

Luke 15:1-10

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[0 : 0 0] This morning we were looking forward to the prospect of joy unspeakable in the new heavens and the new earth as we gave some time thinking about the words of God through the prophet Isaiah chapter 55 and verse 12. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace. The mountains and the hills will burst into song before you and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

And this joy we were discovering is the inheritance of those who respond to God's invitation to come to Him for life. It is the experience of those who are granted repentance unto life.

So repentance is the source or perhaps we could more accurately say the cause of this joy, even that joy, that future joy in the new heavens and the new earth. It is, of course, also the cause of joy in the here and now. When a sinner is freely pardoned, there is joy. There is joy in the heart of the sinner who experiences forgiveness of sins and a welcome into the family of God. There is joy in the hearts of fellow believers as they see God's work in another sinner being brought to saving faith.

And we rejoice in that. I'm sure as believers we can relate to that. We know what it is to hear of and to witness a sinner coming to faith. And what a marvelous thing that is. What a joyful thing that is to witness. And maybe even if we have the privilege of in some small way being involved in it, we rejoice. It's the cause of joy. Repentance is the cause of joy. Joy in the future, joy in the present, in the here and now. But repentance is also the cause of joy, we might say, in another location, not in the future, but in the here and now. Repentance is the cause of joy in heaven.

And that is true even today. There's no doubt that in the course of today, there has been much rejoicing in heaven over sinners who have repented. And that's what I want to reflect on this evening to complement, I guess, in a way, a similar theme to what we were thinking about this morning.

[2 : 5 0] And I want to reflect on this reality, considering words of Jesus as they're recorded for us by Luke in the passage that we read. And in particular, focusing on the words that we find in verse 10.

In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. The parables themselves are familiar parables, and indeed both parables that we've read, the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, culminate in this application, in drawing our attention from the parable to what it is teaching us about what happens in heaven when a sinner repents. And so, our focus will be very much on that culmination or that application of the parable as it's expressed there in verse 10, similar material or similar language found in verse 7, concluding the previous parable. Well, let's explore this reality that is spoken of, of there being rejoicing in heaven by posing a few questions around that reality. The first question,

I think, is one that we'll be able to deal with very swiftly. The answer is so explicit in our text, but nonetheless, we'll pose the question and just note the answer. First of all, why? Why is there rejoicing in heaven? But then moving on to something that maybe we can think about a little bit more carefully or delve into with a little bit more care, and that is, who is rejoicing in heaven? Who is participating in this scene of joyful celebration? But then also maybe dig a little bit deeper and ask another question, and it is this, what does this rejoicing in heaven tell us about God?

And in parallel to that, what does this rejoicing in heaven tell us about us, men and women, boys and girls? I think we can draw very important and indeed encouraging truths from this reality of rejoicing in heaven, truths about God and truths about ourselves. And then finally ask the question, how does this actually happen? This turn of events, if you wish, that results in a sinner repenting.

You know, how does that happen? What goes on to result in that outcome? And we'll close with just thinking a little bit about that. First of all then, why the rejoicing? What is the cause of rejoicing in heaven? Well, the text is very explicit and very clear. In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. The cause of rejoicing in heaven, one sinner who repents. Now, we might imagine, or we might be tempted to imagine or to think, well, is that really such a big deal in the grand scheme of things? There are so many important things going on, so many millions of people that inhabit this little planet of ours. And to imagine that one of them would be that important is maybe something that we find difficult to get our heads around. But the text is very clear. God is very clear. Jesus, in telling this parable, states the matter explicitly.

[6 : 29] One sinner, any sinner, anybody, we're all sinners. And so we can say anybody, anybody at all who repents, is the cause of rejoicing in heaven. And of course, it's any sinner who repents, any sinner who turns from sin and turns to Jesus. We've been thinking a little bit about repentance over the last two or three Sundays, particularly in the context of Isaiah 55. It's a theme that's central to that chapter, so I don't want to perhaps repeat what's already been said. But just to remind ourselves that when we speak about repentance or when repentance is spoken of in the Bible, it's spoken of in maybe two senses, though they're very related, it's sometimes spoken of in the sense or to describe what we might call a once-for-all turning from sin to God. What we might use other language, the language of conversion, the language of being born again, the language of becoming a Christian. And so there is a sense in which sometimes the Bible is using the language of repentance to describe such an occasion when a sinner comes to understand, to appreciate for the first time his condition and his need and turns to Jesus. And I think that's the principal way in which it is being thought about in these parables.

