

# Joy to the World

## Psalm 98

I want you to close your eyes for a moment. Think about a time in your life, either recently or in the past, when you experienced joy at Christmas. It could be a special time when you were with family or friends. It could be when you found great satisfaction in a gift you gave or received. It might be when you experienced a mighty answer to a prayer from God. Think about that moment. Think about the emotions you experienced and the thoughts you had.

Joy is one of those words we hear most often at Christmas. You see it on Christmas cards. You hear it sung about in Christmas carols. It's a word that describes many of the celebrations and parties at this time of the year.

I believe that if we're honest, we have to admit that sometimes it's hard to be joyful at Christmas. There are a lot of things we can let rob our joy this Christmas. Our world feels very fragile and vulnerable. There are wars, terrorists and all kinds of evils in our world. For some people dreams have been shattered, relationships have been broken, and if we're honest some of us battle the blues tonight. Joy isn't something you can manufacture or drum up, at Christmas or any other time of the year.

Joy. What an amazing gift it is. When it's present, our lives are richer, and when it's absent there's an emptiness in our souls. Joy is a complex subject, and in some ways it's hard to define. But once you've experienced it, once you've tasted its fruit, there's a longing in your heart to want to know and experience it again and again for the rest of your life.

Christian joy expresses itself in a feeling, but it's often deeper than a feeling. It's like knowing a secret. It's a deep gladness. It's a delight, a great contentment. There is something about joy which is beyond our outward circumstances, and beyond our feelings. And joy is a reservoir in our hearts, a river that never ceases to flow. In John 15:11 Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."

As we think about joy tonight on Christmas Eve I want us to turn to Psalm 98. It is the scripture on which Isaac Watt's hymn, "Joy to the World," is based. "Joy to the World" is a favorite carol of many and one of the best known of all the Christmas songs. The words were written by Isaac Watts, who is widely regarded as one of the finest hymn writers in history. Watts often wrote paraphrases of the Psalms for his hymns, and "Joy to the World" was inspired by his study of Psalm 98, especially verse 4 which reads: "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music."

What is ironic is that Watts never meant for his hymn to be a Christmas song. The hymn is really an Old Testament Psalm mixed with New Testament language which probably describes Christ's second coming better than his first. Still, the note of joy and the images of the Lord coming and every heart preparing him room all combined to make this one of the best-loved Christmas carols of all time.

Listen to the whole Psalm:

**1 Oh, sing to the Lord a new song! For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory.**

**2 The Lord has made known His salvation; His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations.**

**3 He has remembered His mercy and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.**

**4 Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth; Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises.**

**5 Sing to the Lord with the harp, With the harp and the sound of a Psalm,**

**6 With trumpets and the sound of a horn; Shout joyfully before the Lord, the King.**

**7 Let the sea roar, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell in it;**

**8 Let the rivers clap their hands; Let the hills be joyful together before the Lord,**

**9 For He is coming to judge the earth. With righteousness He shall judge the world, And the peoples with equity.**

Psalm 98 is one of the Royal Psalms (Psalms 93-100), so called because they all emphasize God's royal kingship in various ways. Psalm 98 especially emphasizes our joy in the face of God's kingship over all the earth.

The Psalm is nine verses long and is made up of three stanzas of three verses each. Verses 1-3 tell us to rejoice in God as Savior of his people. Verses 4-6 tell us to rejoice in God as King over all the earth. And finally verses 7-9 tell us to rejoice in God as Judge over all the nations.

### **1. There is joy when the Lord God is your Savior (vs. 1-3)**

The Psalm begins by saying: **"Oh, sing to the Lord a new song!"** God is always doing a new thing in the lives of his people, and so he is always deserving of new songs of praise. Ironically, there were many in Isaac Watts day who refused to sing or listen to his new fangled songs like "Joy to the World" calling them Watts' whims instead of hymns. was one of those new songs when Isaac Watts first wrote it based on this Psalm. When you repent of your sin and believe in Christ, you become a new creation and you too will sing a new song. Saved people love to sing praises to the One who saved them.

Three times in these first three verses we sing about God's deliverance and salvation. Notice how this salvation is all of God and not of us. Verse 1 says, **For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory.** And verse 2, **The Lord has made known His salvation; His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations.** God has worked our salvation for us through Christ on the cross.

The end of verse 3 speaks of a time when all the ends of the earth will have seen the salvation of God. The message of Christmas is that Christ has come and won the victory over sin and all its results. This victory is expressed very well in the third stanza of our carol – *"No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found."*

Since the time of Adam's Fall, sin has been the root of all issues in this world. Every problem of life can be traced back to sin. Every heartache, worry and fear finds its ultimate source in sin. Sin has brought untold misery to our existence. The world we live in is awfully ravaged by sin. What is there to be joyful about in such a messed up world?

The angel announced to the shepherds, **"I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior,**

**who is Christ the Lord.**" (Luke 2:10-11). Christmas brings great joy because Christmas brings the Savior, Christ the Lord.

If nothing else goes right for you this Christmas, will it be enough to bring you joy that you have Jesus as your Savior?

## **2. There is joy when the God the King reigns (vs. 4-6)**

The next three verses tell us to rejoice in God as King over all the earth.

