

# For Those in Search of Joy

## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>50</sup>And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. <sup>51</sup>While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup>And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, <sup>53</sup>and were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:50–53)

### As a Moth to the Light

- A. I was doing dishes the other night after dinner and where our kitchen sink is there's this big window right in front of it. And as I was going about my way there, one dish after the other, I noticed this moth, pretty sizable, beautiful.
1. My daughter Bella just adores every possible little creature you could imagine. It's great. And she has me tuning in a bit more even to the insect world. So I noticed this moth.
  2. And it was fluttering about somewhat furiously just outside the window. And then I realized it was trying to get in, to get through the glass. You know they're drawn to the light, you've probably seen this sort of thing.
  3. So it would motor its little wings and slam into the window and then hover back and try again and then it would just fall in exhaustion and rest on the little ledge that's outside under the glass. And then it would somehow muster the strength to try again. And again. And again.
  4. And then finally I watched as she just walked off that ledge. She couldn't get through the window, so I don't know, it looked like she just gave up.
  5. I was so moved by the whole thing I really did go outside to try to find her there in the soil below, but I couldn't. I don't know if she flew off or if she was down there somewhere, dead in the dirt . . .
- B. But one thing I do know, you and I experience the same sort of thing—when it comes to joy.
1. We see it like a light glowing, it even seems close at times, but we can't ever seem to get to it. We keep banging our heads against the glass. We can't break through.
    - a. And for some of us this has been going on for so long now, we too may be ready to just call it quits, to take a step off the ledge. I've tried and I've tried and I've tried. And I'm tired. Anyone?

### Great Joy

- A. Listen, if that's you, I think this text we have before us this morning has a lot to say. I mean after all the whole scene ends on this high note with Luke describing Jesus' disciples here characterized by what he calls "great joy" (v. 52).

1. The word translated great here is in the Greek the word **megas**, it's where we get our word "mega" from obviously. So this is a "mega joy" we're talking about here.
- B. And I just want to ask: How do you get that? We all want it. But we can't seem to get at it. Where does that come from?
1. Is it too cliché to say: Jesus? Well, before you roll your eyes or yawn, give me a chance this morning to show you how this is the case, to show you why it's true.
- C. You know this theme of "great joy" is actually what links Christmas and Easter together for Luke.
1. Do you remember what the angel says to shepherds out in that field the night Jesus was born? "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). The angels declared it from the very beginning.
  2. Now we see that Jesus, by way of his death and resurrection has, in fact, delivered it.
    - a. So what we have here in the final verses of **Luke 24** comes full circle back to what we saw at the start. We end where we began.
      - i. But this is not an indication of mere redundancy or futility—as if we're going around in circles and getting nowhere, no!
      - ii. This is an indication of completion and fulfillment. What had only gotten started at Christmas is now coming to a glorious climax at Easter.
- D. And, in it all, surprisingly, it's yours and my joy that features large. Now that ought to give us reason to pause right from the outset.
1. Listen: Jesus came with a view to your great joy. Jesus lived with a view to your great joy. Jesus died with a view to your great joy. And Jesus rose with a view to your great joy.
    - a. I daresay, then, Jesus cares more about your joy than you do. He knows you're trying to get through to the light. And he's broken the glass and wants to bring you in.
- E. I have three headings we'll consider this morning as we make our way through this text and towards this idea of mega joy that shows up there at the end of it: (1) The Blessing (v. 50); (2) The Parting (v. 51); and (3) The Joy (vv. 52-53).

## (1) The Blessing (v. 50)

### Lifting up His Hand He Blessed Them

- A. Look at v. 50 again: "And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them."

- B. Now, remember, if you're just dipping in with us for Easter Sunday here, Jesus has already been betrayed and rejected, he's suffered and died, he's risen and appeared to his disciples many times, and now he's going to ascend to his Father.
  - 1. But before he goes (and this is significant) he's going to lift up his hands here and bless them.
    - a. And you say, well what's that? I mean that's cute. That's a nice gesture. But I don't really get it.
- C. Truly this idea of pronouncing a blessing or benediction over people in one way or another is rich with biblical significance—significance that's lost on us if we just read right through it. So I want to stop and help you see this . . .

