



TIME OF GRACE®

Christmas Buzzwords: Joy Study Notes

Summary

How do you define the word *joy*? When that word appears on the latest Christmas card, where does your mind go? Is it just another word for *happy*, or is something more, a deeper and more lasting version that only Jesus can provide? Listen to this message and find out.

- “Every man, whatsoever his condition, desires to be happy.”—St. Augustine
- “I have now reigned above fifty years in victory or peace; beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure, have waited on my call, nor does any earthly blessing appear to have been wanting to my felicity. In this situation, I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot: they amount to fourteen.”—Abd Al-Rahhman III
- **Luke 1:47,48:** ⁴⁷ My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
- **Luke 2:10,11:** ¹⁰ I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you.
- “I want happiness. I don’t want to keep on with drugs. . . . Explain to me what Christianity can do for me. Is it phony? Can God love me? I want out of hell.”—John Lennon
- **Matthew 2:10,11:** ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.

Points to Ponder

1. Evaluate: Biblical joy is happiness that isn’t based on what is happening.

2. Read Philippians 4:4-7. How did the apostle Paul, the author of these words, find joy as he faced difficulties in his life? Name two lessons that could help you personally increase your joy this holiday season.?

Homework for Next Week

Read Isaiah 9:2-6.

Time of Grace Ministry
Christmas Buzzwords: Joy
Luke 1: 47,48; Luke 2: 10,11; Matthew 2: 10,11
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Pastor Mike Novotny

So maybe you picked this up already, but one of the four most popular words during the holiday season is the word joy. If you take all the instances of joy that you find in Christmas letters, and on Christmas cards, and in Christmas carols, and in Christmas songs, on the decor, on the wrapping paper, on the billboards, on the holiday sweaters, and if you tag along with those all of the second-cousins of joy, the merries, and the happys. If you put all those together in one massive, big bunch, I think you would need a pretty good storage unit to fit it.

This is the season of joy. The happy holidays, and the merry New Years, and a happy New Years, and everything together in-between. And I thought a lot about joy recently, and happiness, and gladness, and I stumbled across a quote. One of my favorite quotes from one of the most famous Christians of the past 2,000 years. He lived way back around 400 AD. He was from northern Africa, and his name was Augustan. And when Augustan thought of joy and happiness, he left us these epic words. He said: "Every man whatsoever his condition, desires to be happy." One of the most famous Christians said that, what you want, what I want, that every man, every woman, every child wants, it does not matter where you are from, what is your age, what you wear, where you work. Deep in the desires of every human heart is a desire to be happy.

I was thinking about Christmas gift lists the other day, and asking myself, was Augustan right, even if Christmas gift lists did not exist in his day? Like, the stuff on your official list, or the Amazon page that you just happen to keep open for mom or dad. You know, the unofficial stuff that you kind of hint at and namedrop in front of your boyfriend, or your parents, or your kids. Is not behind all that the desire to be happy? I bet it is.

In fact, just a quick show of hands. How many of you, if on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning, you ripped open the wrapping paper, and you found a brand-new iPhone, would that make you happy? Yeah, a couple of you? Yeah, yeah. How about if you tear open the massive wrapping paper, and inside was a 75" 8K Ultra-HD QLED TV, would that make anyone happy? When I stand in front of those at Best Buy, I instantly feel better about myself. I can imagine having one of those in my home.

How about this, if you ripped open the wrapping paper, and there was an XBOX Series X. Oh, a bunch of hands went up there. A PS5. A Nintendo Switch with Mario Kart 8 together along with it. And then, Dad brings out the 75" TV after that, would that make you happy? I do not know if my wife is here taking notes, but that would make me super-duper happy.

How about a kitchen makeover? You go away for the weekend, and there are new countertops, new cabinets, new appliances. How about an engagement ring? Oh, it got awkward there in the beginning, didn't it? No pressure, guys, sorry about that one. How about this, how about a Christmas dinner, your closest friends, your family, no masks, no pandemic, no restrictions, no rules, no one is in a rush, no one has got to get to someone else's house, would that make you happy? Yeah. Deep in the desire of every human heart, whether it is a big TV, a round of golf, an engagement ring, or being with people you love, according to Augustan, was a deep desire to be happy. To rejoice always.

