

“A LIGHT FOR REVELATION TO THE GENTILES”

Isaiah 11:1-10, Colossians 1:9-14, Luke 2:22-38

December 30 & 31, 2023

“Proverbs 15:30 says: *“A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives life to the bones.”* In other words, when you look at other human beings with cheerfulness, it brings joy and life to their own spirits. They’re lifted up and encouraged. The Amplified Bible translates this verse *“the light of the eyes of him whose heart is joyful rejoices the heart of others,”* and the Good News Bible simply says, *“Smiling faces make your happy.”*

“This is the real meaning behind the famous children’s book *Pollyanna*, written by Eleanor Porter in 1913. It sold over a million copies and spawned a whole line of books. It was dramatized in 1916 and later made into a movie with Mary Pickford. It was later remade by Disney, starring Hayley Mills, and into a BBC production a few years later. The word *Pollyanna* even became a part of the American vocabulary, being listed in *Webster’s Dictionary* as ‘someone who is excessively happy.’

“That’s where the problem lies. When we think of a *Pollyanna* now, we think of someone who is foolishly optimistic or excessively happy, someone who denies reality. But the book doesn’t really present Pollyanna in that light. It tells of a little girl whose father, a minister, died, leaving her orphaned. Her only relative was an unpleasant and severe aunt in Vermont who took her in. But Pollyanna was an optimist who somehow managed to find a bright side to everything. Her favorite word was ‘glad,’ and she enjoyed her ‘Glad Game,’ in which she tried to find something in every situation to be glad about, no matter how bad.

“For example, when she arrived in Vermont, she thought that the servant who met her was her aunt. ‘Oh, Aunt Poly, I’m so glad you’ve come to meet me!’

“But I’m not your Aunt Polly,’ said the servant. ‘She stayed home.’ After taking a moment to absorb that, Pollyanna beamed and replied, ‘Well, I’m glad Aunt Polly didn’t come to meet me - because now I can still look forward to meeting *her* and I have *you* for a friend besides!’

“Pollyanna’s cheerfulness eventually began to transform her aunt into a pleasant and loving

person, and, in fact, the whole town became a different place because of Pollyanna, just like the verse says: ‘*A cheerful look brings joy to the heart.*’

“But the real question of the book is - what was behind Pollyanna’s optimism?”

“Like so much of earlier fiction, *Pollyanna* was written from a Christian perspective, and there’s a very tender chapter in the middle of the book in which the town minister is discouraged to the point of resignation. Things hadn’t gone well at church, and people were critical and divided. He rode into the forest to ponder things, and his spirits were lower than they’d ever been. Pollyanna, playing in the woods, saw him and noticed his depressed expression.

“I know how you feel’, she said as they talked. ‘Father used to feel like that too, lots of times. I reckon ministers do - most generally. [My father] grew mighty discouraged until he found his rejoicing texts.’ “His what?”

“Well, that’s what father used to call ‘em. Of course, the Bible didn’t name ‘em that. But it’s all those that began, ‘Be glad in the Lord,’ or ‘Rejoice greatly,’ or ‘Shout for joy,’ and all that, you know - such a lot of ‘em. Once, when father felt specially bad, he counted ‘em. There were eight hundred of ‘em.’ “Eight hundred!”

“Yes - texts that told you to rejoice and be glad, you know; that’s why father named ‘em the ‘rejoicing texts.’ Father said that if God took the trouble to tell us eight hundred times to be glad and rejoice, He must want us to do it. And father felt ashamed that he hadn’t done it more. After that, they got to be such a comfort to him, you know, when things went wrong, like the time the Ladies’ Aiders got in a fight. Why, it was those texts, too, father said, that made him think of the Glad Game.’

“Thus we learn that Pollyanna’s cheerfulness wasn’t really an air-headed escape from reality into the fanciful world of positive thinking. It was instead a simple childlike faith, learned from her father, trusting God and rejoicing in all life’s ins-and-outs, and ups-and-downs.”¹

We heard a glad test today, when we listened to Isaiah 11:1-10. In the middle of his telling the

¹ (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 671-672)

people of Israel how much they had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Isaiah stops for a bit and gives a glad moment. He says, “*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him - the Spirit of wisdom and all understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord - and He will delight in the fear of the Lord*” (11:1-3a). In the middle of trouble and turmoil, in the center of a blazing rebuke of the people, Isaiah turns around and gives those same people hope and something to look forward to.

A Savior will come up out of the line of Jesse to bring hope to the people. He will bring them back to the Lord God Almighty. Everything will change from wicked and evil to peaceful and joyous. Though there might be war all around them, though the people had failed miserably at following the Lord’s commands, God had not yet given up on them. He would bring a Messiah to their help so that the people might find hope once more as they follow Him. Victory will come to those who put their trust in the Lord once more and hold Him as their God.