## From God

- A. The whole idea actually begins with God. Remember we're not talking about a God like culture so often presents him. As I've said before, so many think of him as this cosmic killjoy in the sky. He gets a kick out of crashing your parties. He's know more for what he's against than for what he's for, he loves to say no and will say it 99 times for every yes.
  - 1. Isn't that how even we can feel sometimes?
- B. But that's not the God of the Bible. That's not the God of creation. We've already said he cares more about your joy than you do. And when we go back to creation we see he created in, what appears to be, this overflow of love and joy.
  - 1. There's a sort of dance that's going on in the opening verses of Genesis. And he says time and again: "It's good, it's good, it's good!"
  - 2. And when he makes man and woman, do you want to know what he does? He blesses them.
    - a. [Gen. 1:28](#): "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" He just says: "Listen, I made all of this, it's full of beauty and delight, go and enjoy!"
      - i. According to the Bible God is not the one who crashes the party, he's the one who throws it. He blesses them.
- C. And then he does the same thing later after the flood with Noah, when he's trying to rebuild after rebellion and sin.
  - 1. [Gen. 9:1](#): "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'"
    - i. According to the Bible God is not the one who crashes the party, he's the one who throws it. He blesses them.

D. And, of course, he later zeros in on Abraham in particular, but his blessing of Abraham is done with a view to his blessing of us all.

1. [Gen. 12:2-3](#): “<sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

## Through Patriarchs and Priests

A. So this idea of blessing starts, as we would expect, with God. But we see it carried on from here through God’s representatives . . .

B. So we have the patriarchs, men like Isaac and Jacob pronouncing a blessing over their children. I mean whole chapters are given over to discussion of this (cf. [Gen. 27](#); [48-49](#); see also [Heb. 11:20-21](#)).

C. And then, of course, this whole notion of blessing takes on an even more significant light with the priesthood, right?

1. So in [Exod. 20](#), the LORD tells Moses to instruct the people on how they should worship: “An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you (v. 24).

- a. We start to see here this idea of blessing connected with the altar of sacrifice. It’s a very important development.

2. And, of course, it’s the priests whom God appoints to oversee these things. So in [Lev. 9:22](#), as Moses is ordaining the first priests, we’re told that “Aaron [the now High Priest] lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings.”

- a. He makes an offering for the sins of God’s people and then he lifts up his hands and blesses them. That’s significant.

3. And, of course, all of this culminates in that now well-known priestly benediction that’s outlined for us in [Num. 6:22-27](#): “<sup>22</sup> The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>23</sup> ‘Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, <sup>24</sup> The LORD bless you and keep you; <sup>25</sup> the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; <sup>26</sup> the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. <sup>27</sup> So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.’”

D. It’s still from God, all of it, but we see how it’s made its way to us through the patriarchs and the priests. And now, at last, we see that it comes to us ultimately through Jesus the Christ. . .

## To Jesus

- A. So Jesus is here in Bethany (which was a little village on the eastern slope of Mount of Olives about two miles outside of Jerusalem) and, as his final act so far as his earthly ministry is concerned, he lifts up his hands to bless. This is the last thing he's going to do, before he parts. That's a big deal.
1. And when does so, listen, he knows what he's doing. He's drawing on all of this we've been discussing. He's got all this rich biblical tradition in the dragnet. It's all in his mind and in his heart.
    - a. He's come to bring the blessing of God back to a broken and wayward people. Think of it!
- B. God pronounced blessing over the creation at first but things devolved into sin and rebellion. And Jesus brings in now the blessing of new creation.
1. [2 Cor. 5:17](#): “[I]f anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”
    - a. Imagine his hands raised up over you this morning, declaring such a thing. “You’re a new creation in me. Oh I know you feel old and used and guilty and ashamed and wrung up with regret and beat up with hardship . . . but . . . “Behold, I am making all things new” ([Rev. 21:5](#)). And I’m starting with you!”
- C. He's come to spread the blessing of the patriarchs abroad, even to the Gentiles, even, as God had promised, to all the families of the earth!
1. [Gal. 3:14](#): “[I]n Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham [has] come to the Gentiles, so that we [can] receive the promised Spirit through faith.”
- D. And, of course, when he takes up the posture of the priest here, lifting up his hand over his people, Jesus is showing himself to be the fulfillment of all that Aaron was but a picture of.
1. Aaron, you recall, after offering a sacrifice for the sins of the people, pronounced blessing from God over them.
  2. But Jesus offers up not lamb or bull or goat, which the author of Hebrews says could never really take away sin ([Heb. 10:4](#)). No! He offers up himself.
    - a. He goes to the cross as a sacrifice, as the sacrifice, for yours and my sin. And it's only after he's offered up his own life in such a way that he can now therefore lift up his hands over us and declare God's blessing upon us this day and forevermore!
- E. The only way God's blessing can flow to a sinful people is if there be a substitute, a sacrifice for sin—someone who will stand in the place of the sinner, and take the curse deserved. That's what the altar of old was meant to teach us. And that's what Jesus has come to fulfill.
1. I just read from [Gal. 3:14](#), but do you know the verse that comes right before it: “<sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—<sup>14</sup> so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham

might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” (vv. 13-14).