But there is a problem. And I bet even if you are young, you are old enough to have realized the problem, that the problem is that being happy and staying happy is really hard. That is what I learned from the story of Abd al-Rahman III. Ever heard of him? About 1,000 years ago, Abd al-Rahman III was a Muslim ruler who ruled over most of what is now Spain and Portugal. And even though it was a very violent time, he held onto this position of power for over 50 years. This was a dude who had it all. He had the position, he had the power, he had a harem, he had pleasure, he had his own palace. But after all of it was done, after over 50 years of sitting on the throne, Abd al-Rahman III left us a quote that should shock you. It is a long quote, he said this: "I have now reigned above 50 years in victory or peace, beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure have waited on my call, nor does any earthly blessing appear to have been wanting to my facility, my happiness. In this situation, I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness, which have fallen to my lot. They amount to 14."

And that might seem crazy to some of you, some of you would say, "If I had a boyfriend, a girlfriend, a loving husband, a palace, if I had the money, if I had no debt, I would certainly be happy." But maybe this Christmas, if you stop and think about it, maybe you would realize where Abd al-Rahman III was coming from. In fact, think about last Christmas. Do you remember all the gifts you got last Christmas? I did not think so. About 12 months ago, you thought that if you got the things on the list, or at least half the list, you would be super happy, but now, do you even remember what they were?

See, Saint Augustan and Abd al-Rahman were very different spiritually, but they were onto something, that we all want to be happy, but getting happy and staying happy is really hard. You can get the money, you can get the stuff, you can get the guy and get the girl, you can get the house, you can get the car, but at the end of the day, holding onto happiness feels like it is chasing the wind.

But that is why I am super glad that you are here today. Because, do you know what this book, the Bible, talks about even more than the concept of faith? Happiness. I actually did a little nerdy Bible research, and I found out that if you count up all the words in this book, like happy, happiness, joy, rejoice, joyful, glad, gladness, they do not show up once or twice, but almost 500 times. In fact, those words show up more than the word faith, in this book of faith. And so, if someone would ask you, "Is the Bible a book about faith?" You would say, "For sure." If someone asked you, "Is the Bible a book about happiness?" You should answer, "Even more." Not the kind of temporal happiness that is based on video game systems and big screens and

engagement rings, but the kind of happiness that is so good and so constant that it can actually co-exist with all the ups and downs of your life.

The Apostle Paul would say, "Rejoice always," like, you can have a kind of happiness that can be right there, with your grief and sadness and struggle. And friends, that is the gift that I want to give you today. Today, I want to give you a crash course on how the Bible says a person can be happy. Not just one or two, or 12 or 14 days, not just during the holidays, the Christmas season, and the New Year. I want to teach you the path to lasting and genuine happiness that God himself puts a stamp of approval on.

So, if you are searching for something today, you can make the Amazon list if you want, but I got something better for you. And it is all over the original story of Christmas. Today, I want to cover my message in three parts. We are going to look at Mary, we are going to look at the shepherds, and we are going to look at the magi, or the wise men, and we are going to find that out of those 500 uses of the word joy and happy and rejoice, these words show up in all three of these stories. And once we study them and put them all back together, we are going to find out God's plan to be happy.

So, if you are ready to go, let us start with her. With Mary. If you are kind of brand new to the Bible, the Virgin Mary was a poor girl from a small town, who loved God. She lived in ancient Nazareth, in northern Israel, which was, like, a little bump in the district of Galilee. It was the kind of place, have you ever driven through one of these in Wisconsin, with, like, one gas station, one church, one stop sign, and four bars?

All right, that is like what Nazareth was from. Mary was devout and she was a fairly good person. She loved God, she was dirt poor, she was planning for her upcoming wedding. And then, she stumbled upon the source of joy. An angel appeared to her, the angel Gabriel, and he came with news that would blow Mary's mind. That the long-awaited Savior of the world, the Messiah or the Christ, would come from her womb. And Mary was stunned, and slightly confused, but when she started to process the good news that came from God, if you love musicals, you are going to love Mary, because she burst out into a song, and in the midst of the song, she said this. "My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior. For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant." Like, I am on the mind of God.

I picture Mary, after the angel Gabriel goes back to heaven, she is looking around at Nazareth, at the one blinking stop light where the two county highways cross. I was on God's mind. He is conscious of our existence. God himself sends angels to serve his people, in fact, 2,000 years ago, he was born to be among his people. This is insane. Us. I have told you some of this.

