

A Song of Joy

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] We're going to read again in Luke chapter 1, it's page 856 in the church Bibles, page 856. I see, by the way, that you've all got a Christmas card on your seat.

Do take that away, it's for you to have. There are other cards available at the doors. If you'd like to take some of these and use them for yourself as Christmas cards, you can do that. There are bundles of them.

It'd be good if you could donate a couple of pounds for each bundle, that would be a help towards the cost. There are also lots of small cards which are there in abundance for you to take away. And you'll see on the back all of our Christmas services are there.

So please do take them and use them, give them to your friends, give them out around the office, and encourage folk to come to our Christmas service. Next Wednesday at 1 o'clock, we'll start a little bit earlier so we can sing some more carols, we'll have our lunchtime carol service.

Then the following Wednesday, of course, is Christmas Eve. We won't have a lunchtime service on Christmas Eve. We've got a service at 6.30 instead. And it's just all a bit much to have two as close as that with everything to be done.

[1 : 01] But next week at lunchtime, come a bit early at 1 o'clock, and perhaps you'll bring some of your friends as well, and they'd like to sing some Christmas carols with us. Okay, you should all be turned up by now. Let's read Luke 1 at verse 39.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country to a town in Judah. And she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

Well, keep that open in front of you. And our title today is A Song of Joy. Quoted last week from George Campbell Morgan, who said, When Jesus came into the world, poetry expressed itself, and music was reborn.

[2 : 20] And we saw last time how Luke's account of Christmas repeats the sounding joy of the birth of the Saviour. The joy that that birth brought into the hearts and the minds of just ordinary men and women, people like Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary, and even to unborn children, to John in the womb.

And we thought about John's intrauterine dance of joy. He was the unborn prophet, but he experienced real joy, even in his mother's womb, the joy of the Christmas message.

And so in a sense, in Luke's Gospel, he's really the first believer. And he is also the first evangelist. He was filled with the Spirit, even in his mother's womb, just as the angel had promised Zechariah would be so.

And his Spirit-filled leaping inside his mother's womb caused Elizabeth, his mother, to recognize somehow the wonder of the incarnation of the Lord Jesus, the Son of God.

Extraordinary story, isn't it? Elizabeth had a sudden revelation that that tiny embryo in her cousin Mary's womb was indeed her Lord and her God.

[3 : 29] Look at verse 33. It's the mother of my Lord who's knocking at my door. That's what she's saying. How does she know this? For the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

Well, once you've read those words, you can't ever think of unborn babies in the womb, even tiny embryos, as just a ball of cells, can you?

Just something to be pulled out and experimented on. Something to be just treated like that. Of course not. But having thought about joy in the womb, the sheer joy of Christ's salvation experienced in the womb by John, and I want to turn today to think about the joy of the women. The Christmas joy that's expressed in these words of Elizabeth, in her song of joy. Elizabeth, we're told, bursts into song at the astounding revelation of what's happened, doesn't she?

I think we can take it that that's what verse 42 means. It says, She exclaimed with a loud cry. I reckon that's a song, don't you? I mean, if you look at verse 46, everybody calls Mary's Magnificat a song, don't they?

[4 : 37] And all it says is, And Mary said, My soul does magnify the Lord. So surely if Mary says that and it's a song, and if Elizabeth exclaims with a loud cry, then hers must be a song too, don't you think?

I think so. I'm on a crusade for Elizabeth to get proper recognition for her song here. So I hope you're with me. It's a real song. It's got real content, and I'm quite confident that her cry was a very tuneful one.

Not like the Eurovision Song Contest. Did you read this week that Terry Wogan has given up that after 35 years? Well, most of those songs don't have any content, and most of them are not very tuneful either.

I think actually he ought to get an honour in the New Year's Honours list for coping with the Eurovision Song Contest for 35 years. But anyway, this is a song with content, and I'm sure it was a song with tune.

So, Elizabeth bursts into song. What does she say? She says, Benedictus, Benedictus, Benedictus, which is just a posh Latin way of saying blessed, but I'm on a crusade to give her a bit of Latin as well.

