

# Praise And Probe

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[ 0 : 00 ] Everybody knows and loves the story of the shepherds and the angels because it seems so safe. Shepherds are gathered round a fire in the coldness of a Palestinian night when suddenly the lights of the sky shine like even the most brilliant of northern lights displays.

Heaven comes to earth and the songs of the angels sound in the fields of the Judean desert. It's the perfect story to keep us warm on a winter's night, right?

Cold fields, snow even, bright sky, cozy stable. What's not to like about this story?

Well, nothing really. Unless, first of all, you count out the coldness of a Palestinian night. For Jesus, of course, wasn't really born on a northern European midwinter night when the snow lay deep, crisp and even.

I was born and brought up about 80 miles from Bethlehem. And trust me, I never saw a wink of snow there all the way through the year.

[ 1 : 18 ] We don't really know what time of year Jesus was born at all. The important, well, the important thing then, okay, forget the time of year. The shepherds and the angels. So nice, so inoffensive.

Well, again, I'm hardly the Grinch who stole Christmas, right? You'll all know that. But even I know that angels are very far from the safe fairy type figures they're made out to be.

They are not cute. They are fierce heavenly warriors, the mighty hosts of God whose appearance strikes terror into the hearts of men.

They are the executors of God's justice. So they're very far from being safe and cozy. Okay, so it's not a winter night and the angels aren't cute.

Well, what about the shepherds? Because shepherds, I mean, we all know shepherds, right?

They're just cute men who love to cuddle cute wee lambs. Is that what shepherds are?

[ 2 : 16 ] What a lovely picture. Well, probably not. When you pick up the image of shepherds from the Old Testament, these were rough men. They're used to fighting wild animals.

Shepherds, the shepherds of Jesus' day were the equivalent of the Irish travelers of our day. Not that I want to offend anyone who is of that stock. Shall we say men who use their fists to settle arguments, not their trunks?

So I guess I'm kind of deconstructing that nice cozy picture we have of the shepherds and the angels. Because actually nothing about our passage here is safe.

In fact, the more you come to terms with what happened that night out in the fields in Bethlehem, the more unsettled you begin to feel.

This passage challenges us with the realities of the natural and supernatural worlds. Far from being comfortable and cozy, this story destroys the respectable edifice of human capability.

[ 3 : 28 ] Replacing it rather with the story of divine initiative, divine grace, and divine power. My hope is that at the end of this sermon today, our response will not be a cozy sigh, but a convicted heart.

Not a prelude to a lovely snooze this afternoon, but the preparation for a new life where the realities of the natural and supernatural world become your reality.

Nothing's ever the same again. In short, I pray that this story from the word of God would bring you to the stable of our Lord in Bethlehem, filling your hearts and your minds with worship.

Now our passage begins today. We're not going to be having points today. I'm just going to be talking through this passage. Our passage today begins with the shepherds out in their fields, looking after their flocks.

They're watching out for predators, for strays. That's what their job description is. They're to look after the sheep. The reality is we don't really know what these shepherds were doing when the

angels appeared.

[ 4 : 39 ] Were they playing the equivalent of a game of cards? Were they having an arm wrestling contest? We really don't know. What we do know is that these shepherds would not have made particularly civilized company for any of us.

They were rough men with calloused hands. They were used to fighting. They were the Georgian equivalent of American cowboys.

But then in verse 20, these very same shepherds, tough guys, they returned to their fields glorifying and praising God. The night begins with them thinking only of themselves and their sheep.

The night ends with their minds and their hearts filled with the glory of the worship of God. Change has come about in these hardened men. Their faces previously looked downward and angry.

Their faces now look upwards and worshipful. Nothing would ever be the same for them again. And then you have the angels. As I said earlier, the angels aren't the fictional fairy figures we so often think they are.

[ 5 : 53 ] We say of the most inoffensive child, a new baby perhaps, always the face of an angel. And by that we mean, he wouldn't hurt a fly, he's cute.

But the reality could not be more different. Angels are fierce creatures. Their appearance is described for us in the Old Testament.

They're called the seraphim, the burning ones. That's what that word means, seraphim. They burn with the reflected glory of God.

