

THE JOY OF FORERUNNERS – Like John!

John 3:22-26

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
 Let earth receive her king.
 Let every heart, prepare him room,
 and Heaven and nature sing
 and Heaven and nature sing.
 And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature Sing!*

My goodness, what a JOYFUL song! And you and I sing it every year at Christmas time.

Still, I'm not sure how you see it, but from my "neck of the deck" it sure seems like **true joy** is in short supply these days. True joy...lasting joy, an inner happiness that comes, settles in, and stays for a long time. Why does that seem so difficult?

This hit me again when reading my favorite newspaper. In the BOOK REVIEW section, Sam Sacks headlined his piece "Surprised by Joy" as he reviewed an Irish novel that "tries to capture [what he called] *the most fragile of human emotions: happiness.*" And all the proof I needed of his description was found in the rest of the newspaperⁱ:

- Knife Attacker Kills Two in London
- Iraqi Leader to Resign After Violent Protests
- Coach Resigns after Uttering Racial Slur
- Suit Details Nursing School Sexual Harrassment

It's no secret. Our most cherished annual holidays often put a bit fat magnifying glass over our lack of true joy. Tina Donvitoⁱⁱ suggests that we may hate the holidays for any of 12 reasons.

1. We haven't prioritized to reduce stress; we just try to "do it all"
2. We imagine a picture-perfect holiday
3. We expect the holidays to (magically) fix longstanding relational tensions
4. We don't anticipate holiday "triggers" which increase the losses we've experienced
5. We overindulge
6. We drink too much
7. We avoid exercising
8. In all the busyness, we forget caring well for ourselves, sleeping adequately
9. Something called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) kicks in when there is less daylight
10. Holiday spending can simply compound debt
11. We overcommit
12. Someone else often determines how we spend the holidays

In all of this joy doesn't seem to come to the world, though we dress it up in lights and presents. At

Christmas, heaven may be singing, but "nature" struggles to stay in tune.

So, what does the Bible say about JOY, and what does it have to do with the truth that **the Lord is come**? Just this:

True joy happens when the Lord Jesus comes, and is received

Now with your help, let's discover this from the life of one person who was around when the Lord came. I mean, when the Lord came, he was FULL of joy...joy that did not go away. And there was a reason. Take a Bible and turn with me to the Gospel of John, chapter 3.


²² After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. ²³ John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized ²⁴(for John had not yet been put in prison).

²⁵ Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. ²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, **and all are going to him.**" ²⁷ John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."


³¹He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. ³³ Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. ³⁴ For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Let's take a few moments to figure out what's going on here. We know from

- **Matthew's gospel (3:1-12)** that before Jesus ever became a public figure, his cousin John (the baptizer) was out in the wilderness near the Jordan declaring that the Messiah was about to arrive. Matthew reports that "Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (3:5).

 TRANSLATION – John baptized thousands who had become his crowd, disciples. John had become a popular and powerful public figure.

- **Then (Matthew 3:13)**, Jesus comes down from Galilee and is baptized by John. And suddenly, the spotlight begins to shift from John to Jesus. As Jesus is baptized, the heaven opens up, God the Father says, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!"

 TRANSLATION – Suddenly it's Jesus, not John, in the spotlight.

- Third, now (according to John 3) John has moved up the Jordan river to Aenon, near Salim, while Jesus (for a time) has stayed in Judea, in and around Jerusalem. And something very curious

begins to happen. We read in it John 3:26. Some of John's loyal disciples come to him and say,

"Hey John, remember that guy you baptized down south, beyond the Jordan. He's down where you were, and he is baptizing people...and (note! 3:26) **ALL ARE GOING TO HIM.**"

You see, John's ministry and popularity were fading. Those who had come to him, those who had flocked around him, followed wherever he went, listened to every powerful declaration...now a whole lot of them were now going to Someone else. And John's closest companions had a problem with that.

But not John. His reply to his disciples is a classic "It's not about me" response. Look at it again

^{3:27} John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease.

Translation? **True joy happens when the Lord Jesus comes, and is received.** For John, when he thought about his life, he might put that idea like this

True joy happens when people respond to the call of the bridegroom to become His bride

When we think about John's response to his territorial disciples, he makes it clear that he understood he was a "forerunner." Someone who goes ahead and gets things ready. Someone who runs ahead to prepares others to meet Jesus. "Forerunners" get their JOY, first, from their

#1 CONFIDENCE in GOD'S PURPOSEFUL PLAN

^{3:27} John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven."

Think for a moment. Why would John say *this* in response to his disciples, wringing their hands in saying, "Hey John, *you're* losing market share! It used to be that all of Jerusalem and Judea were excited about *you!* Traveled miles to listen to *you!* Gave *you* 10,000 likes on Facebook. They were *your* Twitter followers! John, they are all leaving YOU; going after Him!"

