

Following John to Fullness of Joy

Introduction

The Text

Luke 1:13–16

¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. ¹⁶And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God...

From Sorrow to Joy!

- A. Does anyone come into this room this morning sad, depressed, despairing? I’m praying for you. I’m preaching this message for you. There’s joy to be found in this text. We’re going to follow vv. 14-16 verse by verse, from a (1) A Pregnant Joy (v. 14), to (2) A Spirit-Filled Prophet (v. 15), to (3) A Family Reunion (v. 16).

(1) A Pregnant Joy (v. 14)

A First Note of Joy

- A. In v. 14 the angel Gabriel first begins to explain to Zechariah who his son John will be, what he’s going to do, and what effect he will have on others: “And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth...”
1. Don’t you love that. Gabriel could start anywhere, but he starts here. It is not insignificant that the first note sounded is one of joy. In fact, Gabriel starts multiplying words at this point to ensure we don’t miss this: not just joy, but “joy and gladness” and then the verb form: “rejoice.”
 2. And, beyond this multiplication of words, Gabriel describes this joy, gladness, and rejoicing as a sort of expanding force:
 - a. We see in the first part of the verse that this joy will begin in the personal dimension: “You will have joy and gladness.” This is, perhaps, understandable. After all, Zechariah’s wife has been “barren, and both were advanced in years” (v. 7). It doesn’t take much imagination to perceive that such a child would bring Zechariah joy.
 - b. But as we keep reading another dimension opens up for us: the corporate, even cosmic dimension. “And many will rejoice at his birth...” And here is the surprise of this announcement. It is not only Zechariah that is in view,

but Zechariah's nation, and, even, as we will see, the nations plural. This joy cannot be contained, it cannot be privatized, it is breaking out and coming for the world. You and I are in this "many." There is joy for us here!

- B. So, we don't want to miss this! As God resumes His redemptive activity in the world after an apparent 400 years of silence (between Malachi 4 and Luke 1), the first note sounded is one of joy—for the individual, for the world! The age of fulfillment, inaugurated by the coming of God's Son, is also the age of joy. The entrance of God into history is synonymous with the entrance of joy. Where God is, joy is.
 - 1. Do you believe this? How does that sit in your mind and heart? Have you ever thought of God as a killjoy? Isn't that how our culture wants us to think of Him? "God's not the giver of joy but the killer of it. You want that girl, He says: 'NO!' You want to store up your treasure in barns, He says: 'NO!' You want to give your enemy what she's got coming to her, He says 'No!' He's not a give-joy, He's a killjoy."

God Is Joy!

- A. Luke, Gabriel, Zechariah, Elizabeth, John, they would all vehemently disagree! This God, He not only gives joy, He is joy!
 - 1. Luke's Infancy Narrative (chs. 1-2) lights up with joy at every point.
 - a. The joy that's foretold in v. 14 regarding John, with its personal and corporate dimensions, already begin their fulfillment, just a few vv. later:
 - i. For Zechariah's joy, see 1:67-79 as he erupts in praise upon John's birth.
 - ii. For the expanding of this joy to others see v. 58 where we read that Elizabeth's "neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her." The joy is breaking out!
 - b. But the joy that John brings is just the beginning, it's anticipating the joy that Jesus brings.
 - i. And this begins, perhaps in 1:28: "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"—where "greetings" here in the Greek, is the same word we find up in v. 14 that we translated "rejoice." While most scholars take this word here to be a standard greeting, some have seen it as a call to joy! "Rejoice, O favored one...!" If we take this as a call to rejoice disguised under a standard greeting, then, intriguingly, both announcements (to Zechariah regarding John, and to Mary regarding Jesus) begin by striking the note of joy!

