

What difference has looking made?

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Date: 27 December 2020

Preacher: John Woods

[0:00] Good morning and welcome to this pre-recorded time of worship. On Sunday morning of 27th of December, we are Calvary Evangelical Church.

! We are an independent, reformed Baptist church based on the south coast of England in the town of Brighton. If you are listening in for the first time this morning, we extend a particularly warm welcome to you.

And we hope that you will be blessed by hearing God's word preached this morning. My name is Jerome. I'm a member of the church and will be introducing today.

John Wood is going to be our speaker and John is the ex-pastor of Lansing Tabernacle. John will be preaching from Luke 1 and that wonderful portion of scripture where the shepherds have that encounter with the angels.

And then they go out and seek the Christ. And his sermon is going to be called What Difference Does Looking Make? So we look forward to hearing from John a little bit later.

[1:08] I hope you had a good, peaceful and joyful Christmas. The build up to Christmas this year has certainly been a week of many changes and much disappointment for many people.

It's been a lot of upheaval. And there have been further restrictions from seeing family, from seeing loved ones, from seeing friends. And I think it's fair to say for most of us, this has been a very different Christmas.

We think particularly for those who have been lonely, isolated, particularly the elderly that haven't been able to get out and see family. This is likely to have been a really difficult time.

And with that in mind, I think it's really helpful for us to focus on that which is unchanging, that that is dependable, that that is solid and that that is eternal.

The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and our immutable God. An Old Testament prophet Malachi said, For I, the Lord, do not change.

[2:25] Therefore, you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. You may be feeling wearied, fearful, anxious or uncertain of the future.

But there is comfort. There is wonderful comfort in our Saviour and in our God. Another Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, prophesied to the people of Judah around 700 years before the coming of Christ.

And he said, comfort, comfort, comfort, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended.

But her iniquity is pardoned that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

There's no greater comfort than the wonderful Christmas message of Emmanuel.

God with us. The second person of the Trinity. The eternally pre-existent Christ.

[3:32] The one who is co-eternal, co-essential and co-equal with God. Has become enfleshed, incarnate and dwelled among his people.

And dwells among us by his spirit. We've heard a lot of late about social distancing. Well, our God has come as close as you can get.

God with us. Becoming dependent. A helpless babe. Subject to our infirmities. Our weaknesses and our limitations.

But without sin. Let's hold these thoughts in mind as we sing our first song. Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

[4:46] Glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth and mercy mild. God and sinners reconciled.

Joyful all you nations rise. Join the triumph of the skies. Christ by highest heaven adored.
Christ by highest heaven adored.

Christ the everlasting Lord. Late in time behold him come. Offspring of a virgin's womb.
Nailed in flesh the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate deity. Pleased as man with us to dwell.

[6:05] Jesus our Emmanuel. Hark the herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn King.

Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace. Hail the Son of righteousness. Light and life to all he brings.
Risen with healing in his wings. Mild he lays his glory by. Born that we no more may die.
Born to raise us from the earth. Born to give us second birth. Hark the herald angels sing.
Glory to the newborn King. Come desire of nations come.

[7:18] Make in us your humble home. Rise the woman's conquering sea. Rise the woman's conquering sea. Bruise in us the serpent's head.

Adam's likeness now effaced. Stand your image in its place. Second Adam from above.
Give us life. Impart your love. Hark the herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn King.
Amen. Let's focus our hearts and our minds on our Saviour and bow our heads in prayer. Father in heaven.

You are the forever blessed, infinite, eternal and unchanging God. God. We praise you for your greatness, your majesty, your holiness, your infinite worthiness.

[8:32] It's the one full of splendor, beauty, wisdom, light, power and glory. Father in heaven.

Father in heaven. Father in heaven. We've been affected by so many changes. So much uncertainty. Things that are beyond our control.

We can become fearful of the Lord. God. God. This reminds us of our finite creatureliness. Our limitations. But Father, we remember that you are unchanging.

You are the same yesterday, today and forevermore. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you have entered into our world and you became a true man.

And in doing so, not changing in your divine essence, but by taking to yourself human nature. You sympathize and understand with our weakness, our need, our frailty.