However, John was centered. It wasn't about how popular *he* was...because John was confident that heaven was in charge of what was going on in his life on any given day. God was in

charge of what God had given him (yesterday), on what God was giving him (today) , and what God would give him (tomorrow). It wasn't about him; it was about trusting what God would give him day by day. He was confident, he was centered. Heaven was in charge.

Number two – “forerunners” get their JOY from an

#2 AWARENESS OF THEIR CALLING FROM GOD

^{3:28} You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’

What is fascinating about this verse is the very first part, and then the middle. Our English translation mirrors the original Greek, “You yourselves” is emphatic, and then “I am not.” One of the things John always had to battle, because God had made his witness so powerful, was the people’s impression and clamoring that he be the Messiah. Popularity bloated the heads and hearts of his followers, but John was centered. Over and over and over again, he made it clear

^{John 1:19} And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” ²¹ And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?”

And he answered, “No.” ²² So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” ²³ He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” ²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)

²⁵ They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

²⁶ John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

Joyful forerunners know their calling. They’ve been sent ahead. They have a calling to help prepare people to meet Jesus. But JESUS is the ONE people need to meet. Look

- we don’t offer “this church” as *the solution* to anyone’s falling-apart-marriage or discordant home. *We prepare people to meet Jesus.*
- we don’t offer reading the Bible from cover-to-cover as *the remedy* for a life that is adrift and without direction. *We prepare people to meet Jesus.*
- we don’t offer involvement in Upward sports or Missions teams or Worship/music or Connect Groups or the Perfect Gift as *the answer* to life’s most difficult challenges. These things are only worthwhile *if they prepare people to meet and trust and to begin to walk through life* in a relationship...

with Someone whose sandal strap we are not worthy to untie...**and yet** Who loves us and alone can give us the very life we need when we walk with and follow Him. Preparing forerunners know that true joy happens when the Lord Jesus Christ comes, and is received.

#3 CLARITY ABOUT THE TRUE SOURCE OF JOY

^{3:29} The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.

Verse 29 gives you the sense that John knew his concerned followers needed an example. So he reminds them of what they knew and often saw (in their own Jewish culture) when friends of theirs got married. When someone sought to be married to his bride, he leaned on “the friend of the bridegroom.” Raymond Brown explains:

*[Translate the phrase in vs. 29] “best man”...literally, the friend of the groom. This is the **shoshben** of Jewish custom, the groom’s closest friend who takes care of arranging the wedding. Paul claims this role [with those in Corinth] in 2 Corinthians 11:2. The rabbis taught that Moses was given this role in the marriage between God and Israel. Because of this special trust, any impropriety between the best man and the bride was regarded as particularly heinous. John the Baptist could never marriage the bride. His only function was to prepare her for Jesus.ⁱⁱⁱ*

And John’s joy? “to stand and hear...the bridegroom’s voice.” Again, Dr. Brown –

The exact picture is not clear. Some think that the best man is at the bride’s house, standing guard and waiting to hear the noise of the groom’s procession as it comes to fetch the bride. Others picture the best man at the groom’s house after the bride has been brought there; he rejoices to hear the groom speaking with his bride.

True joy happens when the Lord Jesus comes, and is received.

True joy happens when people respond to the call of the bridegroom to become His bride

Forerunners are confident God being in charge, aware of their calling to go out ahead to prepare, clear about the true source of joy...and therefore

#4 JOYFUL WHEN THE BRIDEGROOM INCREASES

^{3:30} He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Forerunners want Jesus to be large through them, but themselves to be small. In the Spring of 1985, Peggy Noonan was on the White House Staff in Washington, D.C., serving then President Ronald Reagan. One day, President Reagan awarded to Mother Teresa the Medal of Freedom in the Rose Garden. Peggy Noonan remembers that, as she herself was

[leaving the ceremony] I walked down the corridor between the Oval Office and the West Wing drive, and there she was, turning my way. What a sight: a saint in a sari coming down the White House hallway. As she came nearer, I could not help it. I bowed. “Mother,” I said, “I just wanted to touch your hand.”

She looked up at me—it may have been one of God’s subtle jokes that His exalted child spent her life looking

up to everyone else—and said only two words. Later, I would realize that they were the message of her mission.

“Luff Gott,” she said. “Love God.” She pressed into my hand a poem she had written, and then glided away in a swoosh of habit.

I took the poem from its frame the day she died (Noonan continues). It is free verse, 79 lines, and is called “Mother’s Meditation”^{iv} (In the Hospital). In it, she reflects on Christ’s question to his apostles – “**Who do you say that I am?**”

Mother Teresa wasn’t afraid [to speak the truth to the most powerful of people in the most public of settings]. The poem she gave me included her personal answers to Christ’s question. She said Christ is...

**the Truth to be told
the Way to be walked
the Light to be lit.^v**

In hearing about that encounter, what I love is two things – Mother Teresa put the spotlight on Christ, and Mother Teresa challenged Peggy Noonan to do the same...to be a forerunner for Jesus.

FINISHING UP...

True joy happens when the Lord Jesus comes, and is received.