- ii. And just as joy expanded from Zechariah to many, so Mary's joy becomes a joy "for all the people." "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10b).
- c. And as we keep reading in ch. 2 songs of joy continue to erupt everywhere!
 - i. The angel that declared v. 10 to the shepherds in the night, lifts the curtain, as it were, in vv. 13-14: " ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'"
 - ii. And this angelic song is retuned to the human tongue of Simeon, as he sings over the baby Jesus when He's presented at the temple (vv. 29-32).
- 2. But there is more, this note of joy actually frames the entire gospel! The joy that rings out in the temple scenes at the beginning of Luke's gospel reach their crescendo in the temple at the end! " ⁵⁰ Then he [Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God" (Luk 24:50-53).
 - a. All of His activity from beginning to end, from incarnation to ascension, has been for joy, yours and my joy!
- 3. And of course, this is not a truth monopolized by Luke. Joy not only frames this gospel, it frames the entire Bible!
 - a. It's there at the creation of the world with that resounding refrain: "And God saw that it was good...And God saw that it was good...And God saw that it was good..." And then after He creates man and woman and "Behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). What's that? God is happy. And humanity was created to join in His joy.
 - b. And it's there at the end of the world, with the songs of the saints in heaven still echoing in our minds as we read the last vv. of Revelation.

B. God is not a killjoy, He gives joy. And He not only gives joy, He is joy! Don't miss that!

(2) A Spirit-Filled Prophet (v. 15)

For He will Be Great

- A. So how do we get it? We've already inferred that this joy and gladness that would come to Zechariah and many is connected in some way to this miraculous child, John (v. 13). This

inference is confirmed logically as we now see in v. 15 that this joy and gladness is, in fact, grounded in, experienced on the basis of, the person and work of this child: “for he will be great before the Lord.”

1. This joy that we all want has something to do with “he”, with this child, John. If we want joy, we have to follow John to it! That’s why I titled this message: Following John to Fullness of Joy.
- B. We then read that John will be “great before the Lord (in His sight, in His estimation).” Here we recall what Jesus would later say of him: “Among those born of women none is greater than John” (Luk 7:28).
1. The rest of v. 15 describes how John will in fact be great before the Lord and lead us to joy.

Empty of Wine and Strong Drink

- A. The first thing we read is: “And he must not drink wine or strong drink...” Now what does this mean?
1. It seems to point us in some way to the fact that John would be set apart from the things of this world for service unto God.
 2. But, at first read, this detail seems a bit counterintuitive does it not? We think of wine and strong drink as something we break out on occasions of celebration and joy. Even the Bible knows of this sort of thing throughout the Old and New Testaments. So why does this path to fullness of joy begin with this call to asceticism and abstinence? Is God just going to leave us empty?
 - a. We’re back to God as the killjoy again. He’s just one “No!” after another.

Filled with the Holy Spirit

- A. But for all of God’s “No’s” there is always an even greater “Yes!”: “...and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit...” God may call us to separate ourselves from this world like sojourners, but it is never to leave us empty and alone. It is rather that we might be filled with Him!
- B. A contrast emerges at this point: there’s a filling with wine and strong drink on the one hand, and a filling with the Holy Spirit on the other.
1. We actually find this contrast making appearances elsewhere in Scripture, perhaps most clearly in Eph 5:18 where Paul writes: “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.”
- C. This contrast pushes us towards a decision: Where do we think we’re going to find joy? Are we going to find it here, in this life, the things of this world, in wine and strong drink? Or are we going to find it in God?

1. The filling of this world, as with wine and strong drink, while it might bring a more immediate sense of joy, but it leaves us hungover and empty. The filling of the Holy Spirit, of God, while it might be hard at first and seem to be more like an emptying, it truly leads us to fullness of life and joy.
 - a. There's a reason why the Holy Spirit and joy are so often paired together in the Scriptures:
 - i. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52).
 - ii. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17).
 - iii. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit... (1 Th 1:6).

2. So we have a decision to make: Are we going to go after the world and fill ourselves empty, or are we going to go after God and empty ourselves full, of God and His joy?
 - a. Do you remember Jesus with the woman at the well? She been drinking from every well she could get her water jar in. Husband after husband, relationship after relationship, and I'm still empty. I'm drinking but I'm empty.

“¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Joh 4:13–14). And we know from Joh 7:39, this water is the Holy Spirit.

3. You might have to leave behind wine and strong drink or “watering jar” (v. 28), but you won't be empty you will be filled!

