

"The Gloria" Luke 2:8–14

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- [0 : 0 0] As a minister, I have lots of opportunities to talk with people about spiritual things or philosophical things, things that aren't exactly about weather or politics.
- ! Because my body, well, it just doesn't heal as quickly as it used to. And, you know, a half an hour or 45 minutes, rather, on a massage table without phones and conversations can lead to a really interesting topics of conversation.
- And in this conversation, we ended up talking, myself and the gentleman that was trying to put my body back together, we talked about all sorts of different bits about the spiritual world.
- Is there a spiritual world? If so, can we get access to it? And if we get access to it, are we getting access to a good portion of the spiritual world or a very scary portion of the spiritual world?
- Well, this gentleman was not very religious. A lot of more questions than he had answers. And to be honest, I have a lot of questions as well.
- [1 : 2 8] But it was a really interesting conversation because that is not an isolated conversation I had. I have conversations, not every day, but often enough where it seems that the here and the now, the material world that we live in, it's not enough for people.
- There's a desire for more, a desire for something transcendent, a desire for something that is eternal and big and magnificent.
- So how do we get access to it? Is this just simply the function of religion? In our conversation that I had with this gentleman, we ended up talking a lot about hallucinogens.
- Is that the way that we access the spiritual world? Is there a heaven? A paradise? Some kind of celestial utopian existence out there for us to experience?
- And how do we make sure that we get there? Maybe the biggest, the bigger underlying question is this. Why does the desire of heaven seem to be, and whatever heaven looks like, whatever vision that might be, why is that a pretty ubiquitous desire?
- [2 : 4 3] That spans time and culture and regions and languages. So as we explore these questions, and I'm putting forward to that, it is a universal question.
- Let's focus on the third of our four songs for the Savior recorded in the gospel according to St. Luke. Luke's gospel account is a very thorough investigation of the birth, the life and ministry, and then the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- It was written by a physician to this man named Theophilus. And it was written in such a way that it is, I mean, we can't say it's like a scientific biography, but Luke wrote it in such a way that there is kind of caked into it proof texts or footnotes or endnotes.
- So that it's not just a story that he made up. Anyways, the first song, there's four of these songs. The first song is by Mary, the mother of Jesus, and she magnifies the Lord.
- Mary is a nobody from Nowheresville, okay? She is a peasant woman from Nazareth, very unimportant town. The second song is by Zacharias.

[4 : 04] Now, Zacharias is this elderly priest. He is a somebody. He's a religious and cultural elite. He lives in Jerusalem. Jerusalem happens to be a very important city.

And he blesses the Lord. Both of these early songs have to do with God sending to earth this child that would be the Savior.

Now we get into our third song. The third song is not on the lips of a peasant woman, nor on the lips of a priestly elderly man, or on the lips of anybody for that matter.

Instead, we find that it is an angelic song. And the question for us to ask is, will this instance of this angelic song shed any light on this question about the hereafter, about eternity, about what we seem to be all after?

So we'll take a few minutes this morning and contemplate both the story and the song of the angels in Luke chapter 2. And we're just going to take a few minutes.

[5 : 11] We're going to look at the shepherd's point of view and then the angel's point of view. If you have a Bible, you can follow along with me. If you don't, that's okay. I'll read the section chapter 2 of Luke's gospel starting in the 8th verse.

And this is what it says. I'll pause there.

Why the shepherds? There are a few different comments to make, but I'll share just two. The first is this. Throughout the Bible, there is a pattern of God meeting people where they are at.

Not in giant palaces, not in very public spaces, but often in the jobs that people are working at, in secluded places.

And sometimes they are alone. So an instance that might come to mind is Moses. He is tending a flock when the Lord visits him in a burning bush.

[6 : 42] He was the great emancipator of Israel, but before that he was a simple shepherd. The second, Gideon, before he was Israel's great deliverer and judge, he was secretly threshing wheat in a winepress when the Lord visited him.

And finally, the third example that I'll give is Elisha. He was a great prophet. He came after the prophet Elijah, and he was plowing a field when the Lord visited him.

In all these cases, the Lord had met these people where they were at. Again, not in prestigious venues or in public places, but where they worked in their day-to-day.

I think it tells us something remarkable about the God of the Bible, that this transcendent Lord who is the eternal creator, who is high and above all things, who spoke creation into existence.

