

Beholding the Saviour

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[0 : 00] We're going to consider in a few moments this great theme of beholding the Saviour, particularly as we see that reflected in verses 8 to 20.

Three very simple, we pray, powerful headings. Good news heard, good news seen, and good news proclaimed. As I said just a moment ago, very much we're going to resume from where we left off this morning and our consideration and our thoughts on the story, the narrative of the birth of Jesus as we behold the Saviour.

And as we read in the passage there, from the beginning of the passage to the end, whether it's from Caesar Augustus in Rome to shepherds in the hills overlooking Bethlehem, God had planned every circumstance, every detail surrounding the birth of Jesus.

Under God's sovereign plan, the time had come for Jesus to be born. We might say the wheels had been set in motion, yes, humanly speaking, by the Roman emperor for that great movement of people across the vast empire.

The reason being, as we heard this morning, for a census to be taken so that Caesar could have an accurate estimate, of not just an estimate, an accurate count, of how many people were in the empire to pay him the taxation relevant for his empire.

[1 : 35] That great movement of tens of thousands of people included two individuals. Two people obscure to the Roman powers in the great city of Rome.

Two individuals, but these individuals central to the whole plan and purpose for the birth of Jesus. Joseph. Joseph and his heavily pregnant betrothed Mary, who have set out from Nazareth to Bethlehem, because Bethlehem was the ancestral city of which Joseph could claim a direct connection, his great ancestor being King David.

And as we read in the passage, the order was to go to the hometown of the individual, the head of the household from where the census would take place.

And that was obeyed by Joseph. Joseph would obey the authorities. Joseph is obeying the authorities whom God had set in place. Joseph, of course, would obey a greater authority. Joseph would obey God. Joseph would do as God had called him to do, to take Mary as his wife. And Joseph would do what also God had called him to do.

[2 : 52] He would name the child that Mary would give birth to. He would name the child Jesus. All things working together for good under God's sovereign purposes.

All things work together, even in relation to the details of the birth of the Lord Jesus. That birth and fulfillment of prophecy. Of course, ultimately, in fulfillment of God's great plan for the salvation of his people.

And by faith, and that's by faith, you believe the scriptures. You believe the word of God that God breathed out to those of old, the word that's infallible.

And in believing the word and believing the scriptures, we're truly, again, encouraged to see in the birth of Jesus the hope of mankind. And we're encouraged, again, to see the love of God for sinners.

And I pray that you're encouraged, too, in the strengthening of your faith, to believe that our God reigns. That God does all things well. And if God should so love his people so much, that he sent his one and only son for us, how will he not give us, how will he not give you all that you need to glorify God?

[4 : 15] And this is the good news that we celebrate, whether it's this time of year or we pray throughout the year. We're celebrating the good news of God's intervention to rescue man from sin.

It's the good news of the birth of Jesus that, again, by faith, we contemplate, we meditate upon, and we give glory to God for. It's the good news that these humble shepherds, these shepherds who are

the first group of people to hear the good news and to proclaim the good news that the Saviour had come.

And as a result of these shepherds hearing the good news, they were never the same again. And it's that hearing the good news and that seeing Jesus, Jesus, it's that which changes all who behold the Saviour.

It was the old Puritan Richard Sibbes who declared so rightly, he said these words, the very beholding of Christ is a transforming sight.

The very beholding of Christ is a transforming sight. And it's that beholding of Christ that I pray we're going to be engaged in this evening. That we look upon him intently.

[5 : 34] We look upon him with, if you like, with great attention of our hearts, of our minds, of our souls, that I pray that we'll do for a time this evening. It's that great beholding that Mary was engaged in and her seeing her newborn son.

It's that great beholding of Jesus that the shepherds that took part in when they saw the Saviour in the manger. It's that great beholding that John the Baptist would speak of 30 years after Jesus' birth when he declared, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And I pray that as Mary beheld Jesus, as the shepherds beheld Jesus, as John the Baptist beheld Jesus, you behold Jesus this evening. And that in beholding him, that you be truly transformed and never the same again.

And so, let's go to Bethlehem again. And even in your mind's eye, as it were, let's come alongside these shepherds. Let's come alongside them as they're watching over their flocks at night.