4 Implications

- A. We should say a bit more about the presence of the Spirit here. This activity of the Spirit becomes a central theme for Luke, particularly in these opening chapters. Read [Luk 1-2](#) and you will see the Spirit at work everywhere. And the presence of the Spirit here brings with it some very significant implications that we should at least mention before moving on:
 1. It indicates that God is resuming His redemptive work in history, and even points us to the fact that this work will be along the lines of a new creation. As the Spirit hovered over the face of the waters, so it is beginning to move again here in an unprecedented way.
 2. It indicates the arrival of the Messianic Age, the Age of Fulfillment that was foretold by the prophets and anticipated by all of Israel. Consider [Joel 2:28a](#): “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh...” And also [Isa](#)

44:3a: “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring...”

- a. God, now, at the beginning of Luke, is inaugurating this great work. We see the Spirit saturating the opening chapters of this gospel until it comes to rest on Jesus in [ch. 3](#), indicating Him as the One who “will baptize...with the Holy Spirit” ([3:16](#)), a baptism which He administers to the church after His ascension in [Acts 2](#). And then the Spirit’s activity just explodes (16 references in Luke to 57 in Acts!).
3. It indicates John as “the prophet of the Most High” ([1:76](#)), and one who in some way will take part in advancing us towards this Messianic Age and new creation. He is filled with the Spirit of God to do the works of God.
 4. It indicates man’s utter dependence on God to do anything great for God. The starting point for all truly great men isn’t their own effort or ingenuity, it’s God and His Spirit. God will know nothing of the self-made man. The only man who matters in His sight is the one whom God remakes by His Spirit and grace! As John would say later regarding his ministry: “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven” ([John 3:27](#)).
 - a. The last part of [v. 15](#) takes our fourth implication and drives it even deeper. For John the Baptist will be filled with the Holy Spirit “...even from his mother’s womb.” This filling takes place for John before he ever had a say in the matter.
 - i. In one sense, this merely emphasizes for us that this man is going to have a special role in God’s kingdom advance.
 - ii. But in another sense, it communicates to us of the utter freedom and absoluteness of God’s grace. As one theologian puts it: “The grace of God is pure grace and hence absolutely independent of any human condition...For God no door is locked, no creature unapproachable, no heart inaccessible. With His Spirit He can enter the innermost being of every human, with or without the Word, by way of or apart from all consciousness, in old age or from the moment of conception...The Spirit of Christ is not bound to the consciousness and will of human beings” ([Bavinck, 4:123-4](#)).
 - b. Your salvation, from faith’s first bud to all the fruit that follows, can all be put under the banner of that magnificent statement from Paul: “It depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” ([Rom 9:16](#)). Is your God that big? Is His grace that free?

(3) A Family Reunion (v. 16)

- A. But now we return to following John on the way to fullness of Joy. And as we come to [v. 16](#) we see what John will do that makes him so great and results in our joy (we’ve seen how he

will do it—by the “Holy Spirit”—now we see what he will do): “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God...”

He Will Turn

- A. The first thing to note is that this language of turning implies that the children here are going in the wrong direction. That hurts the ego. It’s like the guy who’s so stoked he has the ball he doesn’t even realize as he’s racing off that he’s heading towards the opponent’s goal. You’re going the wrong way. It looks like glory and joy at the end there but it’s only shame and sorrow.
 - 1. Here we have another counterintuitive twist. The world says: “You want joy? Fight for your rights. Defend yourself. Protect yourself. Exalt yourself.” Then John comes and says: “You want joy? Humble yourself!” You and I are wrong, we’re off, we’re broken, we’re going the wrong way and we need to “turn.”
 - a. The way to joy, then, not only includes an empty fullness it now also includes a low highness. If you want to get back up to God, you’ve got to get low.
- B. Humanity went off in Adam. With the rising chorus of “It was good”s, man refused to harmonize. What was very good for God wasn’t good enough for us. We were invited into His joy and we would have none of it. We couldn’t get over the one thing He said we couldn’t have. He gave us everything but one thing and that one thing became everything to us. “He’s a killjoy” Satan whispers. “All He ever does is tell you ‘No!’ Well, maybe it’s time you should tell Him ‘No!’” Do you want to know what happened when Adam and Eve told God “No”? They didn’t find joy. They killed it!
 - 1. Now I know in our text its “the children of Israel” that are mentioned: John “will turn many of the children of Israel.” But Israel, at bottom, merely replays at a national level what happened with Adam at an individual level. In Israel, the fall of man is put on the global stage, and all the nations (that all proceeded from Adam) are called to take their seats and watch. The nation of Israel emerges from the chaotic waters of the Red Sea, created by God, as it were, and called His firstborn son. And God brought this son into a garden paradise in Canaan. And Israel was given God’s law but rebelled against it and was expelled from that land into exile.
 - a. They are a corporate Adam. They keep the story of the fall alive in historical memory...so that John could come in the overlap of the ages, and turn them (and the nations) back to the Lord their God, and to the joy that was lost so long ago!

