

TIME FOR JOY



Christmas is a time for joy. We are told to be joyful. We want to feel joy. We want to share joy with others. But joy can be hard to find sometimes. It isn't accidental. Joy is something to pursue and guard—to cultivate and value. God gives us the season of Christmas to interrupt our patterns and calendars. It is a time for more celebration and gathering with friends, to treasure family and to remember the birth of Jesus Christ—God's greatest gift of His own Son. Let's take time for joy.

TIME FOR JOY • Isaiah 12:1–6 • John Goodale • January 6, 2019

One of my seminary professors, Lewis Smedes, once said, “You and I were created for joy, and if we miss it, we miss the reason for our existence.” We want to be a joyful people, and as we look ahead to a new year before us, we want to lean into it with joy. Today’s passage from Isaiah 12:1-6 can help us do this.

Whenever we enter into the stories of others, there’s a backstory that’s already occurred prior to our arrival in the story. Previous events, for good or for bad, have shaped the story we encounter. This is also our reality each Sunday when we worship together; we all bring our personal stories into this place. Though we sit in close proximity with each other, previous events prompt each of us to approach the Lord differently. Some of us may come with heavy hearts—discouraged, overwhelmed and in need for the Lord to do something in our life. We may be sitting next to others who are rejoicing in and giving thanks for the good they’ve experienced. The looks on our faces as we worship together don’t always reveal the story each of us have lived the previous week.

Our text today is shaped by its own backstory, even as it offers a glimpse of the future. Isaiah begins with a phrase he later repeats: “In that day you will say . . .” (12:1, 4). In what day? And what’s going on at this time in Israel’s history that make these words so important? Isaiah wrote them during a very difficult time for God’s people; the world around them was changing, and not for the better. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been conquered by Assyria, and the Southern kingdom of Judah was continually threatened. If that weren’t bad enough, God had revealed that He wasn’t happy with His people. As was so often the case throughout the Old Testament, they’d once again turned away from Him, looking elsewhere for fulfillment. God’s response was often to use invading nations like Assyria and Babylon to get the attention of Israel, and help them rediscover their need for all He wanted to give them.

Isaiah’s opening words acknowledge God’s anger, but they also reveal something else: “Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me” (12:1b). At some point in the midst of Israel’s adversity, God’s anger had turned to compassion, and He no longer

treated them as their actions deserved. The source of comfort referred to here came from the Lord’s assurance that better times were ahead. Earlier, in chapter 9 and then again in the chapter immediately before this one, God promised that a new day was coming, when the Messiah would arrive and usher in a new kingdom. When this occurred, God’s peace would reign, and all God’s people who were scattered in exile would return.

Isaiah anticipates a joyful response prompted by these events: “In that day you will say: ‘I will praise you, O Lord’” (12:1), and “Surely God is my salvation . . . my strength and my defense; He has become my salvation” (12:2). I want to suggest that the joy we observe in this chapter can be instructive for our own time for joy.

The first thing we see is that **our joy flows from God’s bigger story**. Isaiah was not only painting a picture of what God would do one day that would lead to joy and praise at that time—He was offering a word of hope in the present moment. In spite of what was seen, God was writing a bigger story, and this hope of what He would yet do would anchor the hearts of Israel, and provide a reason for joy in the present.

Notice Isaiah’s words in verse 3: “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” Remember that water was always scarce in a dry and arid land, and a well represented life. Isaiah’s promise of wells, plural, offered a stark contrast in a parched desert that stretched everywhere. This image would have encouraged Isaiah’s audience that no matter how desolate things looked around them, God was writing a bigger story for the good of His people than they could see in the moment. Isaiah wrote in chapter 9, “To us a child is born (9:6).” That child would one day become a source of life and salvation.

Let’s think about what this means for us today. There are times, too many times, when all we can see is the bleakness of our circumstances: challenges seem too great, the pain too relentless, or our resources too insufficient. We find ourselves wondering how or even when things might get better. As we enter into a new year, some of us may feel beaten up or beaten down by last year. There may be a sense of uncertainty or even dread of what the months ahead will hold.

Isaiah reminds us of God's bigger story, that He is actively at work for our good. Though what He's doing can be agonizingly hard to see at times, this hope of what lies ahead makes joy possible in the present. Our perspective is shaped by God's assurance of His redemptive work on our behalf. One of my favorite quotes is by a Brazilian theologian, Rubem Alves, who wrote, "Hope is hearing the melody of the future; faith is dancing to it in the present." When I hear that, I think of times when I'll fly somewhere, and my practice of putting on earbuds and listening to music on my phone. Invariably, there'll be moments during that flight when I find myself tapping my foot to music no one else around me can hear! That rhythm is fueled not by my external circumstances, but by the song I can hear within. In the same way, our hope in God's bigger story of what He's doing in the days ahead can prompt a joyful response in the present.