[9:41] And you bring full salvation to needy sinners. Lord, please remember those, those among us who are suffering. Those who are unwell.

Those who are lonely. Those who feel mentally and spiritually low. Lord, please remember. With your tender mercies and care.

Would you grant those much comfort at this time? And thank you. We thank you so much that you came to save sinners like us.

To save your people. We thank you for the good news of the incarnation and the gospel. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And we have seen his glory. Glory of the only son from the father. Full of grace and truth. Oh Lord, may we this morning see that glory once again.

[10:48] And like the shepherds that we'll hear about in a moment. May we see salvation. In this child that was born. In this Christ, our saviour. And we pray these things in Jesus' precious and strong name.

Amen. Amen. Our next song is from the squalor of a borrowed stable. From the squalor of a borrowed stable.

By the spirit and the virgin's faith. To the anguish and the shame of scandal. Came the saviour of the human race.

But the skies were filled with the praise of him. Shepherds listen as the angels tell. As the gift of God come down to man.

At the dawning of Emmanuel. King of heaven. King of heaven. Now the friend of sinners. King of heaven.

[12:09] Now the friend of sinners. Humble servant in the Father's hands.

Filled with power and the Holy Spirit. Filled with mercy for the broken man. Yes, He walked my road and He felt my pain, joys and sorrows that I know so well. Yet His righteous steps give me hope again. I will follow my Emmanuel.

Amen. He fights for breath, He fights for me, loosing sinners from the claims of hell. And with a count, our souls are free, death defeated by Emmanuel.

Now He's standing in the place of honour, crowned with glory on the highest throne. Amen. Thank you so much for your welcome again here to Calvary Church. I've been very pleased to share with you during this year in different services and very privileged to be speaking on this last Sunday morning at the end of 2020.

[14:52] Be very nice to meet some of you in person at some point, maybe God willing in 2021. What a strange year 2020 has been. Characterised by uncertainty, fear, so many dark moments, so many challenging moments.

In the last few days, people have gathered together for their Christmas time. Some had expected to travel some distance, spending five days with their family.

That's been reduced to one. And people have wondered whether Christmas itself would be something that they could really enjoy and celebrate and enter into.

Glenn Scrivener has said that Covid cannot cancel Christmas. It is the context for Christmas, because here is where Christmas shines.

It shines in the dark. It reminds me of Psalm 139 that tells us that even the darkness is not as dark to you.

[16:07] God has come into our world of darkness. He has come and shone his light into the dark places so that we can see the truth.

We can experience reality and freedom. What a joyful message that is as we come to this Christmas season. But as we do look back at the past year, it's important to reflect, are we wiser and deeper as a result?

I thought for the day recently, the contributor spoke about opening up his brand new 2021 desk diary and placing it next to his 2020 desk diary.

And he said that the 2020 desk diary was an itinerary of the crossed out, the cancelled and the postponed.

We've all felt a little bit of that, haven't we? Plans that have been dashed. Hopes and dreams that have been shattered. We've all experienced disappointment.

[17:27] We have all felt let down. We've all asked questions. Some of us have asked questions about what God's plans are.

Maybe some of us even thought, is there a God in all of this chaos?

Are you a wiser and deeper person as a result of the experiences of this year? The ups and the downs, the twists and the turns, the gut wrenching disappointment and pain.

Are you wiser? Are you deeper? Have you been changed by these things? At Christmas time for the last 30 years or so, I've read a sermon with the title, What difference has looking made?

It's a sermon preached by Francis Schaeffer in a book called Ash Heap Lives. And it's a sermon on the shepherds and their response to the life changing event of the angels coming to them and giving them the news of the coming of baby Jesus.

[18:46] And Schaeffer thinks about, you know, what practical things would have changed in their lives after they had gone to see Jesus.

Were they wiser? Were they deeper? In what way were they changed by the experience? We do know that they were convinced.

The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Luke's very interested in being convinced. Luke chapter one, verses one to four, tells us that Luke lays out his gospel with this intention that we might be convinced of what we believe.

We might be sure of what we believe. And what an important thing that is. Here we're told that the shepherds are convinced that what they have seen is exactly what the angels have said to them.

