

Angels We Have Heard On High

Luke 2:8-15

The announcement of the birth of Jesus made by the angel and the song of the host that follows it contains the promise and power of the gospel. Hearing and believing as the shepherds did makes for a merry Christmas.

Summary of the Text

The shepherds lived in the country around Bethlehem, the place where Joseph and Mary were headed to be registered in the census (2:4-5). It's possible they kept sheep for sacrifices in the temple as we know some did in that region. These shepherds worked in the fields at night, and one night suddenly an angel of the Lord stands in front of them, the glory of the Lord shines around them, and they are terrified ("feared a great fear", vv. 8-9). The angel says not to fear because he brings good news of great joy, not just for them, but for all people (v. 10). Today a savior has been born in the city of David who is the Lord Christ (v. 11). They will see the sign when they find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger (v. 12). And then suddenly a multitude of the heavenly host, the angelic army, joins the angel, praising God: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (vv. 13-14). The shepherds leave to go to Bethlehem and find the Christ (v. 15).

Glory to God in the Highest

Angels serve the Lord in worship and service. The Lord asks Job if he was there when He laid the foundations of the earth, "when the morning stars sang together, and all the son of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:7). The seraphim surround the throne of God singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (Rev. 4:8). When we get glimpses into the bliss of heaven, we see songs bursting out, and when the Son of God was born heaven opened to announce the good news on earth: "Glory to God in the highest!" Glory is praise, honor, adoration and distinction given to someone because they possess qualities that manifest it. We glorify that which is glorious similar to how we honor things that are honorable. The angels glorify God in heaven—He has glory in the highest—but heaven breaks out in the highest, glorifying God because He has been born in the lowest. We do not know exactly when the angels found out how this would take place, but we know these are "things which angels desire to look into" (1 Pet. 1:12). The angels praise and serve God (cf. Ps. 104:4), giving Him praise and glory, and so we should follow the angelic choir. This private field concert has to be one of the greatest ever given, and perhaps the descendants of those shepherds have been musical ever since. The glory of God came down to earth, and while the shepherds (and their sheep) heard and saw it shining all around in the field, it took wisdom and strength to go see Him in the manger. First of all, it's a baby. When is salvation coming—half a century? Second, why Bethlehem? Third, they would wonder, why us? The chief end of man is to glorify God, and when we do that, all other secondary ends are accomplished and questions answered. Most wonderfully, we enjoy Him forever. It glorified God to send the Son to be born of the virgin Mary, to send the heavenly to announce and sing to these shepherds, and they responded by going to see for themselves and then telling everyone in the region (vv. 17-18).

Peace on Earth

The second statement of the angelic choir is "And on earth peace." When God is glorified, peace follows. The heavenly hosts are not answering questions for a beauty contest of what their greatest wish would be in an unrealistic world. Christ has been born of a virgin; glory to God in the highest; ergo, peace on earth. Modern Christians tend to be individualistic and apply the truth of Scripture only at personal level. This passage is full of political realities. Caesar Augustus is the emperor, Quirinius governs Syria, and Bethlehem is known as King

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David's city (vv. 1-2, 11). There's an inscription from the city of Priene in western Turkey from 9 BC that celebrates the birth of Augustus as "good news." His birthday would be celebrated on September 23rd because "providence..., bestowing him upon us and our descendants as a savior—he who put an end to war and will order peace, Caesar, who by his epiphany exceeded the hopes of those who prophesied good tidings (*euaggelia*)." God is referred to as "Lord" nearly twenty times in Luke's Gospel, and here Jesus is announced as "Christ the Lord" (*Christos Kurios*, v. 11). Jesus is the messiah, the savior, and He is Yahweh come in the flesh to rule and reign with justice upon the earth. This is why Herod was so threatened and after being deceived by the wise men sent his soldier to murder all the sons two years old and under in the region (Matt. 2:16-18). The last thing he needed was another political rival to mess with him or his descendants. Jesus' kingdom is not from this world, so His servants don't fight with carnal weapons to overthrow governments. Instead, we announce the coming of the "Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (v. 12), the Prince of peace who must be believed and obeyed to enjoy peace on earth. This is true not just for individuals, but for every sphere of society—family, church, and state. Because He is Lord of all, Jesus really does offer peace to everyone, and all who call upon Him in faith receive it. The natural man is at enmity with God, but Jesus takes away it away, having propitiated—turned away—the wrath of God. Peace comes to individuals, to marriages, to children and parents, to tribes, to cities, states, and nations. In the latter days, Isaiah prophesizes, "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it... they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore" (Is. 2:2, 4).

Goodwill Toward Men

The shepherds were a despised class in Israel. Their work made them ceremonially unclean and therefore it was difficult to worship at the temple, and they were also known as thieves—original sheep stealers. We don't need to think these particular shepherds were like that, but they certainly were unimportant and disreputable by trade. Jesus fraternized with tax collectors and sinners because God has always has, taking the lowly and exalting them, binding up the broken-hearted, causing His mercy to abound. Christmas is filled with nobodies. Joseph is not known. Mary is now despised only being betrothed until the birth of Jesus. The angels don't appear to Augustus, Quirinius, Herod, no one in Caesarea or Jerusalem hears this glorious music. Christ comes to us and shines the light of His glorious gospel all around us. We listen to the story, hear the music, and believe in the message delivered by the angels on high that our God has come to be born, and He will come again to judge the living and dead. The shepherds went to find Him. Then they told everyone in the region what the angels told them concerning Christ, and they all marveled (vv. 17-18). So this is the Christmas gospel: Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, and goodwill toward men. Christ has been born, fulfilled His ministry of death and resurrection, and offers Himself, the goodwill of God, to this broken world which will be transformed by His love.