

Has your heart ever been so full of joy it could burst?

The Bible says that there is great joy in salvation, in God's presence, and when we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

- David wrote, 'Restore to me the joy of your salvation (Ps 51:12 NIV).'
- And, 'You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand (Ps 16:11 NIV).'
- In 1930, Howard Carter wrote, 'The power of the Spirit flooded my being and ... a definite experience of boundless love and joy filled me, a joy I cannot express, a joy unspeakable and full of glory, for I felt like singing and praising God continually.'¹ – Howard Carter

Tonight I'd like to focus on the joy that surrounds God's word. God's word brings joy to our soul and it is attractional.

For example, Jesus taught that our hearts are like various types of soil, soil that receives God's word with joy (Lk 8:13).

The prophet Jeremiah was even more vivid: 'When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight (Jer 15:16 NIV).' Weird, but I know what he means.

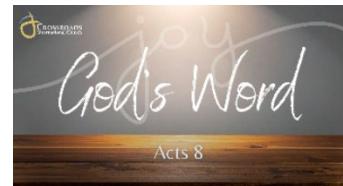
- Our spirit is nourished by God's word (1Ti 4:6).
- When I hear God's voice, my inner spirit can be satisfied and filled with joy for weeks.

When God speaks, joy breaks out. God speaks through us. The content of what God says could lead to salvation, or encouragement, or faith, or Spirit baptism, or anything.

- The point is that the unseen God has revealed himself, spoken to our need and situation.
- Our inner spirit is filled with great joy.

Tonight, I would like to look at the joy in Acts 8. Joy is the atmosphere of the Good News.

Joy – God's Word



¹ Howard Carter, 'My Personal Testimony to Pentecost,' *Word and Work* 52:3 (Mar 1930) (Framingham, MA), 5-6 (6).

Acts 8

Let me start with a testimony. I have been reading the Bible through every year since I was a teenager; let's say 50 times so far. To keep it fresh, some years, I switch to a different translation.

- But in the last 10 years or so, I have discovered a new way of seeing scripture.
- I was raised during a time of Bible doctrine. Truth is good, but we should not read the Bible like a engineering specification sheet. At times it is more like a love letter through which the Holy Spirit whispers to my heart.
- Andrew Sargent first alerted me to this emerging literary method of scholarship when he taught the gospel of Mark.
- I am seeing more and more that we should read the Bible as the writers intended it to be heard instead of looking to make it fit a theological structure.

Currently, the Holy Spirit is feeding my soul by revealing the importance of joy in Luke-Acts. Luke weaves joy into the atmosphere of both his Jesus-biography – Luke - and his church history - Acts.

1. Background, Acts 4-7.

The background to Acts is ...

1. The church was rapidly growing, Acts 2:47, 5:14, 6:1.
2. There was intense jealousy from Jewish leaders.
3. Satan sought to destroy from within, Acts 5:1-11, 6:1.
4. Persecution forced them to "go" into the world, Acts 8:1.

Acts 8-9 is one story segment, the Good News goes to Samaria.

- The Holy Spirit anoints key people with power.
- Philip (one of the other busboys), Peter, and John all help bring the Good News to Samaria.
- Here 'Luke highlights the ... charismatic activity with the atmosphere, experience, and expression of joy.'²

Let's jump in.

² Lyle Story, *Joyous Encounters: Discovering the Happy Affections in Luke-Acts* (New York: NY: Herder & Herder Book, 2018), 168.

2. The Good News, Acts 8:1-4, 25, 40.

'Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria.² (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.)³ But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison (Acts 8:1-3 NLT).'

As a great writer, Luke introduces us to Saul, the focus of chapter nine.

'But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went (Acts 8:4 NLT).'

