

JOYFUL IN MY GOD

Two weeks ago, the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania published a report with the title, “What’s Behind the Holiday Suicided Myth?” The report states:

For more than two decades, the Annenberg Public Policy Center has tracked the ways in which news organizations erroneously link the year-end holiday season with suicide, perpetuating the false holiday-suicide myth. But as years of national data show, the winter holiday months usually have low average daily suicide rates, with December the lowest of all.

[\(https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/whats-behind-the-holiday-suicide-myth/\)](https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/whats-behind-the-holiday-suicide-myth/)

Although the number of suicides may not increase during the holiday season from Thanksgiving to New Year’s Day, some people do experience what is popularly called “the holiday blues.” According to Doctor Kendra Cherry, this feeling of sadness is caused by lack of sleep, excess eating and alcohol use, financial stress, isolation and loneliness, and unrealistic expectations. (<https://www.verywellmind.com/holiday-blues-4771716>) The regimen is obvious: sufficient rest, moderate eating and alcohol use, moderate spending, socialization, and realistic expectations. Yet, some people fail to understand that the Christmas season is the joyous celebration of the Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ to right the wrongs of the world.

In the days of the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah, the people were, more often than not, in high rebellion against God. When Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, were kings of Judah, Isaiah was a prophet, and Isaiah called the people to repentance, and warned them of coming judgment. Concerning the sins of people, the prophet said:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. (Isaiah 1:2–6)

Israel were God’s covenant people whom He loved. He was their Father, and they were His children. He reared them, and brought them up; yet, they rebelled against Him. Brute beasts like the ox and the donkey know their master, and the manger of their master; yet, Israel did not know God. Israel were a sinful nation, and they carried the weight of many sins. They were God’s children, but they were an evil brood; they were corrupt children. They had abandoned the Lord, and provoked Him to anger. They had not moved forward in their sanctification, but had slid back. As a good Father, God had disciplined them, but His discipline had no effect. If He administered more discipline, the people would be unmoved, and they would continue to rebel. Their corruption was not limited or minor. They were diseased and wounded with sin from head to toe, and had received no treatment. The Israelites did not simply falter; they rebelled.

God said to Isaiah:

Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God. Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (Isaiah 58:1–7)

The people continually violated God's moral law; yet, they continually practiced His ceremonial law. They took pride in knowing, and performing the rituals God commanded. They took pride in being God's holy nation. They fasted and denied themselves. Yet, the Lord had no regard for their ceremonies, and He was not pleased with their fasting. The people could not understand why, if they performed the ceremonies God commanded, that God was not pleased with them. The reason is that they sought mercy from God, but would show none to men. On the days of fasting, they rested from their business, but required their laborers to work. The fasting days were to be days of rest and peace, but the people made them days of strife and quarreling, days in which they oppressed their workers. They would have God forgive their debts, but they would not forgive their debtors. This is not the fasting God required, the fasting of bare ceremony, any more than God required bare circumcision. The people were to be in their hearts what circumcision signified, namely, God's holy people. They were to be in their fasting what fasting signified, namely, people who deprived themselves so that they might help others. They were not to oppress people, but to relieve the oppressed. They were to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked. This is the sacrifice that God required. As God said to the people by Hosea the prophet, "I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6) Through Isaiah, God said, "Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men." (Isaiah 29:13) The people honored God with the things that they said, but in their hearts they did not honor Him, and so they did not obey Him.

Isaiah said, "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear." (Isaiah 59:1, 2) God hears cries for deliverance, and He is able to deliver. Yet, because of the sins of the people, God refused to listen to them. Isaiah said:

And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation unto him; and his righteousness, it sustained him. For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, and an helmet of salvation upon his head; and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloke. According to their deeds, accordingly

he will repay, fury to his adversaries, recompence to his enemies; to the islands he will repay recompence.” (Isaiah 59:16–18)

God’s people were unjust; they did not treat people as they deserved. Moreover, there was in Israel no one to right the wrongs, no one to be a champion of the oppressed. God is just, however, and gives to every man what he deserves, and His people deserved punishment. So, God prepared to go to war against them. God would send a foreign army to conquer the kingdom of Judah, and to destroy the capital city of Jerusalem, and to carry away the people into captivity.

Isaiah said:

And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the LORD. As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever. (Isaiah 59:20, 21)

God is both severe and merciful, and with denunciation comes annunciation of blessing. God would punish His people for their sins, but He promised that, when the people came to their senses, and repented of their sins, He would deliver them..