[20:00] They're not disappointed. They don't feel as though somehow there's been an over promise and an under delivery. They have been promised something of great significance.

And they believe that having gone to see the baby Jesus, that what they've been promised has indeed been delivered to them and to the world.

It has an impact on them and it will have an impact upon others. They want to draw attention to this fact. They are convinced. Now, of course, we need to remember that the shepherds were ordinary working men.

They were men who, like men in the 21st century, are not easily convinced. Who are not perhaps natural contenders for being excited about God.

But here are these ordinary men truly excited about God. And not only excited about him, but talking about him. One of the privileges over the last 20 years or so in Lansing is to see a number of men becoming Christians.

[21:17] Particularly men whose wives had been Christians for some time before their husbands were converted. And it was interesting to see the transition.

Men who kind of avoided the conversation about God, who avoided coming to church. Or if they came to church, surrounded themselves with strategies of avoidance and evasion.

Suddenly being softened and opened to the reality of Jesus Christ. What an exciting thing it was to baptise some of those men and to hear their testimony.

To hear them suddenly talk about the Jesus they had avoided for so long. Here are ordinary men, ordinary shepherds, who within their working day context, have allowed space in their minds and their hearts to explore the possibility that God is at work in the world.

For men and ordinary men, the idea of God is an unusual thing. Something between the tooth fairy and the man on the moon. Not something that they particularly give much credence to.

[22:34] Not something that they leave very much room in their hearts or minds for. Just simply on the back burner at best. We just don't want to go there.

We don't do religion. We don't do God. We don't do politics. We just want to avoid those things. But they are excited.

We're told there in verse 14 and 15. Because something has happened. Let's go to Bethlehem and see what has happened there.

Something has happened. They're excited because of a space time event. The reality that something has happened.

Now they don't have an awful lot to go on. All they've been told by the angels is that they will see this sign. Verse 12. A baby wrapped in cloths laying in a manger.

[23:36] It's a very unusual sign. There would have been babies born probably. Around about the time that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. But none of them would have been wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger.

It was an unusual circumstance. Just imagine in the car park of Worthing or Brighton Hospital. A pig trough with straw in it.

And instead of a baby being born in the maternity ward. Being born in a car park and laid in a trough. That would certainly get the attention of the Brighton Argus.

It would certainly get the attention of the local news. It would be very unusual. And it was an unusual sign. But it wasn't much was it? It wasn't an indication that this Jesus was somehow special.

There was no kind of evidence there that he was going to become the person that he would become. There was no feel for the amazing teaching that he was going to give.

[24:44] There was no feel for the astonishing miracles that he performed. There was no understanding of the perfect character that he displayed. Or the amazing act of self-sacrifice of him dying upon the cross.

There was no inkling as they looked at that baby in the manger of the triumph over the tomb when Jesus was raised from the dead. Just a baby.

Wrapped in cloths. Laying in a manger. An unusual sign. Yet a sign. You know sometimes when people point into the distance when they're walking their dog.

They point for the dog to perhaps go and fetch a stick. The dog will not look at the stick but look at the finger.

They look at the finger that's pointing to the stick. And sometimes you know we have a finger in scripture pointing to something. And we don't notice what it's pointing to.

[25:51] We just look at the finger. And we can kind of get a little bit absorbed by the details of the Christmas story. That we forget to see the Jesus at the heart of the Christmas story.

It's interesting that in Luke. We read in Luke 53. 23 verse 53 rather. That then he took it down.

The body of Jesus. And wrapped it in linen cloth. And placed it in a tomb. Cut in a rock. One in which no one had yet been laid. It's interesting how the language of the end of Luke. Mirrors the language of Luke chapter 2. It's almost as if Luke is saying. That baby. Laying in the manger wrapped in cloth. Is the same one who. Now is being laid. In a tomb. The tomb from which. He will rise. Triumphant. Almost as if Luke is saying.

[26:52] The same simplicity. The same. Apparently ambiguous. Sign. Sign. Of ordinariness. Is being displayed to show how.

Extraordinary. This person is. An ordinary sign. Rough cloth. Babyness. In a manger. Is the sign that says.

