

'Joy' in Luke's Gospel

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All biblical quotations are from the New International Version [NIV] translation.

Luke: The Gospel of Joy

The word 'gospel' means 'good news' and in that sense, all four gospels recount a message of joy. But, in the Gospel of Luke, the theme of joy permeates much of the gospel and is key to its understanding. Joy is one of the rich theological threads that the evangelist skilfully weaves into the tapestry of the gospel.

References to 'joy' and 'rejoicing' and other terms designating particular aspects of joy occur more frequently in Luke than in any of the other gospels or indeed of any book in the New Testament, as can be seen in **Appendix A** [*Felix Just's list of Greek terms describing joy and rejoicing and the frequency of their occurrence in the New Testament*]. However, as we see from the Appendix, the Gospel of Luke uses a variety of Greek terms to convey this sense of joy. In translation these are variously translated as 'joy', 'great happiness', 'to rejoice', 'to exult', 'to glorify' and 'to jump for joy', as well as related terms like 'blessed', 'happy' and 'to celebrate.' However, for the purposes of this short presentation, I will limit our study to the terms highlighted in yellow on the appendix, namely those related to various forms of the Greek terms: *chairō*, *aggaliaō*, *euphrainomai* and *skirtaō*.

The dominant mood of the opening two chapters of the gospel is one of exultant joy. In Luke 1:14, announcing the birth of John the Baptist, the angel Gabriel announces that the child to be born 'will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.' This emphasis on joy persists throughout Luke's Infancy Narrative prefiguring the recurring focus on joy throughout the gospel. Significantly, Luke's Gospel ends with a similar emphasis on joy in Luke 24:52-53 where, after the ascension, the disciples 'returned to Jerusalem with great joy.⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.' Thus, in Luke, references to joy act as bookends for the gospel, alerting the reader to the importance of joy as a key theme within the gospel.

The different ways in which Matthew and Luke relate similar traditions also highlight Luke's particular focus on joy as key to understanding the message of gospel. Whilst Matthew and Luke both include the Parable of the Lost Sheep [Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7], Luke alone includes Jesus's words 'I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent' [Luke 15:7] and this detail becomes a hermeneutical key for understanding the significance of the parable. In the same way, all four gospels record the miracles of Jesus and the Risen Christ appearing to the disciples, but only Luke records the joy of the people in response to Jesus' mission [Luke 19:37], and only Luke [Luke 24:41] and John [John 20:20] record the disciples' great joy at seeing the resurrected Lord. 'And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" [Luke 24:41].

The Infancy Narrative: A Prelude to the theme of Joy in the Gospel of Luke.

As with so many other themes in Luke's Gospel, the infancy narrative in the opening two chapters establish and anticipate the central role that joy will play in the unfolding narrative.

In Luke 1:14 the angel Gabriel announces to Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth will give birth to a son, whom they must name John, who will *'be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.'* In the account of the annunciation to Mary, the angel greets Mary saying: *"Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."*

Here the actual Greek term for the greeting *'chairō'*, translated as 'Greetings' in the NIV Bible, literally means 'rejoice' or 'be glad' and so establishes from the very outset the joyful tone that is to dominate the angel's message and the passages to follow. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaps for joy [*skirtaō* in Greek] and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. This association of joy and the Holy Spirit will become central to Luke's understanding of joy throughout the gospel.

When Elizabeth acknowledges this physical reaction of her child leaping with joy within her womb in Luke 1:44 she continues by saying in Luke 1:45: *'Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'* and in so doing, establishes a link between joy and the fulfilment of God's promises, which will recur time and time again throughout the Gospel.

Mary's response to Elizabeth in the Magnificat [Luke 1:46-55] begins with a joy-filled outpouring of praise to God for what he has done. *"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."* [Luke 1:47-48]. Here the Greek verb used is *'agalliaō'* which conveys a sense of deep rejoicing. Again, this great joy is a response to what God has done, causing Mary to sing the praises of God. This emphasis on joy at the deeds of God in turn inspiring praise and worship is a theme that will be repeated throughout the gospel narrative.

When Elizabeth gives birth to her son in Luke 1:57 we are told in Luke 1:58 that *'Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.'* Joy is presented as something that is shared with others and a cause of joy for others, an aspect of Luke's understanding of gospel joy that is repeated throughout the gospel.

