

Joy to the World with Fellowship

I John 1:1-9 (NIV)

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴ We write this to make our joy complete. ⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. ⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come! It's Christmas Day, and what a glorious day it is!

I have a lot of great memories of Christmas traditions from growing up, but there is one specific Christmas moment that I remember the most. One year Mom & Dad told me that everyone was only going to get one present. I don't remember exactly how old I was, but I know that I was old enough to understand that presents cost money and my parents don't have an unlimited supply of it. They often worked two to three jobs to provide for all that we needed, including sending three kids through private Christian grade schools and high schools. I told myself that this is okay. My parents love me; I can be happy with just one present. (Saying that out loud makes me realize how much of a first world problem I had and how truly blessed I was at that time without fully realizing it.)

Then Christmas Eve came and we got our presents. I knew that there would only be one, but then I saw that one present. It was the size of a dishwasher box. Same for my brother and sister. Truly just one present, but then we opened them up to find many gifts inside that one present.

I bring up this story because of the joy I remember getting that one present with many gifts that came out of it. That's what John is giving us here today. He gives just one present, and maybe getting just that one present makes you a little apprehensive. John wrote, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (verse 3) The one present he presents to us is fellowship. Huh. Fellowship. That's it.

"Fellowship" is a churchy word. We talk about having fellowship, enjoying fellowship in the fellowship hall. We say, "Let's fellowship around a potluck." But what is fellowship? The Greek word that is used here in John's letter for fellowship is *κοινωνία*. This is the same word that also gets translated as "communion." This fellowship that John is sharing is a shared unity with something else. Fellowship is a unity. Okay. But a unity of what? Well, let's open up this one present of fellowship and see all the gifts inside.

One gift from the present of fellowship is a fellowship, a unity, that is tangible. John declares, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." (verse 1) We appreciate what we can hear, see, and touch because it engages us, it involves more than one of our senses, almost making it more real. Except we have not been able to see Jesus standing before us, to touch his hands, to hear his audible voice. We didn't get to do that, but John did. He experienced Jesus that way, and he tells us this so that we know that Jesus is real. Jesus is not some fictional character. He's not some figment of your imagination. John observed him, ate with him, embraced him, talked with him. John does not claim superiority for having touched Jesus with his own hands, heard Jesus with his own ears, or having seen Jesus with his own eyes. He instead shares his experience so that we can have unity with him in that tangible Savior. He is real. Mary & Joseph got to hold him. The shepherds got to see him. So many thousands upon thousands of people saw, touched, and heard Jesus, the Immanuel. God really came into the world for us, for all people. Joy to the world that the Lord has actually, physically come!

We are all connected to, unified with, Jesus as our tangible and real Savior who came down from heaven. Immanuel took on human flesh to be with us, to experience what we experience, to resist temptation for us as a proper substitute. Because Jesus has truly come to earth in the flesh, we share a unity with him in what he has done for us and that he truly understands what it is to be us. Joy to the world that we share a fellowship, a unity that God is really with us and that we are never alone!

Since the Immanuel has come to us and has connected all believers together in the unity of the same God – Father, Son, and Holy Ghost – we have a unity, a fellowship, in life. “The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.” (verse 2) Mankind has always tried to put a stopper on death. Yet no one has been able to do so. We cannot stop death, but by bringing us together with him, Jesus has given us eternal life with him because he gave up his life only to take it up again. He rose from the dead, the firstborn of the dead, his victory over death which is a preview of our victory over death that we have only through what he has done. Joy to the world that the Lord has come and given us life, fixing the impossible problem of death for us.

God has brought us into a fellowship by bringing us to believe in him, and so he has also brought us into his light, to walk, to live, in his life. Another gift from the present of fellowship: “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.” (verses 5b-7a) God has brought us from spiritual darkness into his light to walk in his ways, to live according to his commandments. We get to live for him. We get to help other people and see their joy as we serve them as we walk in the Lord’s light. Joy to the world that we get to live for God!

But we know that we don’t always walk in God’s light. This we confess. This we all confess – another fellowship, a unity we share, in confessing our sins. We all live under the same verdict because of our sin, but we also share the same absolution, the same forgiveness of sins. We share in the fellowship, the unity, of being purified before God because “the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” (verse 7b) We all share in the same means of forgiveness, the same blood of Jesus shed for the whole world purifies us from all our sins. You don’t need more forgiveness than me. We all need the same blood of Jesus. Together we receive this same forgiveness through the Lord’s Supper, which is called a holy *κοινωνία*, a holy communion. As we share in the Lord’s Supper, we share in the same body and blood in, with, and under the bread and the wine as John himself tasted and saw during that very first Lord’s Supper. This is the same Supper that even our Lord ate and drank. Joy to the world that the blood of Jesus brings us all the same purification from sin.

We receive this same gift of purification through this fellowship whenever we confess our sins because “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (verse 9) We have a fellowship in the same faithful God who always keeps his promises, just as he did for John, as he does for all believers. Just as God was faithful to his Word to them, so he is also faithful to us. Joy to the world that we all share in the same faithful God who always keeps his Word, who doesn’t promise to some and not others, and who never backs out of a promise to any of us.

In that faithfulness, we share in the gift of a God who judges all people justly. He does not judge arbitrarily or at his whim. He is just – just in that his Son came in the flesh, lived perfectly for us, and took the punishment that our sins deserved on himself. God made him who had no sin be sin for us so that when he gave up his life years later on the cross, his one payment is all that was needed for every single one of us. We share in the fellowship, the unity, of one payment of sin by Jesus Christ which satisfied God’s justice over our sin. Joy to the world that our God will always judge us justly based on Christ’s one, complete sacrifice for the sins of the world.

That Christmas for me so long ago when I was getting just one present was a day I still looked forward to it with joy. Then when I actually got that one present that contained so many gifts, my joy was even greater. Today, John presented to each of us one present from God: a present of fellowship. It may not be the present you expected today, but that present of fellowship, that present of unity, has given us so many other gifts. The Immanuel has come. He has brought us into fellowship with him as he purified us from all sin by his one payment made by the faithful and just God to give us eternal life with him and all believers. Thank you, God, for the present of fellowship that has given us all these other gifts as well. Amen.