One of the meanings of that word, seraph, in Hebrew, is the impact that a viper bite has upon you, a snake bite. It makes you burn inside.

The burning ones, the seraphim reflecting the glory of God. In the Old Testament, they destroy armies, they flatten mountains, they wreak a terrifying devastation on the world of men.

[ 6 : 56 ] They judge the fallen angels, and they cast them into the fiery abyss of hell. And whenever you encounter an angel in the Bible, there is always terror on the part of even the greatest and hardest of men.

Whenever a man meets an angel, he falls to the ground and chews the dust of the earth. Think of the mightiest of human weapons, the greatest of human powers.

They are as nothing compared to even the weakest of these angels. Each of the angels have enough power to carry a planet on its back and carry it supersonic from one side of the universe to the other.

And look too. They appear in the sky. And there's millions of them. And they look for all the world like 10,000 flying fortresses illuminating the heavens in a greater light display than any aurora.

And what is it they're doing? What great activity are they engaged in? Are they making war on the legions of Rome? No, we read in verse 13, they are praising God for that is their greatest role.

[ 8 : 17 ] They are giving praise, glory, and worship to the Lord God of heaven. The supernatural light show in the Judean skies with the cataclysmic cry of heaven come down to earth.

Give glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men upon whom his favor rests. And so here in this passage you have heaven's highest and earth's hardest joining together as one.

Giving united praise and glory to God. For one brief moment everything is as it should be.

Everything is as it's created to be. The heavens and the earth connected by worship.

As we read in the book of Psalms, let everything that has breath, angels and beasts and human beings give glory to the Lord.

This is how it should be. This is how God created our world to be. The whole of the created order both natural and supernatural reflecting back to God the praises of their glory.

[ 9 : 30 ] glory. We are never more like the shepherds and the angels the hardest the highest of heaven and the hardest of earth than when we're engaged in praising God and thought and word and in deed.

Whenever we lift up our voice in praises as we've done three times already and we'll do again at the end of the service we capture again for that moment that great light and sound display on the plains of Bethlehem.

Never mind Glasgow worship with Christians on a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening you'll get a better display of heavenly lights than you could ever imagine.

The lights of worship the sounds of praise. But what is it that elicits the praise of both heaven and earth?

What is of such universal importance that both the highest of heaven and the hardest of earth join together in worship? It is the announcement made from heaven itself as we read in verse 10 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 saviour who is Christ the Lord.

[10:54] The reason for all this furore of praise and worship is found here the birth of a child saviour Christ the Lord. The praises of the heavens and the earth doesn't focus on the majesty of the planets and their orbits around the stars not on the depths of the oceans not on the splendor of human palaces not the greatness of the great armies of this world every eye is focused on a stable where a young mother is holding close to her her infant child.

Now there may be one or two of you who remember this I think probably there are I think I remember Colin Mackay telling me about it and I think Cathy Fraser remembers it as well. During the second world war searchlights from the ground would cast their beams high up into the night time sky searching for enemy bombers and I guess these searchlights would crisscross each other until the sky became somewhat of a chessboard with a hundred searchlights all pointing in different directions at this Heinkel and this German bomber.

Now here in Luke chapter 2 verses 8 through 20 the innumerable searchlights of praise and worship are all fixed on a baby born in Bethlehem who is Christ the Lord.

Ah would that all our eyes were fixed on the same place this Christmas. Would that we could pull our eyes and our hearts away from News 24 and daily entertainment from the moronic Omicron variant from the worries of this world and our own personal circumstances would that for just a few minutes we could wrench them away from our anxieties and our worries and fix them on the baby's birth the Saviour Christ the Lord ah change your outlook transforming your woes to worship and your panic to praise but notice and this is the main theme of the point the praises of the angels and the shepherds follow on from the birth of the child in Bethlehem verses 8 and 20 follow verses 1 to 7 what comes first is God's activity what follows on is our praise what comes first is the coming of Jesus what follows on is our worship

God's saving activity comes first it always comes first and is then followed by our response of praise and worship we glorify him and we worship him on account of what he has done to save us and this is where the message of the shepherds and the angels here moves on from the cozy story I suppose we thought it once was to the challenging discomfort if as the angel announces the child born in Bethlehem Christ the Lord is to be the saviour as he's talked about in verse 11 the one who saves us then what does he save us from what's the need for Jesus from what did we from what did we need saved such that