Then Isaiah said:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified. And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:1–4)

Isaiah proclaimed the good news that God would deliver His people. God gave him His Spirit, and anointed him to preach good news to the meek, to those who suffered injustice. He would bind broken hearts of the people, and to the captives He would proclaim their liberation. He would proclaim that the day had come for the Lord to deliver His righteous people, and to take vengeance upon their enemies, and His. To them that put on their heads ashes as a sign of repentance, that mourned sin, that were heavyhearted because of sin, He would give a crown of beauty, and He would anoint their heads of the oil of joy, and He would dress them in a garment of praise. They would be a righteous people, established by the Lord, and for His glory, like great trees planted by Him in good soil. They would rebuild what had been destroyed. They would rebuild the ruined city of Jerusalem, and the temple there.

The prophecy continued:

For I the LORD love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering; and I will direct their work in truth, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. And their seed shall be known among

the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people: all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the LORD hath blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels. For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations. (Isaiah 61:8–11)

God would deliver His people because He loves justice, and hates robbery and injustice. God would reward the righteous suffering of His people, and make with them a new covenant, an everlasting covenant. God would greatly bless them, and the heathen nations would witness their blessing. When the people hear this message of their redemption, they greatly rejoice. God would forgive the sins of His people, and reckon them righteous before Him. They would no longer appear wretched because of their sin, but because of their right standing before God would appear magnificent as a bridegroom, or as a bride, on their wedding day. As in springtime, new buds appear, and the seeds sown in a garden come to life, so the world would begin a new era, a new era in which the Lord would cause all the nations to be righteous. This is cause for great joy.

Of course, what applied in one sense to Isaiah and to Israel in exile, applied ultimately to Christ. Saint John wrote:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. (John 1:6–8)

In the time of Christ, God sent John the Baptist to bear witness to that Jesus is the Christ. The world lay in spiritual darkness, both sin and ignorance, but Christ is the light of the world that dispels darkness, the one who teaches men what to believe, and what to do.

Saint John wrote:

And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias. (John 1:19–23)

John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and many people listened to Him, and were baptized by him. So, the religious rulers sent priests to ask John who he was, and he answered that he was not the Christ. They asked him if he was Elijah, whose coming was to precede the coming of the Christ, and he answered that he was not. They asked him if he was the great prophet that Moses said would come, and he answered that he was not. So, they asked him again who he was, and he said that he is the one that Isaiah the prophet said would call upon the people to make ready for the coming of the Christ by repenting of their sins.

Saint John's narrative continues:

And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet? John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1:24–28)

The Pharisees asked John why, if he was not the Christ, or Elijah, or the great prophet, he presumed to baptize. John did not defend his ministry; he rather answered by bearing witness to Christ. He said that he baptized with water, but there was One among them, whom they did not know, who was far greater than he, One whom all should prefer over him. The next day, John saw Jesus coming to him, and he said, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.” (John 1:29–30) John the Baptist, a prophet of God bore witness that Jesus is the lamb of God, whose sacrificial death would save the world from its sins. The First Advent of Christ was cause for great joy. On the night of Christ’s birth, an angel appeared to some shepherds who were in field tending their flocks, and the angel said to them, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10, 11) Then a host of angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Luke 2:14) The angels glorified God because He was disposed to do good to mankind by sending into the world His Only-Begotten Son to die for men’s sins, so that man and God might be at peace with each other. This is cause for great rejoicing.

Saint Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, instructing them that Christ, who ascended into heaven, will one day return to our world. As He rose from the dead, so He will raise from the dead all those who believed in Him in their lifetimes. Then they, along with those who believe in Jesus and are still living, will join Christ and be with Him forever. Saint Paul told the Thessalonians to comfort each other with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:18) After this, Saint Paul wrote:

Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:16–22)

The Christian has reason to rejoice, and not just once, but always. God sent His Son into the world to take away the sin of the world, and so make peace between God and man. Christ is gradually bringing the world to faith in Him, and so making the world a better place. Christ will one day return to raise the dead in Christ, and to judge the world in righteousness. The Christian should always pray, knowing that his Heavenly Father loves Him, and will give him whatever he needs. For the same reason, the Christian should give thanks to God in everything. John baptized with water, but Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The Christian ought not to let the cares and troubles of this life output the fire of zeal and devotion, and he ought not to allow them to inhibit his use of spiritual gifts. Some abuse the gifts of the Spirit, but the church should not therefore suppress them. When a man speaks, the church should by Scripture test what he says, and then affirm any truth, and deny any error. This was an important exhortation for the Thessalonians, because some would later discourage the Thessalonians by claiming that the resurrection had taken place.

Saint Paul then prayed, “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24) He prayed that God, with whom they were at peace

because He forgave their sins for Christ's sake, would completely sanctify them, making them like Christ in every way. He prayed that God would preserve them blameless, that God would keep them from falling away, until the Second Advent of Christ, when He would judge the living and the dead. Saint Paul prayed this, firmly believing that God, who calls Christians to Himself to be His people, will indeed preserve them. This is cause for great joy.

Let us rejoice that God promised to save His people. Let us rejoice that Christ came to take away the sin of the world. Let us rejoice that Christ will return to raise the dead, and to judge the world in righteousness.

Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.