

Song of Angels

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- [0 : 00] Lord God, as we ponder your word, we pray that you will speak. And as you speak, that we will store up the things in our hearts so that we can live in light of what we hear.
- For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. I wonder when have you really felt scared?
- What has made you really afraid? I'm not talking about the fake, confected fear that comes from a horror film or somebody giving you a start or something.
- I mean really afraid. It may have been when you or a loved one faced a terrible medical diagnosis or it may have been a time of physical danger for you personally or someone you loved and you felt afraid.
- And there are lots of things, of course, that do inspire fear in us. Bushfires, floods, snakes and sharks in the natural world.
- [1 : 19] Cancer, pandemics and pain in the medical sphere. Terrorists, criminals and tyrants from human quarters. All these can induce terror in us.
- Terrorists, criminals and tyrants from human quarters. Well, our passage today talks about terror. Not the terror of Kalashnikov rifles or natural disasters or unstoppable diseases, but terror of God himself.
- And you might think that's a strange message for Christmas. But let's get into it. And we start with a domestic story.
- But actually, a domestic story that... Oh, really? Okay. Verse 1 isn't on the screen.
- It says 2-1, but... Oh, yes, it is 2. I'm sorry. I'm reading 2 and thinking it's the verse. And it gives a global perspective.
- [2 : 31] Caesar Augustus, the ruler from Rome of all the known world, has issued a decree. There's going to be a census. And the subtext here is they're going to collect taxes.
- And this was going to happen everywhere, in all provinces. And the province we are concerned about, in that of Syria, which included the little region of Judea in particular, is the focus for our purposes.
- And the reference to Quirinius helps to focus that a little bit more locally. Everyone is off to their hometown to get registered. And that included the carpenter, Joseph, who'd been working in Nazareth, right up in the north, in Galilee, but was actually from Bethlehem.
- So we get an even more local focus. And Joseph must have been away for a while, actually, because when he got back to Bethlehem, accommodation was tight and he no longer had a home there.
- And the added complication was that he came back with his pregnant fiancée. And the only accommodation is a room with animals.
- [3 : 57] And there, of course, she gave birth. And they had to put the child in the manger, in the place that the animals feed out of.
- Now, this is all a fairly commonplace story. It would have been consigned to a merely moderately interesting family anecdote, except, except for who that child is.

And so the story continues. And to give us the story of who the child is, we're immediately taken to a different scene.

A field not far out of the town. And again, it's an ordinary scene. Some ordinary, no-account shepherds were staying in the field, sleeping rough, guarding their sheep, minding their business.

And it was an ordinary night until the events of verse 9 of our reading. An angel shows up. And the glory of the Lord shone around them.

[5 : 12] I don't know quite what exactly that means, even. Except that it was plain to the shepherds that this was from God.

And they were terrified. And so they should be. So they should be.

Because if this is really from God, they were in the presence of the glory of the Lord. And throughout scripture, whenever people had an experience of the presence of the Lord, or is even an angel of the Lord, the common element is fear.

We saw that from our first reading. From Adam and Eve after the fall, when they felt the presence, knew of the presence of the Lord in the garden, and they hid because they were terrified.

Moses at the burning or non-burning bush. To Isaiah in the temple. And even, as we've read in Revelation, the Apostle John, many years after this event in the fields around Bethlehem, the common denomination, in the presence, when confronted by God or his representative, is fear.

[6 : 42] And as I said, that's as it should be. We, sinful beings, should fear a holy God.

We know that we have turned away from him. And so we fear his presence. As Isaiah said, he comes from a people of unclean lips.

How can I even live, having seen the Lord? But this angel wasn't there to harm or punish them, though.

Quite the opposite. The message of the angel is don't be afraid. I'm bringing you good news.

And verse 11 gives the reason why they don't need to be afraid and why it is good news. A saviour has come. There's no need for sinful people to be afraid in the presence of God if there's a saviour.

[7 : 57] sin and sinfulness. You see, sin and sinfulness, once that's removed, the presence of God is a thing of great joy.

It goes from being sheer terror to being joy. It's good news. Jesus, that little baby in the feed trough, would one day grow up to be the man on the cross, dying to save us from the consequences of our sin.

And that is good news. It's the best news. Well, we aren't used to being forced to confront our fear of God in the way that those shepherds did on that Christmas night.

We don't get angels turning up when we're out in the fields with our sheep. At least I don't. But we do realise who we are.

Sinful mistake-prone rebellious people when we realise who God is. Holy, perfect, all-powerful and pure.

[9 : 22] And we're right to be afraid. And that's why the angels' message wasn't just for them but for us as well.

