

# Advent 2017:

## Unwrapping The Gift Of Christmas

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.  
(Isaiah 9:2 ESV)*

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.  
(Micah 5:2 ESV)*

*And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold,  
I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.  
(Luke 2:10 ESV)*

*“Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”  
(Luke 2:14 ESV)*

### **Peace: Glory To God And Peace Among Those Whom He Favours**

**December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

**Luke 2:13-14**

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#### **Introduction:**

Good morning. This is the fourth Sunday in Advent – Christmas Sunday is always the first Sunday after December 25<sup>th</sup> unless Christmas falls on December 25<sup>th</sup> as it does about once every seven years. On the fourth Sunday in Advent we light the peace candle, or as it is sometimes called “the angel candle”. And the reading that goes along with the lighting of this candle comes from Luke 2:13-14; that’s on page 857 in your pew Bibles. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:13–14 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

I think that if you were only allowed 2 verses with which to explain Christmas you might choose

these two verses – but if you did then you would have to be careful to explain exactly what they mean. Part of the problem is that most of us have these verses memorized in the Old King James Version of the Bible because we see them every year on Christmas cards. So we think this verse is saying:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:14 KJV)

But its not.

That is one of the most unfortunate mistranslations in the history of the Bible. No modern translation renders this verse that way. Let me show you a few:

The ESV (2001, 2016), puts it this way:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14 ESV)

The NIV (2011) renders it this way:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”  
(Luke 2:14 NIV11)

The CSB (2017)

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!  
(Luke 2:14 CSB)

That’s a big difference from the KJV Christmas Card version. We’ve learned a lot about Greek in the 400 years since they made the King James’ Version. Here’s the point, understood correctly this verse is not about warm sentiments on earth, it is about Sovereign decisions made in the heavens. Leon Morris puts it this way:

The angels are saying that God will bring peace ‘for men on whom his favour rests’ (neb). There is an emphasis on God, not man. It is those whom God chooses, rather than those who choose God, of whom the angels speak.<sup>1</sup>

So this passage means the exact opposite of what we thought it meant. But here’s the good news,

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<sup>1</sup>Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 102-103.

properly understood it explains perhaps better than any other passage the true Biblical meaning of Christmas. So let's walk through it carefully.

We'll do that by asking two very important questions; the first one is this: what exactly is being celebrated in this passage?

### **Q1: What Is Being Celebrated?**

A careful reading of the text provides the answer. In verse 13 an army of angels suddenly appears praising God and getting super excited about two things. The first one is this:

#### **1. Glory to God in the highest**

Now, 'glory' is one of those Bible words that even most of the church insiders don't really understand. If you are visiting this morning and you are hearing some new words and terms and feeling like you are the only here that doesn't know what these words mean – you can relax. Most Christians don't know what these words mean either. We throw them around and we know how to use them but more often than not we don't know what they mean.

I'll never forget the Sunday morning when a young woman who had just become a Christian a week or two before and was here at her 3<sup>rd</sup> or maybe 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday for worship came running into my office after church very concerned and she said: "Pastor, I thought there was only one God! I never knew that God was married and that we are supposed to worship God's wife as well – I didn't know that." Well of course I didn't know that either so I asked her what in the world she was talking about and she said, "this morning we sang about Jesus' wife. We sang the song "Hosanna – you are the God who saves us, worthy of all our praises" – isn't Hosanna the name of God's wife?"

Well you know I'd never thought of that before, it does kind of sound like that. Hosanna is one of those Bible words that we throw around and never explain and don't understand. Hosanna just means "God save us" – why we insist on leaving it untranslated I have no idea because it does sound an awful lot like the name of God's wife. To be clear, God has no wife.

Similarly, we throw around this term “glory” and we often have no idea what it means. It literally means “bright appearance”. It means to look good, pure, majestic, holy, beautiful and God-like. Therefore when the angels sing “Glory to God in the highest” they are saying that this baby will make God look good.

He will bring CLARITY to how God is seen and understood down here on earth. He will BRIGHTEN THINGS UP. He will CLEAR up misconceptions and he will HIGHLIGHT beautiful aspects of God’s nature and character.

That’s what is being celebrated: Because of Jesus people are going to see how absolutely marvellous God really is.

Did you know that?

Isn’t that good?