When I was growing up, my dad, his name is Tom, he would often try to keep me humble. So, when I would do something, like, big, playing hockey or soccer, I won the high school ping pong tournament once at my high school, have I ever told you that? And I would come home, I would tell my dad, feeling all big about myself, and my dad -- this is my dad's classic line, he says, "Michael. There are a billion Chinese people who do not care."

He is a good dad. A very good -- you know, who am I? I am another pastor, another church, who lives in another generation, in another country, but God does not mind. He shows up in the places you would least expect. He shows up at churches where you would least expect, he shows up in hearts where you would least expect. There is great joy when you think God is mindful of me. And that is why I brought one of you a gift. Inside this gift bag is the secret to my personal happiness. It is the place where I turn on my good days and my bad days, it makes the good days better, it makes the bad days bearable. This is the source of my happiness, and no, it is not a puppy. And it is not filled with Swedish Fish, although that would make me very happy as well.

No, inside this gift bag are the three words that have changed my life. GOD, all caps. GOD, he is right here. He does not mind. My wife and my kids have these shirts, they wear them around our house all the time, and it still stops me in my tracks. GOD. In my house? 1,600 square feet? Stuff needs to be fixed. Lawn isn't that great. He does not mind. My soul rejoices in God, my Savior. It magnifies the Lord because he has done great things for me. Anyone out there a men's large? Anyone? Yeah, all right, see if I can get it back there, I got you. Soccer players, darn it, all right. Enjoy, man. You might not get the t-shirt, but you still get the promise. Immanuel, God is with us.

So when you go home today, you might go home with a great family, you might go home with a broken family, you might go home by yourself, but I want you to remember who is with you. God is here. And just like Mary, your soul can rejoice in the presence of your Savior. So, that is our first story for today, the happiness of Mary.

Let us move onto the second story, the happiness of the shepherds. The shepherds, if you stop for a second to think about it, were not the boujee-ist guys on the block. You know what I mean by that? They were not fancy, they were not rich, they were not special. We tell the Christmas story, and there were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks at night. These are third-shift, blue-collar workers who needed a shave and a shower. Their reputation in the first century was not great. It was somewhere between, like, Hollywood defense lawyer and 1980s television pastor. Right? That was the shepherds.

But when God had good news to share, guess who he wanted to hear it? Another angel appeared that wonderful night of Jesus' birth, and it said this. "I bring you good news that will cause great," what is the word? Joy, "Great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you." Great joy. Not just regular joy, but great joy, like a triple scoop of happiness for all the people, and you see the reason. Because the God who is here, the God who has been born on this night, is not a judge, he is not a guide, he is not a guru, he is not a prophet, he is not a professor.

The angel said, "A Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord." God sent a messenger to some of the sketchier guys on Bethlehem's block and says, "Rejoice, brothers. A Savior has been born." Have you ever heard the story of when John Lennon, the famous musician for The Beatles, reached out to a 1980s television pastor? Oral Roberts was the pastor, he became pretty big in the 80s, but even in the 70s, his ministry was starting to thrive, and in 1972, I believe, John Lennon reached out to him with a desperate letter. And in the letter, John Lennon said this. "I

want happiness. I do not want to keep on with drugs. Explain to me what Christianity can do for me. Is it phony? Can God love me? I want out of hell."

I wonder if some of you have asked those same questions. I wish I had time today to answer a bunch of them. Is this real? Is this phony, is Christmas just another tale that we feel good around the end of the year, or is this historical, when Caesar Augustus issued a decree, if that is your question, please, ask me. I would love to tell you.

But today, I want to focus on this question. Can God love me? You know, lots of us in the depth of our heart, whether it is our first time in church in a long time, or we kind of sit here quietly, most of the time. Most of us answer that same question, can God love me? If you have been coming to church for weeks, if not months, if not years, and there is still a secret that you have not come out with, something you have not verbalized and gotten forgiveness for, can God love me? That is one of the most important questions in all of human history, and do you know who heard the answer? The shepherds.

Do you remember what the angel said to them that night? "I bring you good news that will cause great joy, and it is for all the good people." The angel did not say, "I bring you good news of great joy, and it is for all the above-average people." Neither did the angel say, "I bring you incredible news of great joy," and say it with me, "it is for all the people." All the people. Do you know who all the people includes? All the people. The best people, and the worst people. It includes you. If God so loved the world that he gave his only son, then God, by logical necessity, must love the one. The one that you look at in the mirror.

