

Leaping Joy – The Leaping Joy of Ultimate Freedom

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[0 : 00] The curse is banished, the world released from bondage to decay, and restored to be as God created it to be forever. And Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did come to bring liberation. He came as promised to bring the leaping joy of ultimate freedom to enslave human beings. Listen to these words from Malachi, the very last of the prophets, speaking some 400 years or so before Christ.

And then to what the gospels record of the events of that first Christmas. Malachi says, Behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the Son of righteousness will arise with healing in his wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

And so it came to pass. An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son. And you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. 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. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, Elizabeth's 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 babe in my womb leaped for joy. In the Bible, there is great joy and wonder about the Christmas message. But there's absolutely no sentimentality. There's a message of real liberation, real peace, peace descending from heaven. But peace doesn't come, does it, to rebellious human beings, without, well, without an almighty cost of making peace? And that cost is to God himself.

[2 : 45] And so, or this babe, still infant, crying, shadows of the cross, we're lying. Before we think a little about all of what this means, I'm going to sing again this lovely carol about the angel's poignant message.

Today nel■■■re jank■. Today nel■■■re jankâtton, ii cant convo Egypt, j■■■ciûtetc jubii pereich laiqun■ in lulit a kedemi lulvi juff ujimini Dabei hqipui all theangARKKjennn opportunities ijumini ij hieruja es.

Let us pray.

Let us pray.

Let us pray.

[4 : 59] Let us pray.

Let us pray.

Let us pray.

Let us pray.

It's a picture, I think, of the leaping joy of ultimate freedom. Calves that are kept in a stall all night or perhaps kept apart from their mother during milking, but now at last they're set free to join their mothers again and they're leaping, frolicking with great joy.

[7:16] leaping speaks of celebration it speaks of extreme joy it's actually a quite a common association in the bible king david leaped and danced for joy in the song of songs the lover comes leaping over the mountains to his beloved anticipating a lover's tryst and when the prophets like isaiah spoke of the coming of the lord himself they said lame men would leap for joy just as blind people would see and the mute would sing for joy and here you see in malachi he is speaking also of the leaping joy of liberation of ultimate freedom and that would be the great feature of god himself coming into his world release liberation for human beings from captivity from bondage and that is one of the bible's very consistent ways of speaking about what it calls salvation way back in the book of exodus that was the great liberation of the old testament times and it became a picture of salvation ever afterwards and prophets like malachi refer to it and they look forward to an even greater liberation by far out of the captivity not just of egypt but the captivity that we as human beings experience to the bondage of sin and death and the liberation from that into a whole new world they look for a liberating day in the future isaiah promised that you shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace and the mountains and the hills will break forth into singing and the trees of the field will clap their hands beautiful pictures aren't they and that is the message of christmas that that malachi is speaking about it will bring liberation it will bring freedom from the dark oppressive powers in this world that rob us of so much joy and so much freedom and that's what he saw would begin at the first christmas two thousand years ago with the coming one that he foresaw who at last did come that christmas that's why there was joy that's why there was so much great joy surrounding the events of jesus birth and leaping as we heard in those readings john the baptist in the womb leap for joy but why why is christmas about liberation what does that really mean what does it mean that the human beings need to be liberated i want to explain that in jesus own words because unless we understand his message we really won't understand at all the significance of his birth first of all jesus said that human beings that is every one of us is in slavery and in need of liberation of release from bondage we're all slaves he said we're ruled by a ruthless power and we're helpless in the grip of that ruthless master and he called that master sin jesus said truly i say to you everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin now know what he says because that's not what we tend to think about sin jesus says we commit sins because we are slaves to sin because sin has power over us sin isn't isn't peccadilloes it's not things that we do it's a big great power that has us in its grip and that is the power that jesus says explains our human behavior i remember some years ago and reading an article by the biologist at desmond morris the zoologist