True joy happens when people respond to the call of the bridegroom to become His bride

Two questions as we wrap up. Number one – **Anyone here attempting to find true joy without receiving Jesus Christ?** If so, it is likely you will find the genuine article rather illusive. You can lunge at joy in your career. You can lunge at joy in how much you make, or a certain status you attain. You can lung at joy through chasing exciting experiences, or trying to be popular (or with the “in” group) where you go to school. You can lung at joy through social media. Through diving in to the holiday spirit. Any one of us can lung at joy year after year after year.

But those joys evaporate. Those joys drain off. C.S. Lewis once noted

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and 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.^{vi}

Malcolm Muggeridge^{vii}, the British journalist enamored with the promise of the Russian communist revolution until his life was transformed by meeting Jesus Christ, put it this way

I can say that I never knew what joy was like until I gave up pursuing happiness, or cared to live until I chose to die. For these two discoveries I am beholden to Jesus.

Here's my second question -- **Will we (you and I) be “forerunning friends” of the bridegroom?** Are we willing to purposefully, prayerfully go out ahead to help people meet Jesus? Especially during the days of *this* season...but even more as a lifestyle? Do we think about those around us? Are we ready to simply share, in our conversations with others, in the letters we write, in the exchanges we have, about the joy we have in Him?

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), the first president of Yale University, whose brilliant, Biblical insights often shaped the hearts of those pioneering in the American colonies, put it like this:

The enjoyment of [God] is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied.... Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends are but shadows, but enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.^{viii}

Will we live the joy of being “forerunners” for Jesus? Confident in God's plan for us, aware of our calling, clear about what brings joy, and joyful when others hear the voice of their bridegroom.

**True joy happens when the Lord Jesus comes, and is received.
True joy happens when people respond to the call of the bridegroom to become His bride**

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ⁱ The Wall Street Journal Weekend, Saturday/Sunday, Nov.30-Dec.1, 2019.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.thehealthy.com/mental-health/depression/holiday-depression/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1966), 152.

^{iv} Mother's Meditation [In the Hospital]

You are God.

You are God from God.

You are Begotten, not made.

You are One is Substance with the Father.

You are the Son of the living God.

You are the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

You are One with the Father.

You are in the Father from the beginning:

All things were made by You and the Father.

You are the Beloved Son in Whom the Father is well pleased.

You were the Son of Mary,

Conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary.

You were born in Bethlehem.

You were wrapped in swaddling clothes

By Mary and put in the manger full of straw.

You were kept warm by the breath of the donkey

Who carried your Mother with you in her womb.

You are the Son of Joseph,

The Carpenter as known by the people of Nazareth.

You are an ordinary man without much learning,

As judged by the learned people of Israel.

Who is Jesus to Me?

Jesus is the Word made Flesh,

Jesus is the Bread of Life.

Jesus is the Victim offered for our sins on the Cross.

Jesus is the Sacrifice

Offered at the Holy Mass for the sins of the world and mine.

Jesus is the Word - to be spoken.

Jesus is the Truth - to be told.

Jesus is the Way - to be walked.

Jesus is the Light - to be lit.

Jesus is the Life - to be lived.

Jesus is the Love - to be loved.

Jesus is the Joy - to be shared.

Jesus is the Sacrifice - to be offered.

Jesus is the Peace - to be given.

Jesus is the Bread of Life - to be eaten.

Jesus is the Hungry - to be fed.

Jesus is the Thirsty - to be satiated.

Jesus is the Naked - to be clothed.

Jesus is the Homeless - to be taken in.

Jesus is the sick - to be healed.

Jesus is the lonely - to be loved.

Jesus is the Unwanted - to be wanted.

Jesus is the Leper - to wash his wounds.

Jesus is the Beggar - to give him a smile.

Jesus is the Drunkard - to listen to him.

Jesus is the Little One - to embrace him.

Jesus is the Blind - to lead him.

Jesus is the Crippled - to walk with him.

Jesus is the drug Addict - to befriend him.

Jesus is the Prostitute - to remove from danger and befriend her.

Jesus is the Prisoner - to be visited.

Jesus is the Old - to be served.

To me ...

Jesus is my God.

Jesus is my Spouse.

Jesus is my Life.

Jesus is my only Love.

Jesus is my All in All.

Jesus is my Everything.

Jesus, I love with my whole heart, with my whole being.

I have given Him all, even my sins

and He has espoused me to Himself in tenderness and love.

Now and for life I am the spouse of my Crucified Spouse.

Amen.

Bl. Matka Teresa z Kalkuty. <http://tmoch.i365.pl/lew/meditation.htm>

^v Peggy Noonan, "A Combatant in the World—Mother could be fierce in defending her beliefs," *Time* – Commemorative Issue (September 15, 1997), Vol. 150, No. 11, p. 84.

^{vi} Citation: C. S. Lewis, in the sermon "The Weight of Glory"

^{vii} BRITISH JOURNALIST, WRITER, AND APOLOGIST (1903–90)

^{viii} from *The Christian Pilgrim*