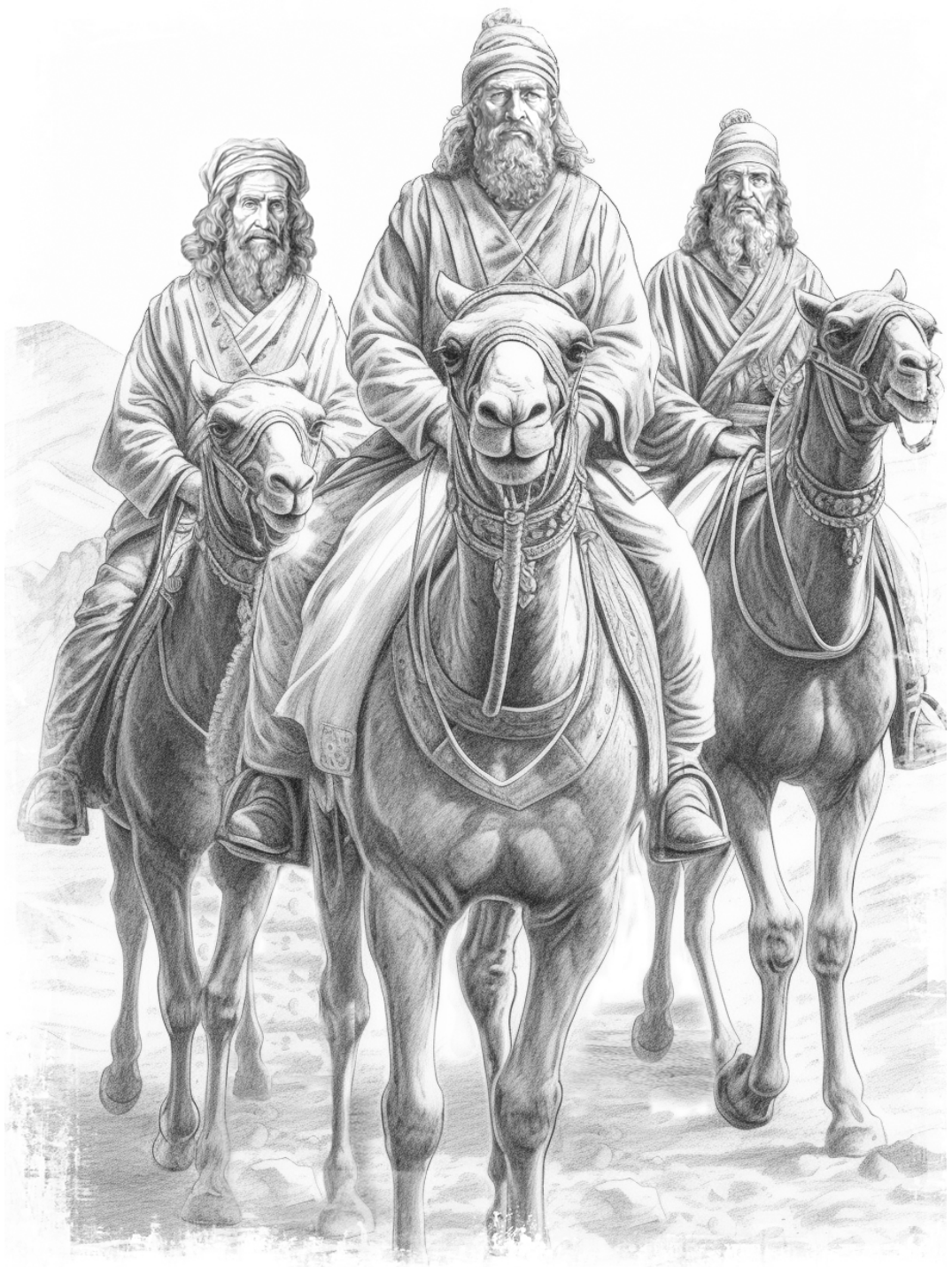




Joy

WEEK TWO





Joy Manifests in Actions

Unwrapping: Matthew 2:1-12

When I think of Christmas, I envision a peaceful, warm, and tranquil atmosphere. With mugs of mocha hot chocolate and festive carols filling the air, I embrace the coziness of the season. Yet, as much as I wish that they would, the struggles we face throughout the year don't magically pause for the holidays, at least they haven't for me.

