

Okay, so if you've not seen the movie, you really do need to see the movie. I don't have time to give you the whole backstory and why there's a giant Elf in New York City. But I tell you this, that is a fun scene. It reminds me in exactly the opposite way of the last time I was in New York City. I was traveling with some friends, some staff people at Sherwood Oaks.

We went out to a conference out there, and we were staying in Queens. And if you're familiar with the area, Queens is a far piece outside of New York City, but that's where the cheap Hotels are. And so that is where we were to. If I wanted to go into the city, we made plans to do it. You had to Uber from your hotel to the Train station.

Then you got on the train and you drove across Long Island. Then you go under the East river, and then you're in Manhattan. And. Oh, my word. But here's the deal.

I had traveled to New York a couple of Times, and so I was the resident New York expert. I sort of tried my New York accent. I worked it up quite a bit. I was pretty good at it, and I was really impressing my friends at work. They thought I just knew everything.

So I was teaching them how to ride the subway. So the day that we had planned to meet up, they had went off on their own. And I got the station. I got my ticket. I rode confidently on this subway.

I got off at the right station. I got up there. I'm walking down the streets of Manhattan. I know where I'm going. I know the corner.

Feeling pretty confident, pretty excited. Honestly, not quite buddy the Elf excited. I wasn't eating gum off of subway rails, but I was feeling pretty good about my New York experience. I get to the place where we're supposed to meet, and they're not. Oh.

So I pull out my phone, and I start to text, and I realize I am on, like, the last little bit of my cell phone power, thinking, okay, what are you going to do? I got to send it anyway. So I sent it, and I got no response. And I wait there on the corner of, like, something and something. And all around me, the city is bustling with life in languages that I've never heard.

Quite honestly, if you've been to New York, you know, that's how it is. And I wait. And I wait and I wait. I'm thinking, okay, I'm just going to have to go back to the hotel. And I pull my phone up to get my contact information, and I realize my phone now is dead.

So I know enough to get back to the train station. So I've got my. Thankfully, I have a wallet and I can buy the ticket to get back to the train station I got on that morning. Now, once I get off there, I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't call an Uber.

I can't pull up MapQuest. I'm just going to have to get off the train station and try to figure if anything looks familiar. The problem is that by the time I get back to that station in Queens and I walk up out of the subterranean recesses of the Metro system and walk up, it is dark and I'm

like, I don't know where I'm at. Nothing looks familiar. And my confidence and my joy about being in this amazing city is deadlier than my phone.

I am done with the city. All I want to be is back in Bedford, Indiana. You ever get that feeling? Yeah, I just want to be home. You may be at a place in your life this morning where the adventure is not quite going the way you thought it was going to go.

And if that's the case, I've got some good news for you. You can still experience Joy. Now, maybe not buddy the Elf, hyper hopped up on Candy Cane and hot chocolate joy, but you can experience divine Jesus Joy even when circumstances, when people, and when moments aren't magically delightful. In fact, the deepest kind of joy that is often discovered is in the last place you would expect to find it. So we're going to be in two Corinthians, chapter six.

I'm going to pray, and then we're going to look at what Paul says about circumstances and joy. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for just joyful moments in our lives that just happen to us sometimes when we're least expecting them, places we certainly wouldn't expect to find Joy, there it is. We're doing laundry or we're making breakfast or we're driving kids someplace, or we're just walking through the woods, and all of a sudden we just sense that life is exactly the way it is supposed to be. Lord, that's the joy that you promised us.

That's the joy we want to live in. Help us, even in the midst of difficult circumstances, to find that place, to intentionally go there. Pray this in Jesus name. Amen. In the letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing to some people that he's written to in the past.

He's been part of this congregation, and he's helped establish the Church there. But something's interesting has happened. Paul has been serving God, and it seems as Paul has been serving God, his life has gotten really tough. He's ended up in prison a couple of times. He's endured some beatings and some very difficult things.

The Church in Corinth has this weird idea that if you follow Jesus, your life should be perfect. Have you ever heard that before? They think, if you follow Jesus, your life should be perfect. And so they look at Paul and they go, now, wait, Paul. If you were really doing what God called you to do, you wouldn't end up in prison.

You wouldn't be suffering beatings. You wouldn't be shipwrecked. None of this stuff would be going on. You are obviously out of the will of God, and therefore, we don't think you have anything of value to share with us. We want to follow the other leaders who life seems to be going pretty good for them.