[5 : 40] Everybody else gets Latin in their songs, Mary and Zechariah and everyone. So, Elizabeth shouts out, blessed. Blessed are you, and blessed is the baby in your womb, she says to Mary.

And in response to meeting Mary, her song comes in response to the leaping of John in her womb. See, verse 41 says, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. So, her song came from her son's dance, and that in turn was in response to the sound of Mary's greeting, wasn't it?

It was when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting that John leapt in her womb. Well, we hear today, don't we, about people playing music to their unborn babies and talking to them and all that sort of thing to make them cleverer and good at music and all that sort of thing.

I don't know about that. But, whatever's going on here is something much more than just that, isn't it? Are we supposed to take it, do you think, that somehow the unborn child, John, heard Mary speaking and then somehow put it all together and understood the gospel and therefore he was filled with the Holy Spirit?

[6 : 58] I don't think so. I don't think that's what Luke's telling us here. Mary's greeting, surely, could only have been a few words, couldn't it? I don't know what she said. Did she rush in and say, Elizabeth, I'm having a baby too.

An angel told me. Maybe something like that. I don't know exactly what happened, but they probably ran and hugged each other and got all emotional and squawked a bit. That's what women do when they all get together, isn't it?

Tends to be. We have a women's Bible study at our house on a Friday morning and just last time my wife was away doing something else. She wasn't able to be there so I had to let them all in and it all got very emotional, all hugging each other and kissing.

I had to go and hide in my study. I suspect that's what Zechariah was doing. We don't read anything about him. I expect he's hiding in his study from all this feminine emotion. But anyway, whatever Mary's greeting was, then surely she can't have had time to explain everything to Elizabeth before Elizabeth burst into song.

Can she? I guess it's quite likely perhaps that Zechariah had managed to communicate to his wife Elizabeth over all these weeks of silence that somehow by writing on his pad or miming or whatever he'd been able to explain to her everything that the angel had said to him about John and about what was going to happen.

[8 : 14] And maybe when Mary ran in and said, I'm having a baby too Elizabeth. Maybe she just suddenly put it all together and she understood what was happening. I think that's probably quite likely. But I don't think we're supposed to expect that John as a fetus in the womb suddenly put it all together miraculously in his mind.

And yet we are told plenty that he leaped for joy in the Holy Spirit. So how do you explain that? Well, I don't know. But simply, surely, because we are meant to see that something truly miraculous was happening.

Something absolutely wonderful was just overtaking these ordinary folk in this story. these faithful believers were waiting for the Lord. They didn't understand it all fully.

I bet none of them understood it all completely fully. But nevertheless, the presence of the Lord himself was in the midst. And that changed everything.

It changed their thinking. It put joy in their hearts. And somehow or other, Elizabeth understands that the mother of her Lord has come to her. and John in the womb somehow responds to the Lord whose presence comes to him.

[9 : 24] The Lord that he's going to be born to serve all the days of his life. And that shouldn't be so hard for us to understand, should it? Because often it's just like that in our own experience too.

I guess it may well have been like that for some of you. Perhaps you came to church the first time. You were seeking something. Maybe that's what you're doing today. You don't quite understand everything about it.

Maybe you came to Christianity Explorer downstairs on a Thursday night or at lunchtime. And you just didn't quite understand everything but certainly something began to happen to you.

You didn't understand it all. You didn't appreciate it all. You couldn't articulate it all. But you knew that something was changing. You knew that a miracle was happening to you. That everything in your life just changed because well because the Lord Jesus himself had come into your presence and come into your life and he changed your life.

He had given you a joy in your heart that you began to express. You see that's what Luke's telling us here. That's what happened in this family to these people. But I want you to notice the focus of the joy that's expressed here among Mary and Elizabeth.

[10 : 42] Now just think about it. They're both newly pregnant women aren't they? They've got so much in common there. So much excitement just in that. You would think wouldn't you that their song of joy was all about that.

