

Nevertheless Joy
Isaiah 9:1-7

This morning I have good news ... for about half of you. I found an essay titled, “*Why men are just happier people.*” Here are some of its disclosures: wedding plans take care of themselves; wrinkles add character; phone conversations are over in 30 seconds flat; we can open all our own jars; we get extra credit for the slightest act of thoughtfulness; if someone forgets to invite us, they can still be our friend; three pairs of shoes are more than enough; we can “do” our nails with a pocketknife; and the #1 reason: we can do Christmas shopping for 25 relatives, on Dec. 24, in 15 minutes. [P]

There are better reasons for happiness. More on that in a moment ... I also came across these actual airplane in-flight announcements.

One attendant said, “Your seat cushions can be used for flotation; and, in the event of an emergency water landing, please paddle to shore & take them with our compliments.

A pilot’s voice came over the intercom: “Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve reached cruising altitude and will be turning down the cabin lights. This is for your comfort ... and to enhance the appearance of your flight attendants.”

And my favorite: After a very hard landing, the pilot was standing at the door while the passengers exited the aircraft. An elderly lady made her way up the aisle, stopped, and said, “Young man, do you mind if I ask you a question?” “No, ma’am,” said the pilot, “what is it?” The lady said, “Did we land, or were we shot down?”

Have you ever felt that way? ... *Nevertheless*, we fly.

So much of life turns on that single word, “*nevertheless.*” People perish in car crashes every day ... nevertheless, I will drive home after church. Children so often break their parents’ hearts ... nevertheless, we rejoice when they are born. God permits pain and struggle and loss in my life; *nevertheless*, I will trust in Him. [P]

This morning, I want us to consider the centrality of joy in our lives as followers of Jesus, the One born to save.

How would you define *joy*? I believe one of the most simple yet profound ways of defining it is: *Gladness transcending circumstance*. Not the happiness which results from happenings. If someone can take your joy ... it wasn't joy. Joy is that inner delight which nothing in this world can give or steal.

Who of us doesn't need such joy? Life is hectic during these holidays – the stresses and the messes. But that's not the hardest part – many of us are remembering those not with us for this Christmas. Some of us are lonely and alone. Some of us are facing an uncertain new year.

We all need joy. [P] But there's only one way to find it ... in the word "*nevertheless*." Let's unpack that this morning ... And I am going to get right to the heart of the matter. This is what we need to remember ...

Christ Gives *Nevertheless Joy*

"Nevertheless" is a common word in the Bible.

Ps. 73:21-23: "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless; I was a brute beast before you. **Nevertheless**, I am always with You; You hold me by my right hand."

Ps. 106:43-45: "Many times He delivered them, but they were bent on rebellion and they wasted away in their sin. **Nevertheless**, He took note of their distress when He heard their cry; for their sake He remembered His covenant ..."

Luke 22:42: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; **nevertheless**, not my will, but yours be done."

In the verses immediately preceding our passage, we find Israel in despairing gloom: "Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their King and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness" (vs. 21-22).

And things are about to get worse for the people. In coming years, their cities will be ransacked, their Temple reduced to rubble, their people enslaved by Babylon.

But Isaiah can proclaim with confidence, “Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress” (9:1). Instead, “You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest ...” (v. 3).

Why? How could they have such gladness transcending their tragic circumstances? Because of verse 2 – “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” This is a great example of something very interesting about a number of prophetic promises found in the Bible. It is talking about a future event in the past tense (technically, the perfect tense, describing an action already made complete!) They *“have seen”* a great light. A light *“has dawned.”* Why is this? Because when it comes to our ever-faithful God, His promises are as good as done. This is the confidence behind Isaiah’s words, and behind the hope of those waiting in eager expectation for their fulfillment.

The Gospel of John proclaims the promise fulfilled in its opening chapter, so no one is confused as to who this Jesus is and what He had come to offer – “In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness ... The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:4-14)

This Light – this Glorious One – is the source of true joy – the source of gladness that transcends even the darkest day. Be it theirs then ... or ours today. [P]

So, they were able to have this transcending joy because of the *Light* promised in v. 2; but also because of *Life* promised in v. 6: “To us a child is born, to us a son is given.”

Again, when Isaiah gave this prophecy, it was still about 700 years before Christ’s birth; but he proclaims it as if He has arrived – not “a child *will be born*” but “a child *is born.*” Our joy in God’s promised Savior doesn’t start down the road at some unforeseen time and place – it is here and now! For the mind of faith, a promised act

of God is as good as done. Like Isaiah, we can take God at His word and rest in the remarkable assurance that He “has visited and redeemed!”

