

The Mirth of God

By Bobby Schuller

Well today is joy Sunday on the advent calendar, and it's my kind of Sunday. I'm joyful to say I'm a joyful person, and I'm told that a lot. I think someone said there's a lot of jokes about my whistling, for example. I think someone said that Bobby comes with an announcement everywhere he goes because I'm always whistling. I don't even hear myself doing it, but when I come in, people know I'm there. And I'm a smiling person. I enjoy life and I think one.. I get asked a lot, you're so joyful, you're so happy. People make comments like that.

But I have a reason. And the reason is because of Him; because of the work Jesus Christ has done in my life. It's because of my family. It's because of my friends, it's because I get to work with a great team. It's because I have a great church and I think that the Lord shows us in His word, that these are the words of life. And when we trust the word of God and we trust our life to God and we continue to grow in our relationships and go deeper in those things, those are the things that create true joy.

And sometimes during the Christmas season we can be distracted from that, and we can be almost overly reminded of that both, right? Distracted because we're shopping and we've got to finish the yearend

stuff for our business or for work. We got stuff we got to turn in or expectations that aren't being met and there are all sorts of movies and stories that remind us of this one thing and it's a Jesus message.

In life there are really big things that as we get older that over time they become smaller and less important. In life there are also other things that are very small that are easy to forget, be distracted from, that over time become more and more important. Things like our kids, like our faith, like our friendships, like your marriage or whatever. And I want to encourage you that maybe one way to look at what Jesus teaches us is to make sure first things are first and second things are second. In other words, that the things that seem really big that get smaller over time, come only after the little things that get big over time.

Hannah and I; I'm so grateful that we had the opportunity to have been to almost every great city in the world. We've been to Hong Kong and Seoul and Moscow and Istanbul and London and Rome, and so many of these places we've been to it's because of missionary trips and ministry, and we're humbled and grateful for the opportunity to do that.

But my all-time favorite city, I think everyone knows, is New York. There is something about New York City that I just love. I didn't go to New York until I was about thirty, and then started going three or four times a year, and every time I go whether it's winter, spring, summer, or fall I just love it. But many of us know that there's no better time to go to New York than that December month of Christmas when all the

decorations are out and the whole city comes to life with Christmas celebrations, Rockefeller Center.

It's interesting because New Yorkers.. there's a saying, they say this about different groups of people: New Yorkers are like everyone else only more so. I think the thing, as an American, I can't speak to those of you who are in other countries, but as an American, it's my sense that New York is almost the spirit of America under a magnifying glass: tons of ambition, industriousness, wealth, but also family. A lot of people think that New Yorkers are kind of stern or mean. I have not experienced them that way. I think New Yorkers are actually very kind. They enjoy good food, they enjoy friendship.

And when I go to New York, I almost see two types of New Yorkers. You see on the one hand the guy in the suit who's ultra-powerful and wealthy and everybody knows his name, and yet there's this brittleness to him or to her, this emptiness on the inside. And then there's this other type of person that's not that way.

America in general is a very industrious country and there's something about our nation that we love to build, we love to make, and that's a good thing, but sometimes we can take it too far where we lose our joy; we lose our joy because we make second things first.

Well we're not the first culture to do that. In fact some cultures do that on purpose, and one that probably did that more than any other country was the Roman Empire. Rome is such an interesting nation

state. It was in many ways the first gigantic meritocracy. You know what I mean when I say meritocracy? It's the idea that people rise to the top a hundred percent based on performance or merit.

Especially in the elite class of Rome, there was so much competition, and fighting, and debate, and wrestling, and the Romans thought this is a good thing, and in many ways they were right. This is part of what made them rise to the top. But it became all about glory, all about fame, and all about prestige. I think it was Dan Carlin that put it this way: imagine for a second the home you grew up in. Picture the home and imagine now in that home a room was added to it. And this room was a room that nobody cooked in, nobody slept in, nobody ate in, nobody entertained in, but there was something creepy and sacred and interesting about this room.

You would walk into the room and on the wall you would see faces everywhere. These faces are death masks of your ancestors. This is something Romans really did. Where if you had a great ancestor as a wealthy elite class of Roman, when that ancestor died, like the minute they died, they would make a wax sculpture of their face called a death mask, then put this face on the wall so that generations after them could see their family's glory. And then there would be faces before that of their grandparents or great grandparents with lines being drawn connecting so that you can look back and see who the great ones were. You know who were not on that wall? The ones who were not great.