Here is something. Really significant for you. Shepherds. Here is something that is. Truly. Life. Changing. Breathtaking. Let's go.

They say. Let's go. And see. This something. Which has happened. This space time event. That is going to change us. And change. The world.

Let's. Go. C.S. Lewis said. That once. In our world. A stable. Had something in it. That was bigger than our.

[27:50] Whole world. And that's right. Isn't it? It's right. The stable in Bethlehem. Had within it. Something that was bigger than the whole world. And in that's.

In that manger. The. Baby. Wrapped in cloths. There was a gift. That was greater than any gift. That has come into our world. A person. Greater than any person who come into the world.

Jesus. Was being born. Today. In the city of David. A saviour has been born. Who is Christ the Lord. Don't be afraid.

For this one has been born to you. Something very. Very special. Indeed. So.

We read that they are convinced. And then we read that they are. Communicating. Something. Of. Great. Importance. Luke doesn't record the conversation between.

[28:48] Mary and Joseph. And the shepherds. Um. One assumes that they didn't just. Barge in. And take a look. Like people. Wandering around.

A national trust property. And then. Just. File out. Without saying a word. One. Assumes that. Something. Was said. Or maybe it was one of those moments where.

Nothing needed to be said. That. The atmosphere of. God being at work in the world. God being at work in Mary and Joseph. And in the shepherds.

Was just so obvious. That there was no. Need for. Explanation. Just simply. A knowing nod. Yes. We know. We know that something special.

Is happening. Here. Maybe just an odd wonder. In the presence. Of the living God. I remember. One of the first meetings.

[29:45] I went to. When I. Became a Christian. Was a meeting. Addressed by a man. Called Jeffrey Bull. Who was a. Missionary. In Tibet. In the middle. Of the 20th century.

And he was talking about. These experiences. Of. Being imprisoned. By. The Chinese invaders. In Tibet. In 1950. And he.

He talks about. Being taken. With. With a group of people. And horses. Across the mountains. On the 24th of December. 1950. And they arrived in a.

Mountain village. At 430 in the afternoon. And he had the responsibility. Of looking after the horses. But first. He. Was. Taken to the room.

Where he was going to stay. And. Unusually. He said. The room was. Beautifully swept. Clean. It was a warm. And. Clean room. Where he was going to sleep.

[30:47] And. He. He rested for a while. After the. After the busy journey. But then. When it got dark. He had to go down. And. Look after the horses. For a while.

Make sure that they were. Safe. And. And well. And that they'd been well fed. And he went down. And he said that he. Stepped into the. The dark stable.

And the. The muck. In the stable. Squelched. Under his. Wellington boots. And he did. The things. And he did.

That he needed. For the horses. And was thinking. That he would. To return. To that warm. Dry. Room. In that. Tibetan.

House. And then he remembered. What day it was. He remembered. It was Christmas Eve. And he thought to himself. Well. That first Christmas Eve. My Savior was born.

[31:44] In this place like this. My Savior came from heaven. To earth. To save me. He was born. In a place. Like this. I returned.

To my. Clean. Warm. Room. Very thankful. I bowed. In thankfulness. Because. He. Had come. And that's what the. Shepherds. Communicated. They communicated. That. Jesus had come.

When they had seen him. They. Spread the word. About. Concerning. What had been told. Them about this child.

Verse. 17. And all who heard it. Were. Amazed. The shepherds. Were. The first evangelists. It's a remarkable thing.

[32:41] Remarkable. Because. Shepherds. Were not. Allowed. To be witnesses in court. Apparently. Yet. They are. Witnesses. Concerning the coming of the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus. Into the world. They had no status. They had no. Obvious ability. As public speakers. And yet. They.

Do. Tell the news. About Jesus. They spontaneously. Tell this news. To the people that they meet. On their way. And on their way back.

From. Seeing. Seeing. Jesus. Spontaneously. Something happens to us. When. Something happens to us.

When the gospel. Has an impact upon us. When Jesus. Suddenly becomes very real. In our experience. We can't help telling. People. About that. There's a certain spontaneity.

[33:37] About it. What's up with you then? What are you smiling about? What's the difference about you? Jesus. Is different. About me. These shepherds.

