

Gloria

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Preacher: David Court

[0 : 00] We're going to read from Luke chapter 2, verses 1 to 14. So we read this passage last week as well, but we focused on a different section, and tonight we'll focus on the very end of the section where the angels sing what's typically called the Gloria.

This is the Word of God. 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.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks 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.

[1 : 11] 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. 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 on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. This is God's holy word. I was traveling to church this evening, and the radio was on, and Alison reminded me of how it was on the old days when the number one single was revealed on Christmas Day, Christmas Day Top of the Pops.

I don't think any of that happens any longer, but often the musical number one, the musical offering at this time of year would be Christmas themed.

Do they know it's Christmas? Last Christmas. Lonely this Christmas. Mistletoe and wine. To name but a few, and you'll be glad to know I'm not going to embark on a rendition of any of these items.

[2 : 40] Instead, what I want to do is for us to look together at a very different Christmas song. Indeed, the first ever song released, if I can put it that way, and sung on that first ever Christmas Day.

And we find it here in Luke's Gospel, chapter 2 and verse 14. A song sung, perhaps even shouted or chanted, by a multitude of the heavenly host.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is well pleased. The song of this text is often better known simply as the Gloria, Gloria in excelsis, in excelsis Deo, glory to God in the highest.

In some churches, it is sung every Sunday. And over the years, great musicians, Bach, Handel, Mozart, Vivaldi, have written arias and oratorios based on this particular text.

And it's a text that announces the great turning point in human history. God Himself, the Creator, breaking into our world and taking to Himself our flesh and blood.

[4 : 00] According to the Bible, here is the great eternal plan and purpose of God coming together. Here is the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to His people, focused on a little baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

No wonder a multitude of the heavenly host, literally a great army of heaven, burst into this song of praise.

It's hardly, I suppose, a silent night. They cry out, they declare glory to God in the highest. Their desire that all of creation should rise up and praise this wonderful God.

And their song essentially is a kind of commentary on what God is doing in sending His only begotten Son into the world.

A song of praise to God about the Lord Jesus Christ and about the significance of His coming. And it's a song that I want to suggest to you tonight.

[5 : 12] It sounds out three distinctive notes about God and about what the birth of this child will mean. And the first note that I want you to see with me is this.

The first note is a note of divine glory. Glory to God in the highest. The coming of Jesus is first and foremost designed to reveal and to bring glory to God.

According to the Bible, this is what God Himself, in a sense, is all about. He is a God jealous for His own glory. After each musical composition, Johann Sebastian Bach would write that great Reformation slogan, SDG, Soli Deo Gloria.

To God alone be the glory. And what Bach understood, perhaps better than most, was that this is the great mission statement of heaven. This is what God has written over the universe and over the world that He has created.

Soli Deo Gloria. Here is God's great overarching purpose in all that He does. I recently bought a copy of Herman Bavinck's book on Christian doctrine, entitled *The Wonderful Works of God*.

[6 : 41] It's beautifully rich, devotional, systematic theology. The first sentence of the book is, God and God alone is man's highest good.

And the concluding sentence of the book is a quote from the Apostle Paul. For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Bavinck's literary envelope follows Calvin in underscoring the aim and goal of all Christian theology as being the glory of God.

Glory to God in the highest. Therefore, the first note of the Gloria is about God, not about us. The angels do not begin with our felt needs, our psychological wounds, our existential loneliness.

They begin with the glory of God. And that is always the biblical order. Man's chief end is to glorify God.

[7 : 48] And only then, in the light of that glory, to enjoy Him forever. It seems to me that much modern theology and indeed preaching has kind of reversed this order.

Begins with humanity and its problems. And then, you know, if there's time, we might squeeze in a word or a thought about God. But the angels of heaven know better.

They know that the highest thing that can be said on earth is something about the God of highest heaven. This God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Father eternally loving the Son, pouring out the Spirit upon Him. God of eternal glory, giving out love and light. And that's why in the Bible, so often God's glory is likened to light shining and radiating out.

And we see it here in this text, in this passage in Luke chapter 2. The shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

[8 : 59] We have that in the Old Testament in Isaiah 60. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Behold, darkness shall cover the earth, thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you, and His glory will be seen upon you.

