

Prepare Him Room

Introduction

The Text

¹ Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.

² The Lord has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

³ He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

⁴ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

⁵ Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody!

⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!

⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it!

⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together

⁹ before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity. (Psa 98:1–9)

From This Psalm to an Old Christmas Hymn

- A. I should begin by making mention of the fact that, although I just read to you [Psa 98](#), we shall actually not be dealing much with the ins and outs of that Psalm at all.
- B. This morning, I had it on my heart to prepare a sermon reflecting on a bit of that old Christmas carol that we all have probably sung hundreds of times by now: namely, [Joy to the World](#).
1. It's a hymn with lyrics written by one of the more premier hymn-writers of all time, Isaac Watts—heralded by many as the [“father of English hymnody.”](#)
 2. It was originally printed in a book of poetry he wrote inspired by the Psalms of David.
 3. It was not intended to be merely a Christmas poem of sorts, but when over a century later it was set to the melody we're familiar with today and released to the public in that form around Christmas time, it struck a chord, so to speak, and has since become the most published Christmas carol in America.
 4. And here's a significant detail for me: Mr. Watts penned these words now precisely 300 years ago, in the year 1719.
 - a. So I thought, as a way of celebrating the 300th year anniversary of this song, perhaps it would be a good idea to prepare a special Christmas message drawing a bit from it.
- C. So, then, still you are asking: Why read [Psa 98](#) before a sermon dealing with an old Christmas carol?
1. Well, the answer is quite simple really: Watts penned the lyrics to this carol in response to, under the influence of, we might say, this Psalm in particular. Surely, you can now see how this is the case.

- a. Verse 4 in particular stands out on this point, does it not? “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!” Hence, “Joy to the world!”
- D. Looking more closely at Psa 98, we see that it’s really a grand celebration of the universal kingship and reign of YHWH. It’s cosmic in its scope as this King restores justice and righteousness in all the earth—thereby saving His people and filling them and, indeed, all of creation with joy!
- 1. His people are singing a new song (v. 1).
 - 2. They are breaking out every instrument they have—lyre, trumpet, horn, and on it goes (vv. 5-6).
 - 3. The sea and every creature within it is roaring with delight (v. 7).
 - 4. The rivers are clapping their hands to the beat (v. 8a).
 - 5. The hills we could say, I suppose, are alive with the sound of music—not because Julie Andrews is singing and twirling among them, but because the King has come (v. 8b).
 - 6. And we see there in the last verse what the coming of this King means: “He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity” (v. 9b).
- E. And Isaac Watts, rightly, connected the dots from this Psalm towards Christ. For we know now the way that God will ultimately step into this cosmic kingship—the way that He will ultimately bring justice, and righteousness, and salvation, and joy in all the earth—will be by coming down Himself in the person of Jesus Christ.
- 1. Which is why, by the way, on the night Jesus’ birth, when an angel first appears to the shepherds there outside of Bethlehem, he says: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).

Prepare Him Room

- A. Now then, with all of this in view, let me simply read to you the first verse of this carol and from there I’ll begin to set out our course for the morning: “Joy to the World; the Lord is come! / Let earth receive her King! / Let every heart prepare Him room, / And Heaven and nature sing.”
- B. The title for this morning’s sermon, you may have noticed, is: “Prepare Him Room.” And I ripped it, obviously, straight from this verse: “Let every heart prepare Him room . . .”
- C. As I read the words to this first verse, something of a dissonance, a confusing tension, caught my eye and set me to wonder.
- 1. Certainly, we must say that the great note struck here is one of joy, right? The Lord has come! The King is here! Joy has arrived for the world. Heaven and Nature are singing!
 - a. And yet, in spite of all of this—the glory, the splendor, the majesty of it all . . . that God Himself has come down to rescue us—you and I still need to be encouraged to prepare room for Him in our hearts . . . as if we would be a bit reluctant to do so. What is that?!

- i. On the one hand: joy and salvation and blessing.
 - ii. On the other hand: reluctance, even resistance . . . to the degree that we need to be exhorted to make room for Him, as if we otherwise might not.
- D. Of course, as we may well know, such is what plays out in the Christmas story, and it is likely this that Watts is evoking here. [Luke 2:7](#): “And [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place [no ‘room’] for them in the inn.”
 - 1. This is not just an incidental detail about lodging arrangements for Jesus and His family. This is, in itself, a parable of the great problem in the world: God has come down to redeem and restore . . . and we couldn’t care less!
 - a. John puts it most pointedly for us in [John 1:9-11](#): “⁹The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”
 - i. In other words: There was no room for Him in their hearts.
- E. Now, what are we going to do with this? Well, I’m going to try to answer two questions with regard to this idea of preparing Him room: (1) Why Don’t We Prepare Him Room?; and (2) Why Should We Prepare Him Room?