So you're brought as a child.. imagine being a little boy or a little girl and you're brought into this room by your father, and you know the names of all of these people. You can actually see their dead faces, and you're told this is what he did. This is what he did. This is what he did. And then your father looks at you and says what will you do? Historians talk about this practice as being really important in the life of one famous Roman, you might have heard of him before. His name is Julius Cesar: incredibly ambitious, incredibly successful. Julius Cesar formed a union with two other members, Cassius and.. Crassus, sorry and Pompeii, this thing called the triumphant, and they overthrew effectively the Roman republic, and this is how eventually Cesar comes to power and becomes one of the most famous, glorious, successful, wealthy, powerful people in human history.

And he committed atrocities, and genocide. Genocide in Gaul, Genocide in Britain, killing kids by hand. We still glorify him. Evil man. And he is the result of a nation and a culture that imbues its children with ambition and only ambition. That makes glory and power the most important thing.

It's interesting because Julius Cesar in a famous story was at war with Pompeii, and in the battle of Alexandria, was rescued by a Middle Eastern Semitic man named Antipater the Edomite. And after this, Julius Cesar and him became fast friends, and he rewarded Antipater this position of the chief minister of the Middle East. And so his job was

to collect taxes and oversee the administration of the Syrian area, including Jerusalem. And this guy Antipater put in place different governing rules, his sons, one of whom was named Herod, who he put in charge of the city of Jerusalem.

Now Herod was a neurotic, narcissistic, nervous guy. And through multiple workings, political shifting, bribing, assassination, multiple marriages and things like this, he rose to the top to become essentially himself the most important man in the Middle East in the client kingdom of Israel. And during a big upstart and even a war, this guy Herod retreats back to Rome, asks for help because Israel is in chaos. The Roman senate gathers and they dub him the king of the Jews. This is super important. This is the official Roman title for Herod the first: the king of the Jews.

He marries a Hasmonean princess Mary and becomes this sort of puppet king in Israel. Herod himself is not even Jewish, he is an Edomite, and he's got all this insecurity. And right away he begins to gain and galvanize his power. He begins a building project which he's most famous for, of course we know the vast amazing temple in the second century. In its day the temple was considered the most glorious temple on earth. It was more than twice the size of any other temple in its day. Herod did that.

Herod also built this amazing city. You can see it if you go to Israel today called Caesarea Maritima. It had a hippodrome, an amphitheater,

and this area on the water, that is where Herod's palace was. Everybody say this is the ruins of Caesarea Maritima. (CONGREGATION: THIS IS THE RUINS OF CAESAREA MARITIMA) Okay.

The next place that Herod was really well known for.. there's a reason we're doing this, guys. The next is a famous palace and fortress called Masada. This has its own amazing story. I don't have time to get into today, but it's a gorgeous place. It was considered one of the most beautiful places in the Middle East; a palace and a fortress. You can see the Dead Sea from there. If you go to Israel, you can go visit it today. This is another amazing project he accomplished. Everybody say the ruins of Masada. (CONGREGATION: THE RUINS OF MASADA)

Okay, and then finally it's not as famous today, but in his day was probably his most famous building named after himself - it was called the Herodium. The Herodium was just this incredible fortress palace built on a tell, on a hill, on the edge of the Judean wilderness, three miles from Bethlehem overlooking the village, and this is where Herod lived. It had pools and baths and gardens, maybe waterfalls, incredible towers, and apartments, and servants, and slaves, and all sorts of gorgeous accoutrement. This is where Herod lived and dwelt and spent most of his days.

What you're looking at are the ruins of the Herodium. Everybody say the ruins of the Herodium. (CONGREGATION: THE RUINS OF THE HERODIUM) Aside from the fact that they were all built by Herod, what

do all of those places have in common? They're ruined. They're gone. Fallen bricks, empty, a memory of a bygone age.

Think of how important these buildings and this prestige must have been to Herod, who in the region was by far the most wealthy, probably important influential, famous person to everyone he cares about; his friends, his neighbors, everyone. Herod is the very symbol of power, wealth and fame, and today nobody cares. Nobody cares. They only care because he's a small part of a bigger, more important story that everybody cares about: the story of Jesus Christ.

So Herod, when I see him, I wonder how much am I like Herod? How much do I believe that if I build more, if I get more, if I have more power, if people say things about me if I'm famous? Or if I had a lot of glory, or I accomplish all these great things, if I have a list at the end of my life and I can say I made this, this, this and did this, this, this and this. What if I did all of that, then what would happen? And Herod is like New York magnifies all Americans, Herod magnifies some of the bad things in me. We'll see Jesus magnify some of the good things in us in the way that New York amplifies Americans, too. But when I look at this story, I wonder how much am I like that?

