

Rejoice - God has come to save his people

This year 4 teenage Queensland footballers suffered serious spinal damage. With specialist treatment one is almost walking normally; another is able to stand and take a step or 2. For each the change is astonishing. Doctors, physios and other medical staff have come to bring help. These teenagers are so thankful for the help and skill they've received. They rejoice - and I'm sure you rejoice with them and for them.

Christmas too, gives us great reason to rejoice! For Christmas is about God coming to help and rescue us.

The Bible opens with the creation of man and woman in the image of God. It closes with God's people around his throne, rejoicing in the presence of the Lord Jesus who saved them through his death and resurrection. Do you see yourself there? With all those from every nation, age, and race who have been rescued and saved by Jesus. Rejoicing together, in the presence of Jesus, your Lord and Saviour!

Through the OT God promises his people that he will send his King who will rescue them. In the OT book, Zephaniah 3 God declares that he will end the punishment of his people. He will gather the afflicted, save the lame, and bring them to himself. It will be time to rejoice! The prophet Isaiah in chapter 12, verse 6 affirms "Rejoice and proclaim: God is my Salvation! Proclaim his name."

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Our Gospel reading from Luke 3, is set some 400 years after Isaiah wrote. At that time, God's people have little reason to rejoice. They are in Israel, but under the rule of Rome. They are not free; their religion is formal and gives little hope. Yet, even in this dark time, some are faithful, patiently looking for God to fulfil his promises.

Our reading introduces John the Baptist to us. God had revealed to John that the time when God would fulfil his promises to rescue his people is near. With this in mind, the Gospel reading informs us that John went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. *"As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: John was:*

*"A voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him."*

To know their long awaited King is coming is good news!! Salvation is at hand! That would be something to rejoice about. But not yet. The people are not ready for the King to come. They need to:

1. Prepare in Expectation of the Coming King. John saw that there were 2 important ways the people must get ready. In particular,

They need to get real in being God's people. Many people heard John's message and those who wanted to take God seriously were baptised. But John makes clear that this was not simply a formal activity. In vs. 8 John called his hearers to *"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."*

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In the Banking Royal Commission the banks which charged fees for no service agreed that was wrong. The Royal Commission then wanted to know what the Banks intended to do about that. They needed to 'produce fruit' to demonstrate their change of heart. In the same way, John challenges the people to start making changes to the way they live. In particular vs. 10-14 give some examples of what it would mean for the people to get ready by:

Living God's ways. In vs. 11 John explains God's way of living will mean you care for one another, and you'll share what you have with those who don't have. In vs. 12-13 he demands that they stop ripping people off. In vs. 14 he challenges them to be content with what they have. How good would it be if their society was like that? Caring for one another; people not being ripped off; people content with what they have. It'd be time to rejoice if we lived in a society like that!

As people who follow Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, we also ought to live lives that produce fruit that pleases Jesus. Lives of thankfulness and in caring and loving others.

But why should the people change how they live? Why should they pay attention to John? In vs. 15-18 John says:

2. Rejoice - The King is on his way! The long years of waiting have ended.

In vs. 15 we see that some were so keen to see the arrival of God's King that they thought John might be the one. John was such a fresh change - his teaching took God's word seriously - he lived by it!

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Then in vs. 16 John clearly states that **he is not that King**. God's King is coming, John affirmed, and he is so much more powerful than I am! He will come and he will get rid of all evil and harm. He will gather his people, giving them his Holy Spirit so Jesus will always be with them. His people will indeed rejoice, as they witness the fulfilment of God's promises in their own lives.

So John encourages his hearers:

3. Rejoice because the King brings Good News!

In vs. 18 John's message is summed up as Good News. It is Good News to know God's King is coming. Good News to know God's promises are being fulfilled in Jesus. Good News to know that the suffering of our world will end. Good News to know that God will bring all injustice to judgement. Good News to know that God's Spirit will be with us always. Christmas is a reminder that we rejoice in the good news of Jesus - Jesus our Lord and Saviour, who has given us life.

This passage has 3 messages for us:

first, if you love Jesus then rejoice! Hold fast to him. Ask him to enable you to live bearing the fruit of being his follower; being light and salt to our world.

second, if you know about Jesus but have not yet trusted him as your King and your Saviour, then it's time to do so! If you don't know him enough, then read Luke's gospel and John's gospel. When you read, pray and ask Jesus to make himself known to you.

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third, John knew many in his world suffered at the hands of others. It was hard to rejoice. If you suffer from any abuse know that God cares; do seek help - your church should have details for Safe Ministry contact persons. They will help you. If you are an abuser, you need help. You could phone the same service and seek help to control your life.

For those who suffer from abuse, know that suffering will end - Jesus our King and Saviour will bring peace and security for his people. You can pour your heart out to him. He understands. Those who trust in Jesus can rejoice knowing their future is secure; he is faithful in all his promises. In the future Jesus is bringing there will be no more suffering, dying, or pain - he is making all things new. You can rejoice in the hope he gives.