These scattered believers preached the Good News. Luke does not take the time to give us a sample sermon of the Good News, like on the Day of Pentecost. But we remember what Peter said:

- Jesus was accredited by many signs & miracles, Acts 2:22.
- Jesus was put to death, but God raised him from the dead, Acts 2:24.
- Jesus is exalted, and we are witnesses, Acts 2:32.³
- Repent and be baptized and you will receive the Holy Spirit, Acts 2:38.

Luke wants us to feel that the joyous news of Jesus is spreading 'wherever they went.'

- This special segment highlights the happy words of salvation because Luke repeats it twice: 'After testifying and preaching the word of the Lord in Samaria, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem. And they stopped in many Samaritan villages along the way to preach the Good News (Acts 8:25 NLT).'
- Again, after the Ethiopian Eunuch's story: 'Meanwhile, Philip found himself farther north at the town of Azotus. He preached the Good News there and in every town along the way until he came to Caesarea (Acts 8:40 NLT).'

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Acts 8 is about sharing the story of grace that brings great joy to the human heart.

3. Philip in Samaria, Acts 8:4-8.

'Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah.⁶ Crowds listened intently to Philip because they were eager to hear his message and see the miraculous signs he did.⁷ Many evil spirits were cast out, screaming as they left their victims. And many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed.⁸ So there was great joy in that city (Acts 8:5-8 NLT).'

³ In Luke-Acts, 'the exaltation motif is more central than the idea of the vicarious atonement,' Story, *Joyous Encounters*, 182.

If you read carefully, you can see movement in Luke-Acts from individuals to a group.

- In chapters 3-4 Peter and John heal one disabled beggar, here many 'paralyzed or lame' are healed.
- Later, we will see the first Gentile convert was an Ethiopian Eunuch, but in chapters 10-11, and 15 we see groups of Gentiles converting and being filled with joy.

That one phrase 'There was great joy in that city (v. 8 NLT).' stands out to me.

- Great joy is what Gabriel said would happen because of Mary's baby: 'I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people (Lk 2:10).'
- What if people would say, there is great joy in Attleboro, or there is great joy in CIC.
- We need more great joy in our life. Let's spread great joy to the city.

'Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return,
And come with singing unto Zion;
And everlasting joy shall be upon their head.
They shall obtain gladness and joy;
And sorrow and mourning shall flee away.'⁴

Joy, grace, and gift all have the same root in Greek; they are connected: where God's word is shared, there is grace and joy.

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Paul connects Spirit baptism with salvation, but for Luke Spirit baptism is what brings joy and empowers people to speak grace.⁵

These miracles must have been amazing to witness because the people were eager to hear.

- The Good News is attractional - God's grace and joy draw people.
- Grace, joy, and charismatic activity go hand in hand to advance the Good News.

Please allow me to share Simon's story from his viewpoint.

⁴ Isa 35:10 KJV

⁵ Story, *Joyous Encounters*, 171.

4. Simon the Sorcerer, Acts 8:9-24.

Begin Monologue.

'I am Simon. I used to be a respected and powerful man, someone who knew magic.

- Mostly though, I observed carefully.
- Occasionally, I would practice dark arts, and occasionally they would work.
- I knew spiritual power and it made me rich.

One day, this commoner arrived from Jerusalem, Philip.

- He did not know the dark arts and yet he knew power.
- He told the story of Jesus, a man who was crucified and was now alive.
- There was something powerful in the story; it cut to my heart (He 4:12).

Philip began to work miracles – real miracles – not like the kind I did for money.

- He healed people who had been lame for decades and he cast out demons.
- At times I could not even hear because the screaming of the demons was so loud.
- I have never seen such power.

I was a fraud compared to Philip.

- I believed and was baptized.
- From that time on, I watched Philip even more carefully.

I was no longer the biggest power in town, Philip - no - should I say Philip's God was.

- His message, he called it the "Good News" did not need promotion, people were attracted to it.

One day, some men came from Jerusalem. They sensed something was wrong.