In the story of Jesus' birth, the angels announce to the shepherds in Luke 2:10 *-I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.* Here, Jesus' birth is described as good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Note the intensity of the joy that is described and its reach. It will cause great joy for **all** the people. The joy of what God is doing in Jesus is not confined to one group but extends to all the people and this sense of all people being drawn into the joy of the gospel is extended throughout the gospel. In the broader context of the gospel it is significant that this news of great joy is proclaimed first to the shepherds – a group who would have been socially marginalised in Jewish society of that time, and so gospel joy is portrayed from the outset as breaking through socio-cultural boundaries, introducing a motif whereby the marginalised are first hand recipients of the joyful good news of salvation, as will be the case with tax collectors [15:1-10] and Samaritans [17:17] and later in Acts 8:8 where we are told *'there was great joy in that city.'*

In Luke 2:20 we are told that *'The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.'* Luke routinely links joy with witness. The shepherds are told of the birth of the Christ-child [2:17], they go to witness it for themselves leading to rejoicing and worship. This same pattern occurs in Luke 24:52-53, where like the shepherds in the Infancy Narrative, after the Ascension the disciples returned glorifying and praising God, based on what they had seen and witnessed for themselves.

Luke 2:20 in many senses encapsulates a broader movement or pattern in the gospel where revelation leads to witness, which in turn leads to proclamation and a joy that finds expression in praise and worship.

Aspects and Characteristics of Joy in the Gospel of Luke

1. **Joy is portrayed as the proper human response to God's saving deeds.** It describes an intense, ecstatic response, an often-outward expression of joy, frequently translated as 'to rejoice greatly' [Luke 1:47, Luke 10:21, 'to exult' [Luke 1:47] or 'to jump for joy' [Luke 1:41, 1:44, 6:23]. It has God as its inspiration and source and is an instinctive Spirit filled response to experiencing God's salvation. This deep spiritual joy goes beyond mere human happiness and can coexist with difficult earthly circumstances. In Luke 6:23 Jesus encourages his disciples to "rejoice and leap for joy" even in the face of threats and persecution because their rewards will be great in heaven. The joy is rooted in recognising what God has done and trusting what God will yet do. Joy is presented as the proper response of those who experience the resurrection in the Risen Christ. Even in their confusion and disbelief, the evangelist insists on their joy. *And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?"* [Luke 24:41] The gospel closes as it has begun by referencing gospel joy and praise of God. *'Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.'* [Luke 24:52-53]
2. **Joy: A fruit of the Holy Spirit.** In Luke's thought, Joy is conceived not only as a result of the conviction that salvation has already begun, but also as the fruit of the experience of the Holy Spirit both in the individual and in the community. In Luke 1:67, following the birth of his son, Zechariah is 'filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied.' In her Magnificat, Mary speaks of 'her spirit rejoicing in God, my Saviour' [Luke 1:47]. In Luke 10:21 the evangelist explicitly attributes Jesus' own joy to the Holy Spirit inspiring him to praise God for what God has done in him. *'At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.'* This same relationship will be seen in Acts 13:52 where 'the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit' – further strengthening the inextricable link between Christian joy and the Holy Spirit.
3. **Joy as part of the life of God.** We have already seen the evangelist explicitly acknowledge Jesus' own experience of 'joy through the Holy Spirit' in Luke 10:21. Joy is also presented as part of the life of heaven. The angels sing at the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:13-14. In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, we read in Luke 15:7, *I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.* God and his angels are pictured as rejoicing more over one sinner who repents than the ninety-nine who do not need to repent.
4. **Joy is the response of others to God's saving works in Jesus.** In 13:17, after Jesus heals a crippled woman, the entire crowd rejoiced at the wonderful things that he was doing. In 18:43, after he restores sight to a blind man, the man and the crowd follow him praising God. In Luke 19:6 Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus with joy whilst in 19:37 as Jesus approaches the Mount of Olives on his way into Jerusalem, *the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.*

5. ***Joy flows from the fulfilment of God's promises.*** John the Baptist is described as leaping in his mother's womb in Luke 1:41, 44; this joyful pre-natal witness fulfilling the prophecy that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. Zechariah is promised that his child will be a joy and delight to him and that many will rejoice at his birth [Luke 1:14] and this prophecy is fulfilled in Zechariah's great canticle of praise in Luke 1:67-79 and in Luke 1:58 where their neighbours and relatives 'share their joy.' In her own joyful hymn of praise in The Magnificat Mary praises God for fulfilling his promises to Israel. Similarly, in Luke 2:20 *'The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told'* – emphasising the connection between their joy and their experience of the fulfilment of the promises of the angels.