To the Lord our God

- A. How’s John going to do this? We’re following him here back to the Lord our God, where joy is found, but what does this ministry of turning look like? How is He going to get us back to the Lord?

1. He will get us back to the Lord by handing us off to the Christ (who is the Lord [Luk 2:11]), the second Adam, the true Son of God, the new Israel, the Savior of the world.
 - a. We see this explained for us in v. 17, which we'll look at in more detail next week. For now just notice that his ministry involves "go[ing] before [the Lord]" and "mak[ing] ready (or preparing) [people] for the Lord." In other words: John's journey ends where the Christ's begins. His work is one of preparation...for the Christ's work of consummation!
 - b. John was filled with the Spirit so that He could do what the Spirit has always done: namely, point to Christ! "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me" (Joh 15:26). And: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3b). So John's filled with the Spirit, going before, preparing for, and pointing to Christ!
 - c. And he is pointing to Christ because Jesus is the only One who could ultimately turn the children of Israel and the nations back to God, and the fullness of joy: "⁵ And now the Lord says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him...⁶ he says: 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth'" (Isa 49:5-6). I'm bringing everybody back in, and I'm doing it through You, Servant, Christ.
- B. And so we continue on our journey towards fullness of joy. We leave John and we follow Christ. But He doesn't lead us to a throne or a palace. He leads us to the cross. And the joy that rang out at the beginning of Luke's gospel, here gives way to despair. But only momentarily. For He rises from the dead! And when He does our sins remained in the grave. He opened up a way for sinners to return to a holy and happy God.
 1. And the joy that is left echoing at the end of Luke's gospel, is of a different tenor. It sounds something like the heavenly chorus from Revelation. In light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His ultimate victory over Satan, sin, and death, it is now a joy, as Jesus would describe in Joh 16:22, that cannot be taken from us. His was a sorrow unto death (Mat 26:38) so that ours could be a joy unto glory (1 Pet 1:8).
 - a. O sinner, come back home to God, in Whose presence is "fullness of joy" (Psa 16:11)! Follow John to fullness of joy in Jesus. This is what you need, this is what many need!

Conclusion

A. Let me close with a question for this church: Do you want joy for yourself and others? Do you want to be great before the Lord? Do you want to do something meaningful with your life? John was great before the Lord because he went before the Lord. Meaning: His life counted because He didn't live it for himself. His life was an unrolling of the red carpet for the coming King. If our lives are to amount to anything we must do the same. We live to show Him! We forsake the ways of the world, cry out for the Spirit, and steward our deeds and words in such a way that everyone in our lives is directed away from us and towards Him! That's why we exist!

1. But you say, "Come on, Nick. Get real with us. Don't just leave us here, high in the sky. What does all this actually look like on the ground?" Do you want to know what I think it looks like? When you're spouse (or your roommate, or your child, or your boss) is doing that same thing again that just gets on your nerves, you don't roll your eyes in frustration, you quietly pray: "Christ, empty me of this world and fill me with Your Spirit, that I might have your strength to be patient here and so lead this other person to You!" O it might hurt in the moment, but there is true greatness there, and fullness of joy!

A life like this! Filled with Spirit, trusting in, delighting in, and pointing to Christ, Well done, enter into joy of master!

Jude 24-25