- They said we did not have the Holy Spirit, and they began to lay hands on us.
- I could not see them do anything special, but the effect was amazing.
- The Holy Spirit filled them, and they began to prophecy, speak in tongues, and there was an ecstatic joy all over them.
- I could see with my own eyes that they had changed.

I got myself in trouble when I asked to buy this ability to share the Holy Spirit.

- Peter, the spokesman said, 'The wind blows wherever it pleases (Jn3:8),' and the Holy Spirit is the same way, uncontrollable.

- He said I should repent because 'God's gift cannot be bought (Acts 8:20 NLT)' for money.
- I was in danger of hell.

He saw the real me, the darkness in my heart.

- I wanted people to be amazed at me again.
- I wanted to make money off the Holy Spirit.
- And I was jealous of them.
- But I could not stand before their power.

I asked them to pray for me and they did.'

End Monologue.

Simon's story is a lesson in the proper use of power.

- Christians, not just the leaders – you – are gifted with charismatic power if you are filled with the Spirit.
- You can effectively share the story of grace, you can perform signs and wonders, healings, and great miracles in a way that glorifies God and brings great joy to the human heart.
- But you cannot control it. The Holy Spirit is personal and does God's will.

The apostles in Jerusalem heard that the Samaritans had 'accepted the word of God (Acts 8:14).'

- As Jesus said: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).
- The charismatic outpouring witnessed by Peter and John proved to the leaders in Jerusalem that the Good News was expanding.

God speak through the Bible and through you and me.

One more vignette.

5. The Ethiopian Eunuch, Acts 8:26-39.

'As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, "Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza."²⁷ So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia (Acts 8:26-27 NLT).'

In Samaria we discovered the power of the Good News and great joy that accompanies it. In this episode, we discover the Holy Spirit in divine timing – divine coincidences.

- Philip obeys the angel and goes to the desert, not a likely place to change the world.
- He happens upon a very important man. This high-ranking black man was from Ethiopia. He would be the first Gentile convert and the 'forerunner of the Africa mission.'⁶
- He was clearly a special man whom the Holy Spirit wanted to hear the Good News.

'The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship,²⁸ and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.²⁹ The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage."³⁰ Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah (Acts 8:27-30 NLT).'

- Divine coincidence upon coincidence.
- He was seeking God and even went to the temple to worship.
- But as a Eunuch he was excluded from the Temple (Dt 23:1).
- Rejected in Jerusalem - but still pursuing God through His word.

'Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"³¹ The man replied, "How can I, unless someone instructs me?" And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him.³² The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth.³³ He was humiliated and received no justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?"³⁵ So beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus (Acts 8:30-35 NLT).'

Let's list the coincidences:

- Philip was in the right place at the right time.
- He encounters the right person.
- Who happens to be reading the prophet Isaiah, an important text that points to Jesus and his work of salvation. Too easy for Philip.
- This official even asks Philip who the prophet is talking about.
- They came upon water. Remember, they are in the desert.

'As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?"³⁶ He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.³⁷ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:26-39 NLT).'

- Note the atmosphere of joy.

⁶ Story, *Joyous Encounters*, 179.

- This marginal, disabled foreigner was excluded from Jerusalem's Temple, but he was welcomed into God's household. There was no prohibition, he received grace.
- He received the Good News, and the result was great joy. He finally found a home among God's people.
- This influential believer would be the first to share the Good News to the ends of the earth.

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Conclusion.

I know that 'preaching the Good News' seems intimidating. But everyone here is can tell the Jesus story.

Like Philip's obedience, we are to simply obey and share. God will take our words, or the Bible and transform them into the life giving, grace-filled, joyous Good News.

Jesus' story 'is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defence, laying us open to listen and (He 4:12 MSG)' review the Good News.

Jesus' story brings life. Jesus wondered if his disciples would abandon him, but they replied, where would we go 'You have the words of eternal life (Jn 6:68 NIV).'

You have the words of eternal life.

Prayer.