And the nations shall come to your light as kings to the brightness of your rising. And if we turn to the very final book of the Bible, Revelation, Revelation 21.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb, and the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God gives it light.

And its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk. The kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. The gates will never shut by day, and there will be no night there.

[10 : 08] His glory is the shining forth of all that God is. The effulgence of His holiness, the radiance of His majesty, the splendor of His perfections being made public.

And here the angels announce that the glory has now, in the birth of this child, broken out in a new and quite astonishing way.

The Word has become flesh. The eternal Son has taken our nature. And so, at the birth of Jesus Christ, we have this outshining radiance of God's glory.

Here is a God eternally full of light and love, and whose glory is spilling out into the world in the person of His eternally beloved Son.

In the Old Testament, that word for glory comes from a Hebrew word suggesting weight and substance and importance. The very antithesis of something light and inconsequential.

[11 : 18] When the Bible speaks of the glory of God, it speaks of His infinite worth, His radiant honor, His eternal greatness. And indeed, that's why sometimes in the Bible, in Scripture, God is referred to simply as the glory.

And God's great goal or aim in all things is to display His glory. He is God in the highest. There is none above Him or beyond Him. He glories in His own name.

He delights in Himself. He stands supreme at the center of His own affections, a self-sufficient, inexhaustible fountain of grace.

He delights in His own glory as Father, Son, and Spirit, and He opposes everything that would seek to belittle or diminish that glory. Indeed, the very essence of human sin is in robbing Him of the glory that is rightfully His.

Instead of Him occupying the central place in our lives and in our thinking and in our worship, He has since the fall been relegated, dethroned, marginalized.

[12 : 37] And so, as human beings, we no longer bask in the light of God's glory. We much prefer to hide away in the darkness. We put other people, we put ourselves, other things at the center of our lives.

Everything and anything but our Creator. Paul writes of this in Romans chapter 1 when he says, He goes on, So when the Christmas angels sing, they sing first and foremost about God's glory.

Jesus has come. He's a man on a mission to reveal the glory of God, to restore God's glory in our lives.

He has come to put right what has gone horribly wrong. He has come to prepare honor and glory for Himself through His people.

God is glorified in becoming one of us. And in going to the cross to bear the curse and in being raised up to newness of life, Jesus Christ has come to usher in a glorious new creation.

[14 : 28] No wonder this great multitude of the heavenly host break into song. And that's the first note of the Gloria.

God's glory. A note of divine glory. And that brings us to the second note. Because if God is going to restore His glory, how will He accomplish this?

Well, He will do so by bringing peace. That's the second note in the Gloria. A note of divine glory. And then a note of divine peace.

And on earth, peace. Peace on the earth, not peace from the earth. Here is the peace that only God Himself can bring to us.

And the peace that's spoken of here is not, I think, some kind of vague, wistful, sentimental kind of thing that people often mention at this time of year.

[15 : 32] The angels here are speaking about shalom. That Old Testament word that conveys wholeness and harmony and salvation and everything put right.

And this peace is proclaimed on earth. This place of thorns and thistles, of sweat and blood, of idolatry and immorality, of enmity and strife and of war and conflict.

It is on this earth that peace is pronounced and announced. And so the angels are speaking theologically about peace with God.

For this restless, broken world is at war with God. As human beings, we have robbed Him of His glory and we're not going to give Him His rightful place in our lives.

We're going to do our own thing. We're going to follow our own path. We're going to live life by our own rules. I mean, who does He think He is? And so there's conflict.

[16 : 37] Enmity between human beings and God. But it's a conflict that will not last forever. For God has promised one day to restore His glory and to banish and exclude all that is wrong and evil from His universe.

And sometimes that's referred to in the Bible as the great day of the Lord, sometimes the last day. Think of Isaiah chapter 2 where He proclaims, He shall judge between the nations, shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into

pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. Isaiah envisages a kind of reordering of the world, one not based on partisan loyalties and nationality, but upon the worship of the one true God.

A world of shalom and harmony and peace. Conflicts resolved, wrongs righted, tears wiped from every eye.

Fallible human judgment replaced with the perfection of divine judgment. The symbolism there is of a return to Eden.

[18 : 11] The curse removed, men and women at peace with God and with one another. There can be no ultimate peace and prosperity until men and women are brought under the rule of God.