Whether you've had a wonderful year or a difficult one, Matthew chapter 2 offers us a timely lesson on the resilience of faith and the enduring quest for true joy.

The Magi, otherwise known as wise men, took a challenging journey as they travelled to Jerusalem from the East. We don't know how they travelled, but it's assumed they travelled on camel back. What we do know is that long-distance travel during that era came with its own set of risks. Additionally, they dealt with the political tension of an agitated King. Herod had ulterior motives for finding the newborn, and so the wise men had to tread carefully.

Despite these obstacles, they pressed on, their faith unwavering. When they finally encountered Jesus, Matthew 2:10 (NIV) captures their emotion perfectly: "they were overjoyed." The richness of their joy was magnified by the obstacles they had so steadfastly overcome.

If you find yourself grappling with challenges that have followed you into the Holiday season, you're not alone. The journey to joy

can be a difficult one. It might test your faith, stretch your patience, or even shake your resolve, but the richness of the joy that awaits you makes every struggle worth facing.

The story of the wise men is a warm reminder that joy manifests in action: in their case, in the acts of worship and giving gifts to the baby Jesus. Their joy was more than a fleeting emotion, it was an expression of deep devotion and a heartfelt offering to God.

As you step into the holiday season, let the story of the wise men light your way. Don't let challenges and hardships steal your peace; think of them as stepping stones leading you closer to a deep and meaningful joy.

The Magi came from the East seeking the "King of the Jews." Which verse in Numbers 24 would prompt them to look for the star? Write it here:

Did You Know?

Tradition holds that the gifts the Magi brought represented the three facets of Christ's identity:

- **Gold:** A symbol of royalty, acknowledging Jesus as the King of Kings.
 - **Frankincense:** Representing divinity, it highlighted Jesus' divine nature and His role as our high priest.
 - **Myrrh:** A reminder of humanity, often used for embalming, pointing to Jesus' mortality and His sacrificial death on our behalf.
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Which verse in Psalm 72 foretold the coming of the wise men? Write the verse here:



JOY WELCOMES YOU HOME

Unwrapping: Luke 15

Growing up, I had five sisters and every one of them came home for Christmas. Every year Mom and Dad's house was like grand central station, and they loved every minute of it. That's what Christmas does—it evokes the joy of homecoming—of family, warmth, and belonging—at least for most families.

For some families, however, the season can further deepen our feelings of loneliness as it accentuates the gap between us and our loved ones. If you ever find yourself in that place of yearning or distance, let the story of the Prodigal Son serve as a gentle reminder that there's another homecoming waiting for you. It's the joy of returning to God's embrace, where you're not just welcomed but celebrated, no matter the distance or time that has passed.

In Luke 15:11-32, we encounter a son who, filled with youthful arrogance, squanders his inheritance in a far-off land. Yet, the story doesn't end in that distant place; it shifts to the moment the son realizes his need to go home. As he makes his way back, his father sees him from a distance and runs to him, showering him with grace and joy.

This scene mirrors the essence of Christmas. In sending Jesus, God the Father ran toward us, offering us a way back to joy, acceptance, and ultimately, home. Charles Spurgeon once said,

"The greatest joy of all is to have the joy of Christ within us." How true that is, especially during Christmas!

And what about the older son, who never left home but was consumed by bitterness and resentment? His father's joy seemed foreign to him because he never truly grasped the joy of grace—something freely given, not earned.

In the prodigal's return and the father's uncontainable joy, we see the heart of the Gospel and the true spirit of Christmas.

Whether you've wandered away from the Lord, or you're just feeling distant and longing for home, remember your Father is waiting for you. All you need to do is come home.

The older son's reaction provides a stark contrast to the father's joy. How does his response serve as a warning against self-righteousness and a lack of understanding grace?

Did You Know?

The father's act of running to greet his returning son carries deep cultural significance. The act of an older man running was uncommon and went against cultural norms. Dr. Kenneth Bailey, in his cultural studies of the Bible, underscores how these details illuminate the father's overwhelming joy and his willingness to set aside societal expectations for the sake of his son.