And doesn’t that clear up a lot of things just right there? That in itself helps us understand how the Old Testament and the New Testament go together. The relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament isn’t a relationship of bad to good or of wrong to right, it’s a relationship of cloudy to clear and shadow to sunshine. God has always been all of who he is – but because of sin and idolatry we had a hard time seeing that in Old Testament times – but now because of Christ we can see God CLEARLY.

In the Old Testament people were always wondering how does the mercy and the justice of God go together? Because sometimes God is incredibly tender and merciful and compassionate and then other times he is fierce and dangerous and just – and we almost wonder are there two Gods? Or is God schizophrenic? Right? I mean how does this all fit together?

We don’t really understand that until we see Jesus.

That’s why he came. He said that to his disciples. He said:

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. (John 14:9 ESV)

Sometimes even we Christians falsely contrast Jesus and the Father. We talk as though the Father is holy and judgy but Jesus is merciful and forgiving. Well that's two different kinds of wrong. Because God the Father is very merciful and forgiving – in the Old Testament. Some of our favourite verses about the mercy and forgiveness of God are found in the Old Testament.

as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. (Psalms 103:12 ESV)

Isn't that good? That's one of my absolute favourites! And what about Micah 7:19?

He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:19 ESV)

Isn't that the best? That's my favourite one of all! How in the world could we say that God the Father is not compassionate or forgiving in the Old Testament? He certainly is!

And neither is it correct to say that Jesus doesn't judge or condemn in the New Testament. Have you read the Book of Revelation? Have you read Matthew 25? In Matthew 25 Jesus says:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (Matthew 25:31–32 ESV)

So Jesus says that when he comes again he will sit and judge and separate. He will send some people to heaven and some people to hell. Jesus says that in the New Testament.

So let's be clear, there is no difference between the 'God of the Old Testament' and the 'God of the New Testament' – its just a lot easier to understand God in the New Testament because of the very clear revelation of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Again:

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. (John 14:9 ESV)

Do you know Jesus? Do you love Jesus? Then you know and love God. He is as you have seen him in Christ. That's what the angels are celebrating. Because of this child – God is going to look

good. He is going to be known AS GOOD because he is GOOD – and has always been good. But now, people are going to get it, they’re going to see it and they are going to LOVE IT.

Thanks be to God!

The second thing that is being celebrated here is:

## **2. Peace on earth (among certain people)**

We’ll come back to the “among certain people” part in a minute. For now let’s figure out what is meant by “peace on earth” – that’s what the angels are celebrating – so what does that mean? I.

Howard Marshall is very helpful here. Speaking of this word ‘peace’ he says:

“Here, however, more than the cessation of strife is meant, and the word is used to indicate the full sum of blessings associated with the coming of Messiah. He brings a new situation of peace between God and men in which his blessings can be communicated to them.”<sup>2</sup>

So here we are dealing with “the full sum of blessings” and the angels are excited because Jesus will do something that allows those blessings to be communicated to men and women. The first thing we have to ask then is what is the full sum of blessings? What are we talking about here?

To find the answer you’ve got to back to the very beginning of your Bible. In Genesis 1-2 God promised men and women that they would rule over all created things. He also promised them eternal life and the experience of his intimate presence.

But as many of you know those blessings came with certain conditions. The man and the woman were supposed to obey the Word of God. The deal wasn’t “uncontested autonomous rule over the cosmos” it was that they could be UNDER GOD and over everything else – that was the deal, so God made a test. He put a fence around one tree – I imagine it was the ugliest tree in the garden – and he said:

“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:16–17 ESV)

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<sup>2</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 112.

The deal is off if you disobey.

Some theologians call that ‘the covenant of creation’ – the original deal. Pretty simple: obey and be blessed. Disobey and die.

Its not a complicated world – but we ruined it anyway.

Because we broke the deal. We transgressed the original covenant. We reached for full moral autonomy and we fell away from God, away from each other and into perpetual conflict and chaos.

That’s why its such a really big deal when the angels say that this baby is going to somehow give us the sum total of the blessings of God that we lost in the garden. Somehow this baby is going to get us back to the place from which we have fallen. That’s why the New Testament says:

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. (2 Corinthians 1:20 ESV)

Thank God – Paul says! Amen Paul says. This is good news, Paul says because Jesus has done exactly what the angels said he would do. He has given us back the sum total of the promised blessings of God!

