

Christmas Peace

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- [0 : 00] We're going to read together the Christmas story, the story of Jesus' birth. So it's in the New Testament and the Gospel of Luke, Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 20.
- So I'll read it for us and this is God's word. In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.
- This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria and all went to be registered each to his own town and Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David to be registered with Mary, his betrothed who was with child.
- And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.
- In the same region, there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night and an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with great fear 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.
- [1 : 19] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord and this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.
- And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth and peace among those with whom he is pleased.
- And when the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us and they went with haste and they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger and when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.
- But Mary treasured up all these things pondering them in her heart and the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told to them.
- This is God's holy word and it's the Christmas story. Just want to have a brief reflection tonight on the Christmas story that we got to read just a minute ago from Luke chapter two.
- [2 : 30] It's the story of Jesus' birth and one of the things that happens in it is that the angels come and tell the shepherds to go and find him in Bethlehem and when they do, the shepherds see him and then they leave and in verse 17 it says that they went into the town, they went into the village and they told many people what they had seen and it says that all the people wondered.

So they reflected, they thought, they considered what it meant that Christmas day and right after that in verse 18 it says that Mary, the mother of Jesus, that she treasured all that had happened that night in her heart and then it says that she pondered it and so that's a word that means that Mary was putting all the pieces together of everything that had happened to her and everything she had seen in the birth of her baby, Jesus and it says that when she realized what had taken place that she treasured it.

That's the end of the Christmas story. She treasured it in her heart. What does that mean, that verb to treasure, to have treasure? It means something like she found in Jesus something that could never be taken away from her, a wealth in the bottom of her soul that could be there no matter what her circumstances in life would ever become.

Christmas is about finding treasure, it's about a wealth in your soul. It's about finding something that you can have that can never be taken away from you, no matter what happens in your life.

And Mary found that this very day when Jesus was born and we're told what it is in verse 14, the angels sang about it. They said peace, peace on earth in the birth of this baby.

[4 : 15] What's the treasure? What can make you full this Christmas? It's peace. Jesus came to bring peace. What kind of peace and how can you get it? I just want to say that briefly tonight.

What kind of peace? First, very famous, the shepherds come in verse 14 and they sing a song. We know it more by the Latin. We might not know very much Latin, but we do know this song by the Latin name Gloria and ex-Chelsea's Deo.

We all, people often sing it. You can hear it in the department stores at Christmas. Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth amongst humankind. And so there's a vertical dimension to that song and a horizontal dimension.

Peace, vertical dimension, glory to God in the highest, Gloria and ex-Chelsea's Deo. It's worship, it's praise the angels are giving. But the vertical dimension says, and tonight in the birth of this baby, peace on earth, that he came to bring peace.

Okay, what kind of peace? It's been 2,000 years since Jesus was born and we still have a lot of wars. We still have a lot of conflict on this earth.

[5 : 20] And you can think about the opposite of peace, war, conflict at a national scale, a global scale, but you can think about it in your own life.

You say he came for peace and you think, I've got conflict in my life. And when you come to Christmas, I don't know what you're up to on Christmas day or Christmas week, but when you pack lots of people together for meals, family come in for Christmas, it's always complete peace, right?

We even feel it when we pack all our family in at Christmas, there's conflict, there's struggle, there's strife, that family struggle with family and siblings struggle with siblings.

And we feel it between our employers with our workplaces. What kind of peace did he come to bring? Maybe it's existential peace, the kind of peace in your inner life that you really long for, emotional peace.

What most modern people are searching for when they go to waterstones and black wells and they look through the sections of self-help. They're looking for a way to get rid of the intrusive thoughts, the negative emotions, right?

[6 : 24] And let me say that Jesus Christ came into this world, yes, to offer both those elements of peace ultimately. But in this story, the Christmas story, that is not the peace that's being talked about, peace on earth, what is it?

And we sang about it, Charles Wesley is great, Carol Hark the Herald, Angel Singh, glory to the newborn king, peace on earth, mercy mild, God and sinner reconciled.

The peace that gets sung about in this Christmas story is the peace that we need that we want as human beings with God. It's that we need reconciliation with the living God.