This good news of Christmas means he speaks to us and he speaks through the ages to us. Don't be afraid. This is good news for all the people, the angel says.

Even us. He's our saviour too. Now, as I said at the start, we fear a lot of different sorts of things.

All of the things that are out of our control, basically, we fear. We fear evil people and especially those with power. We fear sicknesses like cancer or in recent years out-of-control viruses.

disasters. We fear bushfires, floods or any other natural disaster. We fear climate change. We fear economic hardship and disaster.

[10 : 37] We fear accidents and unforeseen events of all sorts of various kinds. The list could go on and on. But Jesus isn't just the saviour.

He's also the Messiah, God's eternal king. and the Lord himself, God himself. So Jesus coming isn't just a saviour.

He is the saviour who is the Messiah, the Lord. And that means that all those other fears have lost their bite.

Even the fear of death itself, the Bible tells us, has lost its sting. Because Jesus is the ruler and controller over any situation that life puts before us.

And so we no longer need to fear. Do not be afraid. need to need to need to need to or so the angel said, but how would the shepherds know that such a thing was true?

[11 : 54] Well, the angel said, this will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Go into town and find a baby lying in a feeding trough.

That will be your sign. strange kind of sign for such a momentous message. But suddenly, the angel wasn't alone anymore.

there are a huge number of the heavenly host all praising God together. As a side note, they say something.

We've called this series Songs of Christmas, but none of the songs that we have looked at or going to look at are actually sung. The angels don't sing, despite what the hymn writer or carol writer wants to tell us.

We'll sing about singing. But the angels say, glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace on those on whom his favour rests.

[13 : 12] Is this real? Because it's hard to see. peace on earth these days, isn't it?

We hear of a lot of things that aren't very peaceful. We see a lot of things that are not very peaceful.

Is this all wishful thinking? thing? But listen to what the angel says. Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

Those on whom his favour rests. What does that mean? And Romans, Paul writing years later in the book of Romans helps us to understand this a little bit.

Therefore, he says, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ, the coming of this little one would lead to this sort of statement.

[14 : 33] We have peace with God. So you see that fear of God for a sinful person like me is alleviated, is taken away because of Jesus and I now can have peace with God.

God's favour rests on those who have faith in his son Jesus. For them, fear is replaced by peace.

Glory to God indeed. What amazing news for ordinary old shepherds to be given on that ordinary old night as it started out all those years ago.

No wonder they wanted to go and check it out. So they rushed off to Bethlehem to see about this thing that God has told us about.

They recognised that it was God who'd given them this message. Jesus is disregarded by the world.

[15 : 53] He doesn't even have a place to be born. He's proclaimed by the heavenly hosts and now accepted and searched for by the ordinary and humble people.

and the shepherds saw the baby as described as the sign to them. Now we see three different reactions to the little baby and the news that the shepherds tell in the next few verses.

Verses 16 to 20 tell us of various reactions. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, that he was the saviour, the Messiah, the Lord.

And we're told in verse 20 that they glorified and praised God. In effect, they copied what the heavenly host had done in verse 14. But they aren't the only ones who reacted.

The people who heard about it were amazed at what the shepherds said. It is pretty amazing stuff.

[17 : 27] But it seems like they didn't really take it any further. It challenged them intellectually and conceptually that something like this should have happened, that these people have this story.

But it meant little to them personally. They missed out on the peace and freedom from fear that accepting the saviour, Messiah and Lord would bring.

Mary, Mary, however, took all of these things to heart and pondered over them.

We are told what happened to the shepherds after this story, but we do know that Mary, who had trusted God's word to her from the moment the angel had appeared to her nine months before this, lived her life in obedience to God.

Three reactions. So what does that mean for us? What are the applications for us? Well, first of all, Jesus has come as our saviour, God's Messiah, the Lord himself.

[18 : 54] We are to worship him as such. Because Jesus is all of these things, we who believe in him no longer need to be afraid of God.

Instead, we can have peace with God. God's And when we have peace with God, all of our other fears are placed in perspective.

We can have faith in place of being afraid of those terrifying things that we can't control. And so we can have peace even in the most challenging of circumstances, even in the most out-of-control things.

Jesus. And our response to Jesus is to be a combination of that of the shepherds and Mary. We're to believe, tell others about the truth we have come to know.

And taking all of these things to heart, pondering them and storing up God's truth about Jesus. And praising and glorifying God for all the things that we've seen and heard.

[20 : 15] May that be our response this Christmas and into the rest of our lives. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for the coming of the Lord Jesus and that it means that we have our Saviour, we have God with us, we have a Messiah and we can trust you and we need not be afraid of you or of anything because we know the one who has all things in hand, who is our Saviour.

We pray this in the name of him who came, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.