In Luke 15, Jesus shares three compelling parables that each underscore a distinct facet of God's heart and character:

- ★ **His relentless pursuit:** In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, a shepherd leaves the 99 to search for the one lost sheep, underscoring God's unwavering commitment to bringing back those who have strayed.
- ★ **His meticulous care:** In the Parable of the Lost Coin, a woman searches diligently for a single lost coin, highlighting how each individual is treasured and valued by God, and His joy over their return.
- ★ **His readiness to forgive:** In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, a father welcomes back his wayward son with open arms, symbolizing God's eagerness to forgive and restore those who turn back to Him, regardless of their past.



Joy Stems from Within

Unwrapping: Acts 8:26-40

While 'Joy to the World' offers a familiar melody each Christmas, it also whispers a gentle invitation—a sacred moment to pause and reflect: What is the true source of our joy? Is it wrapped up in tinsel and bows, or does it go deeper than that?

In the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, we see a man who 'went on his way rejoicing' after an encounter with the living Word of God. As we read this story, it's important to note that his joy was more than a fleeting moment of happiness. This kind of joy stems from within, and it's not dependent on the changing world around us. When our joy is rooted in Christ, it's not just here today and gone tomorrow; it is resilient and unwavering.

Amid the season's festivities and the shared laughter with loved ones, it's easy to be carried away by a sense of temporary happiness. But consider this: while those beautiful moments contribute to our holiday experience, they are not the wellspring of our enduring joy. That source can only be found in the person of Christ.

If you're feeling lost in the bustle of holiday to-dos and seasonal expectations, it may be time to recenter your heart. The eunuch's joy emanated from understanding that all of Scripture—every prophetic word, every promise—pointed to Jesus. Similarly, the genuine joy of

Did You Know?

The Ethiopian eunuch was reading from the book of Isaiah, a text written hundreds of years before the events of Acts took place. Isaiah's prophecies, particularly the "Servant Songs," provide some of the most detailed Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah's coming.

How can the words of Psalm 30:4-5 reshape our response to life's challenges?



Joy is Rooted in Our Certainty of God

Unwrapping: Acts 16:16-40 & Ephesians 1

Christmas is known as a season of gladness and joy, but for people who are struggling with unemployment, sickness, distance from loved ones, and loss, it can be a difficult season to wade through.

How do you grasp a sense of genuine cheer when darkness is clouding your joy? The balm for all our sorrow and pain is found in the Scriptures. Consider Paul and Silas in Acts Chapter 16. Despite being beaten, chained, and imprisoned, they still managed to sing and praise God.

Deep-rooted joy in the face of adversity is not exclusive to Paul and Silas. We have access to the same wellspring of joy that they did—a fullness of joy unlike anything this world has to offer, but how do you find this kind of joy when your world is clouded with sorrow? Psalm 107 tells us, "When they were in trouble, they cried to the Lord, and he saved them from their distress" (Psalm 107:27-28, NIV).

It sounds simple, doesn't it? Just cry out to the Lord? That's what Paul and Silas did. In doing so, they found a deep-rooted joy in the midst of their struggles. They didn't wait until they exhausted all of their options before turning to God; they seized the opportunity right there and then to draw closer to Him. They were facing an uncertain future, but at the same time, their faith—and their joy—

Did You Know?

The Apostle Paul faced numerous hardships, including imprisonments, beatings, shipwrecks, persecution, and stoning during his ministry. Despite his suffering, Paul penned some of the most joyful and inspiring letters in The New Testament.

Psalm 107:27-30 describes a human, and often familiar, response to trouble. How do Paul and Silas' actions in prison provide a contrasting example of how to respond in difficult circumstances?



Joy Strengthens a Weary Soul

Unwrapping: Nehemiah 8:1-12

The season of Christmas beautifully mirrors the themes in the story of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the wall—hope, restoration, and of course, joy. Both stories share the sense of anticipation, waiting for something sacred and transformative to be fulfilled.

Imagine it's Christmas, and everywhere you look, people are celebrating the season. Men are stringing up lights, women are shopping for last-minute gifts, and children are making snow angels outside in the yard. Yet one home is different. There's a tangible stillness within those four walls—the father who serves as a soldier is miles from his home.