We trust them. They've got God's blessing. And here's what Paul writes to them in two Corinthians, chapter six, four through ten. He says this as servants of God. We don't want to, but we will commend ourselves in every way, in great endurance, in troubles, hardships, and distresses, in beatings, imprisonments, and riots and hard work, sleepless nights and hunger, in purity, understanding, in patience and kindness and the Holy Spirit and sincere love, in

truthful speech and in the power of God, with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left, through glory and dishonor.

Bad report, good report. Genuine, yet regarded as impostors known, yet regarded as unknown, dying. And yet we live on, beaten and yet not killed. And get this, sorrowful, and yet always rejoicing. I think Paul and buddy the Elf have this in common.

They both have the ability to see past the dirt and the grime and the grit of life to something amazing. Behind it all, they can look past difficult people and difficult situations and somehow still know that there's life and joy and magic in the world around them. Sure, we're hungry, Paul says, but we can stand to lose a few pounds. Sure, people call us imposters, but you know what? We know who we are.

Sure, we got beat, but, I mean, we're still standing here. We didn't get killed. Sure, we got imprisoned, but we're not in jail now. Sure, there's a lot that we could be sad about, but instead we are ever rejoicing. These are the kinds of people I love to be around.

How about you? Now, they can be irritating when you're in your own misery and you just want to soak in it. These kind of people can drive you nuts. But I'm telling you what, they bring faith and they bring hope into every situation, especially difficult ones. And if that's you this morning, here's what I want you to hear.

Here's what I think God would want you to hear. It's the same message that the angels gave to the shepherds on the hillside in Judea. Luke, chapter two, verses ten through eleven. Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people, not just a select few for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord.

A savior who is Christ the Lord. This is the proclamation that they gave to those lonely, isolated. Nothing much to brag about, shepherds there on the hillside 2000 years ago. And what it meant to them is for them to talk about. But what it means to me is what I'm going to share with you today.

After all, the angels said unto you, and that means unto me. And so the message of the angels to the Shepherds has application in my life today. And here's what it means. And maybe this will bring you joy and rest and peace as well. Because Jesus is the Savior, I don't have to be.

Have you thought about that? Because Jesus is the Savior, I don't have to be. I spent a lot of time in my life trying to make myself holy. Anyone identify with that? Trying to watch every word and critique every thought, weigh every action.

And there's nothing wrong with that. But trying to be holy and be your own savior on your own is hard. You see, I wanted God to look at me maybe and be impressed with how good a Christian I was. And if I was really good, then maybe God would say something like, Tim, you're an

excellent example of holiness. I've got a shelf that I'm going to put you on and everyone can see it and go, ooh, what a good Christian he is.

I am terrible at being perfect. I never got close to the holiness shelf. How about you instead? I need a savior. And that's the good news of great joy.

I have a savior. I have a savior. Paul says in Corinthians, I have a savior that has become my wisdom. He has become my righteousness. He has become my justification.

All of those things that I lacked, Jesus has become. He's my savior. That means I don't have to be. Jesus did not redeem us so that we could get put up on a holiness shelf. Have you ever thought about that?

That's not why he redeemed you. We were redeemed to be used by God less like a porcelain vase and more like a big cast iron skillet, rough around the edges, a little dinged up.

Certainly imperfect. But when we give ourselves to God and submit our lives to him as our savior, he can take that imperfection and do some good stuff with it. Trying to be perfect is admirable. I think we've all made that attempt at some point in our lives. But trying to do it apart from Jesus just causes us to live with fear and anxiety, some stress, and it's certainly not joy.

In Philippians, Paul talks about this, and he says that being made right with God is not on the basis of our righteousness, on our perfection. Instead, it is on the basis of the perfection and the righteousness of Jesus. And because Jesus is my Savior, I don't have to live in this place of stressful anxiety about getting it all right all the time. I can just be me. And if you've ever seen someone just experiencing the fullness of joy, you know that their concern is not about anyone around them.

They're living in the moment. And that is how Jesus wants us to live, open and available to him with all our flaws and imperfections that he is refining, not us. And that brings me great joy. And then, because Jesus is Christ the Lord, that means that he is the authority in my life. I don't have to have all the answers.

More importantly, I don't have to control other situations, other people, so that my joy is not robbed. Life can bring us some very intimidating challenges. I've got some in my life. I'm sure you do, too. But when we trust our lives to Jesus, it means that the challenging parts in our life are no longer ours to really sort and figure out.

Now, we try to. We try to make it all make sense. I got a buddy here this morning who's big on statistics.

Statistics are fine, but God has this crazy way of working outside of statistics. When we trust our lives to Jesus, it means that those parts of my life that I just can't figure out, I submit to him.