Of course, repentance is also a permanent imperative in the Christian life. We don't grow out of repentance. We don't tick that box on the day, if indeed we can even identify a day when we are converted. Rather, day by day, there is a continuing imperative placed upon us to repent of our sins and turn anew to the Lord. Of course, we know that, we're familiar with that truth, but I wonder if, even though we're familiar with it, is it something we actually do with any kind of regularity? Now, I can't answer that question for you, but I can pose the question. I'll pose you a very simple question.

When was the last time you, as a believer, when was the last time you repented, consciously and deliberately repented before God for sin that you have committed against God? You should be able, we should be able to say, oh yes, I did that yesterday for that particular concrete sin, that particular occasion when I fell short, when I sinned against God in a particular way, I became aware that that had happened and I repented of it. When was the last time you did that? That ought to be the bread and butter of our daily Christian walk. And such repentance is also the cause of rejoicing in heaven, while the parable does maybe in a particular way focus our attention on somebody coming to faith for the first time, and that being the cause of rejoicing.

And maybe that's our initial thought, and I think it is the principal idea. I think we can also legitimately say that when each of us, even those of us who by the grace of God have been in the faith for perhaps many years, there is still delight, there is still celebration, there is joy in heaven when we are brought to acknowledge our need of coming, confessing our sins, repenting of them before God. So why the rejoicing one sinner who repents? Let's move on to another question we can pose. Who rejoices? Well, the language of the verse is maybe somewhat cryptic. Verse 10, let's read it again. In the same way I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. There is rejoicing before God or in the presence of God, or rather in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Now, who is in the presence of or before God? Or rather, who is in the presence of the angels of God? Well, God Himself. And I think what you have here, though, that the language does seem somewhat cryptic, is simply a Hebrew way that you sometimes find. It's not always the way that God is spoken of in the Bible. Usually, this isn't the way. But there appears to be among the Jews a reluctance sometimes to pronounce the name of God out of reverence and respect. There was no prohibition from pronouncing the name of God, but it had become customary sometimes to be careful about pronouncing the divine name. And so language was used in such a way to speak of God, but in this somewhat roundabout way. And I think that's what you have here, rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God. And who is in the presence of the angels of God than God Himself? And so in answer to the question, who rejoices? Well, it is God who rejoices.

Now, we can develop that a little bit further. We can say that God the Father rejoices over a sinner who repents. Contrary to the caricature that sometimes is painted of God the Father as a distant or grave or impassive deity. Rather, God the Father is one who rejoices over one sinner.

[12 : 23] He rejoices in the work of His Son. He rejoices in drawing to Himself another voice to tell others the good news concerning His Son. So God the Father rejoices. But at His right hand is God the Son and God the Son. Jesus rejoices also. It's Jesus who is telling us that this is what happens in heaven.

And He should know because that is where He came from. He is very well acquainted with the goings-on in heaven. He's not imagining. He's not speculating. He is there now. And when He was speaking here and delivering this parable, He was speaking of His home. He knew His home very well. He knew what happened in heaven when a sinner repented. He had participated in the rejoicing. And He continues now, having an ascended again to the right hand of the Father. He joins with the Father, participating in this rejoicing. One more sinner that He left heaven for. One more sinner that He died for. One more sinner gifted to Him by His Father is the cause of rejoicing in the Son. The Father rejoices. The Son rejoices.

The angels that are spoken of here, though that's not the principal focus, they're not principally identified as those who rejoice. We can be sure that they join in this celebration. Like in the parables, the one who finds the lost sheep, the one who finds the lost coin, what do they do? They share the good news with others. They want others to join with them in the celebration. They don't want to celebrate alone. They don't want to rejoice in some solitary way. They share the good news.

And similarly, in heaven, God shares the good news of another sinner who repents with the angels gathered around the throne. And they join in the rejoicing. We know that angels rejoice. We were presented in the Bible with many occasions or a number of occasions when angels rejoice. Glory to God in the highest, perhaps the most familiar of those occasions. And we can be sure that in heaven, they join with the Father, join with the Son in rejoicing over a sinner who repents.

But what of the redeemed? What of the church triumphant in heaven? Now, nothing is said in the verse about the redeemed in heaven. But they're there. And can you imagine that the redeemed, the church triumphant in heaven, can you imagine that they look on somewhat bemused, somewhat confused, that God the Father and God the Son rejoicing and the angels rejoicing and wonder, well, what's going on?

[15 : 16] Why they're rejoicing? Or are they not also made participants of this celebration? Is the good news of another sinner repenting not shared with them that they too might rejoice over a sinner who repents? And I wonder what this celebration, this rejoicing looks like.