(1) Why Don’t We Prepare Him Room?

Subheading: The Deceptive Allure of Front Door Joys

Making Sense of the Dissonance

- A. Why don’t we prepare Him room? With this question, I simply want to try to make a bit more sense of the dissonance I pointed out in the carol.
 - 1. It seems to me (and upon close reflection I assume you will agree with me) we all make room for the things that we think will bring us joy.
 - a. If you’ll grant me that this is true, then, when it comes to this question as to why we don’t make room for Christ in our hearts, the answer is simply this: We don’t think He will be the means of our joy. Our hearts are already attached to too many other things. We have crowded out the King, as it were. We are thinking we’ll find joy in other places. We don’t need Jesus.
- B. I’m going to make a distinction throughout this sermon between what I would call a “Front Door Joy” and a “Back Door Joy.” Let me at least explain the former here first (the second will become clear as we go along).

1. When I refer to joy that we try bring in through the front door I'm thinking of those things that seem easy, immediate, tangible, obvious—we look at them and think: "Yes! If I get that, clearly, I'll have joy."
- C. The world is full of these sorts of things. There's always knocking at the front door, so to speak.
1. This is what every ad that's ever been created is designed to do—to knock at the front door of your heart and show you why you won't have joy until you have this product, or this service, or whatever.
 - a. I mean, just the other night, we were watching TV, and a new ad was running with actress Jennifer Lawrence looking all flashy and seductive. And the whole thing was to try to sell us on a particular fragrance for women.
 - i. And do you want to know the name of the fragrance? Wouldn't you know it . . . Joy! As if, with just a couple spritzes of this stuff, at last, your soul will be satisfied.

Crowding Out the King

- A. Now, you might not be drawn to the Front Door Joy of a perfume or whatever, but I guarantee there are temptations towards other things even now—stuff that's crowding out the King, because you think in them, not Him, you'll find joy.
1. "A Baby in a manger? That seems foolish. I want [fill in the blank] . Then I'll happy."
- B. It may be you think success in your job will do it; or maybe a relationship or starting a family; or maybe finally getting financial security—money and all the stuff it can buy; maybe sex; maybe drugs; maybe beauty—shrinking that waste line.
1. I don't know what it is for you, but I know there's something knocking on the door, threatening Jesus' place in your heart, even this Christmas season.
- C. And there's yet one more thing that I know: Whatever it is, it will never work. I suppose that's the tragic irony in it all. Though our hearts are full—too full to spare any room for Jesus—they are, at the same time, painfully empty.
1. And, in our sane moments, we feel it. "The deceptive allure of Front Door Joys." Front Door Joys promise much but deliver little. Indeed, they say what they must to get into our home and then they burglar our stuff and make off in the night. We've been swindled. We've been hoodwinked. We've been lied to. We bit into the bait and got a mouthful of hook.

A Couple Examples

- A. Examples abound on this point. Let me give you just a couple.

Example #1: Joy in Our Work

- A. Some of us, as I mentioned, are probably trying to find our joy in our work.
 - 1. When we do well with it, we feel so good about ourselves. We get noticed. We get respect. We get those pats on the back. We feel our lives are worth something. We may even feel what we'd call "joy" . . . for a little while.
 - 2. But then someone else is hired on who's a little bit brighter, a little bit smarter, a little bit better than you, though you wouldn't dare admit it. You feel threatened, a little jealous, and even a bit bitter.
 - a. What promised joy at the front door makes a mess of your heart upon being let it in.

- B. This seems to be, for example, what King Herod is dealing with in the Christmas story. When he hears from the Magi that there is one born who is truly "King of the Jews" (Matt 2:2), that's an unsettling thing for a man whose joy is wrapped up in what he does.
 - 1. So we read that when he heard this news, "he was troubled" (v. 3). And later we're told he "became furious" (v. 16). "I'm the king of the Jews." Jesus entering history here was a threat—to his title, to his position, to his joy. So he tries, in his angst, to hunt down this child and kill him. He's losing his mind.
 - a. The idea here is that his kingship, his position and work, was supposed to bring him joy, but it is ruining him, because it has taken center stage in his heart and there's no room left for Christ. He's full and yet he's painfully empty.

