

[NEW ORLEANS MUSIC - FADE AUTO TO BLANK] When I think of joy, I think of many things, but one of the first things that I think of is New Orleans, Louisiana. I was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, according to my birth certificate. But my soul was born somewhere between Springfield and New Orleans. My mother's parents, who lived in Bloomfield, Connecticut, were from Montgomery, Alabama, and New Orleans. I knew and loved my family in Montgomery, but most of my family who I knew growing up lived in New Orleans.

[HOUSE1] I loved visiting my great-grandmother Sissy's house, on Pitt Street, a little house with ceilings that were taller than most of its rooms were wide. She was a Saint Louis Cardinals fan, and I remember her storming around her house in her baseball cap. [HOUSE 2] And I loved my Uncle Luke's house, nearby on Jena Street, with a great kitchen, and a wonderful garden out back. When Uncle Luke passed, it became the home of my Aunt Betsy and her husband Happy. Betsy and Happy were community leaders who helped to organize the Mardi Gras festivals.

[STREETCAR] Their house, and Sissy's house, were just a few blocks from the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line, and it was a quick hop down the line to the "Vieux Carre," the French Quarter, where there were all sorts of things to experience. I loved the hot, sweet pralines, with melted butter, sugar, and pecans, and I especially loved all of the music. [ALBUM] I got my first song album ever on Decatur Street, and I played it until the steel needle on my phonograph started to wear out the grooves - and then, I played it more! [BLANK]

And when I think of joy, and New Orleans, I also think of Onez, a woman who was a cook at Sissy's house, and then my Cousin Lee's house. Onez was a wonderful, sweet woman, warm like a summer sunrise. Onez was the one who taught me to love spices - whether I was ready for them or not! She was named for Onesimus, the slave mentioned by the apostle Paul in his letter to Philemon. Paul suggested that Onesimus should be treated gently and fairly by Philemon, and to have freedom! Onez had a heart filled with saving faith.

As I became a young adult, I didn't see much of my family down south - until one day, when I was about twenty-seven years old, my mother's father died. I was the only relative near my grandmother's home in Bloomfield, so I went there to help her just a few hours after he died. It was a lot for me to absorb at the time, because it was the first time that I had ever dealt with death in my family. I didn't go to previous family funerals. To me, death was something that you heard about on the phone, or in a letter.

It was the dead of winter when we flew out of Bradley airport to New Orleans for the funeral. When we got there it was damp, as always, and mostly rainy. At the graveside service, it was the first time that I had felt the grief of my family mourning. I was very shaken, and very sad. And then, as I was waiting in the car to go back to our hotel, I saw a familiar face, lighting up with a smile as wide as the Mississippi River, and as bright as the sun. It was Onez! She was so excited to see me, and, to me, it was the most joyful look that I had ever seen in my life! Onez saved me that day. She gave me a sense of

love, and hope, born of the undefeatable joy of faith, that has stayed with me, ever since.

How joyful is a saving faith? As joyful as we need it to be, when we are ready to make room for God's joy. We are nearing the end of our journey through the letter to the Ephesians, a letter written by early Christians to an early church, a church who were learning that Christianity was something bigger, and more powerful, than they had ever imagined. In the middle of a culture that worshiped power, lust, greed, pride, cruelty, and oppression, this small group of families and friends, who believed that Jesus was the risen Son of God, found something pure, something perfectly good and loving, something that turned Rome's death culture upside down. There was an alternative to the corrupt cultures of Rome and Israel.

People were discovering in this early church that they could have faith, real faith, a saving faith, by living a life that was based on a God who promised everlasting love and peace, now and forever, in hearts that were made joyful in this love. And they needed this joy. To say that Jesus was the Son of God was a dangerous thing to say. Christianity was not a lifestyle choice like getting a tattoo, or a new car, or new messages on your social media page. Christianity was a big, fat. "No!" to pretty much every false promise that the world had promised people

Christianity is a different way of living, even today. Christian faith is an alternative to death culture. It is a life culture, a way of living that is meant to bring real joy, not just fleeting happiness based on material things, or achieving things that really don't make us better people, or the world a better place. We can work ourselves to the bone, and discover that, at the end of the day, all that's left of us is...bones. We can party till the cows come home, but the biggest and best party in the world is no comparison to joy that can live in our hearts when all the parties are long gone, when easy fun gives way to harsh truths we avoided.

No, Christian living is about real joy, joy like the smile of Onez, joy that acknowledges the truth of death, and then turns immediately to the truth of life as God has planned it from the beginning of time, a truth perfected in the love of Jesus, that conquered death itself, for our sake. What we suffer in this life is real. What we long for in this life, though, is not necessarily as real as we might think it is. There is a truth bigger than facts, a truth bigger than what worldly power can declare as a fact, a truth that the fact of death itself cannot conquer. And that truth, the truth that God's love will never die, and that we can live, in that love, a life that is precious beyond measure, is a truth that is the source of all real joy. Joy is God's declaration in our hearts that God's love that lives in us through a saving faith gives us the only life that is really worth living.

And to live a life filled with saving faith, and seeking its fullness together as the body of Christ, gives us choices. [VERSE] Ephesians 5:18 underscores this when it invites us to the joy of Christian living with its opening word: "Instead." To live a life filled with saving faith requires us to make a conscious choice for a lifestyle that is different than death-style. And what is it that we're called to as an alternative? [VERSE 2] To be filled with God's Holy Spirit. What we fill our lives with is what determines whether we find

God's joy in our lives. If we fill it with death culture, and our fear of death, we wind up with a cold grave on a rainy day. If we practice living in the culture of life that is the foundation of a saving faith, we will have disciplines that lead us to God's joy. Ephesians says, share scripture and songs of faith that inspire you. Thank God in the name of Jesus Christ for everything that is good, and loving, and holy in your life. Practice being obedient to one another in faith, the way that Christ was obedient to us in God's love, so that we don't mistake our power for God's power.

We have a word for people who practice the life of a saving faith in this way. We call these people...saints. That doesn't mean that they are perfect people, much less perfect Christians. To be a saint means that you seek out the joy of faith through all of life's challenges, again and again, until seeking out God's joy is as natural as a joyful smile at a funeral. A saint trusts in the joy of God now, because God has promised us joy beyond all human measure in the life to come, since before we were born.

[MUSICIANS] In New Orleans, there is a place called Preservation Hall. It is where musicians keep alive the oldest form of jazz, born in that city over a hundred years ago. It is a small, hot room, but the music is as sweet as can be. A sign in the hall says, "Saints, \$10." That means that if you want to ask the musicians to play "When the Saints Go Marching In," you have to pay a good tip. They do this not just because the song is popular. They do it because they know that the joy that comes from that song does not come cheaply. It is sung often in New Orleans when people return from the graveyard of loved ones, who they hope will dwell with the saints in God's eternal home, when all of history comes to an end. The joy of a saving faith does not come cheaply. But it is a sweet, sweet Spirit that dwells within us when we have it. May the sweet Spirit of God's joy come into you like a warm smile on a cold and dark day, and lift you up, now, and forever, into the life that God promises us in a saving faith. Amen. [SLIDE WITH MUSIC, AUTOMATICALLY FOLLOWED BY BLANK]