It would be all about baby clothes and due dates and prams and mother care catalogs and stuff like that. Whether it be a home birth or whether it be the new Princess Herodias Hospital and all its fancy equipment in Jerusalem.

But actually when we look at what they speak about there's none of that in Elizabeth's joy is there? Of course she recognizes that God has done a wonderful thing to her. She thanks God for what she's done.

If you look back to verses 24 and 25 you'll see that. The Lord has done for me these things in the day that he looked upon me. She's praising him for what he's done to her.

So of course she's full of thanks for God's answer to her long awaited desire of a pregnancy. But actually her song here is quite different isn't it?

[11 : 43] It's in quite a different dimension altogether. It's not joy about her child is it? That she's singing about. Verse 43 tells us plainly it's joy in another child.

It's joy in the Lord that has come to her. Her joy and the joy of her unborn child John is joy in the presence of the one that she calls my Lord.

Now whether Zechariah had come to understand all of these things in his silent hours we don't know whether he'd told her these things we can't be sure but what we can see is that she clearly grasped by this moment what Mary's conception meant.

My Lord has come to me she says the mother of my Lord verse 43. Now she's using the language that David the king used in his psalms about the Lord about the one that Jesus himself said was himself.

So in Psalm 110 for example David says the Lord that is Jehovah Yahweh the Lord God says to my Lord sit at my right hand until I make all your enemies your footstool.

[12 : 54] David's speaking about my Lord he's speaking about the Messiah to come the king. And here's Elizabeth singing for joy saying the Messiah the Christ David's Lord my Lord he's come to

me he's here as a tiny baby in the womb of my relative Mary.

And even now she's rejoicing because she knows that he's making his blessings to flow far as the curse is found. And the presence of this Lord is causing poetry to be expressed he's causing music to be reborn in the hearts of his faithful people.

Those who have longed for his coming and now at last have seen it. And that's the focus of Elizabeth's joy isn't it? She understands that she's being caught up in something far greater something vast something eternal.

She understands that in this birth and in this baby coming to her and into her life she's being caught up in God's whole plan and destiny for the universe forever for eternity.

and that's why you see her her own personal joy and the domestic blessing that God's given her of having a son in her old age.

[14:10] That's why it's overtaken by this far far greater joy. A joy in what God is doing in the world and what God is doing in his own story. And it's a joy you see that she sees she's got a part in.

And that's always the mark isn't it of true people of faith. They're people whose horizons are never just on themselves never just on their own concerns never just on their own circumstances and how God can fit into my life and do things to me and bless me and answer my prayers however much he does and he can.

You see real people of faith view things from entirely the opposite way around don't they? they're taken up with the future of God's plan and purpose of grace for the whole world. They're taken up with his plans not just their own.

You know that's what it means when Luke tells us at the beginning of his gospel here back in verse 6 of chapter 1 when he tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth he says were righteous before God they were walking blamelessly in all the commands and the statutes of the Lord.

He says a very similar thing of Simeon in chapter 2 verse 25 and then he goes on to say he was waiting for the consolation of Jerusalem of Israel. You see there were people who were taken up with God's plan and purpose with God's promise of salvation.

[15:38] There were gospel people in other words. There were people who were filled with the joy of God's promises. There's another hint of that back in verse 13 you see when the angel says to Zechariah Zechariah your prayer has been heard and your wife shall bear a son and you'll call his name John.

You see at first sight it looks like what the angel is saying is well Zechariah you've been praying for a son and that's been answered. But actually when you look carefully that can't be the case can it because verse 18 makes it very plain that Zechariah wasn't thinking about that at all because when the angel says to him you're going to have a son he doesn't believe him.

He wasn't expecting to have a son in their ancient old age. Well what was it that Zechariah had been praying about? Well he'd been praying without ceasing for God's salvation to come.

He'd been longing for the consolation of Jerusalem and for God's people to be saved. His prayers were gospel prayers. His prayers were just like Simeon's prayer and Anna's prayer. Lord I long to see your salvation.