- a. In other words: before Jesus could lift his hands up to impart the fullness of God’s blessing to us, he had to spread his arms out wide on that cross and suffer the fullness of God’s curse for us.

F. The picture in my mind at this point comes from the wilderness wandering of Israel.

1. You remember, the people are thirsty and so what does God do? He has Moses strike the rock with his rod, and instead of the rock crumbling to pieces as we might expect . . . water flows out.

- a. That’s Jesus on the cross. He was crushed. We are blessed!

## (2) The Parting (v. 51)

### The Transience of Blessing and Joy

A. So far as blessing goes—and the joy that comes with it for that matter—it always feels fleeting and fragile, doesn’t it?

B. I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the transience of life.

1. I don’t know maybe I’m on the verge of mid-life crisis or something. I just turned 39 and it’s weird to have a lot of life’s big milestones now behind me. College. Marriage. Kids.

- a. When you’re a kid it feels like time passes so slowly. The grains of sand are just crawling down the hourglass, grain by grain.
- b. But as you get older, it feels like the sand is cascading down. And there are times it just hits you: the blessing, the joy of this life, it feels like you can’t hold onto it.

2. I don’t know why, I just had the urge to put on an old Garth Brooks song for Levi the other day when I was in the car. It’s called The Dance. And it wasn’t so much the lyrics that hit me, though they’re great, it was the memories associated with this song and songs like it. I remember my dad always listening to country music in the car when we’d go on our family road trips. And I don’t know why, just hearing a song he used to play, took me back, and I found myself tearing up, thinking about how quick it all goes—wishing I could, you know, be in the back seat again, spend more time with my parents and my sisters. It’s stuff you can’t hold onto even though you might try.

3. You know, we all get inspired by Tiger Woods coming back to play the Masters—46 years old, after all these injuries and accidents and things. But how many surgeries has he had to undergo to keep that up? At some point you’re more metal than you are flesh, more machine than you are human, and it’s still going to break down. Then what?

- a. If we tether our joy to these things, then we go down with the ship.

## “Before I Die”

- A. This is the reality we see all throughout the Bible, even with the blessings that come from the patriarchs and the priests and things.
  - 1. There’s this sense all throughout that, yes they’re pointing us somewhere significant, but they’re not yet delivering on the ultimate thing.
- B. With the patriarchs, there’s this emphasis on them blessing their kids before they die.
  - 1. So Isaac says to his boy Esau: “<sup>2</sup> Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. <sup>3</sup> Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, <sup>4</sup> and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die” (Gen. 27:2–4).
  - 2. Or in Gen. 49, where Jacob gathers together and blesses all his boys, the whole chapter ends with Jacob telling them where he wants to be buried and it ends on this note: “When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people” (v. 33).
- C. And it’s the same sense we get with the priests as well.
  - 1. If we lump Moses in with the priests (he’s really the precursor to the priesthood, he’s even called a priest in Ps. 99:6, he’s a mediator, a go-between for God and man), in his mediatorial role, he too could pronounce God’s blessing upon his people.
    - a. And he does so, quite profoundly in Deut. 33. And, wouldn’t you know it, it’s right before he dies. So the whole chapter opens this way: “This is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the people of Israel before his death” (v. 1).
- D. With the patriarchs and the priests there’s this sense that “I’ve got to pronounce the blessing before it’s too late, before my time’s run out and I can’t bless any longer.”
  - 1. There’s this sense of the insufficiency and incompleteness of it all. They can bless, sure, but it feels a bit fragile and temporary.

## While He Blessed Them . . .

- A. And then of course we come to Jesus. And there’s a marked difference, isn’t there?
  - 1. For one thing, these other guys are all blessing before they die, before it’s too late.
    - a. But with Jesus, there’s not a word of blessing before his death. He’s like a lamb led to the slaughter, he opens not his mouth, we’re told. But then after the resurrection, oh then he has so much to say!

