

"Glory to God in the Highest"

This is one of the most memorable events of Christmas recorded in the Bible. All sorts of artwork has tried to depict this scene. Most nativity scenes include a few shepherds and angels. Songs have been written about this. It's one of the first things we probably think about when we think about Christmas; how the angels appeared to these shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. How they appeared and gave this glorious announcement, that God's plan of salvation had begun through the birth of the Christ-child, the baby Jesus. Through Jesus, true peace had would come to the world. That's what the angels announce in this passage, and it's a reason they proclaim, "Glory to God in the highest!"

And so this morning I'd like to consider this remarkable event in history. As we look at this passage this morning, first, we'll think about this announcement of peace. Second, we'll look at the response to this good news by the shepherds and others. Third, we'll consider this praise of highest glory given by these angels. As we do this, we'll have a chance this Christmas morning to remember again the significance for Christmas.

And so let's begin by looking first at this announcement of peace. The announcement is summarized by all the angels in verse 14. And it puts it in terms of peace. Peace on earth. The NKJV here isn't actually the most accurate in its translation. It makes it sound like goodwill is just another thing God's giving us here, in addition to peace. But let me read you that verse in the ESV which I think more accurately captures the sense of the original Greek: It says, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" This is how most of the newer translations take this verse. The goodwill is not a thing being given by God, but it's actually describing the people who will receive this peace. It's the people of God's goodwill. It's the people of God's good pleasure. They will receive this peace. The phrase might sound a bit clunky or strange to us. But when the Dead Sea Scrolls were unearthed back in the 1950s, scholars learned that this was actually a technical term back then to refer to God's elect. To God's chosen people. And so this is an announcement that peace had come to God's chosen ones. If you're interested in more details about the Greek behind this verse, speak with me afterwards and I can go into more detail.

And so that's the summary of the announcement. It's a message that God had brought peace. But verse 14 is really just a terse summary. The details of this peace were given to shepherds first in verses 10-12. This is before all the heavenly host of angels show up. First, just a single angel appears to give the shepherds the details. Then the other angels come and break forth in this heavenly anthem.

Well, the details of this announcement don't use the word peace in verses 10-12. But, clearly that's the end result of what's announced. In verse 10 the angel says he has good tidings of great joy to announce. A tidings is simply another word for news. When the angel says he has good tidings here, he's saying he has good news. In the Greek, this is the verb of the word "gospel," "good news." He's bringing good news to the shepherds. He's bringing "gospel" to the shepherds.

This gospel is one of great joy, for all the people. There's a definite article in the Greek attached to the word "people" in verse 10, which means its best translated as "the people." Philip Ryken make a good case in his commentary that this is referring to Israel. "The people" here is Israel, God's chosen people. This is a message of good news that has first to come to the Jews. A message of great joy for them. A message that the long awaited peace has come. Of course, we thank God that this is a message that has come not *only* to the Jews, but now has come to all mankind as well. That's why we're here celebrating it today.

So what good news do the angels have that will bring great joy? Well, they go on in verse 11. Today, that Christmas day, the promised one had been born. The promised Savior. The promised Christ. The promised Lord. He had been born in the city of David, which is Bethlehem. The angels don't go into details here. They just give titles about this new child. This new child, Jesus, though they're not even told his name yet, he's the Savior, the Christ, and the Lord. But it seems that the shepherds recognize the significance here. They must have understood these titles, at least in part.

The Jews had been awaiting salvation. They had been awaiting their God to come to them through the Messiah. That's what the prophets had promised. And that's what these titles announce. The title of Savior tells us that the promised salvation had come. Of course, many Jews thought they only needed salvation from their physical enemies. Salvation from things like the Roman government. They would soon learn that God had a greater salvation to bring. Salvation from sin and death and damnation. Salvation that would deliver them to eternal life.

The title of Christ is the Greek word for Messiah. It means the "Anointed One." It has a kingly connotation to it. And so here, this Messiah is born in the city of David. The point is that this is the fulfillment of the promise given years before to King David. That from his line, God would rise up a king to rule forever over an everlasting kingdom. With the birth of this child, the Messiah had come.

And that last title, Lord, is at least talking about his dominion and rule. But it also speaks of his divine nature as well, whether the shepherds realized it or not. The word for Lord in both Greek and Hebrew could be used as a title of respect to people in authority, or to refer to God. Here, both apply to the baby Jesus. And yet what amazing sign they are given in verse 10. This wonderful Savior, Lord, and Christ, would be found wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Of course the contrast here of how Jesus is described hints at what he really came to do. On the one hand he's this great King and Savior. On the other hand, he's lying in a manger? What kind of picture is that? But this challenges how we see Jesus as king. It calls them and us to rethink what we might have assumed about the Messiah and his mission.

And so think about that in terms of this announcement. Here the angels announce good news: the promised one had come. He'd bring great joy. All of this could be summarized in terms of peace. The angels that appear in verse 14 use that term of peace. And it's all the more clear what this peace is, when you realize that the angels are described as a heavenly host in verse 13. A host of angels is most literally an army. This is an army of angels. And this army of angels is celebrating peace. Soldiers don't celebrate peace

until the victory is certain. Then you bet they celebrate! This army of angels comes down to celebrate victory. Peace!