And when I submit those parts to my life that are challenging, that are hard, that bring me some anxiety and fear, when I submit them to Jesus and really submit them to Jesus as Christ the Lord over that situation, what happens is I receive joy. I can live in that place in that tension with joy, because I'm not in charge of it. I can simply be me in Christ in this spot.

The journey he takes us on is not easy ones. David talked about the valley of the shadow. Paul talks about his troubles and his hardships and his distresses. Each of you has your own difficult story as well. But when Jesus is Christ the Lord, when Jesus is our authority, we can trust the questions along the way to his wisdom.

And I tell you, when I can surrender that to him, that allows me to live, enjoy, even with question Marks.

Maybe if you live with kids, you've come across this issue. Who is in charge? If you got teenagers, perhaps you've had to have the conversation about, hey, you're not the parent. Anyone besides me, having dealt with that in teenagers, I didn't think so.

You just want to embrace these children that you love so much and say, listen, buddy, this is not your issue to solve. This is not your problem to figure out. It's not your job to control everything around you. You've got someone, an adult, who can do this. And God says the same thing to us.

He says, when you surrender your life to me and trust me with your life, I will take care of this stuff for you. You just follow me. You just obey. You just open the door when I present it to you. What happens is this.

When we surrender the control of our lives over to God, what ends up happening is we actually become more confident. And when we are more confident, what happens? We experience more joy. The angels came announcing to the shepherds this joyful, confidence boosting news for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord unto you. It's one of the most Affirming parts of this entire Scripture.

Unto you. Unto me. Unto us is born for all of us. The Christmas Story is for us.

John Piper says, the events of history are not about nations and industries. God governs the World for the sake of his children. Have you thought about that? God governs the World for the sake of us. Unto us.

When Jesus was born, the world was a Mess. And God could have sort of strong armed his will and made things exactly the Way it should be. The Roman Empire would have released control over that part of Judea. You could have Turned the heart of Herod back to his Own People, and he could have brought good men to Thrones and taken evil men off Thrones. But instead, he did something very unexpected.

He chose a virgin and her betrothed who were living in Nazareth, a tiny town with less than a hundred people living there, God needed them to get to Bethlehem, where their family, where Mary's baby could be born, the Messiah could be born to get her there. He put it in the mind of Caesar Augustus to take a census. Now this is the most powerful person in the world living thousands of miles from this little town of Bethlehem. And yet God put it in his mind to call for a census empire wide, millions of people. And exactly the moment when it would get one obscure little girl and her new, soon to be born baby and her husband from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

It happened. He sent some angels at the right time to the right place to announce it to the shepherds. He arranged a star in the heaven so that wise men in the east would see it and know far enough in advance to make the journey to see this new baby.

And he did all this for you. Unto you. So, however fearful and stressed and out of control your life may feel right now, I want you to know that you are not forgotten. You are not abandoned. God knows what he's doing, and you can trust him with the parts and pieces of your life that feel a little bit scary right now.

God is for you, and he's with you, so much so that the name he gave his son is Emmanuel. God with us. That's what I had to remind myself when I was walking up out of the subway system. And I get to the top of the steps and I look around and I don't see anything that looks familiar. And it's getting very dark and my phone is dead, of course.

And you just go, which way is the wind blowing? I will walk with my back to the wind. At least I won't be cold. And you just start walking to see if anything looks familiar. Have you been there in your life where you're just walking to see if something looks familiar and nothing looks familiar?

And I am starting to get a little more panicky than I was when the sun was shining and I was on a street corner in the city.

But I began to intentionally do something. The scripture says that we enter into God's presence with Thanksgiving. We enter into his courts with praise. That's the psalmist wrote that in Psalm 100. And so I've been practicing this a long time in my life.

And so I begin to just practice the Thanksgiving and praise model. Sometimes we sing out loud. The best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear. Yeah. So I think I was walking down the streets of Queens.

Just go, there's a song we sang. I will not fear for you are with me. And I could sing it, but I won't. And I begin to hum that. Begin to sing that as I'm sort of singing it out, know people are perhaps looking at me, but it's dark, so I can't tell.

But I begin to sing. And I begin to just begin to thank God. I thank you for your salvation. I thank you for the fact that you brought me here and you're not going to abandon me here. I trust your salvation, your authority, and your power to see me home.

I'm thankful that my feet work. I'm thankful for all the exercise I got today. I'm thankful that though my phone is dead, I do have a wallet. And if I could find a place to find a charger, that would help. I just keep walking, and I just keep thinking of the things that are good in my life.