Evening falls, and just as mom settles down to bask in the glow of the warm Christmas lights, there's a sudden knock at the door. Curious feet rush down the hall, but before they arrive, the door opens wide. Holding a bouquet of flowers in one hand and gifts in the other, Dad is home for the holidays. Each giggle and every embrace transforms the atmosphere from one of waiting to one of wonder and warmth.

As the family gathers together, the words of Nehemiah 8:10, echo the sentiment of the season: "Do not grieve, for the joy of the

Did You Know?

In Nehemiah's time, the Israelites were encouraged to share their joy by providing for the less fortunate. This reflects the biblical theme of communal joy, while at the same time it highlights the joy of sharing during the Christmas season.

In what ways do you feel your own "walls" have been broken down this year, and how can the joy of the Lord serve as your strength in rebuilding them?



Joy Doesn't Wait for Answers

Unwrapping: Luke 1:39-45 (NIV)

At Christmastime, my grandchildren are fascinated by the wonder of it all. Julia is mesmerized by ornaments that reflect the twinkling lights. Joseph is captivated by Grampa's red train that chugs merrily around the tree. And both of them are eager to climb up to the gingerbread cookie jar, hoping to get one more snack before bed.

That kind of joy is easily recognized—the wide-eyed, eager joy of children entranced by twinkling lights and toy trains. Yet there's another kind of joy, so pure, so anticipatory, that it springs forth before you even fully grasp the reason for it.

Luke Chapter 1 tells us that Elizabeth's baby leapt in her womb when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, greeted her. That leap is a beautiful metaphor for the uncontainable, inexpressible joy we experience through faith.

The baby, who would become John the Baptist, sensed God's holy presence and he responded in the most instinctual way imaginable—with sheer, uncontainable joy. Before John had the words or even a conscious thought to articulate it, his spirit recognized the Spirit of Christ. And thus, he rejoiced.

How often do we, as adults, lose that innate capacity for joy, bogged down by life's complexities and our need for understanding? Sometimes our hearts need to leap before our minds have all the

Did You Know?

In ancient Jewish culture, joy was not just an emotion but a commandment. Many of the Jewish feasts and traditions are centered on the concept of joy. The Feast of Tabernacles, for instance, was known as 'the season of our joy.' This highlights how integral joy is in the relationship between God and His people, much like how we celebrate the joyous arrival of Christ at Christmas.

How do Luke 1:45 and Hebrews 11:1 together enrich your understanding of the true meaning of being 'blessed'?



Joy is an EXPRESSION of Our Faith

Unwrapping: 2 Samuel 6:6-23

My family likes to start early. Around mid-November, after eating Chinese food, we whip up hot chocolate, put on some carols, and embark on our yearly tradition of decking the halls. It's a delightful mess of twinkling lights and cherished memories that fills our home with undeniable joy.

Much like our family, King David knew something about heart-felt celebration. In 2 Samuel 6, as the Ark of the Covenant—representing God's presence—was brought into the city, David danced before the Lord. If you think this was a subtle display of emotion, think again. The Bible tells us that David danced 'with all his might.' His joy was undeniable and unashamed, a powerful expression flowing from his deep relationship with God.

The Christmas season offers us the opportunity to celebrate the birth of Jesus in much the same way. His coming is why we can stand before God with exuberant joy. Whether we're singing carols, sharing a meal with family and friends, or simply cherishing the moment, we have every reason to celebrate. This isn't just a holiday feeling; it's a profound joy rooted in God's eternal love.

As 2 Samuel 6 teaches us, not everyone understands this type of joy. David's own wife, Michal, found his enthusiastic display less than dignified. In the same way, some might question your traditions or the way you express your faith during the season. This serves

Did You Know?

The Ark of the Covenant symbolized God's presence among the Israelites and was so sacred that touching it led to Uzzah's death. In contrast, the New Testament reveals that God's presence is now available to all through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Just like David danced joyfully before the Ark, we too can express our joy, knowing God is ever-present in our lives.

What are some ways you express joy through your holiday traditions?