Were the first ones. Who were able to say. We have seen Jesus. We felt the impact of Jesus. In our lives. We know. That what God says.

Is true. And we know. Know that from. Now on. Everything. Is going to be. Different. The people. Were amazed.

And. Perhaps for some of them. That meant. That they thought. The shepherds. Were just saying. Blah. Blah. They were puzzled. By what was said. But some of them.

Must have been. Just truly intrigued. Wow. We don't normally hear. These kind of things. From these kinds of men. The fact that.

[34:32] These men. Are talking about this. Points to the. Reality. That within. That crib. That they're talking about. Um. Is. The most explosive.

Truth. In the whole world. That that baby. Lying there. In the crib. Is truly. The king. Of the world. And might be. The king. Of. Our. Lives. The shepherds. Communicated. The news. Now this year. Um. One of the. Best bits of news. Was the. News that a vaccine. Had been. Discovered. Discovered. A number of vaccines. Have been discovered.

And that they. Um. Showed a. Particular efficacy. That their. Um. Their strike rate. In terms of. Um. Helping people. Was.

[35:28] Extremely high. Vaccine. That was. Remarkably. Good news. But every year. The most remarkable. Good news. Is that Jesus Christ.

Has come into the world. A vaccine. Might. Keep us safe. For a year or so. It might fend off death. For a while. But we will.

All die. Jesus Christ. Has come to live. And to die. And to rise. So that we might. Live. Not. For another year. But live forever. Live forever. In fellowship. With him. With his joy. With his peace. With newfound hope. In Christ.

And finally. We. We see that the. The shepherds. Um. Returned. Celebrating. The shepherds. Returned. Glorifying.

[36:24] And praising. God. For all the things. They had heard. And seen. Which were just. As they had been told. One of the remarkable. Things

about. Luke chapter one. And two.

Is. How many. Songs. And prayers. Are recorded. The Holy Spirit. At work. Within. The main characters. In. These first two chapters.

In. Luke's gospel. Seems to prompt. Um. A great. Tsunami. Of. Praise to God. It's almost like. Going through the.

Um. The set of. Hamilton. The musical. Or. Oklahoma. Or. Mamma Mia. People. Burst out into song. Suddenly people are.

Um. Exclaiming the praises. Of God. Angels. Men. Women. People. Priests in the temple. Shepherds. On the hillside.

[37:20] It's remarkable. That. Uh. That. They are able to celebrate in this way. Because they've got something to celebrate. It's not much ado about nothing.

This is. The real. Deal. They rejoice because God has been at work. And that's what we see in scripture. We see that when God is at work.

God's people sing. Exodus 14. 15. Deuteronomy 32. Judges. 5. The book of Psalms. The book of Isaiah. The book of Revelation.

When. We see God at work. When we see the reality of God in our experience. God's people. Sing. His praises.

They returned. Glorifying. And praising God. For all the things they had heard and seen. Which were just. As they. Had. Been. Told.

[38:22] Were they wiser? Were they deeper? As a result of seeing? Well I think so. They were. Different people. They returned to their. Hillside. We returned to our offices.

Our classrooms. Our neighborhoods. Our homes. Our neighborhoods. Our homes. Are we wiser? Deeper? Are we different? As a result of. Thinking about who Jesus is.

And thinking about. His reality. In our lives. Today. They've been told. In the town of David. A saviour has been born to you.

He is Christ the Lord. That's why they celebrated. Here is a message. For real people. In real places. In real time. The shepherds realized. That they were. Part of the story.

They had a part. In the story. Of God. They were the kind of people. That Jesus. Came. To save. Today. For you. For you. For you.

[39:19] For you. For you. For you. For you. For you. For you. For you. For you. For you. For you. For you. For you.

For you. For you. For you. For you. For you. For you. Yes. What Jesus. Has come to bring. Is available.

Today. For you. You can experience. His truth. His love. His forgiveness. His promise. His promise. Of new life. His promise. That his love. will drive away. Your fear. God. Penetrates.

The defensive armor. Of. Our world. By sending. His son. As a baby. Into the world.

[40:14] Sending him. Not to the world. Connected. And established. But sending him. To the ordinary. The shepherd. It's an indication.