- C. To give a modern example, Megan and I watched the movie *The Company Men* a while back. It's about these guys, who in the face of a recession, lose their jobs and it shows how they all come to deal with it.
 - 1. Well, one man simply couldn't. His identity and life and joy had been so intertwined with his work that when the job was done he didn't know who he was anymore. There's this scene where he's just unraveling, outside in the dark. He's standing off at a distance from his old company's building, hurling rocks and obscenities at it.
 - a. And, when one of his old coworkers finds him there, this is what he says: "Sarah's tuition for Brown is due. I write the check, I can't make the mortgage. . . . You know the worst part? The world didn't stop. The newspaper still came every morning. The automatic sprinklers shut off at six. And Jeff, next door, he still washed his car every Sunday. My life ended. And, you know, nobody noticed."
 - i. You hear it in the way he's talking, don't you? "My joy was wrapped up in this and it's gone." So he ends up taking his life. That which promised joy up front, robbed him of it all in the end.

Example #2: Joy in Our Stuff

- A. Some of us are tempted towards money and stuff. We just want to open the front door of our hearts and let that in. We think that's where joy is going to be found. Because then we can have security, status, and so forth. Then we can have all the comforts and things we want.

- B. We'd do well to consider the fate of Judas on this point, for example. You remember, right? He betrays Jesus to the Jewish authorities for thirty pieces of silver.
1. But when He realizes what he's lost in the deal, what he's done, he tries to give the money back. "It didn't do for me what I thought it would. Take it back!" He just throws the pieces of silver on the floor there in the Temple. "I don't even want it!"
- C. Christmas, it seems to me, is always a good time to reflect on the inability of money and stuff to ever really bring us joy. I don't know if you ever saw *The Grinch* with Jim Carrey, but we were just watching it the other day, and the Grinch, as grumpy and grouchy as he was, at least got this. Do you remember, what his whole beef was with the Whoville folks? "You keep getting all this stuff, these toys and things, year after year, because you think they will make you happy and then they all just end up in the dump a week or two later."
1. Interestingly enough, Jim Carrey himself has said similar things as of late:
 - a. In one interview he says: "I believe that I had to become . . . famous . . . and get all the stuff that people dream about and accomplish a bunch of things that look like success in order to give up my attachment to those things. . . . [You] spend the first half of your life acquiring and adding, thinking you can add to yourself. And it looks great when you have a cool car and nice clothes and you've done something that people admire, but it can never fulfill you, it can never make you happy."
 - b. In another place, he's quoted as saying: "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer."
 - i. Now, to be clear, I don't think he's found the answer on this. In my opinion, he's kind of gone off the deep end a little bit. But one thing he has figured out: Money, possessions, stuff . . . it doesn't work . . . it doesn't fill.
- D. And we could just keep multiplying out examples, but they're all illustrative of one fundamental point: namely: Joy isn't coming in through the front door, however hard or many times we try.
1. No. What we see in Christmas, is that the joy we are all seeking—deep and fulfilling joy, true and lasting joy—is coming in through the back . . .

(2) Why Should We Prepare Him Room?

Subheading: The Surprising Satisfaction of a Back Door Joy

Getting Someone in the Room

- A. While all the world is busy and distracted, off chasing these other things in hopes of attaining joy, God's answer to it all slips in, almost undetected, through the back door. No one seems to notice. No one pays it any mind.

1. That's the point of the angel's announcement to the shepherds, don't you see? Heaven has been anticipating this moment for millennia now, heaven is so excited it can barely contain itself . . . but no one on earth even seems to care.
 - a. So the angels are saying: "The King of Kings is born, the Son of God is here, and no one's even turned out to celebrate! This can't be. We can't have this. We've got to get somebody in the room." So they show up to the shepherds. "What are you doing out here? Get in that stable and rejoice!"

- B. I remember when we lived in Philly, Megs and I were walking about downtown, she was about nine months pregnant with Bella at the time, and we were trying to get things moving along. We were walking just outside of Rittenhouse Square and a reporter actually stopped us to interview Megan for the evening news. As it turned out, Prince George was born and they were going about asking people what they thought of it, what their reactions were.
 1. Now, the point I'm making here is this: All the world tuned in with concern for the birth of this little prince. They were celebrating and rejoicing round about the globe.
 - a. But the King of Kings? The Son of God? The Prince of Peace? He was born in obscurity, on a dark cold winter's night, laid in an animal's feeding trough, with no one there to celebrate, in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn. There's no press. There's no international attention. There's no fanfare or fireworks. There's just silence. Until the angels finally speak up.

A Bit Underwhelming

- A. And you know, I suppose, until you really understand who Jesus is and what He's come to do, it all does look pretty foolish and unimpressive.
 1. We're drawn to the rich and the famous, the intelligent and the powerful. These are the front door sort of expectations. We read [Psa 98](#) with all the earth erupting in joy and think surely this King will be something of a spectacle.
 - a. But Christmas is quiet—eerily so. We look at this baby in a manger and find it all to be a bit underwhelming. "This is it? God's grand answer? Good news of great joy? This is what the sea is roaring at? This is what the rivers are clapping at? I just don't see it."