Isaiah finishes this “rejoicing text” with the words, “*In that day you will say: ‘Give praise to the Lord, proclaim His name; make known among the nations what He has done, and proclaim that His name is exalted. Sing to the Lord, for He has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you*” (Is. 12:4-6).

And those are good words for us, too, as we move along in our celebration of the birth of Jesus. In the midst of all of the garbage and strife that is taking place throughout the whole world, God has done a great thing in bringing Jesus here for us, so that we might have hope, and life, and love and peace through Him. But it takes our focusing on the good and right things in life to defeat the difficult and evil.

Paul says it plainly about what Jesus has done for us. “*For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins*” (Colossians 1:13-14). This is great Good News worthy of enlightening our hearts and bringing joy back into our spirits. God’s Messiah, God’s perfect Savior, came to save us from eternal death so that we could enjoy eternal life! Isn’t that GREAT NEWS???

Of course, at the time when Jesus was born, not many were aware of what God had done for them. They were still stuck under Roman occupation. They were still under crushing taxation. They were still lost from the joy of the Lord under the leadership of the Pharisees, Scribes and Priests, who focused them on how sinful they were rather than helping the people find forgiveness and hope in the Lord God Almighty. But that didn't prevent the Holy Spirit from touching the lives of a few people with the joy of the Lord. Listen to what took place in the Temple on the day that Mary and Joseph dedicated Jesus back to God. This is Luke 2:22-38. (READ Luke 2:22-38).

Simeon had one of the original Pollyanna complexes. The Spirit of God had told him that he would not die until he saw the Lord's Messiah. With all of the trials and turmoil going on around him, it would have been easy for him to become unpleasant and severe, always critical and divided, seeing nothing but the worst in every situation. But the Lord had given him some hope in which to build a life of joy upon: He would see the Messiah!

Have you ever been given a promise of something that is going to happen in the future? Every day you're on the lookout for it taking place. You don't know when it might happen, but your whole life seems focused on seeing the fulfillment of that promise. There is eager excitement of what has been promised. All of the difficulties that you are faced with seem lesser in importance because you have this one thing to look forward to. It consumes your mind to the point of blocking out all of the negative things in the world so that you only look for the good. What joy is yours when you seek that promise each day! And what overwhelming excitement when that day comes and the promise is fulfilled right in front of your eyes. You become ecstatic!

That's Simeon in the Temple when the Holy Spirit moved him to go to the temple courts when Joseph and Mary arrived bringing Jesus in to be dedicated before the Lord. His eyes are opened to recognize that Jesus is God's Messiah. And what delight is his as he "*took Him in his arms and praised God...*" (Luke 2:28). The joy within him overflows to all those around him. The Lord had been faithful to accomplish the birth of His chosen Messiah. It was a life-fulfilling moment.

But not only was Simeon joyful for what the Lord had done, but his joy spilled over onto Mary and Joseph. They “*marveled at what was said about Him*” (Luke 2:33). Even though all of God’s previous promises and predictions about Mary’s conception, and God’s promise to Joseph about the Child being the Messiah, and all of the strange things that happened to bring about Jesus’ birth, once more they are completely amazed at what God was doing in and through Him. “*This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed*” (Luke 2:34-35).

Here was the defining moment in all of history, when God revealed His own Son, Jesus, to the world. THE MESSIAH WAS HERE! Right there in the Temple of the Lord in the city of Jerusalem, the Lord’s Own Son was alive like us, in order that He might lead us back to the Lord God Almighty and to bring Salvation to all who would come to Him. That’s the Good News of Great Joy that the choir sang about. That’s the best news that the world has ever known!

But in order that Simeon’s words to be confirmed as truth, there is another witness there in the Temple who also rejoices in the work of the Lord. “*Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher*” (Luke 2:36), an old woman, a prophetess who lived in the Temple since she had lost her husband decades before, also lifts up the work of the Lord. “*Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem*” (Luk3 2:38).

Now, imagine the excitement that would have made in the Temple that day? Not only has Simeon proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, God’s promised Savior, but Anna prophecies that this Child will become the “redemption of Jerusalem.” Their excitement would have possibly caused a great stir among those who heard it. Such joy was there in the Lord’s House that day!

But sadly we’re not told about any other excitement this may have created. There is no report of the Priests or Pharisees coming over to investigate the proclamations of Simeon or Anna. We have no record of even the teachers of the Law having their ears perked up at hearing this great Good News. It

may have taken place out in the temple courts so the hectic activity of the Temple may not have allowed this Good News to go very far.

But Simeon and Anna had “*seen [the Lord’s] salvation, which had been prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of [God’s] people Israel*” (Luke 2:30-32). Their hearts were set ablaze by the fulfillment of God’s promise. Though those in the Temple may have thought both Simeon and Anna were just “mad and crazy” old people, God was at work. And though it may not have been the time for Jesus to be publicly proclaimed for all to hear and believe, there were a few that trusted in what the Lord had said to them, and their joy was contagious to those around. Both Simeon and Anna could have delighted the people with an effervescent joy. It was the same thing that Pollyanna’s father had experienced - glad rejoicing come to life right there in the Temple.