He descends to meet people in the mundane and the regular, rather than commanding them up to unreachable heights, inaccessible to mere mortals.

[7 : 53] He visits us. He doesn't say, come visit me. I think it tells us what we know deep down. Namely, that we also desire a divine visitation, but unfortunately have no way of achieving it or earning it or acquiring it or somehow getting on some kind of vehicle to take us up into the heavens.

Whereas, throughout scripture and history, whenever human beings have tried to bring heaven to earth, what they end up doing is making earth into a kind of hell.

If you can think of tyrants and leaders, whether they are on the right or the left, that have this utopian vision for the world, what often happens is a dystopian nightmare.

But this text, more importantly than that, tells us that the character of this all-perfect, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, uncreated creator God, his character is mercy and love.

He understands our humble estate. He meets us exactly where we are because he desires to redeem what has been abandoned, to recover what has been lost, to fix and to mend what has been broken.

[9 : 22] That is the very character of God. You cannot divorce mercy and love and a redeeming heart from the one true created God.

And this is the very core, the crux of the good news, which Christians call what we call the gospel. The heart of the good news is that all fear is dispelled and in its stead, great joy is brought.

And it is brought about by a child who had been born, who is the Savior and Christ and the Lord. Now we're going to touch on those three titles, Savior, Christ, and Lord, in a bit, but just keep that in the back of your mind.

The second point about the shepherds. Throughout the Bible, the role of a shepherd was depicted favorably. We read a portion of scripture that spoke of God shepherding his people and God raising up shepherds to shepherd his people.

You can think again of Moses. He was shepherding his father-in-law's flock. Israel's greatest king, King David, he himself was a shepherd. And most importantly, throughout scripture, the Lord himself is likened to a shepherd.

[10 : 38] However, by the time of the first century, some historical documents attest that the vocation of a shepherd fell into disrepute. Shepherds were viewed as untrustworthy, especially because they were not participants in the communal or cultic life of the nation.

They didn't celebrate the holidays. They didn't celebrate the Sabbaths. They were untrustworthy. In fact, their testimony was not valid in a court of law.

Some scholars liken them to like a step up from lepers. If you know anything about lepers in the Bible times or in ancient times, they are the bottom rung, the bottom rung of society.

It's hard to think of a connection here in Canada to somebody like the shepherds. But think of somebody that is low class, working poor, socially outcast, dispossessed, distrusted.

It is therefore remarkable that the birth announcement of the Savior, Christ the Lord, the one who would rescue all mankind from their sins, from their hopelessness, from their inability to transcend this mortal life, it was first declared to a group of people whose testimony couldn't be trusted.

[12 : 07] And, not only that, but it was proclaimed to them at night. If you're coming up with a fantastic PR campaign, this isn't what you do.

This is not a wise strategy for good PR. But it is a wise strategy if the gospel is for the marginalized and also the C-suite executive and everyone in between.

Why? Because the good news being for all people, which we read about in chapter 2, is for the marginalized in such a way that all people should see themselves as shepherds in a spiritual sense.

Those that are far from God, far from their fellow man, people that in a very real way have minimal to no hope to better their lot in life.

That is why the shepherds are uniquely crucial as the first recipients of the gospel. Their need is obvious. And they receive the gospel the proper way with great joy.

[13 : 22] And I'll say really quickly, the shepherds seem noble here. It's a good possibility that the shepherds were not noble people. We think of shepherds tending the flock.

It's maybe a bit romantic in our minds. But almost certainly they stunk. They didn't have polite speech. They didn't maybe know how to work a room or to interact with polite society.

Nevertheless, it wasn't so much of who they were or how they acted, but how they received. And they received this good news with great joy.

That's the shepherds. So let's take a look at the angels. After announcing the good news of the birth of the Christ child, there was one angel, the angel of the Lord.

The angel, it says, is joined by a host of angels, verse 13, which means that they were countless. One commentator suggested or imagined every angel that had ever existed showed up in the night sky.

[14 : 26] Whether it was that or something else, maybe a contingent of angels, the point is, there were many. And that they reflected the very light of heaven and they began to sing.

And here is where our third song for the Savior is found. Verse 14. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

Here's the thing about angels. Okay? In the Bible, in the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible, angels appeared to humanity at God's command.

Sometimes they were relaying a message or maybe they were assisting humans in various ways. They were on special assignment from heaven. And when they completed their divine task, they returned to heaven afterwards.