And let's be with them as they're huddling together in that evening chill, as their eyes peer out to see if there are any wild animals who might be lurking around trying to snatch one of their valuable sheep.

[6 : 59] And let's be with them as with most nights, nothing much has been happening up to this point. The stillness of the night, a very familiar feeling for these shepherds.

No doubt, a few words of conversation struck between the shepherds, but generally another night as with previous evenings. And suddenly, as Luke records the events that have been passed down to him by reliable sources, suddenly, everything changes in an instant.

An angel of the Lord, the angel of the Lord appears to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. As we're told, the shepherds were filled with fear. The stillness of the night is broken by the light of the glory of God.

And the appearance of a heavenly angel, that angel in recognisable form as an angel. No wonder Luke tells us that the shepherds were filled with fear.

I mean, they'd never seen such a sight. Their peace had been shattered and yet not shattered. Yes, their mental peace, their physical peace, no doubt, they were shaking with fear.

[8 : 14] That was disturbed. But there was a greater peace about to be announced to them by the angel. It was the good news that the shepherds heard.

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a 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.

The fear of the shepherds is absolutely real. I mean, as we said, we can just picture they're shaking, they're dumbfounded at the response that they're seeing, that they're seeing before their eyes.

They're beholding the glory of God and there's glory seen in light. Their fears are calmed by the good news that they hear.

They're hearing the words, good news. These words, good news have been mentioned. They're hearing the word joy that's mentioned. They're hearing the words that tell of a great event that's happened just below them in the little town of Bethlehem.

[9 : 21] They're hearing the good news that in that little town, that backwater town in Judea, in that great place that was associated with King David, they're hearing that David's divine successor has been born.

This is no other than the promised Messiah, none other than the Saviour, Christ the Lord. Good news, joy for all the people, Saviour, Christ the Lord.

Now, add all these words together and we're hearing the same good news that the shepherds heard and they heard in their Aramaic language. We're hearing in our own language, in our own languages.

Whatever languages these words are heard in today, whether 2,000 years ago or words that we're hearing, the same words we're hearing today, these same words convey the same truth. They convey the same hope. It's the same response that we surely are to give from all who love the Lord because we're hearing the good news given, the message of true peace with God.

[10:33] We're hearing this message again that God has intervened in the human race. He sent his one and only son for all nations, all peoples, Jew, Gentile.

We're all recipients of the good news. We're all receiving the good news, the gospel of salvation that's found only in the Savior who was born in Bethlehem. Let's hear the good news again. Let's never tire of hearing this good news. Let's hear it again with the shepherds. And just as it were, just even try and get into the mindset of the shepherds as if you're hearing these words for the first time.

These are great words of comfort. These are words of rest for the troubled soul. So hear these words that are that have been conveyed by the angel to mankind.

Behold, behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior whose Christ the Lord. The first words of the angel, behold.

[11:44] In other words, stop in your tracks. Stop thinking of anything else. Just behold. Listen attentively. Pay attention and act upon what you're going to hear.

Act upon this announcement of good news. And listen again to what the angel is saying to the shepherds that we're hearing again. Just again, imagine you're hearing this for the first time and even beyond the first time.

Angels sing to the shepherds, for unto you is born. Just focus on that word you. Unto you. Unto you and for you a Savior is born.

You who are hearing the good news proclaimed. You're hearing good news that dispels bad news. You're hearing good news that remains good news and has remained good news through the millennia, through all these many centuries since that news was first proclaimed.

hearing the good news that will be proclaimed again and again until the Lord Jesus returns. So don't close your ears to the announcement of good news.

[12:54] Hear and rejoice and resolve to do what these shepherds resolved to do and resolve to go with them, go with the shepherds to Bethlehem and see the Savior, see the Savior born for you.

So let's go with the shepherds from that hillside down to Bethlehem, down to where Jesus was laid in that manger where good news was seen.

Again, let's read the passage that tells of good news seen. 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. When they saw it, or maybe even more accurately, and in seeing it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning the child.

The shepherds had seen an angel. In fact, they'd seen a host of angels, a heavenly host of angels. The angels, the shepherds had seen the angel who'd given them that good news of the Savior born.

[14:05] now they were about to see, they were now about to behold the one who truly transforms lives and has transformed lives by his appearing.

