

LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for December 13: Joy to the world

November 30, 2009

Joy, a term difficult to define, speaks of an attitude of certainty based solidly on the assurance of God's grace and promises. Joy springs from an assurance of God's continuing ability to care for his people and his continuing demonstrations of this care. The word "joy" is based on the same root as "grace." The message of Jesus' birth certainly is one of joy that we take to the peoples of the world.

An angel of the Lord had appeared to a priest, Zechariah, and declared the priest's wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son. This son would bring delight to the parents and multitude of others. The promise was unusual as both Zechariah and his wife were elderly. The unusual promise to the elderly couple was, however, fulfilled.

The angel Gabriel appeared to a young, unmarried woman, Mary, and announced she would bear a son in a miraculous way. This son would be the eternal king over God's people because he would be the "Son of God," that is, the Messiah. Mary is spoken of as "blessed" due to her faith and character but not in the sense of one to be worshipped or venerated religiously. Both women accepted these messages in faith and humility.

During their waiting, Mary visited Elizabeth. God gave signs that the expected children would greatly bless people. Mary responded to Elizabeth's praise of God because of the promise by breaking into a hymn of praise, called the Magnificat, based on the first word of Mary's song in the Latin Vulgate. Mary's song expresses ultimate joy.

Like Mary, we are but simple, humble people, but also like Mary, God can accomplish great acts of love and kindness through us when we commit our lives to his kingdom.

We experience joy in proclaiming who God is (Luke 1:46-50)

Mary begins her song by declaring that her soul (her entire life) glorifies or praises the Lord. Neither Mary nor any of us can “magnify” the Lord by making him any greater. We can, though, make him more visible to the people of the world and allow people to see his majesty clearly. The microscope does not alter the size of the tiny organisms but only makes them visible to the viewer.

Mary expresses the joy of her spirit (another synonym for “I”). She has found joy in God her savior (1 Timothy 2:3). Mary expresses the reason for her joy and praise of God; God regarded (took note of and related to) her humble state. While Mary may have been considered of low status by the majority of people of her day, God had respected her by allowing her a part in the coming of the messiah who would provide salvation. Mary’s child, who would share her low status, would bring grace to all people. God’s grace and mercy come upon all devout people who reverently obey (fear) him. As part of this first reason for praise to God, Mary recalls the mighty things he has done to and through her. All generations would call her blessed because of the child she would birth not because deity or personal status on Mary’s part.

We experience joy in observing the great acts of God (Luke 1:51-53)

The first truth of the Magnificat refers to the great things God had done to Mary. The second truth is a prophetic look at the coming results of Mary’s child for believers throughout history. Mary acknowledges God has done mighty deeds with his arm (his mighty power). He has scattered the proud (put to flight the proud of heart) who trust in their power and riches. God

has dragged the strong rulers from their thrones (positions of power through which they oppress the powerless) and lifted up the lowly people.

Mary continued her praise of God showing that he filled the hungry (satisfied the poor's needs) but sent the rich away empty. These good things include both the physical and spiritual needs. The rich are sent away empty. They depended on their wealth and position and had no awareness of their need of God. They used their positions to oppress the powerless.

Mary reminds us that real service does not come through wealth and position but through humble dedication to God's kingdom service and others.

We experience joy as we reflect on God's reliability (Luke 1:54-55)

The God of the Bible is unchanging and reliable. Mary's praise expressed the beautiful understanding that God always would be faithful. God has aided his servant Israel so this people would become the instrument by which God would bring salvation to all. This praise is not simply God's miracle in giving the child to the virgin Mary but also the child's service of delivering all people from their estrangement from God.

Mary's statement that God is "mindful of His mercy" (to remember) does not suggest that the Almighty had any slip of memory. "God's remembrance" teaches that God acts with faithfulness and reliability (Psalm 98:3). God's promises are secure as seen in the fulfilled promises to Abraham and his descendents. What God promises God does. The promised Messiah has come.

We participate in Mary's expression of joy at the provision of God's Messiah, our Savior Jesus Christ who takes away the sins of the world and bestows genuine meaning to life. We share this joy with others.