So although it would have been quite an experience for these shepherds, it was not the only time angelic visitation was recorded in Scripture. Okay? You read through the Old Testament, you see angels kind of popping up here and there.

[15 : 34] Sometimes it's very clear they're angels, sometimes it's more mysterious, like they're kind of these superhumans. Because anyways, you'll see them all throughout the Old Testament. What was special about this angelic visitation, though, is that there is no other record in the Bible of angels worshipping on earth.

They warn, they guard, they intervene, they protect, but they do not worship and sing on earth. They sing in heaven, they glorify God in heaven, but not on earth.

Why is this significant? Significant because the angels are supposed to sing God's praises in his presence. But they're on earth, presumably where God is not there.

God is in heaven, they are on earth, and yet they are praising God in a location where he is not to be found. So either they are breaking protocol, or God himself is truly present in some kind of way on earth.

See, in the Bible, the Christ, or the Messiah, Christ is, some of you may know this, maybe some of you have forgotten, maybe some of you do not know, Christ is a title, not so much a last name.

[16 : 49] It is the Greek term for a Hebrew title that merely means anointed one. Somebody who would be anointed by God to carry out redemption.

This Messiah, or this Christ, would rescue God's people from their troubled lives and troubled hearts. So using the term as Savior and Christ was very fitting for Jesus. However, if you remember, the angel calls this child Jesus Savior, Christ, and Lord.

Throughout the Bible, the term Lord is only used when referring to God himself. It would seem that the angels are singing on earth because the child born in Bethlehem is more than some anointed Savior.

He is God incarnate, God himself. Jesus Christ, the Lord, is the one true God, literally, enfleshed, fully man and fully God.

So when Christ, the transcendent God, comes to mortal man, the spiritual breaks into the natural and the result is nothing less than peace.

[18 : 05] The angels, they are glorifying God. Why? Because he has brought peace on earth. A heavenly, divine peace. Peace towards mankind not because mankind did good by God but because God is doing good to mankind.

God's peace and pleasure rests upon all those that recognize that there are, that they are in no better spot than a lonely, a lowly shepherd.

Or maybe, or maybe, no better than a wayward sheep. I'll wrap it up with this.

You see, the question about the spiritual world gaining access to heaven is less about, I would humbly put forward, is less about transcending this mortal life and more about knowing the God of peace who created this life.

Which means knowing God in a very personal way. It involves accessing him, being with him, being close to our creator. It means a return to a state without sin.

[19 : 15] One of the reasons why we open up Lessons and Carols not with a gospel reading but from Genesis chapter 3 because it highlights the fall of man where man chose our forefathers, chose to glorify ourselves rather than glorify God and all of the problems that ensued as a result.

It means a return to that state where sin was not known to us.

A state without war and without pride, without bravado, without envy or greed or gluttony or sloth or lust or unrighteous wrath.

to want the things of God without God himself is to miss the point and that's why I think we struggle to articulate what we truly want, this transcendence, when what we truly want is the transcendent one.

to transcend this world without being with God is not a destiny that will give us peace. God knew this and so he came to earth and he united himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ so that in doing so that God would do what only he could do, bring mankind into his presence.

[20 : 41] You see, Christ himself isn't just this baby in a manger but is the promise of God to all mankind that death would be conquered, that sin would be conquered, that vice would be conquered, that every evil force that oppresses and friends, they exist, it would be conquered and that grace and love and kindness and mercy would be extended to those who are hopeless and helpless.

The Savior and Lord Jesus Christ born of man yet fully God was wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a wooden feeding trough, a manger, yet he was not destined for a wooden trough but a wooden cross and through his sacrificial death those who are united to him by faith trusting in what he has done in his salvation they will be where he is for eternity and friends this means we do have a hope that transcends this life and will satisfy us for eternity because we will be with the one whom our heart truly desires.

for those of us in the Christian faith remember that Christ Jesus he visited you when you were still in darkness when you were like a shepherd alienated in the dark alone and at war with God and fellow man God did not just give you a ticket to heaven but a seat at his table and for those that might be outside of the Christian faith consider that the one true God he is eager to be found by you he is not far away he is not playing hard to get he has condescended he has lowered himself to the very lowest place to visit us and he urges you he urges me this morning to have eyes to see that he truly has visited mankind.

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