- i. His blessing is not so much in view of his impending death as much as it is in view of his everlasting life.
  - 2. And that's the other thing to bring out. His blessing is not given before his death but after his resurrection. And it's not just for a brief moment, a chapter or two, but it's ongoing . . .
- B. Look once more at [v. 51](#), and this time note the grammar: ["While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven."](#)
  - 1. Did you catch it? The picture we're given here is that Jesus is carried away from view, not after he finished blessing his disciples, but while he was still doing so.
    - a. Another translation puts it in clearest terms when it says that he parted from them ["during the blessing" \(NET\)](#). He's not done. He's still going. And yet he's parting.
      - i. Implication: the blessing never finished, because it doesn't finish. He's still blessing.
        - (1) He's not like the others. We don't end with his burial, we end with his blessing. And the words of his blessing are still echoing on.
- C. So far as the priests of old are concerned I thought of [Heb. 7](#) at this point. You remember? In [v. 23](#), the author begins: [" <sup>23</sup>The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, <sup>24</sup>but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. <sup>25</sup>Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. <sup>26</sup>For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. <sup>27</sup>He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. . . . <sup>1</sup>We have . . . a high priest . . . who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" \(vv. 23-27; 8:1\).](#)
  - 1. You know, during Holy Week, you'll often see those devotions and reflections referencing each day of the week and what Jesus was doing and experiencing.
    - a. So on Palm Sunday he's coming into Jerusalem.
    - b. And on Maundy Thursday he's eating the Last Supper with his disciples.
    - c. On Good Friday he's being crucified.
    - d. On Easter Sunday he's risen.
  - 2. But where is he now? What is he doing now?
    - a. Is he off on some extended holiday? Is he with Paul Walton in Hawaii sipping margaritas in the sand? Where is he? What's he doing?
    - b. Well, the author of Hebrews tells us. He's at the right hand of the Father. And he's interceding for you. By virtue of his sacrifice and atonement, he's still pronouncing God's blessing and favor over you. That's what he's doing.



- D. That's what I think is being hinted at not so subtly by this idea that Jesus parts from us still uttering blessing as he does. You didn't think you could draw so much out of the grammar, but you can. My joy is hanging on the structure of this sentence.
1. If he blesses and then stops, then he's no different than anyone else who's come before. He can get things started for you, he can point you in the right direction, but it's still insufficient and incomplete at the end of the day. He stops.
  2. But if he blesses and blesses and blesses, if while he is still blessing he parts from us, if that blessing is still going on while he now lives to make intercession for us as our eternal high priest, then, let me tell you something, nothing can stop that blessing . . . and nothing can steal your joy.
    - a. And I suppose that leads to the last heading we'll consider this morning . . .

### (3) The Joy (vv. 52-53)

#### Three Observations

- A. Look at vv. 52-53 now: “<sup>52</sup> And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy,<sup>53</sup> and were continually in the temple blessing God.
1. So we see this great joy, this deep gladness and rejoicing. That's the last note struck in this gospel. That's where Luke chooses to end things. Isn't that awesome?!
    - a. This chapter began, if you remember, with confusion and anxiety and sadness (v. 17).
    - b. But once they came to understand what Jesus really did on that cross and what the resurrection now means for them, well that sorrow has turned to joy.
- B. And, before we close, there's a few observations I'd like to make concerning this joy as we see it here.

#### Observation #1: It's Tethered to Jesus

- A. That's what's brought out by the note there that “they worshiped him” (v. 52).
1. This is the first time Luke speaks of anyone worshiping Jesus.
  2. The only other time he even mentions the idea of worship is when he says it is for God alone: “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve” (Luke 4:8). So this is a big deal. “[T]hey worshiped him [Jesus!].”
- B. You know, there are other places in the NT where people get their worship wrong. They worship men or angels. And in every instance they're rebuked, corrected.