I'm here with friends, and I do have a place to sleep tonight if I can just get to it.

And there's this thing that happens when we begin to give thanks and praise God, even for little things, our perspective begins to change. We sing, we remind ourselves of the good things in our lives, and we find ourselves entering into the presence of God. We're entering through his gates and into his presence, into his courts. And there, the Scripture says, in the presence of God is fullness of joy. And that's what happens when we begin to intentionally choose to be joyful.

We find ourselves in the presence of God, where we experience the fullness of it. And I'm walking along, and I notice a few doors down, there's still a glow from a storefront window. And it's a little bodega. Anyone ever been into a little bodega? They sell everything from little bags of potato chips to MotoR fluid.

And I walk in, and I'm like, do you hold my phone up? And says, I need a charger. I didn't think he spoke English, but he said, what kind of charger do you need? What kind of phone is it? I said, it's an iPad.

He goes, okay, right here. Said, tell me how much it was. I paid for it. I said, is there a place to charge it? And he goes, I don't think so.

And he says, oh, over there behind a little cardboard container of beef jerky, there's a little outlet over there. I've never been so happy to see an outlet and a box of beef jerky in my life. I plug it in, and I'm there watching it slowly come to know it takes a while when you plug it in, if it's completely dead, it takes a while. And so you plugged it in and you're looking at there going, oh, Jesus, please let this be the right charger. And then the apple appears.

The apple caused Adam and Eve a lot of trouble. But for me, it was the voice of God saying, hello, I am with you always, even unto the end of Queens. And my phone came up and within a few moments I was able to dial in MapQuest and figure out where the hotel was. Not close, but close enough to walk. And I thought, I can get there.

My feet are killing me. It's tough. I'm tempted to just get a cab, but no, I can do this. And I kept going on because I knew at the end of it were my friends. I knew at the end of it was a warm place, a comfortable bed and dinner at some point in the evening.

And I walked, and you walk under passes and I think I cut across an expressway at one point in time, dodging traffic. It's not quite as dramatic as I'm making it sound, but I walk in that night and of course, no one is aware that any adventure is going on in my life. And I keep it on the down low until this morning. But I think about that moment and I am reminded again that when we are at this place in our lives where it feels like we are just helpless and hopeless, it's never the case. Jesus is savior and Jesus is Christ the Lord.

And if we have submitted our lives to him, then nothing that we encounter in life is beyond his ability to bring us through it. And if we walk through it with him, we will experience the fullness of joy even in the middle of those difficult things. The world stage right now is crowded with scary things, wars and rumors of wars, economic challenges, societal breakdown. If we were to make a list, we could spend all day talking about what's wrong with the world. It feels very dark and Alma's times walking through unfamiliar territory.

And it's tempting to say, well, where is God in all of that? Well, I'll tell you where God is. God is with us and God is for us. And in this world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer, be joyful, because I am the Savior and I am Christ the Lord and I have overcome the world.

Fear not embrace the news of great joy. As we come to a time of communion, I want to remind us of Hebrews. Hebrews tells us that Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, 8th who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising its shame and now sits at the right hand of the throne of God. Jesus didn't run and move away from shame and reproach. He didn't walk away from difficult things.

Now, like all of us, if you don't have to go through difficult things, don't do it. But Jesus said, for the joy that's set before me, I am willing to endure the cross and the shame that goes along with it, because I know there's joy. There's joy at the end of it and there's joy in the middle of it as well. Jesus calls us to the same know. He calls us to take up our cross and for the joy set before us to take up our cross and follow him.

And it may be through difficult places that he calls us to go. But if he's with us again in his presence, there is fullness of joy. Whatever we go through, if we submit it to Jesus, we're trusting him with it. Then we can experience the fullness of joy. Heavenly Father, we want to be intentional about living in joy, living in the joy that you promised.

Because of the good news, we can experience great joy. It doesn't mean that life is going to be easy, but it does mean that no matter what life brings, if we are with you, it's all good.

As we take the bread and the cup this morning, we are thankful that we have you as Savior, that we do not need to be our own Savior. We don't need to make ourselves perfect. But we trust our lives to you and as we just obey, you transform us and we trust our lives to you as master, as Christ the Lord, giving you authority over our lives and the things that we encounter.

Lord, may our lives exhibit that kind of joy. Buddy, the Elf joy, Jesus joy that whatever happens, wherever you take us, we know you are with us and you are for us, God with us. Emmanuel, may the bread and the cup remind us of your presence in Jesus name. Amen.

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