Now, how did he do that? I said that the first thing we have to ask is what is meant by the full sum of blessings – that implies that there is a second question and there is. The second question has got to be: How did he do it? To answer that question you have to be clear on what is blocking the sum total of our blessing – the answer to that is in the Old Testament. Its on pretty much every page, but nowhere more succinctly perhaps than in 2 Chronicles 24:20 which reads as follows:

“Thus says God, ‘Why do you break the commandments of the Lord, so that you cannot prosper? (2 Chronicles 24:20 ESV)

That is God bringing it down to street level. Its not rocket science folks. Disobedience blocks

blessing. Write that down.

The problem couldn't be clearer in the Old Testament. By the end, if you've been paying attention then you understand. God designed the world to receive blessings through human obedience – that was the set up! We would obey God and receive blessings that we would then mediate to the rest of the cosmos. Simple system. Disrupted entirely by human rebellion and sin.

That's the problem.

So now we are ready to ask the question: how is Jesus the answer to that problem? How did he fix it? Because the angels are pretty sure he is going to fix it. They're already celebrating. So what does he do? How does he fix it? The answer to that is all over the New Testament. The answer to that IS THE NEW TESTAMENT. The problem is all over the Old Testament – and the answer is all over the New Testament but perhaps nowhere more succinctly than in Colossians 1:20. There Paul says that Jesus is:

making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:20 ESV)

There it is!

If “peace” is “the full sum of blessings” and if disobedience is the reason we don't have those blessings – then this is the missing piece of the puzzle. We get them back because of Jesus' blood on the cross. Jesus blood on the cross – Jesus' sacrificial death – pays the price for our rebellion. It satisfies the original deal. It absorbs and obliterates the curse of God – such that now God is willing to start again. But in case you are worried that we will only BLOW IT AGAIN if given another chance – the good news is that not only has Jesus paid for our prior rebellion, he has completed the probation that we previously failed. God wanted a human – an image bearer - between him and the rest of the world that was like him, that resembled him and that loved him. That was going to be Adam – that was supposed to be us. That's why there was a test. The test was about whether or not we saw that God was good and whether or not we believed that his Word could be trusted. But we didn't. We didn't see God right. The devil confused us and we thought God was holding out on us so we rebelled. But now, Jesus is going to help us see God the way he really is and he is going to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. He is going to



obey God perfectly and love God perfectly – and so he did. So now, there is nothing in the way but time. God is waiting to reboot the world. He is waiting for people to see him as he really is in Christ and to receive from him what he has made available in Christ: Forgiveness and a future.

Its all sitting right there for you in the child, born of the Virgin, in the City of David who is Christ the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

Now, we have one more bit of business to take care of. We need to ask one more question:

## **Q2: Who Are The “Certain People”?**

We understand now that the angels are excited because this baby born in Bethlehem is going to make God look really good. Glory to God in the highest! People are going to see God and LOVE GOD as they should. They are also excited because Jesus is going to deal with the fundamental blockage – he is going to pay for our disobedience and replace it with his perfect obedience such that the blessings of God can begin to flow into the world through CERTAIN HUMAN BEINGS. So that leaves us with only one more thing to figure out.

Who are these “certain human beings”?

The text makes it clear that these blessings aren’t going to be for everybody. The angels don’t say that, they say:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14 ESV)

Or as the CSB puts it, with those:

... people he favors! (Luke 2:14 CSB)

Again, as we said earlier:

There is an emphasis on God, not man. It is those whom God chooses, rather than those who choose God, of whom

the angels speak.<sup>3</sup>

Now, I don't think that this is the place for a full discussion of how God's choice and our choice go together in Holy Scripture – they do go together – but I don't think this text tells us enough to sustain that discussion. What it does do is give us some important hints, particularly if we widen out our lens to notice some of the other people that are included in this marvelous announcement.

Let me put it this way, you can learn some things – not everything – but some things about the people that God favours by looking at some of the people who receive special notice of this very good news.

Let's make a list. In Luke 2 we've got:

- i. Mary and Joseph
- ii. The shepherds
- iii. Simeon (Luke 2:25)
- iv. Anna (Luke 2:36)

All of these people get special notice about this Good News for those whom God favours – which strongly suggests that they are the sort of people that God favours. So what can be said about them collectively?