Look at verses 4-6, **Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth; Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises. Sing to the Lord with the harp, With the harp and the sound of a Psalm, With trumpets and the sound of a horn; Shout joyfully before the Lord, the King.**

The theme of this stanza is clear. God is King over all the earth, and so all the earth should shout and sing for joy to Him. We should be so filled with joy in God as our King that we can no longer contain it. This is not a forced joy, but rather a joy that is so full that it breaks forth out of us.

Here the whole earth is instructed to shout for joy to the Lord. Every voice is summoned. The whole orchestra is enlisted to sing God's praises. The stringed instruments join the song in verse five, and the wind instruments join the song in verse six. Harps and voices and trumpets and horns rise together in jubilant song as the whole earth rejoices in God as King.

We sound the trumpets for earthly kings, how much more for Jesus Christ – the King of kings and Lord of Lords. He is King over all the earth; let us rejoice in him!

Do you believe that God, the King, reigns? Do you know that "*He rules the world with truth and grace?*" Did you know that even in times like ours when so much seems to be going wrong in the world, God still rules from His throne in heaven?

Think about Isaac Watts as he wrote "Joy to the World". Watts was born and raised during a time of plague and uncertainty. His town of Southampton was still decimated from the Bubonic plague that had killed over one hundred thousand people in and around London a decade before. Families had been torn apart and there was much poverty and economic uncertainty.

This was also a time of persecution for the Christian faith. Isaac Watts grew up in a family that was part of a group of churches that were called Nonconformists. Many of the Nonconformists suffered persecution for their faith. In fact Isaac's father was in prison for his beliefs at the time when Isaac was born. He would continue to be in and out of prison or in exile for the rest of his life.

So Isaac Watts lived during a time of uncertainty, a time of great pressure to conform, and a time of persecution for the Christian faith. Sounds a little bit like our times, doesn't it? We also live in a time of uncertainty, great pressure from the world to conform, and increasing persecution for Christian faith.

I share that with you because it would be easy to think that Isaac Watts lived in simpler times in which it would be easy to write a hymn such as "Joy to the World." But Watts wrote "Joy to the World" not because he lived in easy times, but because he read the scriptures and had faith in the God of the Bible. We have the same scriptures and we celebrate the coming of the Savior, the King who rules the earth.

If everything else in this world were taken from you, could you still have joy this Christmas because Jesus Christ is King?

### 3. There is joy when God Judges in righteousness (vs. 7-9)

The first stanza tells us to rejoice in God as Savior of his people. The second stanza tells us to rejoice in God as King over all the earth. And then finally the third stanza tells us to rejoice in God as Judge over all the nations.

It's not enough for all the people in the world to rejoice in the Lord. In verses 7 and 8, all creation is told to rejoice in the Lord.

**7 Let the sea roar, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell in it;**

**8 Let the rivers clap their hands; Let the hills be joyful together before the Lord,**

And why does all creation sing together for joy? Verse 9, **For He is coming to judge the earth.** When the Lord comes again He will come as the Judge. He will restore all things, including creation, which is why creation joins the chorus of praise here. ISIS and other terrorist organizations will be no more. Every false religion will be exposed. Every violation of God's law will be judged. Every knee will bow and every tongue confess when Christ returns as Judge over all the nations.

The psalm finishes by saying: "**With righteousness He shall judge the world, And the peoples with equity.**" When God comes to judge, he will judge in absolute fairness. He is all-knowing, so he knows all the particulars of every situation. He is all-just, so he will always make the right decisions. He is all-powerful, so he is able to execute the proper judgments against sin. He is all-loving, and so he has provided a way of escape for his people who have put their trust in him. Psalm 98 tells us to rejoice in God as Savior of his people, as King over all the earth, and as Judge over all the nations.

Yes, this world is a mess. It is wrecked by sin. Maybe your family is a mess because it is filled with sinful people. Maybe your life is a mess because you are a sinner. The good news is the Lord has come to save us from sin. He has come to rule as King over your life, your family and this world. He is coming again to set all things right as the judge of all the earth.

Is that enough for you to have joy this Christmas?

Joy to the world! Why? Because God sent Jesus into the world to be our Savior.

Joy to the world! Why? Because Jesus is a good and righteous King over all the earth.

Joy to the world! Why? Because Jesus is returning as Judge over all the nations.

Just as we began this message, I want you to close your eyes again and this time instead of searching your mind for joy, think about Jesus. Picture the Son of God leaving His glory in heaven, coming to earth born in a stable, laid in a manger. Picture the Savior hanging on the cross for your sin, suffering and dying to rescue you because He loves you. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross. Picture the joy of that third day when Jesus rose victorious from the grave and He appears to you and says peace be with you. See Him as He ascends into heaven where He sits down on His throne. Picture Him returning as Earth finally receives her King.

Joy comes from having Jesus, knowing Him as Savior, King, and Judge. Have you opened the gift of God's Christmas joy offered to you in Christ? If you never have, I pray you'll do it tonight. It will make all the difference in the world, and Christmas will take on a whole new meaning. Through Jesus you and I can choose joy this Christmas!