Second, we're reminded that **our joy is influenced by our actions**. Even with the hope we have of the bigger story God is writing, joy isn't always a given. If it was, we wouldn't need a six-week sermon series on joy! Henri Nouwen wrote, "Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day." That's because there's so much throughout our days that can dampen joy, and steal it from our hearts. Challenging moments shift our gaze from God's bigger story to the immediacy of what's in front of us. We're tempted to find our hope and salvation in just getting through whatever we're in the midst of.

We choose joy when we make a conscious decision to find our hope and salvation from our Lord. Look again at verse 3: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Water from wells of salvation is a wonderful image of God's provision, but there's more to Isaiah's words than that. We have to intentionally draw water from what the Lord is offering us. Some effort is required on our part to grab hold of and experience it. Note the actions of the will described by Isaiah in response to what God was doing. Earlier, we heard in verse 1, "In that day you will say: I will praise you, O Lord"—but there's more:

"I will trust and not be afraid (12:2);

"Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name (12:4);

"Sing to the Lord (12:5); and

"Shout aloud and sing for joy" (12:6).

Each of these declarations reflect a conscious decision to claim and trust the promise of God's bigger story.

Eugene Peterson noted, "Biblical hope . . . acts on the conviction that God will complete the work that he has begun even when the appearances, especially when the appearances, oppose it." Throughout scripture, we find God's people claiming and living for a future that's been promised by God. Abram was given the promise of a son. The Israelites were given the promise of a land. David was given the promise of a throne. God's people were given the promise of a Savior. In each instance, they had to wait for what was promised, and they were sustained by holding fast to the hope of what lay ahead. We have our own promises of God's loving care, constant presence, abundant life, power in weakness, and eternal life. Our joy is fueled when we look above our daily challenges, and grab hold to our hope in the larger story of what God is doing for us.

Finally, this passage reminds us that **our joy spreads to others**. Our joy reaches its fullest expression when it ripples outward into the world around us. There's something about sharing our joy with others that deepens it within us and reinforces it with each other. We experience this in worship, when our individual responses of joy are multiplied in a community expression. The same is true throughout life; Tim noted in his sermon two weeks ago, "Joy multiplies when it is shared."

In Isaiah's words we see this outward movement of joy experienced by God's people. First, we read, "Make known among the nations what God has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted" (12:4). And then in the next verse: "(the Lord) has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world" (12:5). As we draw water from God's wells of salvation, our joy should be an experience that seeps out for others to see. We become a beacon of hope to the world of what God is doing and can do for each of us.

Twenty-eight years ago, my wife Deborah and I were engaged. During the next nine months leading up to our wedding, there was a lot of daily life that had to be lived out. It all fell under the umbrella of a bigger story of the wedding to come that couldn't help but shape our perspectives

during those months. That was the impact of Isaiah's words in this text: to remind God's people in the midst of challenges and trials that God was doing something that would be a source of joy at a later time. And this hope of what was yet to come could prompt joy in the present.

Our communion table does the same for us today. It reminds us of our backstory of a God who loved us so much, He entered our world as a child, whose birth we just celebrated. This child grew up to become our well of salvation, taking our sin upon Himself, and restoring our relationship with God.

This table also assures us that as we enter into uncertainty of the new year before us, we can be anchored in certainty of God's love for us, and the bigger story He's writing on our behalf. Because of this, every day can be a time for joy.

STUDY GUIDE

TIME FOR JOY • JOY TO THE FUTURE

Isaiah 12:1–6

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Isaiah 12:1–6. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

1. The passage identifies a few works of the Lord which are evidence of God's faithfulness and are cause for celebration. What are some other examples of God's faithfulness throughout the Bible which are cause for praise?
2. What has God done in your own life which deserves celebration?
3. Re-read verse 2. Our world is filled with pain and struggle. How does God provide strength and defense in the midst of the challenges of our world?
4. This passage follows a prophecy about the future reign of Jesus. It is because of Jesus that we have hope and are filled with joy. How has the good news of Jesus Christ given you hope in your life?
5. At times it can be hard to believe this good news. In what ways do you continue to rebel against this hope in your own life?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Re-read verse 4. The hope we have in Christ should cause us to overflow with joy and proclaim the good news to those around us. How does this happen in your life? How do you participate in proclaiming the Lord's name?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Pray for those in your life who are experiencing reasons for celebration; also pray for those who especially need God to provide strength and defense during this season.