

Charles Dickens's novel *A Christmas Carol* is about Ebenezer Scrooge and how his heart was changed one Christmas. It's a story that makes us feel good because in the end "they all lived happily ever-after" and Tiny Tim says his famous line "God bless us, everyone!"

But the lines from another one of Dickens novel more accurately describe the way Christmas feels for many of us. He begins *A Tale of Two Cities* with these infamous words:

**It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity. It was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness. It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. We had everything before us, we had nothing before us.**

Christmas is also a time of contrasts. It is a time of prosperity and a time of poverty. It is a season of good will and a season of ugly greed. Christmas is a time of family togetherness, and it is a time of excruciating loneliness. It is a season of light, and it is a season of darkness. Christmas is the spring of hope and Christmas is the winter of deep despair. Don't get me wrong. We all want Christmas to be the **best** of times. That's why we decorate and donate and shop until we drop. We put up trees, hang tinsel, cook turkeys, and put together all kinds of toys. We want a holly, jolly Christmas. But let's be honest. As much as we **want** Christmas to be the best of times, sometimes it is the worst of times. Some of us have spent too much money, again, and we are worried sick about our financial future. Others are struggling with their health, or the health of a loved one—wondering if this might be their last Christmas on earth. Some are wrestling with old hurts that won't heal and new wounds that won't go away. Still others are missing loved ones this Christmas—either because of distance or death or by cruel design.

That's why our text from 1 Thessalonians seems so strange, so out of place, so artificial. "Rejoice **evermore**." "**Really?**" some might wonder. "Paul, just what is there to rejoice about? In the end isn't Christmas just a fantasy in a season of fantasies? Isn't Christmas about as real as sugar plum fairies and a guy named Jack Frost nipping at your nose?"

"And even if Christmas joy is real," a jaded person will say, "it's real for **other** people. It's not real for me. I've got problems that no one else can relate to. My parents had a lot of hang ups and passed all of them on to me. And my siblings? We don't get along that well, especially at **this** time of the year.

“My job’s a hassle. My marriage is on the rocks. And it’s too late to do anything about this mess I call my life. So how dare Paul say, “Rejoice evermore”? How could he suggest such a sugary sentiment?”

Well, I’ll tell you why. Paul knew that the angel’s announcement at Bethlehem, “I bring you good news of great joy” (Luke 2:10), was not just for *some* of the people. Not just for the good people. Not just for religious people. No. This is “good news of great joy for *all* the people.” Joy is the gift Christ gives to *everyone*. And He gives it especially to *you*.

Please hear what I’m about to say. It is very important. There is huge difference between happiness and joy. They’re not the same thing. External gifts like health and wealth and family are awesome blessings from God. They make us happy. But—and this is a big but—they are not *essential* for joy. Why is that? Happiness is determined by what is going on around me. I can’t control that. Joy is determined by what is going on *inside* of me. And God has taken control of that. He sent Jesus.

Jesus didn’t have a lot of reasons for earthly happiness. He didn’t become an emperor, a statesman, a general or an investment banker. He was born in an animal feeding trough to a blue-collar father and a teenage mother. As an adult Jesus had no home. “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20) Jesus was as an itinerant preacher and washed feet. That’s never been the key to making it big.

And then this. “Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8) Death on the cross was reserved for slaves, thieves, and murders; the lowest of the low. It brought unimaginable pain. In spite of it all, though, Jesus exuded joy. Poverty couldn’t take it away. Disappointments and rejection couldn’t take it away. Even death on a cross couldn’t take away His joy. Hebrews 12:2 says as much, “. . . who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.”

What does it all mean? It means no matter what your life may be like right now, this one great truth makes everything worthwhile: Jesus Christ was born to die for you. Yes, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay, placed in a manger by the loving hands of His mother, protected by the strong hands of his foster-father Joseph, the same Savior proclaimed by the angels, worshiped by the shepherds and later on by the Wise Men; He came into the world on that silent, holy night, to grow up and die *for you*. And from His cross Jesus freely gives joy; unlimited, undeniable, and unending *joy*. And it is *for you*. How can we be

so sure? The angel tells us why: “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **all** the people.”

Jesus once said, “No one will take your joy from you” (John 16:22). Why is that? Remember? Happiness is determined by what is going on around me. I can’t control that. Joy is determined by what is going on **inside** of me. And God has taken control of that by sending Jesus.

who is the doorway to deliverance, the pathway to peace, and the gateway to glory. There is no limit to His goodness. There is no matching His mercy. His love never changes. His grace is sufficient. His word is enough. And His reign is righteous forevermore! And no one will take this joy from you! Joy stems the tide of gloom and despair. It brings confidence in the midst of confusion. Hope in the midst of uncertainty. And calm in the midst of life’s chaotic storms.

But please, don’t confuse happiness and joy. They are not the same thing. There are happy Christmases and there are sad Christmases. It all depends on what is happening around us.

Joy, on the other hand, is dependent upon what is happening **in** us. And the birth of Jesus is God’s commitment to send the Holy Spirit who comes inside to heal our hurts, forgive our sin, redeems our wretchedness, and give us life eternal.

Whether Christmas this year is the best of times or the worst of times for you, the birth of Jesus— announced by the angels, witnessed by the shepherds, and marveled at by the Magi—leaves us finally with only one response. And what would that be? Paul wrote it. They are the words of our text: “Rejoice evermore!” (1 Thess. 5:16) Amen.