Now, if you are still not convinced that you can find in Christ Jesus a joy that transcends your trying circumstances, consider the alternatives ...

Thomas Aquinas said, “Man cannot live without joy ... when he is deprived of true spiritual joy, he becomes addicted to worldly pleasures.” But do they work? [P]

Matt Chandler writes, “A war will be waged again this Christmas. It’s a battle for our heart, our joy, and our worship. Almost every commercial and classic movie promises us a false reality. There’s a feel to this time of year, and we love the feel. But we must ask ourselves: What do we truly want from this season? What do we long to have that makes Christmas a favorite time of year? A thousand other answers subtly (or overtly) compete with this: *‘To us a child is born, to us a son is given.’*

When we shift from the real meaning of Christmas, when we go looking for some other ‘good news of great joy,’ we long for something that will never come. Why? Because we live in a broken world. We have no power to save ourselves. No amount of might will usher in peace on earth (or extended families). Instead of hiding from this reality, this is the very context which makes the real meaning of Christmas irreplaceable.

To not lose the substance of Christ in the shadows of all the Christmas hoopla this season, we must seriously reflect upon this good news of great joy given to those in a broken world. We need to take time to sit in the darkness, remembering our need of a Savior, that we might marvel that the Light of heaven came down to earth ... In the hustle and bustle of buying and traveling and gathering, we need to drop an anchor. *Instead of falling for the feelings of Christmas, the real challenge is learning to truly enjoy the One who is our Joy.”* (Matt Chandler) [P]

How do we have that delight in Christ and not circumstances? In eternity and not events? In God and not goods? ... How can we have *Nevertheless Joy?* [P]

Trust His Purpose. The Christ of Christmas is our *Wonderful Counselor.* “Wonderful” in verse 6 means “so full of wonder as to be miraculous.” “Counselor” points to a person of such wisdom that he can advise kings; the wisest in the land. The two together can be translated, *“He who plans wonderful things.”*

The world cannot *give* us such joy-filled purpose, OR *steal* it. Paul was as much an apostle to the Gentiles when he wrote letters from a Roman prison cell as he was preaching in a Roman marketplace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was as great a theologian when in a Nazi prison as in a seminary classroom. The *way* your life’s purpose is fulfilled can change; but the purpose will not.

Where do you need direction ... counsel? Will you make Him your Wonderful Counselor? [P] No matter the world around you, will you *trust His purposes* ... nevertheless? [P] Then you’ll have His joy.

Seek His Power. The baby in the manger is also the *Mighty God*, translated literally, *“The God who possesses might.”* No circumstance could steal His power. Frederick Buechner is right: *“For all his enormous power, Herod the Great knew there was somebody in diapers more powerful still.”*

No circumstance can take His power from His people. Nothing can threaten His redemptive work on our behalf!

Where do you need strength beyond your circumstances ... courage to face the future, resolve to do what is right? Will you make him your Mighty God? [P] No matter the world around you, will you *seek His power* ... nevertheless? Then you’ll have His joy.

Live in His Presence. The Christ of Christmas is also called *Everlasting Father* – not to replace the first person of the Trinity – but to imitate his fatherly care for his people. In the Hebrew, a *“Father forever.”* one who is always a protector and nurturer to us, one who forever loves us as only He can.

No circumstance can change His love. He is a father, not an employer or manager or any other relationship that falls infinitely short of such intimacy. A father loves his children simply because they are his children.

Where have you failed, where have you fallen? Where do you carry guilt? Will you seek His forgiveness and grace? Will you make Him your Everlasting Father? [P] No matter the world around you, will you *run to Him* ... nevertheless? [P] Then you'll have His joy.

Claim His Peace. The baby of Bethlehem is the *Prince of Peace.* In the Hebrew, "*the Prince who gives peace.*" No circumstance can change the fact that he brings peace, or that we need that peace. We need peace our circumstances cannot give.

Where do you need such peace? Will you ask Him? Will you make him your Prince of Peace? [P] No matter the world around you, will you find your rest in Him ... nevertheless? [P] Then you'll have His joy. [P]

We need the purpose of God, the power of God, the presence of God, the peace of God. Don't settle for less. Don't settle for happiness based on happenings. C. S. Lewis was right: "*Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.*"

Make the Christ of Christmas your Wonderful Counselor, your Mighty God, your Everlasting Father, your Prince of Peace. Do it no matter the world around you, despite all appearances. My prayer is that you will know and cherish, this season and always ... *Nevertheless Joy.*