If Jesus was not born for some, if he did not live for some nor die for some, if he did all of it for all, then he must have done it for you. And this good news of great joy is the best news for us all. That when God shows up, this glorious, big, caps-lock GOD. He is not coming to judge or condemn; he is reaching out with the hands that would later be pierced to save. And I want to tell you, you might think I am biased, as a Christian believer, but what you have been searching for your whole life is that. God. Someone massively important to extend his hands and say, "I want, I love, I want to be with you."

Have you ever noticed how powerful the right person's presence is? Like, you could be going through the worst day at work, and you come home to someone, maybe, who loves you, or your dog, who does not know about the stress of work, and just the presence of the right person changes you?

Imagine if it was not a dog. Imagine if it was God. God is here, Mary found out, and God is here to save, the shepherds learned, and that brings us to our last friends for today. The magi, or the wise men. In the Gospel of Matthew 2, we meet these mysterious travelers from the East. Probably from modern-day Iran, or Iraq. On the back of a camel, their journey would have taken between four to eight weeks. But when they finally arrived and saw Jesus, not as a baby, but as a toddler in Mary and Joseph's house, do you know how these guys felt after two months, perhaps, away from their family, friends, mattresses, and comfortable lives? They were really happy. Let

me prove it to you, Matthew 2 says this. "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, not the manger, the house. They saw the child and worshiped him."

And that is the thought I want to leave you with today. He is so worthy. I cannot see his face yet, and neither can you, but I guarantee, whatever you give up for Jesus will be worth it. If you start changing your Sunday schedule to watch this at home, or to gather here, I guarantee you, it will be worth it. If you re-arrange your habit so that you can open this book and learn about this Savior every morning or every night, I guarantee you, it will be worth it. Whatever it costs you, whatever you have to change, whatever habits you have to give up, whatever sins and temptations you have to reject, one day, when you see his face, you will say, "It was worth it."

It was all worth it. Because the God who is here, the God who saves, he is infinitely worthy. And friends, that is how you find lasting joy. I hope I get the 75" TV. And the video game system. I hope your Amazon list gets checked, and the kitchen cabinets get redone, the engagement ring ends up on your finger, but even if it does not, there is a way that you can be happy. And it is not in another this, another that, or let us try again. It is seeking the face of the one who is infinitely worthy.

Yesterday, I sent an email to our church staff. I am working on another book, and the premise is that one little verse from that book can change your life. Some people call it the life verse, you heard of that before? It is like this one truth, I just -- I come back to and I think about it, and it helps me, and it comforts me, and a dozen stories have already rolled in from my email requests, of people who go out in nature, and they see more than a golf course, or a beach. They see the presence and the power of God. And from the mother who lost her little three-year-old girl to cancer, but it was going to be okay. Because she had something to cling onto, a promise and a God who was worthy. People who have had ups and downs in their careers, moments when they loved work and moments when they dreaded it, but they had this promise that Jesus would be with them every step of the way. And through verse after verse, chapter after chapter, they found exactly what these people found. That if God shows up, and he shows up to save, and that God is good and big and glorious and worthy, then you actually can have a merry Christmas, a happy holidays, and a joyful life.

I pray that you do. So let us pray.

Father in heaven, if we could see your face, oh, we would give up anything and everything. There are spiritual forces out there trying to deceive us and lie to us, to make us think you are small. You are some stocking-stuffer. You are St. Nick's Day, instead of Christmas morning. Because if we believe that you are not much, God, we will not seek you with passion.

And so, today, our souls magnify you. We lift up your name, we hallow it and declare you are worthy. You are holy. Anything that we could give, you are so infinitely worth it, God. I pray that I would believe that, and my family would believe that, my daughters would believe that, and everyone here listening would believe that.

God, thank you for being with us. The bigger you get, the more unlikely it seems that you should walk with people who are as complicated as we are. So thank you, Jesus, for being Immanuel, the God who is here, the God who is with us. Thank you, Jesus, for your promise that you would be with us always and you would never leave us, and never forsake us.

I pray today that that simple thought of your glorious and saving presence is enough to satisfy the desire that all of us have, the desire to simply be happy. I pray this all, Jesus, in your glorious name. And all God's people who wanted lasting happiness joined their voices and they said, Amen.