

The Glory of the Nativity (Christmas Eve)

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[0 : 00] for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. This is the Word of God. Now, as I mentioned, this is obviously a very familiar passage to many of us, whether you are church-ed or unchurch-ed.

Certainly you have heard this passage before and heard this story. And while that's truly a blessing, sometimes when we hear a story over and over again, it can be somewhat domesticated.

It can easily be lumped into the rest of Christmas that we celebrate, right? We think of the Santa Claus and the Christmas markets and the trees and the lights and the gifts.

And while all these things, there's nothing wrong with them individually, so often we put this story of the Nativity on par with all these cultural elements. In fact, probably this Nativity story, if you think about Bible stories and unbelievers, this would not be an offensive story to most, right?

Because they see it as being something that's tame, that's warm-hearted, that's cute, perhaps. But as we look at this passage tonight, I want this to be anything but that.

[1 : 10] I want to be able to see this story with fresh eyes tonight because this is a story about fear. It's a story that has elements of shock. This is an army of angels, a coming king, a radical salvation plan.

And so while this story certainly brings comfort to us, it should also invoke awe and wonder and praise and worship because this story screams to us of the glory of God.

And so that's what I want us to focus on tonight is the glory of God that we see in this passage. And so if I were to ask you to define what the glory of God is, I imagine there would probably be as many different answers as there are people here this evening.

And not to say any of those answers would necessarily be wrong because the glory of God is revealed and defined in many different ways within the Scripture. And so tonight I want us to look at just three of these different ways where we see the glory of God because glory is mentioned three different times in this passage.

And each time that glory is mentioned, it's used in a slightly different manner. We see glory when the glory of God, it says it surrounded the shepherds and they were afraid.

[2 : 28] It says that the angels sang of the glory of God. And then it says that the shepherds glorified God for all they had heard and seen. And so these are the elements that I want us to think about.

God's glory in three parts. I want us to consider the glory of God in His presence. I want us to think about the glory in God's essence or His being and the glory in man's response.

And so let's look first at the glory of God in His presence. Look again at verse 7 and 8, or excuse me, 8 and 9. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. Now I'm sure many of you have different Christmas traditions in your home.

One tradition that my family has done for a number of years now is something we call a shepherd's meal. So on Christmas Eve, and we'll do it this evening, on Christmas Eve before the kids go to bed, we gather in our living room, and we lay out a blanket on the floor, we turn off all the lights, and we have a very simple meal of usually fruit and bread and cheese, something similar to what the shepherds might have had that night.

[3 : 42] And we sit there, and we think and we talk about what the shepherds may have experienced when they were confronted by those angels, what they would have seen, what they would have heard, what they would have felt.

And while certainly this would be probably more realistic if we were to go like up to the Pentlands and do this in the middle of the night rather than just in our living room, it's a good exercise for us to think about what the shepherds would have experienced.

But I think the thing that often happens here is that we can jump forward in the shepherds' emotion. Right? We can jump forward to the awe and the excitement of what they experience without really recognizing that first emotion emotion that they felt was terror and fear.

It's hard to replicate terror and fear in our living room. But think about this level of terror and panic that the shepherds would have experienced here. Why were they fearful? It says, because the glory of the Lord shone around them.

See, the Bible, it often speaks of the presence of God as his glory. If you're familiar with the Old Testament, you know that the people of Israel were led out of Egypt by this pillar of light or this cloud that led before them, which was the glory of God.

[4 : 59] In the tent of meeting, it talks about this glory cloud that hovered over it. When the tabernacle was completed, it says the glory of God filled the temple. And so the Old Testament, the people of Israel so closely related God's presence with his glory that when they lost in battle to the Philistines and the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant, they cried out.

He said, the glory of God has departed from Israel for the Ark of our God has been captured. And so we see then that glory is this special term that's used in the Bible often that depicts God's visible and active presence among his people.

And so what happens when often in the Bible when we see people are confronted with the glory of God, how do they respond? It's with fear. Right? We read earlier from Isaiah 6, which talks about Isaiah sees God on his throne in all of his glory.

And how does Isaiah respond? He says, woe is me, I am a dead man. When Peter, James, and John, they recognize they're with Jesus when he is transfigured, and they hear the voice of God from heaven, what do they do?