Here is the important part for us today. God had sent Jesus into the world as His light for the hope of new life, if we believe in Jesus as God’s own promised Messiah. That light came into the world to give us joy and gladness. The light of Jesus gives us the opportunity to see beyond the disappointments and struggles and hardships and frustrations of this life. We can see the possibilities and the prospects that are presented to us, even in the trials of our lives, if we keep our eyes on Jesus. Our hearts can be glad, too, as we focus on what might be, if we don’t let the troubles of the world turn us into sourpusses.

If we take the time to focus our hearts and minds to all that the Lord our God has done and is doing through Jesus Christ our Light, the dominion of the darkness of the world cannot overwhelm us and that darkness will not determine how we live our lives.

You see, the “*light for revelation to the Gentiles*” is for us. We who do not have a Jewish heritage now have the chance to see the work of the Lord our God through Jesus. We who grew up outside of the people of Israel can begin to make the connection with the prophecies of old and see how God mysteriously brought them into fulfillment because His Light now shines into our hearts, giving us

the comprehension to understand all that God is still doing in our world for us. But if we have our focus on the dark dominion of the world, if our minds are filled with criticism and rebellion and self-centeredness, then the Light of Jesus will not become known to us. Like the other people at the Temple on the day of Jesus' dedication, our lives will not be encouraged, or uplifted, or enlightened, or transformed. The Light of Jesus comes to those who are cheerful and seek the Lord.

We who gather here in this place on a weekly basis can enjoy the presence of the Lord with us. But that only happens to those who allow the Light of Jesus to reveal to them the hope that can be theirs. If we have no expectation for the Holy Spirit of the Lord to touch our hearts with His powerful love, nothing will happen as we gather here. If we come bearing the burdens of the world and harbor them in our hearts as we are here, we will not allow the Holy Spirit to relieve us of our burdens and give us the peace that we so desperately long for. If we gather here in judgment of how this worship service should go, rather than letting this service empower us and encourage us, then we'll leave this place just like we came in. If we gather here just out of religious duty, then our hearts will remain cold and hard and we'll never experience the love of the Lord Jesus.

Jesus is the light for our revelation as to how we desperately need the love of the Lord in our lives. For us to see that light of Jesus, we have to humble ourselves before Him and allow Him to transform our hearts and minds by the power of His Holy Spirit. For revelation to affect us, we have to want to be here to hear the Word of God spoken to us. If we limit ourselves to a certain time limit as to how much time God has to speak to us, we lose the chance for Him to work in us. If we confine God to a box, with a time limit of how long the service has to be, or how long the sermon can be, or what kinds of songs we have to sing, or what rituals we have to perform during the service, or anything else, the Light of Christ Jesus will not touch our hearts, and we'll remain as empty and wanting as the rest of the world. Jesus is the "*light for revelation to the Gentiles,*" but that only happens if we let Him be that!

But we have come here to let the Light of Jesus revolutionize our hearts. Don't come with an agenda to be completed, but come expecting to be in the presence of the Lord Jesus, Himself. Let the

Holy Spirit transform you “*by the renewing of your mind so that you may know what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect*” (Romans 12:2). Let the Lord God reveal to you the wonders of His love given through His promised Messiah, Jesus. Let the majesty of King Jesus become real to you in a way that enlightens your hearts and makes your spirit glad. God delights in those who worship Him in spirit and in truth. And He rewards those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

Simeon was seeking the consolation of Israel. He was looking at God’s provision of a Savior who would bring about the peace and comfort that only God can bring. The Holy Spirit led him into the Temple so that He could see God’s fulfilled promise of the Savior.

And so, we too have the chance to find our hearts renewed and restored and encouraged. We, too, have the chance to find our hearts gladdened by the praise of the Lord God for what He has done for us. We, to, then can sing with David the song of Psalm 150: “*Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.*” And then as we leave this place, our gladness and joy will be contagious to so many others.

Father, we have come to You today to find the Light of Jesus Christ in our hearts. But there are so many things competing for our attention, so many things demanding our consideration, so many things distracting us from worshipping You in spirit and truth. Give us Your gladness, instead, Jesus. Give us hearts that are so full of joy that we overflow into the lives of others. Fill us with Your love Jesus, so that we might share that love with all those around us. Change our hearts, O God, to make us new creatures in Christ, ready to seek Your presence and finding hope and life and peace in You. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit today, so that we might draw near to You, and experience the joy You have for us. Then, let us share that joy and gladness to all those around us, so that they, too, might find their lives changed because of us living for You. This we pray in Jesus’ Name. AMEN.