[14:32] God had to send Christ the Lord you see the story of the shepherds and the angel it confronts humankind with the two most unsettling truths in all our history the first is we need to be saved the second is we can't save ourselves only heaven can do that if we didn't need to be saved then God wouldn't have sent Christ to save us and if we could have saved ourselves then God would not have needed to send Christ the Lord to save us if no one ever got sick there'd be no need for hospitals Christmas is sold as a time of unblemished joy you know even from the beginning of November I watched a Christmas advert for the jewelry chain jewelry store Pandora where it's all hugs and kisses and warmth and expensive presents and family hugs and turkey and the birth of Jesus at Christmas challenges us challenges this cozy view of Christmas with the stark reality that all those smiling actors pretending to be happy together with all the rest of humanity need to be saved and cannot save themselves the praise we offer at Christmas is because God has sent his son Jesus Christ to be our savior to do something which it's impossible for any of us to do to save ourselves but tell me what is it we need to be saved from well in verse 14 the angel talks about the birth of Christ in these terms on earth peace on earth peace Christ has been born a savior has come to bring peace from heaven to earth or more accurately to make peace between heaven and earth here is the unsettling and troubling truth of this passage there can be no peace between us and

God without Christ the Lord listen to that again there can be no peace between us and God without Christ the Lord he has come to reconcile heaven and earth to save us from the consequences of our estrangement from God the problem is this not so much the darkness in which the shepherds were sitting that night arm wrestling but the darkness in the hearts of each of these shepherds brought about by their own personal sinfulness however dark it gets on the outside this is nothing compared to how dark it is on the inside of us how dark and our sinful hearts have become you

know some of us buy rain jackets seeing if any of you got them on today I don't think so with hydrophobic coverings that means the rain doesn't soak into our jackets it rolls off hydrophobic coverings we have developed hearts which are theophobic godphobic hearts hearts which repel the love of god and his righteousness hearts which resent our accountability to god and his call for lordship over us we go our own way we turn our backs on god and this is the starkness of this passage for all the imagery of happy families when it comes to god and humanity we ain't a happy family we are at war with god we will not have this one to rule over us we will not be loved by him we will not obey him we will not be fathered by him and this is precisely what christ the lord has come to save us from the very sins which estrange us from the god who loves us the very sins which repel us from him the world is in darkness without the christ born in the stable the world is lost in sin without hope and without god there is no reason for praise and for worship no song for the shepherds to sing lest it should be of the first few words of robert mary mcshane's jehovah said kenya i once was a stranger to grace and to god i knew not my danger and felt not my load but now god has acted he has sent his son born of the blessed virgin in a stable in bethlehem christ the lord our savior though he is the one offended by our sin he loves us so much that he sends a savior to deal with our sin and lostness from him a savior who is christ the lord here is a child who growing up as one of us will die a sinner's death on the cross sacrificing himself to take all our sin and guilt away so you see the praise of the angels and the shepherds follow on from the announcement of the birth of the child jesus this is what makes that announcement such good news for them and for us this is what draws the praise of the highest of heaven and the hardest of men it is the birth of jesus which fixes all the spotlights of heaven and on earth upon it all the praises of heaven and earth like a thousand world war two searchlights zero in upon this most ordinary and yet most unlikely of occurrences what man could not do by virtue of our inner sin and weakness god has done by sending his son in the likeness of sinful human flesh as a baby in bethlehem who in time will grow up to be the sacrificial lamb who will take away the sins of the world by his death on the cross here then for us all is the good news of the gospel that by faith in jesus christ we can be saved from our sin and our guilt our misery and our darkness by faith in jesus christ we can have hope in him and through him we can have peace with god we can be rid of the feet of death god has reconciled the world to himself through christ our lord and faith makes it ours god has reconciled the world to himself through christ the lord and faith has made it ours we'll come back to this at the end but notice for whom the birth of jesus is good news in verse 10 for all the people for all the people as we continue to go through luke act go through luke act over the next number of months and years we're going to meet all different kinds of people for whom the coming of jesus is good news lepers the blind the demon possessed the dead we're going to meet rich people and we're going to meet poor people and middle class people we're going to meet men and we're going to meet women we're going to meet asians europeans africans we're going to meet jews and gentiles slaves and free the gospel of jesus christ isn't just for righteous people like zechariah and elizabeth joseph and mary it's for gentiles like luke and the philippian jailer it's for prisoners and for soldiers and for slaves and for wealthy landowners remember luke's writing to a church the early church which is largely made up of both christian jews and christian gentiles sometimes those christian jews treated their gentile brothers as second class citizens purely on the basis that they weren't ethnically jewish the coming of jesus christ is good news for all the people not just those who are ethnically pure and religiously clean but for the off scourings and the outcasts of this world the gospel is the great equalizer the gospels the great equalizer we do not even know for sure whether the shepherds to whom those angels appeared were ethnic jews or ethnic gentiles we don't know but one thing is for sure the gospel of jesus christ is for all people palestine or pakistan scotland or the states china or kenya jesus christ is for us all but what then shall we say by way of conclusion to all this how can we apply the teaching of this passage a passage which i preached to you during my ministry in glasgow city ten times so far that's why perhaps today has been a bit disorganized ten times already preached this passage well how can we apply this passage well the shepherd's first response was to go to bethlehem and see this child the shepherd's first response was to go to bethlehem and see this child it was to obey the call of heaven to check for themselves the truthfulness of what was being promised their first response was not to sit back and relax their first response was to get up and go now surely this must also be our first response to the message of the gospel of jesus christ that rather than sit comfortable and sit passive we're going to get up we're going to investigate for ourselves whether what god says in his word is truthful we're going to look into our own hearts through the lens of the