6. ***The Joy of Salvation and Repentance – A Joy that is open to all.*** In Luke, joy also comes through repentance. We see it in the joy and thanksgiving of Zacchaeus as he repents and experiences the forgiveness and love of Jesus. Luke speaks of the joy of God and heaven in the repentance and salvation of a single lost sinner in Luke 15:17. Each of the three parables in Luke 15 end with a joyful celebration: the shepherd invites everyone to rejoice with him, as does the woman when she finds the coin, as does the father whose son had been lost but has finally returned. In each instance the joy is one shared with all and open to all. Joy is not something to be kept to oneself. It is to be shared with others. This call to celebration and inclusion contrasts sharply with the grumbling of the scribes and the Pharisees who complain about Jesus associating with sinners and tax-collectors and which we see reflected in the unwillingness of the elder brother to join in the celebrations. Likewise, in Luke 19:6, the joy of Zacchaeus who rushes to welcome Jesus with joy is contrasted in 19:7 with the people who grumble that Jesus *'has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'* Throughout the gospel joy is seen as being offered to the all regardless of their social or religious status – poor shepherds, the sick and the crippled, tax-collectors and sinners. However only those who are open to inviting others into that joy, and sharing in their joy, can ever know the true joy of the gospels.

7. ***A Joy experienced as part of discipleship.*** Joy is portrayed as an integral part of the experience of being a disciple of Jesus. In the Beatitudes Jesus encourages his disciples to rejoice even in the face of persecution and to leap for joy for their reward will be great in heaven [Luke 6:23]. Even in the face of hostility and adversity the disciples are called to be joyful, trusting in the faithfulness of God who will in turn reward them for their faithfulness. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus speaks of those who hear the Word of God and *'receive it with joy'* [Luke 8:13], which becomes the model for true discipleship. After the mission of the seventy, *'the disciples returned with joy, saying that even the demons submit to us'* [Luke 10:17] but Jesus insists that they must find their joy not in the submission of evil spirits, but rather because *'their names are written in heaven'* [Luke 10:20]. Here, as elsewhere, the joy of the disciples is to be rooted not in their own endeavours or achievements, but in what God is doing in them and through them. Joy is always a response to the saving actions of God. It has God as its origin and its inspiration. In Luke 19:37 as Jesus enters Jerusalem, *'the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice.'* Significantly, the final act of the disciples in the gospel in Luke 24:53 presents them as *'returning to Jerusalem with great joy'* and *'praising God continually in the Temple.'* Joy remains a consistent and central aspect of discipleship in Luke's gospel right to the very end.

8. ***A Joy that finds expression in worship and praise.*** Just as Luke consistently presents joy as a response to the saving actions of God, this interior disposition finds its natural expression in worship and praise. Zechariah, Mary and Simeon experience great joy at witnessing the promises of God being fulfilled and express their joy in canticles of praise. Just as God is the source of their joy, so also God is the object of their praise. Likewise, the shepherds returned home praising God for they had witnessed for themselves everything the angels had announced. In Luke 13:17 the entire crowd rejoice at the wonderful things God was doing in Jesus after he healed a crippled woman, fulfilling the prophecy he had spoken of himself in the synagogue in Nazareth where he had declared that he had come *‘to bring good news to the poor’* and *‘to let the oppressed go free.’* [Luke 4:18] As Jesus enters Jerusalem, *‘the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen’* [Luke 19:37]: their praise giving voice to their resounding joy for all God has done in Jesus’ life and ministry.

This pattern of announcement/prophecy →→ fulfilment/saving action of God →→ a Spirit-filled joy →→ praise and worship, offers a pattern for Christian discipleship and Christian living which begins with God as the source and the ground of our joy and ends with God as the object of our praise and worship.

As mentioned in my opening remarks, the evangelist bookends the gospel narrative with explicit references to joy in the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist [Luke 1:14] and the return of the disciples to Jerusalem after the Ascension of Jesus. In so doing Luke is inviting us to read the gospel with joy so that it may lead us to praise God for his mighty deeds in Jesus.

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2ND MARCH 2026