They fall on their faces in fear. And so almost every time in the Bible when these men and these women encounter the presence of God and they fall on their faces in fear, what's the next command?

[6 : 26] Don't be afraid. It's what we see here as well. Don't be afraid. Why should they not be afraid? Because this is not God coming to judge. This is God coming to announce good news.

When it says good news, this is where we get our word for the gospel. This is the good news, that God is not merely revealing his glory through these angels for this one-time announcement.

The good news is that God is revealing his glory through his Son. God's presence will be with his people through the coming of his Son, Jesus. And so he says this is the good news that brings great joy for all people.

This is not good news. The good news of Christmas is not for some people. It's not for the religious, and it's not for the righteous. It makes no difference your nationality or your race, your socioeconomic status, your background, your history.

This Christmas story, this gospel message, is good news for all. And we see that because who is this message delivered to?

[7 : 33] Right? This message isn't for the political leaders or the religious leaders of the day. This isn't for the chief priests or the Pharisees or an announcement to Caesar himself. This is a message to a bunch of lowly shepherds, a bunch of wandering, smelly outdoorsmen, the lowest of the low in society, people who were ritually unclean, who were regarded as so untrustworthy that their testimony wouldn't have even been accepted in court.

Yet God chooses these men to announce the birth of Jesus, that they may hear it and share it with others. And so this is the good news that's announced in verse 11.

Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. Listen to those three titles that we hear in here. It talks about Jesus as our Savior, as our Messiah, and our Lord.

This is the only place in the whole New Testament that we see these titles combined at once. And so while we don't have time to kind of break apart every single title and what their significance is, I want to look at them at least briefly to recognize when it talks about Jesus as our Savior.

What does that mean? Jesus has come to take away our sins. In the Old Testament, God is referred to as the God of our salvation. That salvation has now come in the person of Jesus.

[9:02] It says he is our Messiah or our Christ. It's a title for the Anointed One. This is what we read also from Isaiah, that this coming king would reign on David's throne over his kingdom.

And it says he is Lord. It's making clear the point that Jesus was not just a regular man, that this is Yahweh, the Lord God Almighty is now dwelling among his people.

And so the question then is, well, how is this glorious king going to save? The angels say that there's a sign. What do you think that the shepherds would have anticipated when they see the glory of God in their presence announcing the coming of the Savior that Jesus is coming on this flaming chariot from heaven?

That Jesus' presence is somehow going to kind of manifest in the temple somehow? Or at least he's going to be born to this wealthy, religious family or some political leader to establish his kingdom?

No. This will be a sign to you. You will find the baby wrapped in rags and lying in a feeding trough. Does that not just strike you as bizarre?

[10:18] Can you imagine how the shepherds would have responded to that? The presence of God, the glory that we see now, his presence coming in a barn, in a poor baby.

How is this glorious? How is this going to lead to anyone's salvation? How in the world is this little baby going to become king? This passage is telling us of the humiliation of Christ that he took on our nature.

This infinite God became a finite man. The creator of the universe was born of a woman. Not only did he take on our nature, he took on our condition.

Isaiah also says in chapter 53, Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering. Yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by men, and afflicted. You see, he came to save sinners like you and me by standing in our place, by taking the penalty for our sin.

And so this is the presence of God that we see in his glory. Let's think then of that second instance of glory. The second time that we see glory in this passage. The glory of God's essence or his being.

[11:30] Verse 13, Suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

Now have you ever thought about this term glory here? Because I think we read it and we think this must be a command. Right? This is a verb. The angels are telling the shepherds that you need to glorify God or at least we angels need to be glorifying God.

Glory here is not a verb. There's actually no verb in this sentence in the Greek. Glory is a noun here and it's used more as an observation. It's used more as a statement of fact.

The angels here are praising God for who he is. He is intrinsically glorious in his worth, in his sufficiency, in his beauty, in his splendor, in his majesty.

God is glorious in his very being. And his glory doesn't fluctuate. It doesn't change based on what you think of God, whether you acknowledge it, whether you appreciate it or not.