who's written a lot of books and it was a time of tiger woods and his fall from grace you remember he went right off the fairway didn't he made a complete mess adulterous ruining of his marriage and so on but desmond morris was writing about him saying he's a powerful man and all he's doing is living in tune with his prime evil instincts he says to spread his powerful genes as widely as he can as though that sort of made it all okay his wife certainly didn't think it was okay did it did she and uh i think in the end it cost him was it something like three quarters of a billion dollars in the divorce settlement pretty hefty all the same primeval instincts there is a grain of truth in what desmond morris is saying there but the bible i think explains it much much more fully because of course we're responsible for our actions aren't we we're moral beings we're not just animals but yes we are in fact in the grip of something very powerful and something very base and very evil not prime evil instincts as though it was something natural and it was just an innocent thing no says jesus but the power of sin which is far from natural and which is far from good and far from innocent and jesus says we are slaves to that mastery we're not free because if we were our world would be marked very differently in its relationships wouldn't it relationships not marked by infidelity but by total fidelity wouldn't need divorce lawyers wouldn't be marked by deceit but by honesty wouldn't need any tax inspectors either be a world not marked by suspicion but by trust but we wouldn't need a foreign office would we wouldn't need diplomats or any of these things and it would be a world marked not by war but by peace nato really could be disbanded because it wasn't needed not just because mr trump's not going to pay for it is that the world that we know is that the world as it really is well you know the answer to that question as well as i do it's not and jesus says the world is actually as it is because we human beings are enslaved we're captive to the power of sin to an alien intrusion into our true humanity now we recognize it we do we use euphemisms of course we say things like well that's just human nature isn't it when what we mean is well we're far from perfect although we tend to recognize that much better in others don't we we're very good at these irregular verbs i'm not perfect you've got issues he is a complete crook that's how we tend to think isn't it but we recognize nevertheless that there's a problem in humanity and the apostle paul echoes the lord jesus in his letter to the roman church he describes that excuse me that dark power of sin like a harsh master and like a brutal general and like a tyrannical ruler and like a vicious employer it subjugates our human lives that that dehumanizes us and therefore dejoys our lives and that that is a consistent message you see from the very beginning of the bible right to its end that the human race is not free that we're slaves and actually we're in desperate need of liberation well you might be saying to yourself come on that's nonsense what are you talking about

we're not slaves at least i'm not a slave i'm free this is a free country at least relatively i can live my life the way that i want to i can do it my way you you're quite wrong to infer that i'm some sort of a slave that's that's just a cheek well remember i'm just reporting jesus words these are not my words they're his and actually that response isn't new either because that is exactly what people said then to jesus they said we're offspring of abraham we've never been enslaved to anyone what are you on about what a cheek jesus to accuse us of being in bondage everyone who sins says jesus is a slave to sin you're wrong that was jesus contention wasn't popular then it's not popular now maybe you think to yourself who says i ever sin but honestly are you really the person the person that you want to be always do you never let others down do you never let yourself down if that's the case please come and speak to me afterwards because i could really do with you on our staff team we've never had anybody like that working with us here and let me ask you this are you really as free as you think you are are you joyfully liberated to be all that you can be all that you want to be all that you long to be well the bible would contend that you're not actually the apostle paul says that by nature we're enslaved to things that are not gods the apostle peter says the same whatever overcomes a person he says to that we are enslaved things that are not real gods things that have no power to help us we look to them maybe to fulfill ourselves to fulfill our lives to bring us liberation salvation but they don't have any power to save us like that what they do have power to do actually is to enslave us to condemn us most years i visit india and when i'm there i see people worshiping giving homage giving money to animals to idols even to trees literally in in bondage to idols which are made by the imagination of man and yet actually here in the secular west we're we're not really that different there are so many people who are who are in bondage to things that have no power to liberate them or bless them many artists and intellectuals are slaves to that great quest for for meaning for expression many many people in our culture are slaves to the quest for wealth as their salvation many people are seeking liberation seeking fulfillment through their relationships through their lover through their spouse through their children or through finding their identity and expressing their their sense of self expressing their sense of sexuality whatever that may be and that includes doesn't it the latest tragic fashion of people even mutilating their bodies in a quest for for liberation for freedom there are many many powerful masters abroad and in 21st century britain controlling people with great power with great persistence maybe a quest for beauty the perfect body shape maybe a quest for academic success for sporting success or whatever or just just the desire to be liked at school or at college or at your work