Do you remember when Simeon took baby Jesus in his arms? What did he say? Lord you can take me home in peace. I can die happy now because I've seen the thing I longed for. And you see the wonder here is that the angel answers Zechariah and he says your prayer Zechariah for the coming of my Messiah has been answered but listen to this.

[17:07] You personally and your own family are going to have a place in this that you could never have imagined. Everything that you've longed for is going to touch you in such a wonderful way that brings joy to your whole household.

You see that's the focus of Elizabeth's joy. It's not focused on the fact that God has come and answered her own personal prayers for her domestic situation.

That God had come into her story if you like. Rather her joy is in something far greater. Her joy is that she and her husband and now her own unborn child that they've been taken up into God's marvellous story.

That they've been sucked into the wonderful and marvellous thing that God is doing for the whole world for eternity. And that's why she cried out with a loud voice, blessed be the fruit of your womb. Blessed be the Lord. Blessed be the Messiah, the Saviour who has come. That's what's making Elizabeth full of joy. Don't misunderstand me.

[18 : 13] I'm not minimizing Elizabeth's very real joy at the child in her old age. Of course she has joy in that. Verse 25, as I said, she gives thanks for that. She thanks the Lord for removing her reproach.

And of course, childlessness, well it's a great sadness, isn't it? To many, many even today, perhaps to some here. It's a very painful burden to bear, but of course it was even worse then, wasn't it? Far, far worse. A childless mother really was nothing in that culture. She was a reproach. So of course it was a wonderful joy when her years of barrenness were ended.

And it always is. We heard just a little while ago of some great friends of ours who've been longing to have a baby for years and at last they're expecting one and it was just great joy, great joy. But you see, Elizabeth, Elizabeth here is a true woman of faith. And she knows, she knows that real joy and lasting joy and utterly fulfilling joy could never ever be something that could just come from seed of her own, however natural that desire was, however much joy and blessing it was when it was granted.

[19 : 30] Now her song tells us that she knows where real joy was to be found. It's to be found in the seed, the promised seed, in the Messiah, in the Lord who had come to her.

And that's why her great joy here is focused on that. How should it be granted to me that my Lord should come to me? My friends, it's no different for us today, is it?

There'll be many, many things that you and I long for in life, many things that we naturally yearn for and long to have the joy of having. It might be for us, just like it was for Elizabeth, the longing for a baby or a child.

It might be for you a longing for a wife with whom to have a child and a family or a husband. Or it may be longing to have the good health that you've never really experienced to give you a normal life, a fulfilling life.

Or perhaps the particular career that you longed for and never yet been able to have, the desire of your heart to use all the abilities that God has given you for the full.

[20 : 39] But you see, what we learn here from this passage about Elizabeth's song of joy, is that true joy and lasting joy, although of course it may be reflected in many of these things, true joy is really only found in one place.

It's found in an experience when the Lord Jesus himself comes into your presence, comes into your life, just as he came into Elizabeth's life that very day. See, she knew that and she understood that and that's why she found that day the great, great joy, the joy of Christmas that she expresses in her song.

She couldn't keep it in, she had to express it. She cried out with a loud voice, blessed be the Lord who has come to me. See, when Jesus, the Saviour of God, the Messiah, the bringer of joy, when he came into her life and into her presence, everything changed.

And poetry expressed itself in her soul and music was reborn and she couldn't keep it in. And that's the real joy of Christmas. That's why Christmas is so full of song, music, delight.

I do hope that you can sing that same song of joy with Elizabeth this Christmas. I do hope that you, like she, has experienced the joy that overflows when Jesus, the Saviour, comes into your presence and comes into your life.

[22 : 19] That's what Christmas is about. And that joy can happen to you and can overtake you and cause music to be reborn in your life, just as it did that day for Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

Why is this granted to me that my Lord should come to me? Well, I hope that's all of our song this Christmas and the joy will never cease.

Let's pray together, shall we? Lord, we thank you that although we do not always understand everything and although we cannot understand the mystery of the way that you reach out of eternity and touch our humble lives here in this earth, nevertheless, we can know its reality and we can share the joy of Jesus.

Maybe so for every one of us here this Christmas. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.