This tells us what kind of victory Jesus came to bring. This tells us what kind of peace he came to bring. Not victory over the Romans. Victory over sin and death and Satan. That's a different sort of peace than what many Jews expected. That's a different sort of peace than what the world might have wanted. That's of course what Jesus says in John 14:27. He tells the disciples, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you." Jesus gave us peace.

But think about the full significance of this great peace. Our enemies of sin and Satan have only become our enemies, because we have switched allegiances. Before we became Christians, sin and Satan were actually our allies. You see, the peace Jesus brings us is that he brings peace between us and God. That's what Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

And so this is the sort of peace we have. This is the good news. Jesus has brought peace between God and his people by saving us from our sins. And it took God to come to man to accomplish it. Jesus is God in the flesh. On the cross Jesus would die in our place and overcome sin and death. Only God in the flesh could do pay such a price in full. What a wonderful work of saving us.

And something I especially like about the angel's announcement here is that *they* are the ones announcing this. You see, in the Old Testament prophecies, there are a number of places that talk about this day. About God coming to his people on earth. And in those places it commands God's people to herald the coming of God. To announce his coming. Like Isaiah 40:9 that commands Jerusalem to go to a high mountain and announce the coming of God. But here, as with all aspects of our salvation, God takes something we are supposed to do, and does it for us. On that first Christmas, God announces for us that he has come to his people.

And so this is the announcement we bring today. God has come in the person of Jesus. The good news says that if you believe in him, then you will eternal life. You will be saved from your sins. You will have peace with God. If you have never trusted your life to Jesus, this is God's challenge to you this morning.

You see, going into our second point for today, we see that this announcement implies a response. It demands a response. You'll notice that the shepherds respond. Others in this passage have to respond to this as well. Let's think a little bit about these responses here. How do the shepherds respond?

Well, in verse 15 we see them talk about it first. But they don't spend too much time talking about it. It seems this angelic experience left them with a clear directive. They must go to Bethlehem and see this great thing that God has made known to them. And they say in verse 15 that they had to go "now!" In the next verse it's with great haste that they go.

Now, notice that the angels didn't explicitly command them to go to Bethlehem and find the baby. And yet think about what the angels did say. They said that the child was "*born to you.*" There's something about this child that has meaning for them. Even lowly shepherds that most people looked down on at that time as the lowest of society. God chose to announce first to *them*

that this Christ-child was something given *for them*. And then the angels tell them in verse 12 of a sign that was again to them. They'd find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. This was a sign to them, the angel said.

And so they could have sat there thinking, "Well, we weren't actually commanded to go find this child." But no, they read between the lines. These things were for them, even if there wasn't a bill board with a flashing message telling them to go. And so they went to find this baby Jesus.

Of course, they weren't given very detailed instructions, were they? That could have been an excuse to turn around too. And the wording in the Greek in verse 15 suggests that this wasn't just a block away. They had to set out to Bethlehem. They were probably in the general vicinity, but it sounds like they still had a bit of a trek to get there. Maybe a few miles even. And of course, they weren't told a name or an address. Just to find a baby in a manger. So they'd probably have to go asking around once they got into Bethlehem. And since there was no room left in any of the inns, there was probably a lot of people in town to sort through, trying to find this baby. But nonetheless, with haste they found the child.

And of course, the shepherd's response didn't stop there. Then they begin to announce it. They tell it to Mary and Joseph. They start telling it to others all around them. And then finally in verse 20 they join the angles in praise and glorifying God.

Mary of course pondered all this into her heart, verse 19. Many marveled at these things according to verse 18. We don't know how much Mary understood yet. She surely was still figuring things out. Looking at the rest of her life, she still had some figuring out yet to do when it came to her son. And of all the people who marveled at the shepherd's report, I wonder how many actually believed them? You see, marveling at these truths is a good start. Pondering them in your heart is even better. But ultimately the response we all need to come to is a place of real faith. We need to believe this good news. We need to trust our life to Jesus in faith. We need to say that he is my Savior, my Lord, my Christ. This is the challenge for each of us. Maybe you are someone who only comes out to church on Christmas and Easter. Maybe you marvel at the message. Maybe you even begin to ponder it in your heart. But don't stay there. Believe it. Trust your life to it. If you do, then it should result in you doing what the shepherds and angels did. Giving God all glory and praise!

And so that leads us to our third and final point for the day. I'd like to look now at this praise of highest glory. It's what the angels say in verse 14. Glory to God in the highest! This announcement is the reason to give God glory. Of course, even before this host of angels starts this anthem, we see God's glory. Right when the first angel showed up, God's glory shone all around the shepherds according to verse 9. It terrified the shepherds. They were "sore afraid" in the language of the memorable KJV. Let alone when a whole army of angels showed up. God's messengers evidently were reflecting some of God's glory in their appearance.