That you don't need. To be. Particularly qualified. To become a Christian. All you need. To do. Is. Come to Jesus Christ. Trust in him.

And receive. His gift. Like these. Men. Did. What difference. Did. Looking. Make. Well it made.

All the difference. In the world. It made a difference. To the way. That they. Thought. About life. The gospel. Is only.

Good news. If it is. True news. And the thing. That these men. Were particularly. Excited about. Was that. What they had been. Told.

[41:09] Was true. They had seen. With their own eyes. What the angels. Had announced. This is true. We can declare. That the message.

Is. True. They were confident. In passing on. The message of Jesus. Because. They were convinced. That it was true.

They had. Evidence. Evidence. That. Brought. The verdict. That. God is true. Message. Is.

Truly. Good. News. They were different. In their feelings. Their. Religious. Affections.

Verse 20. Is a description. Of the heart. Set. Free. A heart. Set. Free. To worship. A heart. Set.

[42:04] Free. To send her. Not upon. Our. Desires. But. The desire. Of God. A focus. Upon. Him.

Rather than. The focus. Ourselves. Focus. Upon. Him. As the center. Of everything. The center. Of the universe. Acting.

Differently. Francis Schaeffer. In his sermon. Imagines. What might happen. If one of these shepherds. Suddenly meets. Another person. Perhaps someone who.

He's. Not had a good relationship with. Who perhaps. Begins to. Curse. And. Ridicule him. The faith. That he now declares. In the old days.

The shepherd. Might well have used. His fist. To settle the argument. But maybe now. There are other options. The one who has seen. The creator. Enter his world.

[43:01] As a baby. Suddenly realizes. Things can be accomplished. Not. By power. And status. But by.

Gentleness. That a quiet answer. Can turn away. Wrath.

Because. These shepherds. Had seen. God's. Quiet. Gentle. Answer. Jesus. And. Jesus. Has come.

In order to turn. Away. The wrath of God. Against us. And turn away. Our wrath. And indifference. Towards. God. God.

Jesus. The whisper. The baby. Wrapped. In cloths. And laying. In a manger. Is God's. Power. Expressed.

[43:58] In weakness. God's. Rule. Expressed. In gentleness. The one who has come. To conquer. Our souls.

By his tenderness. And his sacrifice. For us. Upon. The cross. The cross. Sometimes. Someone comes into your life.

So unexpectedly. Take your heart by surprise. And changes your life. Forever. That's what happened to the shepherds. What about you? Could. Christmas. 2020. At the end of this horrendous year.

Be the moment where you. See Jesus. Slip gently. Into your life. By his grace. Let's pray. Heavenly Father. We come to you. And thank you. For the reality. That Jesus Christ.

Is our Lord. And Savior. We thank you. That he is. And thank you. That Jesus Christ. Is our Lord. And Savior. We thank you. That he is. That he is.

[44:55] Born. Into our world. That we might see. Your truth. Your love. Your saving purpose. That we might have hope. In a world that seems so often.

Very hopeless. Help us father. those who know Jesus. To be wiser and deeper. Deeper. To take these realities on board. Help us we pray. To those who know Jesus. To be wiser and deeper. To be wiser and deeper. To be wiser and deeper. To be wiser and deeper. To be wiser and deeper. To be wiser.

To be wiser. To be wiser. To be wiser. To be wiser and deeper. be wiser and deeper because we know him, wiser and deeper in our responses to the changing circumstances of life. Father God, we know that many listening today will have burdens from this past year and fears for the coming year. Father God, we think of the message of the angels to the shepherds, do not fear. Oh Father, we pray that you would calm the fears of those who are gathered here today. And Father God, we would pray too that the attention of all of us will be drawn to the one born that day in Bethlehem. We pray that we might by faith see him as the Saviour born for us and that today we might respond to him.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive a King.

[47:06] Let every heart prepare him room. And heaven and nature sing. And heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the earth, the Saviour raised. Your sweetest songs employ. While fields and streams and hills and plains.

■ He comes to make His blessings flow, where Eden's curse is found, where Eden's curse is found. He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness, the wonders of His love, the wonders of His love.