word of god and and see if there's the darkness of unforgiving sin there unremitting shame unrelenting darkness and then we're going to go to jesus and we're going to find in him forgiving grace transforming strength and hope-filled joy we will find peace in jesus we're not going to sit and wait for something to happen we're going to get up and go we're going to make our way to that stable in bethlehem and that cross of glogetha we're going to draw out our hearts to god and ask him to save us from ourselves and from our sin the shepherd's second response was to make known what had been told them to make known what had been told them having found jesus for themselves verse 17 they told the story of the birth of the child christ the lord to all they encountered they left the sacred confines of that holy stable and they went into the streets of bethlehem and they proclaimed the good news which first had been proclaimed to them if their first response was admission in that they admitted christ into their hearts their second response was mission in that they went out with the message of the gospel to others as a solid application of this sermon why don't you make a resolution to share your faith in christ with at least one other person over this festive period solid application solid challenge for every single one of us here why don't you make it your aim and that for what you pray that you will share your faith in christ with one person over this festive period by the way i've been doing quite a bit of research recently into the demographics of this area of the city because you know we all kind of tend to think the part is full of churches actually this area from crow road all the way to boshagri avenue all the way down to the clyde all the way up to the bit that crow road diverts there are 10,000 people live in this area of glasgow and there are two churches 10,000 people live in this area and then lastly the third response of the shepherds was that they praised and they glorified god they praised and they glorified god they had physically left the stable behind them they returned to the fields but they left their hearts behind them in that stable they physically left the stable and returned to their fields but they left their hearts behind them in that stable like all those world war two searchlights their hearts were fixed on jesus the savior who was christ the lord they had found him and they weren't letting him go that's where we want to end this sermon this morning without jesus christ there is nothing for you to celebrate this christmas nothing at all there is nothing about the story of the shepherds and the angels to make you feel cozy or give you comfort but with him the world is

[ 28 : 55 ] changed to us and we are changed to the world suppose your heart today was a world war ii search light beaming up into the sky looking for a bomber where is it fixed where is it focused let us pray lord we thank you for the good news of the gospel we thank you that jesus christ has been born and that in him and through him reconciliation between heaven and earth has been effected effected we thank and praise you lord that without him there is no good news this christmas but with him really the good news of the gospel eclipses any bad news we can receive father we ask especially for those here today who perhaps need to get up and go to bethlehem and find jesus for themselves that this will be the first stage in you opening their hearts to the truth of jesus and we ask these things in his name amen peace you you you you you you you you you you you you