And yet think about what they say in verse 14. The angels don't just say "Glory to God." They say "Glory to God *in the highest!*" In the highest. This isn't referring to the location of God, or the status of God. It's referring to the glory. The type of glory to be given to God here is in the

highest. It's the best, the most exalted form of glory to be given to God. There's no greater glory than glory in the highest.

I mean, let's think about that. Here you have angels who, in a sense, hang out with God all the time. They know his glory probably in some sense better than anyone, in that they are before the heavenly throne room worshipping God all the time. They certainly know his glory. But here they come down and say "Glory in the highest."

Now obviously we know that God always deserves the highest glory. No one deserves higher glory. God deserves the highest glory. When you look in Scripture, you obviously see God referred to as the Most High a lot. God is God Most High. Often Scripture just calls God, "Most High." But that's referring specifically to God, not specifically to his glory. There's actually only one other place in Scripture where glory is said to be given in the highest. That's at the Triumphal Entry. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, just before his death on the cross. Then the people declare, saying: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

This call to glory in the highest appears just in these two places in the Bible. And they are essentially book ends to Jesus' life. Basically at Christmas and Easter. The incarnation and his passion. These become reasons to give glory to God in the highest.

There are so many reasons why God should be given glory in the highest. Just think of all his attributes. Think of all his great works. Think of his creation of the world and his providential care over our lives. All of these surely are reasons to give glory to God. Certainly God always deserves the highest glory. And yet Scripture did not choose to use that language for all those other things. Scripture chose to reserve this phrase, "glory in the highest" for here at Christmas and again just as Jesus makes his final ascent to the cross.

Do you see the significance of this? There are many reasons to glorify God. But the highest reason is Christ. Christ coming to save us. This is the highest reason to glorify God. There is no greater glory for God spoken of in the Bible, than for his plan to save us, culminating in sending his son to earth. As the Son of God humbles himself by becoming man and going to the cross, he exalts God. The greatest act of humility by God simultaneously is the great act of exalting God. Of course, isn't that what Jesus said he did on earth? John 17:4, praying to the Father, Jesus said, "I have glorified you on the earth. I have finished the work which you have given me to do." Jesus' birth, and his work to save us, is, "Glory to God in the highest." It brings God the highest glory.

Of course, that makes sense, doesn't it? Think about all the attributes of God. They are reasons to glorify God. But there's a way in which the greatest attributes of God are seen most clearly in Jesus' work to save us. We say God is love. That's a reason to glorify God. Well, we know God's love the best by how he demonstrated that love for us, that while we were still sinners, he sent Christ to die for us. We say God is gracious. That's a reason to glorify God. Well, we know God's grace the best through Jesus Christ. Grace that freely gives us eternal life and forgiveness of sins. Grace that's unearned by us because it was earned by Christ for us. We say that God is just. That's a reason to glorify God. Well, we know God's justice through how he dealt with our sin through Jesus. That God didn't

just overlook our sins when he forgave them. But he satisfied all justice by having Christ pay the full price of our sins on the cross.

Do you see the point, brothers and sisters? The best, the *highest* expression of God's love, grace, and justice come in Jesus Christ. Certainly we could think in similar lines for other attributes and works of God. All these reasons to glorify God in himself, come to their greatest expression when we think of how he has shown these qualities forth in Jesus Christ. We taste firsthand the glory of God by experiencing salvation in Christ. Christ is, "Glory to God in the highest." God coming to man to save us, to give us peace; that is "Glory to God in the highest." That is what we celebrate at Christmas. This is the significance of Christmas - God coming to man to save us, and in turn, we give him the highest glory and praise. It is fitting that the angels announce this at the birth of Jesus. And it's fitting that this passage ends with the shepherds themselves following the angel's lead, praising and glorifying God.

Brothers and sisters, there are many reasons to praise God. There are many reasons to thank him. Just stop and look at your own life. We just had the Thanksgiving holiday. You hopefully had some time to reflect on all the specific blessings God has given you. Your health. Your family. Your friends. Your job. Your home. Clothes to wear and food to eat. Of course, maybe those aren't blessings all of us in this room even have. But there is a blessing available to all who are here today. One that you can take hold of today, that no one could ever take away from you. It's salvation by faith in Jesus. That's the greatest blessing and the greatest expression of God's glory. It's the greatest reason to praise and thank God.

And so it's my hope this Christmas season the words of the angels here would really color how you see God's blessings in your life. Yes, God has blessed us in so many ways. Yes, thank him for those things. But if the coming of Jesus Christ is "glory to God in the highest," that should color our own praise and thanksgiving. There should be nothing greater to thank God for than that! That he saved us in Jesus.

This is something to think about all year long, not just during Christmas. Christ has come! The King has come and he has set us free! Saints, give Christ all glory for what he has done for you. God has exalted him now in the highest place, giving him the name that is above all names. Let us each live this out. Live out, "Glory to God in the highest" by constantly having before you Christ. Christ is all you need. Christ is your everything. Yes, be thankful for all God's given you. But be chiefly thankful for Christ. It's in his name, we are here today. In all the ways we exalt Christ in our life, it is our way of saying, "Glory to God in the highest!" Amen.

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