Okay now there was another group called the Magi, and I said this a couple of years ago, and there has been some more archeological evidence and studies that have showed that I was right, and I still said it,

sorry Hannah. That I was right! And that is that the Magi were probably not pagan worshippers, that they were actually Jews from Babylon.

Now if you study your Bible, you might remember that about five hundred years before Jesus is born, the Israelites were exiled to Babylon. And even though they returned, a majority of the Jews actually stayed back and sort of trickled into Israel over the centuries. At the time of Jesus' birth, catch this, at the time of Jesus' birth there are more religious Jews living in Babylon than are living in the whole nation state of Israel. There are synagogues, there are times of worship, and people will go to and from Babylon to Israel to visit the temple, to worship and to do things like this.

In Babylon there was probably still a guild of sages who were established by the prophet Daniel. And these sages were looking for the coming of the Messiah. One of their favorite Messianic texts are from the Torah from the story when Balaam, the one with the donkey, says this prophecy about a Messiah that will come, and it looks like this: "I see Him, but not now. I behold Him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall come out of Israel."

This group, there was a group who believed that there will actually be a star that would be a sign of the birth of the Messiah. So I'm in the party that believes that these sages who traveled from Babylon to Israel, who are following the star, were actually looking for an actual star to be the symbol for the birth of a Messiah.

And they come. A lot of times we call them the three kings because of the three gifts. They weren't really kings but they probably were very wealthy. They probably were powerful. They probably had servants with them and soldiers with them and money with them, and an entourage. Picture Aladdin coming into Agrabah after he meets the Genie, you know (SINGS: Prince Ali, ali ababwa). You get it. Okay that's the picture. A parade of wealthy Jewish sages who have come a long, long way, traveled probably weeks or months to get to Israel to find one thing. They walk into Jerusalem and they ask everyone where is He? Where is the King of the Jews who has been born? The King of the Jews, who is the king of the Jews? (AUDIENCE RESPONDS: HEROD) Herod, the king of the Jews, and then the second part: who has been born. Not Herod.

When they come in, in a parade of camels and wealth and cool outfits and everything, and they come into Jerusalem, and everybody is looking, everyone wants to know what's going on, and they say we followed a star to find the King of the Jews who has been born, everybody freaks out. What does that mean? This is not some lone nutcase. This is a group of Jewish sages who are coming to find this person.

Who freaks out the most? (AUDIENCE RESPONDS: HEROD) Herod summons them to his house, the Herodium which is overlooking the city of Bethlehem where he lives. They go up the hill, up the tell, into the Herodium to visit Herod and what does he say to them? He says you've

come to find the King of the Jews? Let me know when you find Him so I can go worship Him, too. Right.

Herod, as paranoid, narcissistic and crazy as he was, pulled the Cohenehm, the priests who are also these prophets and asked them, what does the scripture say about where the Messiah will be born? And they said why Herod, everybody knows that. He'll be born in Bethlehem. Down there?

I sometimes wonder if Herod even built the Herodium there in order to keep an eye on Bethlehem. Did I say, by the way, that Herod wasn't Jewish, by the way? He was an Edomite. He just married in to get power.

Okay then it goes like this. The Magi meet with Herod and their like okay, sure, we'll tell you. That sounds great. And then they go and they find the star. Somehow we interpret this that it's over the house. Mary and Joseph are in the house with this baby, and this menagerie, this entourage, any other French words I can use? Arrive at the house.

And imagine what that would have been like. Mary and Joseph are very simple folks, a carpenter's family. This young couple with this new baby boy in a house, no longer in the stables, and they're just sojourning there for some time, we don't know how long. But this group of sages arrives that says we followed a star. Where is He? And like Simeon, they see the baby and they're like here He is.

And then when I think about what that experience would have been like, wouldn't it have been amazing to be a fly on a wall? I mean I'm picturing music and food and celebration. The presentation of three great gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. How much gold was it, by the way? Do we know? It's probably a lot. I don't think they traveled that far for like a couple coins, man. I think that there were a lot of gold coins in there.

And just imagine how that would have felt as a young couple with a new baby boy with these amazing gifts and this incredible blessing. If there were any word I could put on what the experience would have been there, it would be joy, laughter, singing, dancing, celebration, prayer, thanking the Lord. Right?