- B. And, of course, we wouldn't. That's part of the problem and the point. We want a king who can rule and reign in glory. We want a king to make us rich, fix our lives up nice, strike down our enemies and things.
 1. We don't understand that the greatest enemy to our joy is not out there somewhere, it's ourselves.
 - a. It's our sin that has long since separated us from God, the author of life, the One in whose presence, David tells us, is ["fullness of joy"](#) and ["at \[His\] right hand are pleasures forevermore"](#) (Ps 16:11).

- b. God would have had us full of joy but we've cut ourselves off from Him, the fountain of living water, and hewn for ourselves broken cisterns that can hold no water. We drink and we drink but we are never filled. And the more we dig, the more of a disaster we make of things.
- c. We are, as the Bible would describe it, under a curse. We cannot get back to the God we so desperately need and want (whether we realize it or not).
- d. He is holy and we are sinful. When God sent Adam and Eve out from Eden He set between them and Him an angel with a flaming sword, as if to say: "If you try to get back to Me you will surely die."
 - i. But the gospel, the good news of great joy is that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" . . . to die in our place (John 3:16).

Why the Back Door?

- A. So why does Jesus initially look so unimpressive? Why was He born in such a humble and lowly fashion? Why would the King who's come to make all things new and right enter the world in this way? Well, in a word: grace.
 - 1. If He is to rule and reign as our Lord and King, He must first offer up Himself as our sacrifice and substitute.
 - 2. If He is to remove the curse from us, He must first become a curse for us.
 - 3. If He is to make us eternally rich in God, He must for our sake become poor.
 - 4. If He is to lead us to true and lasting joy, He must first take upon Himself our sin and sorrow.
 - a. He's not come at Christmas to impress us with the pomp and pageantry of His earthly life. He's come to save us by offering Himself up to death—death on a cross.
- B. Perhaps this is why it is to these ragamuffin shepherds that the angels first appear. They were tending their flock there in the fields just outside of Bethlehem, not far from Jerusalem.
 - 1. Indeed, one commentator mentions: "It is not unlikely that the shepherds were pasturing flocks destined for the temple sacrifices. Flocks were supposed to be kept only in the wilderness (Mishnah, Baba Kamma 7:7; Talmud, Baba Kamma 79b–80a), and a rabbinic rule provides that any animal found between Jerusalem and a spot near Bethlehem must be presumed to be a sacrificial victim (Mishnah, Shekalim 7:4)" (TNTC).
 - a. In other words, these shepherds, tending to sheep that were destined for temple sacrifice, were called from their flock on Christmas night to tend to the one "sacrificial victim" to whom all these others were pointing: namely, Jesus, "[T]he Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).
 - i. Here, again, is why the solution to man's true and lasting joy slips in through the back door, as it were. Before He would come as a Lion, He chose to come as a Lamb.
- C. This is the same sort of thing Isaiah wrote of Him prophetically centuries earlier: "²[H]e grew up . . . like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look

at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:2–6).

- D. I suppose the most profound thing in all of this is that, though we’ve been talking about how important it is that we prepare Him room in our hearts, what we see is that, before we’ve ever been inclined to do such a thing He has already been preparing room for us in His.
1. That is the meaning of the cross. That is the meaning of Christmas. God has come down to a people distracted, uninterested, wayward, rebellious, and He has made a way for us to get back home to Himself—the One we truly need and desire.

So Why Should We Prepare Him Room?

- A. So why, brothers and sisters, should you prepare room for Jesus in your hearts this Christmas? Well, it is because in Him you have offered to you everything your heart longs for and more, and all with such stability.
1. That which you may find in your work momentarily—a sense of identity, accomplishment, approval—He gives you freely and forever in Himself.
 - a. You don’t have to be always on or threatened by others who outperform you because your joy isn’t resting in your own performance but His. And He sees your sins and your weaknesses and accepts you anyways.
 2. Whatever you may find momentarily in your money momentarily—security, status, etc.—you find in Him in such fuller measure.
 - a. Moth and rust can destroy your money and stuff, but death itself couldn’t hold Jesus down. And He’s the One securing you, providing for you, protecting you.
- B. You get the point. When we really understand the love of God for us in Christ, it will melt our hearts, we will open our hearts, we will sing from our hearts along with Isaac Watts: “Joy to the World; the Lord is come! / Let earth receive her King! / Let every heart prepare Him room, / And Heaven and nature sing.”