[12:32] He is who he is. But the wonderful thing about this passage here is that he is revealing his glory to us. God is bringing his presence down.

He's displaying for us just a glimpse of his divine perfections to us. And so think about what we read again in Isaiah 6.

This image that Isaiah has of the Lord, high and exalted, seated on the throne. The train of his robe filled the temple. These angels crying out, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty.

The whole earth is full of his glory. This is the glory that the angels witness. This is the glory that these angels have worshipped since their creation. And so now these angels with that knowledge are announcing this glory to the shepherds.

Not only what God is doing here, not only who he is, but also what he's doing. Because they're proclaiming that this glory of God is now being revealed. The glory is being revealed to man through the birth of Jesus.

[13:37] And so what's the result of this glory? It says peace. God's glory displayed in the person of Jesus brings us peace.

Isn't that astounding? I mean, think about these angels. Oftentimes when we picture these angels, right, they're rather feminine looking, they're in these long, flowing white gowns with long hair, and they're all floating about like a choir, right?

That's not how Luke describes them here. Luke describes them as a large heavenly army. An army announcing the arrival of a perfect, almighty king of the universe who's come into a world of rebellious sinners.

How does that strike you? What is this message that's to be brought? It sounds like judgment is about to rain down. That God is going to come with his royal armies to seek to destroy and bring death.

But yet that's not what these angels are announcing. Not death and destruction. They are announcing the peace that God is bringing. Peace between heaven and earth. Peace between an infinite, holy God and a corrupt, sinful people.

[14:54] And it's this peace that only comes through the shedding of blood. It's a peace that only comes by the washing away of our sin and our guilt, by receiving a righteousness that is not our own and that we do not deserve.

Peace that only comes through this baby Jesus who is born to die so that we might live. This is what we're going to sing about at the end when we sing Hark the Herald Angels sing this refrain. Mild he lays his glory by. Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give them second birth. This is the glory of God.

So let's consider then that third glory. The glory that we see in the response of the shepherds. The shepherds receive this message from the angels.

They hurry off to see what the Lord had told them about and verse 20 it says the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told.

[16:02] Now we see here that the shepherds they witnessed the glory of God in this infant baby Jesus and it says it leads them to glorify God. So you see while God's glory it can refer to his presence it can refer to his essence it also describes the appropriate response of God's people to respond in worship.

These shepherds were the first to be told of this Messiah's birth and how do they respond? They go immediately to Bethlehem they see this baby Jesus they tell others what they saw and they glorify God.

when we see God's glory it should compel us also to give God glory because remember these shepherds they didn't have the full story right?

They were told a limited amount of information by those angels that they would find the baby wrapped in swath and clothes lying in a manger. They weren't told how this baby would be their savior.

They didn't have the benefit of hearing him preach or seeing his miracles performed. They didn't know how he would live or die or rise from the dead and yet they're still compelled to give him glory.

[17:14] And so consider our own situation. We know the full story. We have the gospel message. We have God's word that tells us this good news that the son of God humbled himself was born of a poor virgin in a stable.

As a child he was a refugee raised by peasants. When he began his ministry he was rejected by his hometown despised by religious leaders. When he traveled it was on foot usually with no shelter and no food and no provision all the while journeying to the cross where he would pay the penalty for your sin and mine.

We know the full story. How much more ought we to receive this good news and respond with glory to God? God. Because when we think about glory the ultimate goal of God displaying his glory is that he may receive glory.

The ultimate goal of his revealing his glorious plan to us of him extending his glorious grace to us is that we may respond with glory to God. Paul says in Ephesians 1 he says we have been chosen and adopted and redeemed to the praise of his glory.

And so the reality is is that night that song that that angels those angels sang it's a song that has not ceased. It's a song that continues today in the heavenly places among God's people it's a song that we should look forward to participating in at Christ's return that we will glorify God with all the saints as it says in Revelation 19 then I heard what sounded like a great multitude like the roar of rushing waters like the loud peals of thunder shouting hallelujah for our Lord God almighty reigns let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory is this not the same song that the angels sang this is the eternal song of the redeemed this is the song that we too shall sing so I say see the baby born in Bethlehem he is the Messiah born for your salvation and mine so the invitation