

CHRISTMAS EVE - Joy to the World

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] And let's pray. God, our Father, speak to us from your word tonight, we pray. Write in our hearts the words of the gospel truth about Jesus Christ, that we may not only believe it in our heads, but follow it in our hearts and in our lives and bring you glory for Jesus' sake.

Amen. I guess if you were quietly minding your own sheep business, you'd have been afraid as well. A normal night, we don't know whether it's cold or hot, the carols make it all up, whether it's a cold night, but you're looking after your sheep out in the Bethlehem hillside, you think it's a normal night, you've done it dozens of times, no doubt, and all of a sudden an angel appears from nowhere, something you probably wouldn't have been expecting.

Not only that, after the angel appears, in fact the whole heavenly host comes as well, and they speak in the night sky. I think you'd be afraid.

I'm sure I would have been. And certainly it seems that those original shepherds were as well. Especially if you recognise that angels come from God and the whole heavenly host means that God's got something serious that he's saying, you'd be afraid.

You see, people fear God on the whole, and rightly so. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, right at the beginning of the Bible and history, after they'd eaten the forbidden fruit, were afraid of God and hid from him.

[1 : 41] Moses, one of the great leaders of God's people, when he approached the presence of God at a burning bush, was afraid. When the whole of the people of God, ancient Israel, came to the mountain of God, Mount Sinai, and just heard the voice of God, didn't see him.

They were terrified and afraid. They thought they were going to die. When the great prophet Isaiah saw just a vision of God in a temple, just a vision, he was afraid and fell down.

When a demoniac met Jesus Christ, the Son of God, he too was afraid. And so we could multiply the stories through the scriptures and through history.

Overall, people fear God, rightly so. There is something within us that makes us cower at the brilliant and holy presence of almighty God. But the message that the shepherds heard, the message of Christmas to you and to me, is fear not.

Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Because, as the angels went on to say, they gave a reason for not fearing and not being afraid, because a saviour has been born for all the people.

[2 : 59] And in those very famous, very familiar words of Luke's gospel, as we heard Ben read, do not be afraid. For see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.

To you is born this day, in the city of David, a saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Don't be afraid. Good news of great joy. Well, we're very familiar with acts of saving and acts of rescue. We see it in recent weeks with the firefighters risking their lives, in one case losing his life, in order to save property and to save human lives.

We see it with the lifesavers on the beaches between the flags during these summer months, attempting to save swimmers or surfers who are in danger. We see it with ambulance crews and paramedics who rush to road accidents to try and save lives.

We see it with stories of doctors trying to save lives. We see it occasionally, that sort of language of saving, where the government or a business consortium or some amalgamation of some groups tries to save a troubled company or industry.

[4 : 22] And then at the very, perhaps trivial level, we see it with people like Shane Warne or Glenn McGrath trying to save Australia's plight in a cricket match and take a few wickets or whatever.

Often, of course, our independence means that we're a little bit resistant to being saved or to being rescued. We want to feel that we've got right to the very edge and end of our possibility before we cry out for help.

On the whole, the swimmer who is determined to reach the shore for themselves, the person who's determined to save or defend their own home and property and not let somebody else help them, even the little child who doesn't want mum or dad to help them because they're determined to do it for themselves.

If the shepherds were afraid at mere angels, if ancient Israel was afraid at merely the voice of God, if Isaiah fell down in fear in the temple at merely a vision of God, if we still fear the prospect of death, we need saving.

We need rescuing. And we cannot save ourselves, at least from God. We all know that we fail God's holy standards.

[5 : 48] In a week's time, some of us will rashly make New Year's resolutions. By the end of January, at the latest, we'll have probably broken them. We'll probably fail our own standards, let alone God's.

And certainly, of course, we cannot conquer death. You see, the human plight is one where we need rescue and we need saving. And our fear in the presence of God is a manifestation of that need.

Now, you may not think it matters. You may think, I'm prepared to just live this life and that's it. Eat, drink, be merry. Who knows what will happen tomorrow? But God thinks it matters.

In fact, God thinks it matters so much that you and I need saving that he sends his only son to be born as a human being, to live, to die, to rise from the dead and ascend back to heaven.

You see, God thinks it matters so much that you and I need saving. He sent us a rescuer, a saviour, because that's our greatest need, is to be saved.

[6 : 59] As the old sort of saying goes, if God thought our greatest need was education, he would have sent us a teacher. But God knew that our greatest need was a saviour. We need saving and we need rescuing.

You shall call him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins, is why he's named Jesus. And that's what we need saving from. We can't perfect ourselves.

We fall short of our own standards, let alone God's. No matter how good or noble we are, Mother Teresa would have been the first to admit and was the first to admit that she needed saving.

Even Mary, the mother of Jesus, somebody who's exalted and even worshipped by many around the world, she actually said that she needed a saviour too. In Luke chapter 1, don't be afraid is the message of Christmas because a saviour's come.

God thinks it matters and he sent us the saviour, his own son, Jesus Christ. And that's good news. So in place of fear, there is joy, there's rejoicing, there's celebration.

[8 : 11] Don't be afraid, but I bring you good news of great joy. They're emphatic words. And not just for shepherds, not just for Jews, not just for the inhabitants of Bethlehem or Judea, not just for the people of 2,000 years ago under Roman rule.