Only in submission to Christ is there peace. Calvin writes, Oh, that we might live under Christ's perfect rule, that we might enjoy Christ's perfect peace.

One day God's peace will reign on the earth. The curse of the fall will be lifted forever. And we need to be ready for that day. How do we do that?

We need to be reconciled to God now. The angels remind us here that Jesus' coming is all about bringing that reconciliation and peace with God that we so desperately need in this broken, decaying, and dying world.

He brings peace on the earth. The Old Testament, of course, Jesus has given that title in Isaiah 9, isn't he? The Prince of Peace. Paul writing to the Christians in Ephesus says that Jesus himself is our peace.

[19 : 30] We sometimes sing the Christmas carol at this time of year, that famous carol of Charles Wesley's, Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

reconciled. So how does Jesus bring us peace with God? What does this little baby boy wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger got to do with bringing peace on the earth?

Some years ago now, I came across a newspaper article. It was about retail sales at Christmas time. And the heading was this, we won't know the results of Christmas until Easter.

I remember thinking how true that is, at least from a Christian point of view. Jesus lived a life of glory to God.

And at the end of that life, he tasted death and judgment on a cross. Despite living a life of loving perfection, he was rejected and despised and crucified like a common criminal.

[20 : 48] And yet, his death was not just some cruel injustice. According to Scripture, it was accomplishing something remarkable for us.

For at Calvary's cross, he bore! He bore God's wrath and judgment. He stood in our place. He took our punishment and our death.

It is at the cross and through Jesus' violent death and the shedding of his blood that he brings us peace with God. We, as human beings, we've exchanged God's glory for idolatry and sin.

But Jesus has come to exchange his glory for our punishment and to bring us what we need most, and that is peace with God.

John Stott, in his book, The Cross of Christ, writes this, The essence of sin is in man substituting himself for God. The essence of salvation is in God substituting himself for man.

[22 : 01] Sin involves man rising up against God, placing himself where only God should be. Salvation involves God sacrificing himself where only man deserve to be.

Sin entails man claiming an authority which belongs to God alone. Salvation entails God accepting the judgment which belongs to man alone.

The early settlers in North America often had to cope with great prairie fires that travelled often so quickly, so speedily across the land that they consumed everything that was before them.

But to keep themselves safe, often the settlers would start their own fires and stand in an area that had already been burned out.

They were safe there because where the fire had already burned, it would not burn again. And the Bible says that the fire of God's judgment is coming upon all and none of us can outrun it.

[23 : 16] it's unavoidable, we cannot save ourselves. But there's one place where the fire has already burned. There's one place where God's fierce judgment on sin has already exhausted itself.

And that is on the cross of Christ. That is on Jesus, the Prince of Peace. because at the cross Jesus takes our punishment and our place.

He becomes our shelter and our salvation and our peace. Remember the angel says to Joseph, you will give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. There's only one way to evade and avoid the wrath and judgment of God. And that is through faith in the one who upon the cross did not escape it. It's by putting our faith in Jesus, the great peacemaker. And this is the peace of which the angels are speaking and singing on that Bethlehem hillside. [24 : 34] A costly peace. A peace wrought in nails and sweat and blood upon a rough wooden cross. Because that is what Jesus came to do.

He came to bring peace on earth. Peace to sinners and rebels like us. He came to bring us peace with God that we might enjoy as Corey was telling us this morning the peace of God. God. And the big question I suppose for us all is this. Do we have this peace with God? And if not, how can we receive it?

What does it involve? Well, if our first two notes are about God's glory and God's peace, then our third and quickly, briefly, final note, third note, is, I think, a note of divine grace among those with whom he is well pleased.

What does this mean? Are the angels proclaiming a kind of doctrine of works righteousness? Does it mean that only those who really try and please God can be saved?

[25 : 57] No, I don't think so. Some older translations, the authorized version, has good will toward men. Most modern translators have some variation of people he favors.

And I think what the text is driving at is this, is that those who find this peace with God only find it as a gift. This peace is to be enjoyed by those in whom God delights, literally those of his good pleasure, those with whom he is well pleased, this idea, concept, found in a number of places in the New Testament.

It's connected strongly with the idea of God's grace. The NIV, I think, translates it, those upon whom his favor rests.