1. So when Cornelius falls down at Peter's feet and worships him. Peter picks him up and says: "Stand up; I too am a man" (Acts 10:26).
  2. Or when the people of Lystra see the miracles of Paul and Barnabas and they want offer sacrifices to them as gods, they cry out: "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you . . ." (Acts 14:15).
  3. Or when John is so struck by the glory of the angelic messenger that he falls down worship him, even the angel says: "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God" (Rev. 22:9).
  4. But here they worship. And there is no rebuke. There is no correction. Because it's right. Because Jesus is God.
- C. And here's what I love so far as their joy is concerned: the greatness of Jesus wasn't a threat to their joy, it was the source of it.
1. Usually seeing someone else as great threatens our joy. We feel things like envy, or jealousy, or bitterness—when they succeed and we don't, when they're better than us.
  2. But Jesus is different. Because his greatness is not contrary to us or against us—it's for us. He doesn't use his power and ability to shame or scold us. He uses it to help us, to save us, to bless us.
    - a. Therefore, the greater he is the greater my joy. This is why joy here is expressed as worship—which is looking at him, and praising him, and honoring him.
      - i. His glory and my joy are not at odds, they rise and fall together. So these disciples worship and they rejoice. It's one and the same.
- D. And if my joy is tethered to him, and he has overcome Satan, sin, and death, if he has risen never to die again, then guess what, my joy is just as strong. If he is immortal, incorruptible, indomitable . . . then so is my joy!
1. And that leads to the next observation . . .

## Observation #2: It's Immune to Circumstance

- A. I love this. Where do these guys go next? After Jesus, while still blessing them, parts from them, where do they go? They go back to Jerusalem and they set up camp right there in the temple.
1. In other words they go to the one place they were just terrified to go. This is why they were in hiding. We don't want those guys from Jerusalem, from the temple to find us. This is where they just crucified Jesus. The religious leaders were just calling for his head, and now they're coming looking for any of his followers. So I don't want to go back to Jerusalem. And I certainly don't want to go back to the temple.

- B. I was talking with Levi the other night and he was trying to convince me that he sleeps with his eyes open . . . because he's scared of monsters.
1. Now, of course, I know he actually closes his eyes, but that idea of sleeping with our eyes open, it's how we feel sometimes right? If we let down our guard, then how will we know we'll be okay, we'll be protected. If we're not at the post, no one is. That's how it feels.
- C. That's how these disciples felt, that's why they were hiding behind locked doors, anxious and afraid. They were sleeping with their eyes open. The people from Jerusalem, from the temple, could come looking for us.
1. But, when they get the cross and they get the resurrection, they don't care anymore. They go back not with great reluctance, not with great trembling . . . but with "great joy"! "And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (v. 52). It's insane!
    - a. But it speaks eloquently of the fact that when you come to know Jesus, when you're joy is tethered to him and his eternal blessing, you don't have to be afraid anymore. You don't have to sleep with your eyes open. You can rest. Because his eyes are on you. Because he's got you and nothing can stop him working things for your good. God, the God who is over all, is on your side.
- D. But now we should clarify: that doesn't mean it's always going to go well in the immediate for you, okay. It just means he can take whatever curse this world throws at you and he will turn it to blessing in the end.
1. So these guys, they go back to Jerusalem, they're in the temple, and they get strung up, right? They imprison them, they beat them, they charge them not to speak of this Jesus any longer or else. This is not fun.
    - a. But how do the apostles respond? They rejoice. Acts 5:41-42: " <sup>41</sup>Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. <sup>42</sup>And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus."
      - i. You can't steal their joy. It's immune to earthly circumstance, because Jesus has already overcome it all and he's with them.
- E. And it's the same for us. Stop trying to find blessing and joy some other way, it's always going to fall short. Jesus is the only one who's overcome Satan, sin, and death. He's the only one who's broken through the glass. You attach your joy to him and nothing can take it from you.
- F. That's what he says in John 16, right? He's speaking to his guys on the near side of the cross, knowing it's going to get hard before it gets better: " <sup>20</sup>Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. <sup>21</sup>When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. <sup>22</sup>So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (vv. 20-22).

### Observation #3: It's from God and to God

- A. So the whole gospel ends there in v. 53: “[A]nd [they] were continually in the temple blessing God.”
  - 1. Just as Jesus continues to bless us (showering us with grace and favor), so too we continue to bless him (showering him with honor and praise).
    - a. We love him because he's first loved us. We bless him because he's first blessed us. It's all from God and to God. That's the dynamic, that's the dance that Jesus catches us up in.
- B. So I thought it would be fitting to close here with that doxology that Jude writes in his epistle, vv. 24-25, listen and agree with these words, and let's bless the God who has so blessed us: “<sup>24</sup> Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, <sup>25</sup> to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”