

Jesus: God's good news

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[0 : 0 0] The reading is from Luke chapter 2, starting at verse 1, and that can be found on page 1032. That's Luke chapter 2, verse 1.

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, 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 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 fear.

[1 : 1 5] 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 Saviour 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 heavenly hosts, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

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 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 them.

[2 : 3 7] And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. Well, good morning, everyone.

It's good to be here. And as we start, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you speak through your word.

Pray that you'd help each one of us to hear what you have to say to us. Help me, as I speak, to rightly handle your word of truth.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, how do you respond to fantastic news? It could be passing major exams, getting into your first choice school or university, getting engaged, the birth of your first child.

I can well remember the wonderful news we had when we had our first grandchild born. We weren't upset or disappointed about being woken up well before the alarm went off.

[3 : 53] I mean, our son was so excited, he couldn't wait any longer to tell us the news. And it's not just individuals who get excited. Many of us have saw the pictures when we won the celebrations in London to host the 2012 Olympics.

You had sports stars and politicians jumping around, absolutely excited, just like excited five-year-olds. Well, today we're looking at the most fantastic news that's ever been announced.

And yet, because we're so familiar with the story, it's very difficult for us to appreciate how wonderful this news is. I mean, the passage we're studying reads like the script for a typical nativity play, like we had last Sunday.

Joseph and Mary with the baby Jesus in a manger, shepherds and angels looking on. They're all there in this passage. The only bit we're missing is a visit to the manger.

This Christmas story is so familiar, but we need to realise it's a real historical event, not just a nativity play.

[5 : 08] Luke, as we've been seeing from the beginning of this series, has been giving us an ordered, detailed, historical account based on eyewitnesses to give us certainty about the truth of the Christian faith.

And in today's passage, and it would be helpful if you could keep that open on page 1032, Luke has recorded these details so we can have certainty that the good news the angel brought is true.

It's good news for everyone, not just for Christmas, but for all people, but for all time. So let's get away from the familiar cuddly images in nativity plays.

Perhaps it might be helpful to imagine how this would be handled in a modern TV drama. They'd be setting the scene with historical context, perhaps quite dry and factual.

And next we'd see them zoom in for a personal touch, focusing on Joseph, travelling to his hometown with his future wife Mary, and then their very first baby being born.

[6 : 16] Personal but still factual. Then immediately, flashing across to another scene, a pitch black night, gloomy figures of shepherds and sheep.

Then high drama as everything is lit up by an intense, dazzling brightness. So try to keep this drama in your mind as we look in more detail at this passage under the two points in the outline on the back of your service sheets.

So the first point, good news for everyone, a saviour is born. Luke continues his methodical account with historical detail about when, where, and how Jesus was born.

So reading from verse one, in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the world should be registered. This was the first registration where 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.

[7 : 37] 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.

We've seen it so often in nativity plays, that it hardly registers. But as we've already been hearing, this is the most important event ever.

The importance of this baby's birth is emphasized by what happens next, as we flash immediately to a very different scene. So we continue.

And in the same region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch of 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.

Darkness shattered by an angel appearing. All God's glory, lighting up everything. It was terrifying. You can see the shepherds' reaction.

[8 : 42] I mean, they were used to being out at night, guarding their sheep from wild animals. And yet, they were filled with great fear.

They were terrified. I mean, this is captured in a small way in the Van der Velde exhibition. It's currently on its Dutch Picture Gallery. There's a picture there of an enormous angel and a dazzling bright light.

And you see small figures of shepherds cowering fear at the bottom. The first thing the angel does is to reassure them by saying, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David the Saviour who is Christ the Lord. You know, he was bringing good news of great joy for all people.

And we've already heard from what Simon was saying at the beginning that this is this is good news because every one of us needs a Saviour. I mean, the Jews wanted a Saviour, someone to deliver them from Roman occupation.

[9 : 53] Someone like great King David in Israel's glory days. And the world is crying out for salvation. It always has done.

whether it's the civilians trapped in a terrible situation in Aleppo or homeless people looking at Christmas or victims of famine, natural disasters, genocide, or wars.

But the salvation that God plans is the forgiveness of our sins. As we saw a couple of weeks ago when we looked at Zechariah's prophecy just in the previous chapter and you can look at that in verse 76.

So Zechariah's filled with the Holy Spirit speaks about John the Baptist in this way. And you, child, will be called the prophet to the Most High for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.

I mean, this truly is good news for all people because every one of us needs to be forgiven by God. Forgiven for our rebellion against God and wanting to live our own lives in reference, without reference to God.

[11 : 11] I mean, that's what sin is. So whatever problems we're facing, the most important thing we need saving from is our sin and its consequences.

That means God's judgment. And this salvation can only happen through the Savior God provides. That's why the baby born in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph is named Jesus as we see at the end of our passage.

And Matthew tells us that Jesus means saves us from our sins. and this Savior is the Christ.

He is God's promised Messiah. Someone the Jews have been waiting hundreds of years for. The angel's message echoes Isaiah 9.

For unto you is born. This is Old Testament prophecy being fulfilled. The promised Messiah has been born. God is at work.

[12 : 16] But there's more to this baby. He is also Christ the Lord. This baby is none other than God himself coming into this world as a real historical person.

That's why this is the most fantastic news ever. God has entered this world in Jesus to save us from our sins. And to confirm this, God provides a sign as we see in verse 12.

And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And that sign is so that the shepherds and we will know that this good news is true.

The angel provides a detailed description of where and how the shepherds will find the baby. The baby who is to be the savior of the world. And it's not somewhere that you'd expect God's promised Messiah to be born.

A manger. It's not the clean manger that we see in nativity plays. This is a dirty, smelly cattle feeding trough. So each time we see a nativity play, we should be reminded that this is God's sign to show us that the good news that we've heard about is true that he has sent his savior, Jesus, into the world.

