. Joseph does not.

It is precisely for these reasons that we are taking the Messiah's silent, almost invisible adoptive father as our model. The **“good news of great joy”** was for him as much as it was **“for all the [other] people.”**

Yet Joseph received that joy in obscurity and at personal cost, as do we. He received it by relatively mundane means, as do we. He received it not only in the exciting moments, but also in the quiet, day-in-and-day-out routine, as do we.

‡ *How did Joseph do it? How can we follow his example?*

- We will start with verses 18-23:

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband [we would say “fiancé”] was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive

and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

✈ What did Joseph do to receive great joy? He let go of his ego, set aside his ambition, forgot his plan and devoted himself to the cause of Jesus.

From this moment forward Joseph's knowledge, experience, talents, skills, money, possessions, relationships, time and life itself were dedicated to Christ and his reign. He gave himself over to the building of God's kingdom rather than his own.

○ {Lk 9:23-24} Joseph heeded the Lord's invitation to **“deny [yourself], take up [your] cross daily and follow me”** thirty years before it was issued. In the process, he learned that **“whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for [Jesus] will save it.”**

It does not matter that our circumstances are different from Joseph's: by following his example, we can be filled with **“the great joy that is for all people.”**

☑ {Evangelical Dictionary of Theology} We **“cannot experience joy while being preoccupied with [our] own security, pleasure, or self-interest. Freedom from inhibitions comes when [we] are caught up in something great enough to give meaning and purpose to all of life and to every relationship. God alone,”** who is revealed in the Word made flesh, **“is the only adequate center for [our life]... he alone can enable us to experience”** the greatest joy. We

follow Joseph's example and experience "**great joy**" by devoting ourselves to the cause of Jesus.

■ Next, verses 24-25: "**When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.**"

✎ What did Joseph do to receive great joy? He trusted the LORD God and obeyed him in thought, word, and deed despite the insecurity, inconvenience, social disgrace, and physical danger of taking Mary as his wife and raising Jesus as his son.

Had he declined the call, Joseph would have been spared public humiliation and, later, the peril of Herod's rage. But does anyone seriously think he would have received the joy of the Lord?

☑ Joseph proves the words of the old hymn,

**Trust and obey, for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.**

○ {Jn 15:10-11; 1 Jn 5:3} Obedience does not save us; but it does fill us with joy. The Lord Jesus himself has said, "**If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love.... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.**" "In fact, this is love for God, to keep his commands."

We follow Joseph's example and experience "**great joy**" by trusting and obeying the LORD God.

"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." So declares the angel of the Lord.

Like Joseph, we can experience the joy of the Lord – not by focusing on our own security, our own pleasure, our own self-interest, but by devoting ourselves to the cause of Jesus. Like Joseph we can be filled to overflowing with true joy – not by taking control and insisting on our own way, but by trusting God and obeying him.

Matthew 1:18-25 is the word of the Lord.