This peace is not something we can earn or do ourselves. Grace means a gift. Receiving something that is free, undeserved, gift.

We don't pay for gifts. Someone else pays for gifts, we receive them. The whole point of a gift is you don't pay for it. It costs the giver everything, the recipient nothing.

[27 : 12] That gets, I think, to the heart of what we're speaking about here. Grace means receiving a gift I could in no way contribute to or qualify for. And perhaps that sounds great.

Free gifts. Someone else picking up the tab. And yet as human beings, we often don't like this talk of grace and free gifts.

Why? Because often we don't like charity. We're cynical and suspicious of it. There's no such thing as a free lunch, is what we say.

We don't trust getting something for nothing. It seems a bit off to us. I think the story, I'm trying to remember who told it, maybe in the Christianity Explored materials, they told the story of a man who stood at a tube station somewhere in central London, tried to sell golden sovereigns at a penny each.

By the end of the day, he'd hardly sold any. Why? No one believed them. We're suspicious of charity. And secondly, we don't like grace because it offends us, offends our pride.

[28 : 30] We don't want charity because we want to be independent. We want to stand on our own two feet. We want to pay our own way, want to do our own thing. We don't like being in this position of being beholden to anyone else.

We don't like this feeling of indebtedness. Christmas people say, you know, I buy a few extra cards in case someone sends me one and I haven't sent one to them.

We don't like to be one down, like to keep the score even, like to pay our own way, like to be in control. And yet, if we think like that, we will never find ourselves as those upon whom the favor of God rests, and we'll never find peace with God.

None of us can buy or earn our way into God's favor. There is nothing we can give. We have no leverage.

We cannot manipulate God to do our bidding. God's favor cannot be bought. As human beings, we are completely and utterly dependent on his gift of grace that comes to us only through Jesus Christ.

[29 : 51] Charles Spurgeon once told the story of a minister, went to the house of an elderly woman. He had a gift from the church's poor relief fund, and he went to the door, and he knocked on the door, and he knocked on the door, and he knocked on the door, but to no avail.

There was no answer. Later on, he discovered that the lady in question had been inside. She'd been at home all the time, and she explained to him, I heard the knocking, but I thought it was the rent man come to ask me for what I owed.

That kind of parable of misunderstanding. We know that we are accountable, so when God draws near and speaks and knocks on the door of our heart, if I could put it that way, we often conclude that he's come like the rent man to claim that debt of moral obligation we owe.

Instead of opening up our lives to him, we feign deafness, we close our ears. But friends, Christmas is all about God coming near, not to take, but to give.

The triune God of the Bible is not some needy deity desperate for our attention. He is the eternal God of radiant glory who delights to pour out his love and light.

[31 : 15] In Jesus, in the sending of the eternally begotten Son, he has come to reveal his glory to us. He has come to bring us peace with God.

He has come to bestow it upon all who will receive his gift of grace. He wants to give you of himself. He wants his favor to rest upon you.

We sang those words, didn't we? Your grace that reaches far and wide to every tribe and nation has called my heart to enter in the joy of your salvation.

Well, the angels have gone back to heaven. The sky is dark again. The shepherds return to their flocks.

But the song remains. And if you listen carefully, you can still hear its distinctive notes of glory, of peace, and of grace.

[32 : 21] It's still a song worth listening to and singing. For the song of the angels flows from heaven itself.

It's not a song of human progress. It's not a song of psychological wholeness. It's not a song of some political utopia. But a song that begins with the glory of God.

A song that declares peace on earth. All because of the grace of God that is in Jesus Christ.

Will you join with the angels this evening? Will you give glory to God? Will you enjoy peace with God and the peace of God?

Will you rejoice in receiving the grace of God as it is offered to you in the Savior, Christ the Lord?

[33 : 27] Lord, we thank you for the song of the angels and for those notes of glory and peace and grace.

Lord, may those notes resonate in our own hearts tonight as we receive and trust in Jesus Christ, our great Savior and King.

Lord, bless us with your peace, indeed a peace that passes understanding. May your peace reign and rule in our hearts.

May we know what it is to be at peace with you, and may we know your peace reigning in our lives.

May we live to give you glory, and may we rejoice always in your astounding and amazing grace.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.