They would see Jesus. These shepherds weren't gullible fools. These shepherds knew that in their having seen the angel, the angel that they knew was a visitation from the Lord.

They knew in their hearts that the messenger that God had sent, that God had given to the shepherds, they knew that his words were true because they were words from God given to the angel.

They didn't dispute the word that the angel gave to them. They knew that God had sent his angel to give that good news to them. And so they went with haste. They go to the place where they were directed to see Christ the Lord.

because they had to see with their own eyes. They had to see, as it were, the good news, the news that they'd heard. But now they must see that good news, to see the wonder, to see the one who is the fulfillment of the promises that God had given through his prophets, the promise of the Messiah to come.

[15 : 27] And now they must see the Messiah for themselves. And in seeing, believing, and believing, telling others the good news that they had heard and seen.

And at this time of year, when so many turn to the incarnation of Jesus, well, don't you shield your eyes of faith and refuse to see the Lord.

See him, yes, see him, see him by faith, see him in your heart. See the love that sent Jesus from heaven to earth. And see the love of the Savior who was willing to leave heaven to come to earth to fulfill all that the Father had given him and sent him to do.

See the will of Jesus to leave the glory of heaven to come to earth for the sake of sinners such as you and such as me. See the love of Jesus that he was willing to become sin, to be made sin for us. He who knew no sin, so that you might become the righteousness of God by faith. And echoing these words that the great Puritans said, you know, the very beholding of Christ is a transforming sight.

[16 : 45] And I ask you, have you truly beheld Jesus? Even now are you beholding Jesus even as we're worshipping God? Are you seeing him with eyes of faith, eyes that truly believe in him, hearts that truly love him?

Are you seeing the Lord Jesus such that it's your chief purpose to glorify him, to serve him, to do what he calls you to do, and be taking up your cross and following him?

Are you seeing Jesus even as he's given you that call, that command? Or are your eyes simply closed to the Saviour? Would you rather be beholding anything or anyone else other than the Lord Jesus, whether it's at this time of year or any other time of year?

You know, we live in a very visual age. It is the most visual of all ages. We live by our screens. We act according to visual presentations.

As Bob Dillon once said, that it don't count less it sells. Well, I think that may well be true, but in today's age, I think we can amend that to say it don't count lest it can be visualised before our eyes.

[18 : 03] We're to be counter-cultural. Christians are to be counter-cultural. That includes even the very aspect of our seeing. The age old truth then has to be emphasised.

We turn our eyes upon Jesus. That we look full in his wonderful face. The things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

And in seeing Jesus, there has to be a response, a reaction. There has to be a proclamation of Jesus, proclaiming him in word and in witness, as we see was the case with the shepherds.

Our third point, good news proclaimed. And again, let's read again the passage, the part of the passage that tells us of good news proclaimed. 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 that they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

[19 : 14] And as we read initially, we see again, in their seeing, they made known. When they saw it, or seeing, they made known the saying that had been told them.

the two actions go together, seeing, making known. And let's again come alongside the shepherds as they're seeing Jesus in the manger.

There they are, there we are with them, as we visit that very humble place where Jesus has been born. It's anything but the kind of place that normally a prince would be born.

The word of the angel was sufficient. The sight of the angelic heavenly host confirming the word of the angel. The baby lying in the manger has to be seen and believed in and proclaimed.

Let's see the baby lying in the manger. See, believe, proclaim. And isn't that the pattern of faith in action? Seeing Jesus, believing in Jesus, telling of Jesus, whether it's first century humble shepherds, whether it's first century disciples, whether it's 16th century reformers, whether it's 21st century saints.

[20 : 42] The same message together, the same truth applies. If you've seen Jesus, you believed in him, you can't hide the message, you can't hide the good news.

go, yes, literally go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is Lord. Go tell it on your Facebook page. Go tell it wherever God has sent you as his witness and as his ambassador.

Tell it that Jesus Christ is born, Jesus Christ is Lord, that Jesus Christ has come to bring in his reign into the hearts of his people. This is the good news that the world needs to hear.

I was finishing the sermon yesterday evening, just after the news, the broadcast about the renewed restrictions because of the change in circumstances and the pandemic.

Not so good news, if you like, about the spread of the variant of the coronavirus and the real and certainly potential devastation that that's causing.