And Jesus simply tells us that there is rejoicing in heaven. But what's the nature of that? What does it look like? Well, we don't know. We don't have a full picture given to us. But we can maybe just try and imagine having a peek through a curtain into heaven, if you can imagine that kind of scene, to witness what is going on. And what can help us see beyond into heaven and through that opening in the curtain, what can help us to see what is unfolding are words of the prophet Zephaniah.

Now, in Zephaniah in chapter 3 and verse 17, I'm just going to read one verse so you can just listen to me reading the verse. If you want to look it up, the Zeds are always right at the end in the minor prophets, so that makes it easy to find. But you don't need to look it up, just listen to what it says. Zephaniah chapter 3 and verse 17.

And so the prophet here is speaking of God's response to his own saving work. We're told in the verse that he is mighty to save. And then the verse speaks of those he saves, those that he delights in.

And what are we told that God does in response to his saving work of sinners? Well, we're told that he rejoices over us with singing. God sings. And the cause of his singing? Well, a sinner who repents.

[17 : 24] And he rejoices over us as we repent. God sings over us. Let's move on and ask a third question.

What does this teach us, this reality of rejoicing in heaven? What does this teach us about God and about us? Let's, first of all, just draw out some truths about God. I think God's rejoicing in heaven tells us about God's purposes. His great and pivotal purpose is to save, to draw his elect from around the world. And the business of heaven is to rejoice in the fulfilling of God's purposes. As the purposes of God are fulfilled, as his saving enterprise is rolled out and is successful, then that is cause for rejoicing. Because God's purposes are being fulfilled. God himself rejoices in the fulfilling of his purposes. And so that rejoicing speaks about or tells us something about his purposes. I think it also tells us something about his priorities. And of course, these things are very much intertwined.

But let's use the language of priorities. And in using that language, maybe pose the question, what is important to God? And priorities speaks of what is important to us. And in this case, we're asking the question of God. What are the priorities of God? Well, it's clear that among the priorities of God and central to the priorities of God is the saving of sinners.

One soul, more valuable to God than the whole world. What shall it profit of a man if he gained the whole world but loses soul? There we see God's perspective on the value of one sinner, of the priority that he gives to the saving of sinners. And the priority of God, this priority of God is evidenced in the heavenly rejoicing. But I think we can also say that this scene that is painted by Jesus tells us something of God's pleasure. What does God delight in? Well, God delights in himself.

The father delights in his son, and the son delights in his father. And they delight together in the saving of sinners. The pleasure of God is to save sinners. It's not simply some duty that he has imposed upon himself, some saving agenda that he's determined and he's going to fulfill because that's what God does. He does what he decides. No, this is something that God delights in. The pleasure of God is to save sinners. And this, of course, is a truth that we find expressed by the prophets who speak of God in these terms. They present to us a God who delights in mercy, to use the language taken straight from the Bible. A God who is slow to anger but quick to mercy and forgiveness. And we could go on.

[20 : 25] This is the God we have. A God whose pleasure is to save sinners, to draw sinners to repentance, to grant repentance unto life. And rejoicing in heaven speaks of and points to the pleasure of God.

But I think this scene of rejoicing in heaven also tells us truths about ourselves, about man, about men and women. I think it tells us, reminds us of man's great value, of the great value of women and men. That God should rejoice over one woman, one man, one child speaks of our great value in His sight.

You are precious. You are of great value. One of the big problems that people can have, we can have a sense of worthlessness. You know, I'm not worth anything. I think our problem tend to be, I guess we're like that as human beings. We either err in one direction or another. Sometimes we have an overinflated view of ourselves, and we're proud and puffed up, and of course that's foolishness.

But of course there's also the other extreme that some are prey to, and that is to have a sense that we're not worth anything. And this damages us so much in terms of the lives that we live, this idea that we are of no value. Well, this scene that Jesus paints of rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents, any sinner who repents, speaks of and confirms the great value, the preciousness of human beings, of men and women, of boys and girls. But I think the scene painted and the parable within which the scene is painted also reminds us of who man's great owner is. Not only our great value, but our great owner. In the parables, God is represented as finding what is His own. And we're not looking at the parables. We're going straight into the culmination or the application of the parable. But we're familiar with the parables. And those who are presented are the owners of that which is lost. So, the shepherd is looking for his own sheep, and the woman is looking for her own coin.