That's what Christmas is really about, that kind of peace, that there's peace with God on offer in this story. And what happens here is that the shepherds, they're out watching the flocks at night, it is nighttime, they are in the dark, there is no electricity.

It is Edinburgh winter, very dark, but boy, darkness in the first century, much darker than our darkness. And they're out and they're doing their night shift duty of shepherding the flock.

[7 : 28] And then the angels show up and it says in verse eight and nine that when the angels show up the glory of the Lord shows up, the glory of the living God himself shows up.

And it uses a verb that says the light engulfed them, it's shown all around them. And what happened to the shepherds? We think about it as a very nice sweet story, but boy, it says they were sore afraid, a very literal way to translate the original passages.

They were so afraid, they were mega afraid is what it says. They were absolutely terrified. They were shaking in their boots. And that's the story of our relationship with God, that we were made for God, we were made to be in God's presence.

But if you read the Bible in the Old Testament and here in the New Testament, when the glory of God shows up, the light of God, the luminosity of God, boy, people become sore afraid.

They're shaking their boots, they're afraid. And we see in that, that every time God shows up in the Bible, we realize we were made by God to be with God, but because we've rebelled against God, but because we've run away from God, when God shows up, we realize we are unfit, unfit for God's presence, unfit for God's light, the luminosity of God comes into our lives and we're sore afraid.

[8 : 52] And so there's this sense, I think, I think modern people, I think in a city like Edinburgh, we are feeling this very much right now. So many people I get to talk to all the time that didn't grow up in Christian churches, didn't grow up at all in any sense of what we call traditional religion, but say, I am a spiritual person.

And I think that makes sense to me, and the reason it makes sense is because we all, I think, what the Bible says, what Christianity offers you is an answer that says we all are made by God and actually want God, we long for God, yet we consistently push God away and we run from God and we suppress that truth.

And when God shows up, the only way that it could be fixed is that God would show up, he would overwhelm us. But when that happens, when his light comes into the world, we, boy, we realize I'm unfit.

That's what happened to the shepherds. The light came into the darkness and they realized they became fearful. This desire we have deep down in our souls, I think we carry it, all of us, it's a desire that can only be satisfied by seeing the living God.

C.S. Lewis, who's the author of the Chronicles of Narnia stories, he gave a talk once called The Weight of Glory, and I just want to give you a paraphrase of it. He talked about this.

[10 : 11] This is what he said. The vision of God, being in the presence of God's glory is the secret scent, the secret ache, I should say, for a far off country we've never been to, a deep desire for something that we have never actually experienced.

It is what we really desire. We get traces of it when we experience beauty. But the thing itself, God himself, the glory of the Lord, it's the scent of a flower that we have never found.

It's the echo of a tune we have not heard. It's news from a country we have not yet visited. It's the reality that can break the evil spell of worldly enchantment.

Every human, each of us, remains conscious deep down of a desire which no natural happiness will ever satisfy to be in God's presence. But when he comes, fear.

Except Christmas, the angels say, but peace on earth. Fear not, peace has come. How can you have the peace that Mary realized she had that night, the treasure, a peace that can never be taken away from you?

[11 : 14] Ultimately, that peace is reconciliation with the living God. How can you have that? Let me give you three things and we'll finish. You've got to see in this passage that it's all about first, that the history of Christmas is reasonable.

How can you receive the treasure, the peace? You've got to see that the history of Jesus is reasonable to believe in, that it actually happened. And when you read Luke's account, just listen to some of the language.

He says, in those days, the decree came out from Caesar Augustus, and the governor at that time was Quirinius. He was the governor of Syria. Well after detail, I could go forever through Luke's gospel and show you how many historical facts he was putting along the way.

We know that when Jesus was born, Gaius Octavius was the Caesar emperor, that the governor that's being talked about here is Quirinius Varus, and he died in 1480.

It's very important to see that when the Bible writers, the gospel writers write this account, they are writing this as history, not as parable, not as mere myth, not as a fable.

[12 : 22] They are writing this to be believed as history. And the very first thing to see is if you want the treasure Mary found, as you've got to know that the claim of Christianity is that the Son of God really did become human in the first century, that he was born, that he came in real history, that it's not a mere myth.