But good news of great joy for all people of any place and any time, any culture, any background. don't be afraid, for see, I'm bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.

A saviour for the world, a saviour for every person of every age, of every place. That's great news. It's not a limited saviour or a limited rescuer for one people group or one period of time.

But for you and me today and those generations who will follow us and those people of every country, all 220 countries or however many there are in the world today, don't fear, but rejoice.

Be full of joy at this great news that God has given us a saviour. Now this is a message for more than just the Christmas season. It's not just a message for December 24, 25 and on Boxing Day we've completely forgotten it in our hangover Christmas sale cricket state.

[9 : 29] Do not fear, God keeps telling us, for I am with you, not just on Christmas night or Christmas day, but I am with you always to the end of the age.

I am with you through the valley of the shadow of death. I am with you when the floods are there or the fires are there. Cast your cares on him. For he cares for you.

The Lord is my salvation. Of whom then shall I be afraid? That's just a small sample of a constant theme through the Bible. God has sent a saviour.

We don't need to be afraid of the Lord anymore. We don't need, in fact, to fear anything anymore. Not just at Christmas time, but December 26, 27, 31, January the 1st, 2007 and 8 and 9 and whatever day, whatever year, whatever place.

No more fear. If we apply that to our daily life, what a transformation. Don't be afraid.

[10 : 35] All that fear of failure that we store up within us, that somehow silences us or stifles us from doing things sometimes.

We don't need to fear failure. We don't need to fear shame or embarrassment. We don't need to fear looking stupid or inept or unimportant.

We don't even need to fear broken relationships or retirement or ill health or dementia or frailty. We don't need to fear dependence in old age.

We don't need to fear childlessness or unemployment or poverty. We don't need to fear war or terror or global warming. We don't need to fear who will look after me in my old age or who will look after my children after I've gone.

Don't be afraid. Because our biggest need has been met and the others are placed into perspective by the Saviour who's come.

[11 : 38] No more fear. It's God's word to us. It's God's word to us every day in every place. God has come to the rescue.

And so if the eternal things are secured by his rescue of us by sending his son we can trust him for everything else. He's done the big thing.

He'll do everything else. It's a bit like imagine you've been promised two presents tomorrow. You've been promised a Ferrari car and a cherry ripe.

And imagine that the first present you open is the Ferrari car. Would you have any doubt at all that the other present over there is a cherry ripe if that's what you've been promised?

Of course not. God's done the big thing for us. He's given us his son and he says do not fear. So all those other fears that we have in life they're small by comparison.

[12 : 39] God will meet those fears as well. Don't be afraid. And instead of fear rejoice. Celebrate. Be full of joy not just today not just tonight or tomorrow but every day all the time.

Rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice are the words of the New Testament. Whatever happens in our daily life rejoice in the Lord.

You see Christmas secures our eternal joy that nothing can take away from us. Nothing can deprive us of that eternal joy that is given to us at the first Christmas.

The joy of sins forgiven. The joy of heaven's gates open wide to let us in. The joy of death conquered and its sting removed. The joy of being in God's presence and no longer afraid.

Those great and eternal and permanent joys that will never go away. The odd thing is that unless we acknowledge our need for a saviour we have no need of Christmas.

[13 : 52] In fact I don't think if I felt that I had a need for a saviour that I'd actually like Christmas at all. I'd avoid it.

I remember years ago when I was in my twenties and backpacking in England over Christmas and I was in a youth hostel in the Lakes District and the days leading up to Christmas was almost empty. It was very pleasant. Christmas Eve had filled to absolute every bed was full and all these weird people. all escaping Christmas. I wasn't particularly escaping Christmas.

Made me feel homesick actually thinking of all these slightly odd people around me on Christmas night let me tell you. But you see if you don't have a need for a saviour or if you think you don't need a saviour then Christmas actually is bizarre nonsense.

It's sentimental claptrap really. It's consumerist idolatry these days. But when we acknowledge our need for a saviour and when we understand that's exactly what Christmas is about God giving us a saviour Christmas is real joy deep joy a joy that is deeper than all the family arguments you'll have tomorrow a joy that is deeper than all the arguments over presents on Boxing Day a joy that will last and last and last.

[15 : 13] God has given us exactly what we need a saviour a gift not earned by us not deserved by us not merited by us and that's why the angels sang glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours glory to God because it's all God's work it's God's initiative and it's God's gift it's God to the rescue that's why the glory goes to God not to us but to him if you're a sailor as I understand it and you're in need of rescue then you issue what's called a May Day alarm I don't actually know why it's called a May Day alarm it's probably something communist behind that but it does strike me as the odd expression May Day alarm it ought to be Christmas Day alarm because if you need rescuing Christmas Day is the coming of the rescuer par excellence

Christmas Day alarms God sends a saviour a rescuer to save us from our sins to bring us eternal joy in the presence of God the joy of sins forgiven God sent us that rescuer of course Jesus Christ he came was born and lived and importantly died for the atonement for our sins for our rescue for our salvation thereby opening heaven's gates for each and every one glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours amen to arrows and ■■ into the eye him to mo■e son and there are open and the show as and how that has been for her he éc he cookies things fair nothing to