Let me ask you a question. Do you think Herod was a joyful person? (AUDIENCE: NO) I don't think so either. He was neurotic, wanted more glory, and more power, and day by day became a more brittle, fragile, empty man. The ruins of Herod. The ruins of Herod.

I think the story shows us that there's a very big, important person, Herod, is called the great, and a very small, seemingly unimportant person in the story named Jesus of Nazareth. And the author Matthew wants you to see this incredible hyperlink to what's going to happen in the future; this incredible dichotomy that's through the whole Bible. This idea that God lowers the proud and lifts up the humble. That in our strength we become weak but in our weakness we

become strong. That God loves to bring joy to those who are forgotten and in the shadows. And that God loves to hide from the wise and learned, and reveal to the little children.

Matthew wants you to see its only going to be three chapters later that Jesus in Matthew is going to give the Sermon on the Mount, and give us these words of life that show us that joy does not come from power, joy does not come from prestige, joy does not come from fame. Any of these things.

Look guys, this is America. I'm an American. I love building things. I love success. I think it was Steinbeck that said the spirit of America is amazing. In America there are no poor people, only millionaires who are down on their luck. There is that spirit about Americans that is a good thing. The temptation though, especially in a place like Los Angeles and Orange County or wherever you're at, in Hong Kong or in Amsterdam or London, or wherever you are, there is a temptation for those of us who are builders, makers, doers to put second things first and first things second.

And I think the key to a joyful life is to remember to pay more attention to the little things that become big than the big things that become little: to pay attention to your faith, to your prayer life, to your kids, to your spouse, to your friends. These are the things that as life goes on becomes more and more important. You can't get joy from power. Power is good if it's in the hands of the right people, but you can't get joy

from more power, and you can't get joy from entertainment, and you can't get joy from fame. Those things are fine and they're good, and I hope some of you have them, but you get joy from friends and faith and frankly food. And you don't need a lot to get those things, and that's the good news is that Jesus Christ opens His loving arms to anyone who would say Lord I need more joy in my life and He offers freely. That's the message of the gospel.

One last story. This is an apocryphal story, but once there was a businessman who was on vacation in Mexico in a little village, and it was in the morning, and he was sitting on the beach, and he was looking out at the incredible water and the emerald coast and just enjoying the morning. It was maybe eleven o'clock and a boat rolled up and there was a fisherman in there and it was full of yellow fin tuna.

And he looks at the fisherman and he says, why that's a pretty nice catch you got there, pretty good. And he said, oh thank you, sir. I appreciate that. And he says well it's not even lunch yet. How come you're coming in? And he says well this is enough for me. And he says well why wouldn't you fish more and catch more fish if it's so good? He said, sir I told you, this is enough for me.

So the man asks him, he says what is your day normally like? He says well I do the same thing most days. I wake up in the morning and I do some fishing, and I take my fish to the market, and I'll get some lunch. After that I'll take a siesta with Maria, my wife. Then I'll play with

the kids and every evening Maria and I will walk into town where we'll play guitar, have some dinner and I'll play cards with my friends.

And he says well if you actually were able to catch more fish, look I can help you. I've got an MBA from Harvard. Let me tell you what you can do here. If you go out there and you fish all day, instead of just half the day, you'll get a leg up on all of your competitors and you'll have some extra money. He says well then what will I do? Well then you use your money and you buy a fleet of boats and you hire some of these guys to work for you and you'll have more fish. And he says well then what would I do, sir? Well then you can build a canary, move your operation to Mexico City, start exporting, and if you expand that, you can move to Los Angeles or maybe even have a big firm in New York. And he said well then what would I do, sir? He says well then you could sell it and move all of your money to the stock market and ride dividends for the rest of your life. And he said well how long would that take? About twenty/twenty-five years, I think you could do it in that amount of time.

And he said well what would I do then sir? He said well then you can do whatever you want. You could move to a little village by the beach, go fishing in the morning, have lunch with your family, play with your grandkids. Walk to town every night with your wife and play cards with your friends or play guitar, whatever you want. It's a great story.

I think we all, deep down inside that we want more from life on one hand, right? We want to accomplish great things and we should. We

should have big dreams and we should do great things, but at the end of the day there are things that are more important. You know that.

I want to encourage you that that's where real joy comes from. It comes from knowing the Lord, it comes from doing the right thing. It comes from knowing the words of life, deep relationship with your kids, your grandkids, your friends, your family, your church. These are the things that make all the difference in life.

Lord, we love you and we thank you and we praise you for life itself. We thank you for every breath. We thank you for every moment. We thank you for every meal, and Lord we love you. It's in Jesus' name we pray, amen.