

Perfect Joy Is Coming

The Post Office in Port Washington is not just the Post Office in Port Washington. It's official name is the, "Joseph G. Demler Post Office." Joe Demler grew up in Port Washington and ended up as a soldier during World War II. His unit was involved in the Battle of the Bulge, which took place 78 years ago this December. Joe had just turned 19 years old. He was captured by the Nazis and then lived as a prisoner of war until he was rescued four months later. After the war, he returned to Port Washington, raised a family and worked at the post office for 37 years. He died a few years ago at age 94 and the Wisconsin Legislature honored him by renaming the post office after him.

I think it is impossible for us to imagine how difficult Joe Demler had it as a prisoner of war. He was forced to walk dozens of miles through waist deep snow without adequate clothing. He and other prisoners were forced to repair damaged railroad tracks while US planes shot at them, not knowing they were prisoners. Each day, Joe shared one pound of cheese and a loaf of bread made mostly of sawdust with 9 other prisoners. He was 160 pounds, but as a prisoner he lost 90 pounds. When he was rescued, he weighed only 70 pounds and was covered with lice. Doctors said that he would have been dead within three more days. His picture appeared in Life Magazine and he became known as the human skeleton.

It's impossible for us to imagine the troubles he endured. And yet, in a way, we can. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote to Jews who were suffering after their nation was destroyed by the Babylonians. Jerusalem was demolished. The temple dismantled. The country gone. The Jews had no hope, no joy, no future – not on this earth and not with God. They were living as prisoners of war in a foreign land. Isaiah compares their situation to someone infected with sin. That's you and me. We were born with a sinful nature which makes us a slave to sin. We can not stop ourselves from sinning. Even if we control our outward actions and are careful with our mouths, all sorts of unholy things race through our minds – jealousy, complaining, lust, selfishness, self-pity, greed and on and on. The sin in us, the sins that we commit, the sins that others commit around us and throughout the world make things pretty miserable at times. Things are not also that joyful for us.

Maybe things haven't been so joyful for you lately. Maybe watching the news gets your blood pressure up. Maybe the hustle and bustle of the holiday season is leaving you feeling worn out and a bit crabby and ready to yell. Maybe the immorality and materialism in our society frustrate you. Maybe the false preachers in other churches that mislead people make you angry enough to yell. Maybe you share Jesus with someone and they blow you off and it hurts. Maybe looking in the mirror and thinking of all the things you have done wrong depresses you. There is not always so much joy in our day to day lives as we go to work or school day after day, make meals, wash clothes, pay bills, etc. and we complain. Because of sin in us and around us, we deserve an eternity in hell which is far more miserable than a Nazi prison camp.

Isaiah 61 just explodes with good news. Even though it was Isaiah who put these words on parchment, he was really expressing the thoughts of Jesus 700 years before he was born. Jesus is the one speaking in Isaiah 61:1, "**The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me [That happened when Jesus was baptized.] to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.**"

How do you think Joe Demler felt when the US Army liberated his prison camp? Suddenly, everything changed for him. Instead of facing death, he was going to live. Instead of starving, he was going to get decent food. Instead of being neglected, he was going to be cared for. Instead of having no freedom, he was going to be able to move about and do what he wanted. Instead of being in a dark and dingy place, he was going to enjoy the sunshine. Instead of being covered with lice, he was going to be clean. Instead of being brokenhearted, he was going to be filled with joy.

What happened to Joe, is what has happened inside of your heart. You were a captive of sin and death, but the perfect life, death and resurrection of Jesus liberated you. Instead of death in hell, you will have life in heaven. Instead of feeling empty inside, your soul is filled with the good news of God's love. Instead of facing doom and gloom, you can look forward to a bright future. Instead of being trapped in sinful habits and addictions, you are free to live a Christian life. Instead of being weak in the face of temptations, the Spirit of Jesus makes you strong to resist temptation. Instead of going through life feeling like a guilty failure, you

rejoice in God's unending love for you. Because of Jesus, you have been cleansed of all sin and guilt. Rejoice and sing Alleluia!

When they renamed the Port Washington post office in honor of Joe Demler, one of his friends said, "I sure hope heaven is good, because Joe, you served your time in hell." I can appreciate the friend's concern for Joe and what he endured as a prisoner of war, but that friend needs a Bible class. First of all, no prison camp on earth can compare to the reality of hell where people are completely forsaken by God and his blessings. As your Savior substitute, Jesus was forsaken by God as he hung on the cross so that God will never forsake you. As someone recently told me, "I have given God a million reasons not to love me and not one of them has changed his mind. He will never stop loving you. Never.

Also, Joe's friend "hopes that heaven is good." Heaven is so good that we can not truly wrap our minds around how awesome it will be – no sorrow, no sadness, no pains or pills or doctors, no tears. In verses 10 and 11 of Isaiah 61, Isaiah speaks for himself and for all believers as he uses some earthly illustrations to describe heavenly joy. Verse 10, "**I [Isaiah is speaking of himself, but really these are the thoughts of any believer.] delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.**" Just as a bride and bridegroom wear the best and fanciest clothes they can on their wedding day, that's how God dresses us spiritually. We are clothed with "**his righteousness,**" not our own righteousness of good works. We aren't good enough. In chapter 64, Isaiah even explains that our best efforts appear like dirty rags to God. When you were baptized, Jesus wrapped his righteousness around you. Through faith, you become as pure and holy and perfect as Jesus himself. Through faith, it is just as if you never sinned, not even once.

Isaiah continues in verse 11, "**For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.**" We rejoice that God will keep spreading the message of his love throughout the world. Across centuries, continents and countries, God made sure that someone planted the seed of the gospel in your heart so that you are a believer. And as God's people keep telling others about Jesus' saving love, more and more people will join us in the holiday spirit.

What is your favorite edition of Charles Dicken's famous drama, "A Christmas Carol"? The 1935 black and white movie? Or the 1938 one? Or the one in 1951, or 1970, or 1983, or 1992, or the 2022 version? It's a popular story. It's something we can all relate to because we all want to be freed from our misery like Scrooge was. Three ghosts visit Scrooge. The Ghost of Christmas Past was weighed down with chains which reminded Scrooge of how he sinned. The Ghost of Christmas Present reminded him how people were suffering because of his stinginess. The Ghost of Christmas Future showed Scrooge that because he was so evil, he was going to die a wretched man. We can all relate to feeling bad because of things we've done wrong, things we regret.

On Christmas morning, though, Scrooge woke up and was elated to realize that he was still alive. That was good news after his scary visions. He did not waste any time in showing that he had a change of heart. He gave money to the poor. He bought a Christmas goose for Bob Cratchet. He promised to finance Tiny Tim's medical costs. He even sang Christmas songs with the people. He was a changed man and rejoiced. As we look forward to the good news of our Savior's birth, we also rejoice in the good news. Regardless of how things are going in your life right now, regardless of what kind of presents you get and how your holiday celebrations go, there will be joy in your heart. You might not be happy every moment, but you will have the joy of salvation in your heart. Jesus is your Savior. One day soon, we'll be done with this sinful, stinking world and be in heaven. Don't get discouraged. Because of Jesus perfect joy is coming. Amen.