## 1. They are lowly people

I wouldn't say they are necessarily "poor" people. Shepherds made a decent living and Joseph was a carpenter which was a middle class occupation at the time. We know that Jesus' family wasn't "poor" because his family went up to Jerusalem three times a year for the festivals – poor families we know were lucky to go once a year and the really poor were lucky to go once in a lifetime, but Jesus' family went 3 times a year – which means they were probably what we would call upper middle class.

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<sup>3</sup>Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 102-103.

But they were lowly. They had been knocked down a peg or two. Joseph was in the line of David – he was royalty but that didn't matter because the Jews were living under the boot of the Romans and the Romans had installed a puppet King named Herod who wasn't even a Jew. So being a royal Jew was actually kind of dangerous in Jesus' day. It certainly didn't come with any particular benefits. Joseph was working for a living. He was a blue collar man; he was a humble man – a man who had learned to keep his head down.

The other we can say about this group is that:

## **2. They are thoughtful people**

Mary was pondering these things in her heart – verse 19 – the shepherds were thinking about what had been said to them – verse 20. These are thoughtful people. Now we shouldn't be surprised that God favours thoughtful people – we saw that in the Old Testament. Do you remember the burning bush? God made a burning bush in Exodus 3 and he set it there and then Moses saw it and thought about it. He said that doesn't look quite right, I'm going to go over and check that out and the Bible says:

When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" (Exodus 3:4 ESV)

Do you see that? Have you ever wondered how many people wandered by that bush that day and were like: "Burning bush. That's weird. Getting close to lunch time though." Right? But here's Moses checking it out. Thinking, "this isn't right. This might be a God thing..." Apparently God likes thoughtful people. People who are watching to see what he is doing. People who are eager to spot him breaking in and breaking through.

Old Testament and New God favours such people.

The third thing we can say about this group is that:

## **3. They are devout people**

Now I'm using the word "devout" rather than "religious" because there are good and bad religious people in the New Testament. The Pharisees were "bad religious" but Simeon and Anna are good religious. They are devout – that is to say they were looking for solutions from God. I think that's a "good" definition of devout. Devout people have limited faith in human solutions. All human solutions are going to be tainted by human sin – therefore devout people look to God for life and salvation.

Simeon was. Listen to what he said when he saw Jesus. He said:

29 "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;  
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation  
31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29–32 ESV)

Are you seeing that? Simeon wasn't looking for Israel to save itself. Simeon wasn't looking for the Gentiles to find themselves. Simeon was looking to God.

That's what I mean by devout. God favoured Simeon; I think that's worth noticing.

The fourth and final thing I think we can say about this group is that:

#### **4. They are patient people**

Everyone has been waiting a long time in this story but they aren't giving up and they aren't losing hope. Look at Anna, she's not giving up. She's been waiting and watching for 84 years – God bless her! And he does. She gets to see the baby – she gets to see the child who will bring glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those whom he favours.

You see, you've got to be patient, friends, because God moves very slow. Not, it's a particular kind of slow. Peter says:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9 ESV)

You see God moves slow because God is merciful. He is not in a hurry because he loves people

very much. He doesn't want anyone to miss out. He knows that unlike Moses and the shepherds and Mary – most of us are too busy and too distracted to think deeply about all this baby Jesus stuff. So he keeps the bush burning for a very long time. He keeps the story going for a very long time.

We've had more than 2000 Christmases since that first one so many years ago. This story gets told countless times every year and has been now for more than 2 millennia!

That's how patient and loving God is – he doesn't want anyone to miss out.

But don't misinterpret that patience. Peter said that some folks would be put off by it. They would scoff and say "where is the promise of his coming"? Jesus said he would come back and remove all sin, all sinners and all causes of sin from the earth and rule over all creation under the word of God, mediating all the blessings of God, sharing all the blessings of God with his people forever – he said that almost 2000 years ago – but where is he? Where is the promise of his coming?

Peter warned impatient people about taking that sort of view. He said:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (2 Peter 3:10 ESV)

Therefore he said:

count the patience of our Lord as salvation (2 Peter 3:15 ESV)

Everyday he waits, another person finds their way in.

Maybe today is your day. Maybe today is the day for you to get right with God through the blood of Jesus Christ. Maybe today is the day for you to experience peace. Peace with God and peace on the earth.

It is all right there waiting for you – freely available to you – in the child who is born this day in

the City of David, who is Christ the Lord.

So come.

The Spirit and the Bride say Come.

Those who have heard and seen and LOVED say COME.

Come unto Jesus and be saved.

Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.