Questions and Answers

Day 8

The Magi came from the East seeking the "King of the Jews." Which verse in Numbers 24 would prompt them to follow the star? Write it here:

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth. (Numbers 24:17, NIV)

Which verse in Psalm 72 foretold the coming of the wise men? Write the verse here:

May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores bring tribute to him. May the kings of Sheba and Seba present him gifts. (Psalm 72:10, NIV)

Day 9

The older son's reaction provides a stark contrast to the father's joy. How does his response serve as a warning against self-righteousness and a lack of understanding grace?

The older son's resentment shows a self-righteous attitude and a misunderstanding of grace, which is unearned love, rather than a reward for good behavior.

Day 10

What does John 15:10-11, coupled with the Ethiopian eunuch's joyful response to the gospel teach us about the source of our joy?

John 15:10-11 tells us that by abiding in Jesus' love and following His teachings, our joy becomes complete. The Ethiopian eunuch's immediate joy after hearing the Gospel mirrors this, showing that true joy stems from a relationship with Christ and embracing His message. Both instances highlight that enduring joy is deeply connected to our bond with Jesus.

How can the words of Psalm 30:4-5 reshape our response to life's challenges?

Instead of being overwhelmed by adversity, we can find hope and resilience knowing that God's favor is constant. This outlook motivates us to face challenges with faith and perseverance, trusting that God's goodness will ultimately prevail.

Day 11

Paul's certainty of God strengthened him in his time of suffering. According to Ephesians 3:20, what is one empowering fact that he knew about God? And, what is one that you know about God?

That God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.

Answers to the second part of this question will vary among individuals.

Psalm 107:27-30 describes a human, and often familiar, response to trouble. How do Paul and Silas' actions in prison provide a contrasting example of how to respond in difficult circumstances?

In Psalm 107, people try to navigate storms on their own before calling out to God, only finding peace when God intervenes. Paul and Silas, in contrast, turn to prayer and worship immediately upon finding themselves in prison. Not only do they rely on God right away, but they also maintain a sense of joy and worship in the midst of their hardship. Their actions demonstrate a joyful, unwavering reliance on God, even in challenging circumstances.

Day 12

The Israelites were told to share their food and drink with those who had none. How can you extend this principle of sharing to those around you during Christmas?

Answers to this question will vary among individuals.

In what ways do you feel your own "walls" have been broken down this year, and how can the joy of the Lord serve as your strength in rebuilding them?

Answers to this question will vary among individuals.

Day 13

Similar to Paul, Mary's joy was rooted in her certainty of God. Looking at Luke 1:46-55, what are five things Mary knew about God?

1. God is Mindful: Mary recognized that God is aware of the "humble state of his servant" (v. 48). Her joy sprang from a God who sees her, even in her lowly circumstances.
2. God is Mighty: She declared, "the Mighty One has done great things for me" (v. 49). Her song is filled with awe at the power of God to intervene in human lives.
3. God is Merciful: Mary sang about God's mercy extending "to those who fear him, from generation to generation" (v. 50). She was secure in the knowledge that God's mercy is not a one-time act but an ongoing promise.
4. God is Just: Her song speaks of God scattering the proud, bringing down rulers, lifting the humble, and filling the hungry with good things (vv. 51-53). Mary was confident in God's sense of justice and equity.
5. God is Faithful: She ended her song by reminding us that God "has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever" (vv. 54-55). Mary was certain of God's faithfulness to fulfill His promises.

How do Luke 1:45 and Hebrews 11:1 together enrich your understanding of the true meaning of being 'blessed'?

Luke 1:45 shows that Mary is blessed because she believed God's promises would be fulfilled. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Together, these verses suggest that being "blessed" is closely tied to having faith in God's promises, even when they're not yet visible.

Day 14

The Ark's journey to Jerusalem was marked by sacrifices along the way. How do sacrifices or challenges in your life contribute to your understanding and experience of joy?

Sacrifices and challenges often deepen our sense of joy because they remind us of our reliance on God. Facing difficulties with faith can lead to a richer experience of God's love and provision, offering us a joy that is both enduring and deeply rooted in Him.

What are some ways you express joy through your holiday traditions?

Answers to this question will vary among individuals.