She's not looking for something that doesn't belong to her. And so too with God. When God seeks out a sinner, He's seeking out that which is His own. We belong to God. And this reality that we belong to God has implications. It points to many privileges that are ours as those who belong to God. It points to responsibilities that are ours as those who belong to God. We won't develop what they are, but it points in that direction. But rejoicing in heaven also draws to our attention or reminds us of what we might call man's great need. What is our great need above all other? We have many needs. What is our great need? What is our central need? Well, it is to repent. It is this alone that will bring heavenly rejoicing. There are many things we could do, and we might imagine, well, that would please God. That might lead to a smile in the face of God, we could speculate. But there is one thing that we are told categorically and definitively is the cause of rejoicing in heaven without the need for any speculation, and that is our repentance. When a sinner repents, we are told that this results in rejoicing in heaven. And so that reminds us of what is so important for us to do, because this alone is described to us or presented to us as having this effect. Let's just finish with one final question.

[24 : 14] How does this happen? That is sinners repenting. How does that occur? What is the outcome? What leads to that outcome? Well, if we take the parables as our guide, we could say that it is the conclusion of a search and rescue operation. And maybe this is particularly true when we are thinking about that once and for all turning to God that repentance is presented of as in the Scriptures as well as the more continuing imperative. And such repentance, that turning to God, is indeed the conclusion of what we could call a search and rescue operation. And who does the searching? Well, if we take the parables as our guide, well, it's God. It is God who is represented by the shepherd. It's God who is represented by this woman who has lost her coin. It is God who does the searching. Now, we know that in God's redemptive plan, He has done that, the Father has done that by sending His Son, by sending Jesus, who, taking the very language of Scripture, who came to seek and to save that which was lost. A search and rescue operation designed by and delivered by, executed by God Himself. It is God who searches for sinners and draws them to Himself. This is the direct opposite of all man-made religion, where it is men and women who search for search for God. You could study and explore the many religions that you have in the world, a multiplicity of religions. And no doubt we could draw out from them truths and values and principles that are useful and valid, and indeed some of which maybe even overlap with a Christian perspective.

But at the heart of man-made religion is this idea that men and women are the ones who need to find God. Men and women are the ones who need to reach God. Men and women somehow have to climb that stairway to heaven, and not only climb it, but to create it. And the onus is all on us to get there. And the gospel is the opposite. The gospel presents a different direction of travel. It is God who searches for us.

It is God who comes to us and draws us to Himself, because otherwise we would have no hope of ever being brought into a relationship with Him. So, how does this happen, sinners repenting? Well, it is thanks to God's gracious initiative to seek and to save the lost. And maybe a final thought for us to ponder on and to take as a challenge for us, even in the week that's beginning. And the question is, does God search alone today? We know of the, we might call the ultimate search and rescue operation in the person of Jesus. But of course, God continues to draw sinners to repentance today. And how does He do that? How does He conduct that search? Well, He involves us. We are invited to participate with Him in seeking out those who might be brought to repentance. How are we to participate with God?

Well, we can pick up on the themes of the parables and the manner in which the search is conducted. We see in the shepherd, we see in the woman, we see the passion with which the search is conducted.

We see the persistence with which the search is conducted until the sheep is found, until the lost coin is found. There's a persistence, there's a doggedness in seeking out that which was lost.

[28 : 05] And that is what should characterize our participation in God's searching out of sinners. Passion, persistence, and also expectation. We are, after all, participating with God. If this was our task, and the success of it depended entirely on our capacity, then we might quite legitimately wonder if we would have any success. But given that we're participating with God, then we can be assured of the success of the enterprise. Because God is the one who will assure it and secure it. And so, we participate expectantly and with confidence in sharing the good news with others that they too might be brought to repentance and be the cause of rejoicing in heaven.

Well, repentance is the cause of joy at so many levels, even as what we've been thinking about in the course of today. Joy on earth in the here and now among us. Joy in heaven in the here and now.

And as we saw this morning in Isaiah 55, joy in the new heavens and the new earth as God and His people rejoice together in the gathering of His repentant and redeemed community. And so, we listen again to the words of Jesus directed to us. In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You that You are indeed a God who seeks out sinners. We readily acknowledge that we are quite incapable of seeking You out, but You are the one who takes that saving initiative. We thank You for the glorious manner in which You have done so in the person of Your Son, Jesus, in the sending of Your only Son to seek and to save that which was lost. But we thank You that You continue to do that work.

We thank You for the work of Your Holy Spirit today, drawing men and women to Yourself, opening blind eyes to see that we would see our own need, our own condition, but also to see the loveliness and the suitability and the sufficiency of Jesus as a Savior. And we pray that Your Spirit would indeed be working in that way in our lives and in many lives. We thank You for the privilege that we have of being invited to to participate in Your continuing to seek and to save the lost and help us to participate with passion and with persistence and with expectation. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.