We've got to be very weary of any sense of chronological snobbery as modern people, where we think these first century writers, they were gullible. No, not at all. Luke says, this is an eyewitness account.

I've done a great work of gathering eyewitness testimony here. One New Testament scholar puts it like this, Richard Balkum. He says, there is no other faith in history that has so extensively crossed the cultural divisions of humanity and found a place in so many diverse cultural contexts.

Why? Because it's because the eyewitnesses in the first century went around consistently claiming what we saw is real history. Balkum says, that's why Christianity spread so far because of that consistent message.

Look, let me move on, but I'll say this. If Luke wanted you to think, if this is mere legend, mere myth, the one thing you don't do as a first century author is put the primary eyewitnesses of the birth of Jesus as shepherds.

[13 : 47] Shepherds in the first century had no social weight, societal weight. They were not respected. They were poor. They weren't educated, but they're the primary eyewitnesses. The only reason you would put it in is if it happened that way.

That's the only reason. The second thing, how can you receive this treasure tonight? Look at the birth itself for just a moment. In verse 12, the shepherds were told, go to Bethlehem.

You'll find the savior of the world there. He'll be wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. When you go to the one verse that's actually about Jesus' birth, it says that he was wrapped in swaddling cloths.

What is that? Swaddling cloths are work cloth. It's cloth that had been previously used in strips for work.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, become human. Very first clothes were work cloths. And then it says, and you'll find him lying in a manger. The word for manger is a feeding trough.

[14 : 51] It's where animals come to eat. The muck, the spit, the yuck of a feeding trough. It says that there was no room for him, so they put him in the inn. What is an inn?

It's a guest room. It's the first floor of a home where there is nothing but animals. Jesus Christ came into the world and was born and laid in the muck, the yuck, where animals spit and feed.

And the sign of his birth, what does it mean? He came to be poor. He came to take on our feeble estate. It's the sign of his entire life.

The Son of God humbled himself all the way to the point of taking on our feeble estate, even to die because of our injustice. The light of the world entered into the darkness so that we could have light, we could have peace.

And the condition of his birth tells the whole story. Wrapped in swaddling cloths, he laid in the muck the yuck of the animals. If you want to know peace with God, if you want to have treasure in your heart this Christmas, you've got to believe that Jesus Christ, the light of the world, came and entered the darkness in your place, went to the cross in your stead so that you could have Christmas peace.

[16 : 04] Now lastly, and I'll close with this, the third thing, the third way to receive this treasure tonight is to see simply that the peace that Mary received, the treasure that she received, really is peace.

It's a peace that is unlike any other peace that's on offer in this world. Let me say it like this. If you are a person who's had a lot of success in your life, you know, you wanted to get a good education and you got it, you wanted to make money and you made money, you wanted to make partner in your firm and you're on your way to that, that's already happened for you.

You wanted to be successful in whatever adventures you're into in your life. And you've gotten that. The claim of Christmas is this, if you don't have peace with God, if you don't have peace with God, then you don't have real peace.

You know, if you've chased every success in your life and you still feel empty, you keep finding that it's never enough, the claim of Christmas is that if you've not yet found peace with God through Jesus, you're still in the darkness.

And let's say the opposite is true of you. Nothing has gone right yet in life. You at every turn have not been successful. You have struggled financially, educationally, economically, materially, relationally.

[17 : 33] You've never gotten the relationships you wanted. And it feels all the time like the ice is cracking underneath your feet. One little thing is going to be the last thing.

If your circumstances are terrible, but you have peace with God in your life, you have been reconciled to the living God through Jesus, then you have light and not darkness.

You are full. You have a treasure that can never be taken away. You could lose everything in this life, but if you have peace with God, the very thing you were made for, you have a treasure that can never be taken away.

Very on this day, the day of Jesus' birth realized in him, this baby, I have peace with God. I have treasure. Do you have that on Christmas Eve?

Let us pray. Father, we ask that you would show up, that you would touch our hearts, and that you would show us the peace we need through Christ. And so I ask, Lord, that you would shake our hearts up and help us to see how much we really do desire to be in your presence and how much the Christmas child, Jesus Christ, mercy mild, can give us that very hope.

[18 : 44] And so we pray for that recognition, that acknowledgement, that faith. In Jesus' name, amen.