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“JOY FOR US” ~ Luke 1:5-45

? Is joy possible?

That is a grim question to ask so near to Christmas. Still, millions of people are wrestling with it.

Is joy possible for a species wracked by war, sundered by hatred, and dominated by greed and fear?

Is joy possible for a nation caught up in whirlwind of materialism, noise, and busyness?

Is joy possible for people afflicted with financial need, sickness, broken relationships, and violence?

? Is joy possible for *us*? And, if it is, can this joy serve a greater cause than our own pleasure?

Surely, Elizabeth asked if joy was possible.

■ We meet her and her husband in Luke 1:5: **“There was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.”** Elizabeth was born into a priestly household, and then she married into one.

■ Verse 6: Elizabeth and Zechariah **“were upright in the sight of God, observing all [his] commandments and regulations blamelessly.”** These are good people. They love the LORD in word and deed, by what they say and leave unsaid, do and leave undone.

■ Verse 7b: **“They were both well along in years.”** Gray hair is a badge of honor in first century Palestine. Jewish elders are respected for their knowledge and experience. They exercise vital leadership among the

people, blessing the community with their insight and expertise until they are incapacitated.

In a family-centered culture that enshrines marriage, this couple has been married for decades.

In an ancient culture that treasures an honorable bloodline, this couple traces theirs all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses.

In a temple-centered culture that reveres its priests, this couple is a priestly family.

In a highly religious culture that venerates the Law, this couple keeps it.

In an elder-centered culture that honors seniors, this couple is **“well along in years.”**

It is the perfect recipe for joy, minus one *essential* ingredient, without which Zechariah and Elizabeth are objects of pity; one *indispensable* ingredient, without the others lose much of their sweetness. They have no sons or daughters.

■ Verse 7a: **“They had no children, because Elizabeth was barren.”**

📖 **“Barren”** is an ugly word seldom used in polite society. It means **unable to bear children**. It conjures images of desolation: seared deserts and salt flats; frozen tundra; the dust bowl; ghost towns with tumbleweeds blowing down abandoned streets.

Infertility is always a burden. It is especially crushing for women who live in cultures that venerate childbearing as the be-all, end-all of female existence.

First century Palestine is such a culture. Hence, “barren” not only describes Elizabeth’s reproductive

status; in large part, it defines who she is – and, to a lesser degree, her husband as well.

Granted, she and Zechariah have had a lifetime to come to grips with it. What was an open wound is now a scar. Their sharp pain has faded to a dull ache.

Still, they have missed out on a great deal of joy.

■ That begins to change in verses 8-22. An angel announces that Elizabeth will give birth. The infant will be a boy named John. He will be a prophet, the greatest one ever. He will be the forerunner though whom YHWH will prepare Israel to receive the Messiah!

■ {Lk 1:18, 37} No wonder Zechariah asks, **“How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”** Yet **“nothing is impossible with God.”** When the couple unites in intimate embrace, Elizabeth gets pregnant.

Even a young, modern woman – one whose body is fertile and whose status does not depend on producing offspring, yet who desires to be a mother, is overjoyed to conceive.

Imagine Elizabeth’s jubilation as her body starts to change! This pregnancy ends long decades of anxiety, disappointment, shame, frustration, and doubt. Her joy is further multiplied by the revelation that her son will be an extraordinary man who with a mission of eternal significance.

■ {Lk 1:24-25} Elizabeth bears ecstatic witness to God’s goodness, saying: **“The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”**

Elizabeth’s kinswoman Mary is also pregnant. Except she is a virgin, and the baby within her has been conceived her by the Holy Spirit!

■ {Lk 1:36; Mt 1:21, 23} John will be a prophet, but Jesus is **“the Son of God,” “Immanuel ... ‘God with us,’”** who **“will save his people from their sins.”** He is not a forerunner for the Messiah; he is the Messiah.

■ {Lk 1:36} Elizabeth is not aware of Mary’s condition, but Mary is aware of hers. In verse 36 the angel Gabriel informs her that **“Elizabeth... is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is [six months pregnant].”**

■ Mary hurries off to see her cousin. Joy upon joy, when Elizabeth hears Mary’s greeting, (verses 41-45):

the baby [leaps] in her womb, and [she is] filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she [exclaims]: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

Elizabeth is delighted. She is thrilled. She is elated.

If the LORD is able to give joy to a dried-up old wife and her skeptical old husband, who learned to

settle for disappointment and grief decades earlier, can he not give joy to us?! If God is able to bring joy to the world through them, can he not do the same through us?!

We are not them. Our times and cultures could hardly be less alike. Their biographies are quite different from ours.

{Lk 2:10} Even so, their story is full of **“good news of great joy for all the people,”** including us.

✎ The Elizabeth-Zechariah narrative reveals that joy comes in nearness to God.

We strive to take hold of joy in money, possessions, busyness, pleasure, social status, career, friendship, and family life. These bring some gladness.

Nevertheless, many who have an abundance of these are poor in joy. People who cannot be happy or content without those gifts are seldom joyful with them.

☑ {Evangelical Dictionary of Theology} We **“cannot experience joy while being preoccupied with [our] own security, pleasure, or self-interest.”** Joy **“comes when [we] are caught up in something great enough to give meaning and purpose to all of life and to every relationship.”**

That **“something”** is *someone*: the Living God. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit **“is the only adequate center for [our] life... he alone [enables] us to experience”** the deepest, purest, strongest joy.

If Sovereign LORD endows us with material abundance, let us embrace his generosity. Still, joy is not in money or things; it is in fellowship with him.

If Sovereign LORD grants us good health to enjoy a host of pleasures, let us give thanks. Still, joy is not in fitness or diversion; it is in fellowship with him.

If Sovereign LORD fulfills our fondest dreams for ourselves and others, let us embrace his generosity. Still, joy is not in earthly well-being; it is in fellowship with him.

{Lk 1:15} Elizabeth and Zechariah are a case in point. Having a son is, in and of itself, a wonderful cause for celebration. However, John’s birth depends on God’s nearness. Likewise, he will be great because – and only because – **“he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.”**

Is joy possible? Absolutely!

Joy comes, not only in the blessings God gives, but first and foremost in the nearness of God himself.

✎ This narrative also reveals that joy comes in participating in God’s redemptive work.

It does not require biblical faith, or even much natural wisdom, to see that there is greater joy in sharing goodness than in hoarding it. That is the main point of A Christmas Carol, It’s a Wonderful Life, and so forth.

Sharing material goods and kind words is noble and right. But there is greater joy is experiencing God’s goodness, returning it to him in love and worship and obedience, and sharing it with others!

{Jn 15:10-11} 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.”

{Mt 22:37-40} As for the content of his commands, the Savior declares that **“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”**: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul and...mind,”** and **Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

His love empowers (even compels) us to devote ourselves to the cause of redemption.

{Lk 3:4} Elizabeth and Zechariah are a case in point. As they fathered and mothered John, the forerunner of Jesus, they were themselves **“[Preparing] the way for the Lord.”**

Can our joy serve a greater cause than our own pleasure? Absolutely!

Joy comes, not only to make us feel good, but to further the purposes of the One who gives it.

Though the world is drowning in grief, fear, and hatred, joy is possible! It comes in nearness to God.

Though we struggle with uncertainty, hardship, and loss, our joy can serve God’s redemptive purpose.

Joy to the World!

Luke chapter 1 is the Word of the Lord.