to be loved by someone special i don't think i'm exaggerating am i people people people are putting themselves constantly under the power of so many masters sometimes very ruthless masters powerful to condemn to failure but not to save and the fallout is all around us there are many tragedies aren't there of these gods who have who've spat out and rejected those who have looked to them people desperately seeking liberation from from that terrain and often often that is in the way of escapism isn't it into drugs and alcohol even into suicide suicide is the biggest killer of young men in our culture today isn't that tragic one of the most awful tragedies is when we we have young children wanting to take their own lives because they've been excluded by their peers because they've fallen short of the ruthless standards the fashion gods the popularity gods that rule so powerfully in youth culture today isn't that right striking isn't it that it's in this context that our government is trying to arm the medical profession to help people kill themselves i'm not sure that that any of us really can claim to be nearly as free as we like to think we are and certainly there is one master one master that none of us can deny has an icy grip over our lives and that is death itself none of us i think can deny can we that we are slaves to our own mortality sometimes people express this one artist put it this way i don't want to achieve immortality through my work i want to achieve it through not dying well now that's humorous and witty isn't it but there's a cutting edge to it as well the same man said this alienation loneliness and emptiness verging on madness the fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and death absolutely stupefying in its terror and it renders anyone's accomplishments meaningless there's no humor there is that's just dark and that's just a recognition of what jesus says that we are all captives to many many ruthless powers things that have a hold on our lives and above all we are all captive to that great dark power of death itself jesus says we are all in slavery and we're all in need of liberation but second you see the message of christmas is that jesus also says that he is the savior who came to bring that liberation to bring release from bondage the truth about me he says is what will set you free and if the son of god sets you free you'll be free indeed the truth of the gospel of christ liberates us because it faces head on the whole truth about time and eternity it recognizes it doesn't try to hide from the awful reality of sins enslaving power it's power over the human heart over the human mind but it also recognizes and it rejoices in the wonderful reality of the savior's liberating power to free the human heart to free this whole world from the power of death and that is what jesus coming into this world

is all about nothing less he came to bring liberation release from bondage to set us free in christ jesus from the law of sin and death as the apostle paul puts it to deliver us from the domain of darkness and transfer us into the kingdom of his beloved son a total liberation because it's a rescue from the power and the sway of the great tyrant himself the power of sin do you know it was exactly 35 years ago this very night that the world witnessed the overthrow of the tyrant ceccescu in romania some of you will remember it as i do and on the christmas morning of 1989 he was executed along with his wife and all the news bulletins were full of those pictures of their crumpled bodies at the bottom of a wall and a cheering crowd of people full of the joy of liberation after years decades of bondage under the communists release from darkness from tyranny from bondage and rejoicing that began a whole new way of life not just for individuals but for a nation but friends that first christmas saw a far greater liberation begun the beginning the beginning of total and ultimate liberation for this world a world waking up to the overcoming of the power of sin and death you might say well that's all very well but you christians still die don't you just like everyone else well yes that's true and the bible is clear there is still a not yet a not yet about our full salvation and that's because the liberation that is in jesus is not just a personal liberation for men and women it is a truly cosmic liberation for this whole wide world the whole of creation is waiting it's groaning says the apostle paul longing for that great day the day of consummation when the dead will be raised at the return of jesus christ when the same spirit who raised jesus from the dead will raise his people likewise then all things will be complete but meantime even now make no mistake that great liberation has begun because we who know and trust jesus christ we know that day is certain and so we can understand and experience that joy already in anticipation of its coming we are no longer slaves we're not yet full inheritors but we have the certainty of having been declared true heirs of god in christ we live on the basis of what we know is certainly to be ours one day that's the definition of an heir isn't it one who has an inheritance coming and is just waiting for it well perhaps let me illustrate it this way think about a football team that's already qualified for the world cup finals couldn't be scotland obviously but imagine but there's a whole lot of games still remaining in the group well that team is liberated isn't it to play its best its most wonderful free and flowing football because they know the result is already certain they're going to the world cup and that's what christmas means you see for all who fear his name says malachi for those who know christ and love christ there is the certainty of a future a future full of the leaping joy of ultimate freedom that day's not yet but there is already joy in the sheer knowledge of that certain liberation that's to come

[27 : 25] we are liberated already from the fear of death and therefore we can be liberated from every other stultifying fear of tyranny in this world of ours we can be liberated from the need of approval from others and praise from others we can be liberated from terrible burden that so often we put on ourselves judging ourselves and our own self-esteem we can be freed from the tyranny of feeling a need to achieve a need to possess a need to perform a need to be something including be something different to what our bodies truly tell us they are we are free to rejoice in what god has given us and what god has so wonderfully called us to be in this world knowing him through jesus christ friends it's that truth it is that truth in its entirety yes the hard unpalatable truth about sins enslaving power but also the glorious truth about our saviour's liberating power it is that truth that will set your heart leaping for joy this christmas time if you understand it indeed all the time if you'll accept if you'll receive it from the lips of jesus for what it is as he says the ultimate way of freedom and joy and if you haven't yet done that i want to urge you to make it yours this christmas do so says jesus christ and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free with the leaping joy of ultimate freedom the freedom that jesus christ longs to give to you personally now and forever and ever that's the message of the christmas gospel let's pray lord jesus christ risen and reigning forever would you grant us we pray to receive your living and liberating gospel word so that we might be a people who truly rejoice in the ultimate freedom that is yours alone to give for christ's sake amen je■eli

Halloween