[21 : 46] Ten months on and we're still under these restrictions that the virus has brought upon this land causing such devastation. Plans having to be changed at the last minute.

Lives changed. Bad news that we heard yesterday and yet, above all, we have good news. We've got good news to give at this difficult and dangerous time.

The good news is that there is a worldwide message to give for all the peoples, all the nations. That good news that was spread, first of all, not by kings and not by the religious leaders of the day.

That good news that was spread by humble down-to-earth shepherds, these shepherds who couldn't but tell of the coming of the Lord Jesus, the coming of the Christ to earth, a saviour.

good news has to be responded to, is responded to. It's good news that has a response to.

[22 : 59] I gave three points at the start of the service, there's actually a fourth point really, and that's really in verses 18 to 20, good news responded to. because as we read in the passage, there are three responses that we see from what the shepherds had seen and heard.

There's the response of wonder or amazement. There's the response of Mary's response, thinking seriously on the birth of Jesus. There's the response of the shepherds praising and glorifying God. Let's look at these responses and consider where you are in your response to Jesus. First response that we read in the passage that the people of Bethlehem, they wondered, they were astonished, they were amazed at what they heard.

Now, of course, in itself, that's not a negative reaction. The birth of Jesus surely should continue to amaze us, astonish us, even at the very circumstances of Jesus' birth.

But of course, there has to be something more than simple and simply more than amazement, something more than astonishment or wonder at the news of the birth of Jesus.

[24 : 17] There's got to be a response that goes much, much deeper than mere astonishment. that deep response we see in Mary's response. We're told that she treasured up all these things in her heart.

She pondered them in her heart. She used her mind to think deeply about all that had happened.

And the words literally that we have in the original are she gathered together, she gathered together everything that had happened so far in relation to the birth of Jesus.

So in contrast to the amazed attitude of others, she had a quiet, deep, reflective contemplation of these events that had just happened in the birth of Jesus.

She stored up these events in her heart. She considered them deeply. She thought of them seriously about all that the angel had told her, all that had happened through her in giving birth to the saviour of the world.

She treasured up these things in her heart. And us were the shepherds. Well, we might say that they were righteously ecstatic. They couldn't stop glorifying and praising God even as they were returning to their flocks.

[25 : 42] Earlier, they'd heard the angel praising and glorifying God. And now they're doing exactly the same as the shepherds, as the angels.

And through the knowledge of the birth of Jesus, the saviour, angels, shepherds, uniting as it were and praising and glorifying God.

If you like that unity of angelic praise, human praise, it continues, even continues to this day, even with our own very imperfect praise of God.

We've got this assurance that in the glory of heaven, the saints of God and the angels of God are joining together in that perfect harmony in praising and glorifying God.

What's your response to the hearing and seeing of good news? Is it just, amazed, wonder at best? There's nothing more than that.

[26 : 46] Maybe for a time, you know, there's some astonishment in your heart and your mind at the story of Jesus, but just as in the parable that Jesus taught, the parable of the sower, of those who hear, but then, as Jesus said, are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life and don't have saving knowledge of Jesus.

Anyone this evening? Or won't you be like Mary and truly think deeply on the message of the birth of Jesus, on the truth, the reality of the incarnation of the Son of God.

Think deeply on that truth, that fact of Jesus sent to take your place before the wrath of God so that you might have everlasting life. It's that good news that surely we're to respond to in deep contemplation and with the shepherds glorifying and praising God.

God, so where do you stand before Jesus this evening? Do you stand before Jesus for this time of year, this Christmas time? Are you with the shepherds in honouring Jesus?

Are you with Mary in our deep contemplation of Jesus? Or do you simply know a kind of a tinge of excited looking on but then just forget the Saviour?

[28 : 08] Well, don't forget him, but see him, behold him, believe in him, and know that in beholding him, your life is transformed for all eternity.

our Lord, our God, our Heavenly Father, forgive us for the many, many times when we fail to behold the Saviour, when we look upon other things, when we contemplate other things and forget the Lord Jesus.

Give us, Lord, eyes to see, eyes to behold, that truly we will behold our Saviour, who has looked upon his people in love.

Continue, Lord, with us now, we pray as again we turn to your work to sing. Bless, Lord, this aspect of praise before you, that you might truly be glorified.

Hear us as we continue before you now, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[29 : 16] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.