[13 : 43] The savior that each one of us needs. And we continue. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

As well as praising God, the heavenly host emphasized that God's peace is only available to those with whom he is well pleased. i.e.

those who have been forgiven, who have been reconciled to God. So while it's good news for all people, not everyone is going to benefit from it because that depends on how we respond to this good news.

And that brings us to our second point, responding to God's good news. When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let's 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 found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known to them, made known the saying that had been told them concerning the child.

[15 : 02] The shepherds were so certain that what they'd heard from the angel was true and had already happened, they didn't hang around discussing it, but went straight away to see it for themselves.

And when they arrived, they found everything exactly that they'd been told, and in fact, as they were expecting to find it, which gave them certainty about the good news the angels had announced.

Naturally, they had to explain why they'd come and what the angel had told them. And Luke records there were plenty of eyewitnesses who could confirm the shepherd's story, because all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. I mean, that's understandable. Mary had so much to think about.

Having her first baby, the shepherds arising, visiting in the dead of night with their story about an angel, no wonder she was 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 them.

[16 : 17] And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. So we see Joseph and Mary named their baby Jesus, just as Mary had been told by the angel back in chapter one.

And we already know that Jesus' name means saves us from our sins. You see, they were obedient to God.

So we've seen how the shepherds responded to the angel's good news and how Mary responded. But I want to conclude by thinking about how do we respond to this good news.

this is the question we need to be asking ourselves. Whether we're already following Jesus or want to know more about who he is and what he came to do, or we simply like coming to sing carols at Christmas time.

Our response matters because not everyone will know peace with God. And I want to spend a little time considering some different responses, starting with how people responded at the time.

[17 : 33] And the first point is believe and act. This is how the shepherds responded. Yes, they were terrified by the angel appearing at the dead of night, but they listened to the angel's message.

They believed it. The Lord has made known to us. And they acted on it with complete trust because they went with haste to confirm what God had told them.

Having seen everything exactly as God had told them, they went back to their sheep, glorifying and praising God. There was no doubt at all in their minds. They were certain.

And they're a good model for us who are already following Jesus because they took God at his word and acted on it. They were prepared to change their plans, leaving their sheep while they went to see what had happened.

As they acted on God's word, their confidence and their faith grew. And the same is true for us. As we listen to God, believe his word and act on it.

[18 : 40] Secondly, treasure and ponder. This is how Mary responded. She treasured up all things, pondering them in her heart. It had been a momentous year for her, an angel's visit, getting pregnant as a virgin before being married, giving birth to her first baby in a cattle shed, and now just having had this visit from these shepherds.

There was so much for her to think about, and there was more to come because we see her 12 years later in verse 51, treasuring all things in her heart. And we can learn from Mary because she didn't dismiss what God said to her, even when she didn't know how God was going to do these things.

She took God's word to heart, she kept thinking about it. And as she did this, she grew in her knowledge and understanding of who God is. And the same will be true for us if we store up and keep thinking about God's word.

That's how we can grow in our appreciation of God. And as a young Christian, I was encouraged to memorize and to meditate on scripture.

And it's a very practical way for us to treasure and ponder God's word, to appreciate more of what he's done for us in Christ. And Christmas is a great time for us to start doing that as we sing carols, as we hear familiar readings.

[20 : 13] Perhaps we can encourage each other at Grace Church to be doing that now. And thirdly, rejoice and share. The shepherds didn't keep these amazing events to themselves, but they went around glorifying and praising God because they were so excited at what God had done and had shown them.

They knew they had good news to share and everyone who heard them was amazed. And we who follow Jesus have the same good news to share.

It's good news of great joy for all people. And it's a privilege that we can share this good news. not just with the chosen few, but with all people.

And when we sing familiar carols, we can rejoice in this good news like the shepherds did that first Christmas. It's something I so much enjoy about Christmas, singing the carols, those words grow in meaning each year.

It's something that first struck me after I became a Christian, the meaning and truth of those words. But sadly there are other ways in which we can respond to this good news.

[21 : 27] We can dismiss and scoff, possibly the most common reaction today. I mean, who believes in the supernatural? these were just ignorant shepherds born 2,000 years ago and we know so much more now.

Sadly, nativity plays can reinforce such a response. And if that's your response, please think again. Consider the historical evidence Luke is giving us.

Think about where you stand before God. Is he pleased with you? Do you have peace with God or do you need your sins forgiven? And if you'd like to look at the first hand evidence for yourself, we'd be delighted to help you do that.

Please speak with either Simon or myself after the service. And finally, fear. For some people, thinking about God is very scary.

It was certainly true for me as a student. I didn't want to give up my selfish independence. I was scared at how God might change my life. Maybe the truth and significance of these Christmas events terrifies you.

[22 : 48] I mean, that's understandable. Supernatural events, such as the Seppard's Witness, are terrifying, and we don't know where they may lead. And as a student, having looked at the evidence myself, I was convinced it was true, but I was very reluctant to believe and act on it, because I was afraid of the changes it might result.

Change can be frightening, but we need to hear the angel. Fear not, I bring you good news of great joy for all people, because the Saviour has been born, Christ the Lord, who is called Jesus, meaning he will save his people from their sins.

And the salvation that every one of us most needs is forgiveness of our sins, but this is only possible through Jesus. He is our Saviour, so that we can have peace with God.

So how are we going to respond to this good news? Do we accept we need a Saviour? Do we accept we need our sins forgiven by God?

How will we respond by believing and acting, treasuring and pondering, rejoicing and sharing, or by dismissing and scoffing or fearing?

[24 : 13] my prayer is that we be like Mary and the shepherds, so that we can know the joy of peace with God this Christmas and forever.

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