

Songs of Christ's Coming: The Angel's Song

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- [0 : 00] Heavenly Father, as you have drawn near to us in Jesus Christ, help us now to draw near to you. And we ask this in Christ's name.
- Amen. Please sit down. If you just turn back to Luke 2 on page 4, to this very, perhaps the best known and best loved Christmas story, which I'm aware is very, very familiar, like breathing.
- Familiar but necessary. And I think this deserves to be best known and best loved, not just because it's fabulous in the content, but because of the way it draws us in.
- The little story in Luke 2 is like a human body. And when you look at a body, you see the flesh, you see what's outside. You don't see the skeleton, but the skeleton is what gives shape and structure and form.
- And the skeleton in Luke 2 are the historical realities, the facts that are on the ground, what's really happening. But I don't know if you noticed as we read through it, that's not where the focus is.
- [1 : 23] The story is overwhelmingly about how different people respond to what God is doing in bringing Jesus into the world.
- The flesh of the story, if you like, are different responses to what happened. Let me show you what I mean. Just look down at verse 7. By the way, that's not a holiday inn.
- No such thing as commercial inns in those days. There was no room for them in a big staying place. Joseph was likely visiting with family in a crowded house.
- Houses in those days, one room, big room, with a deck built halfway across. Family ate and slept up on the deck. Cold nights, they'd bring the animals in underneath.
- We don't know whether Mary or Joseph slept up on the deck or down. But what we do know is that Jesus, after he was born, was placed in a manger.
- [2 : 37] And that's the word for a food trough. So a little animal food trough. So that part of the story that you see on the Hallmark cards, that rough part of the story is right.
- My point is this. It's just one verse. And if you look from verses 8 to 20, 10 times the space is given to the reaction to the announcement of Jesus' birth.
- And the reason for that is that the birth of Jesus, the coming of this child, needs more and more understanding. It needs to be unwrapped and treasured and pondered.
- Because whatever this is God is doing in the birth of Jesus Christ, God is very interested in how we respond. So what we're celebrating here tonight, the first Christmas, is so significant and so deep and so important to you and me that it takes not only the revelation of God, but our reaction and response.
- And what God is after tonight is to take us out of our shallow and narrow worlds, to take us out of ourselves to Christ himself. So what I would like to do is just look at the two main responses in verses 8 to 14, the angels, and then 15 to the end, the shepherds.
- [4 : 00] So let's look at the angels in that first paragraph. And by the way, the Bible is unashamedly supernatural, which you would expect if it's from God and about God.

So in verse 8 and 9, the angel of the Lord is sent from heaven, from the presence of God himself, to a mangy little field, in a mangy little town, and a group of mangy shepherds near Bethlehem.

And the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. A couple of years ago, Bron and I had the privilege of having a tour around Israel, and we were taken to the field outside Bethlehem.

And I don't know if any of you have ever done that. It is a complete anti-climax. It's a dirty, scrabbly, brushy, rocky... It's not the hills of England.

It's not BC interior. And I say that because if you were in marketing, and if you were in advertising, and you wanted to publicise the birth of Jesus, what God is doing here just seems foolish to us, doesn't it?

[5 : 16] I mean, surely if you know there are going to be lots of Christmas cards made, you'd send the angel to somewhere at least nice and visible, surely. But you know, if that's the way God thought about things, he'd never have anything to do with any of us, would he?

As the God of the Bible consistently acts in ways that we regard as foolish. The child who comes in the cradle goes to the cross.

Because the way King Jesus takes up his rule is being nailed to a piece of wood. Because God's foolishness overturns our wisdom.

And how thankful we can be for that tonight, because it does mean that he wants to have dealings with you and me. However, I want you to see how the angel reacts to this news that he has to declare.

And you're very familiar with these words, but in verses 10, 11, and 12, have you ever noticed? The angel is not just communicating data. He's not just getting across information.

[6 : 23] He's almost trembling with awe. Just look at the words in front of you there, 10, 11, and 12. He says, Fear not, for look. Behold means literally look.

The angel is saying to the shepherds, Don't look at me. Look at this news that I bring you. I bring you good news of great joy. That's why I'm appearing to you. You have great fear.

You're terrified. I want to replace your mega fear with mega joy. Because it's not just for you, but it's for all the people.

Not just for Israel, but for all the people. And the reason for the joy is a child is born to you. The child is not born for us angels. We are not the ones in need of salvation.

The child is born to you, for you. All the blessings that God has are in that child, in Jesus Christ, for you.

[7 : 26] You can understand the angel is overwhelmed. He's saying, You, humans, are incredibly privileged and honoured by the birth of this child. The angel is very, very happy.

And he's happy because of who this child is. It's amazing. He doesn't name the child. He doesn't say, Baby is born. His name is Jesus at this address. He says three things about the child.

He calls him a saviour who is Christ the Lord. He is a saviour because in God's mind, we are lost and perishing and in need of saving.

If our troubles were basically economic, God would have sent an economist. If our problems were boredom, if that was the real issue, he'd send an entertainer.

You understand what I'm saying. But Jesus has come to bring us back to God, to give us what we cannot give ourselves. Life. Eternal life.

[8 : 31] Forgiveness of our sins. Reconciliation with God. He is the saviour. And he's Christ, which means he's God's authorised king to bring this about.

And he's the Lord, which is the word that Luke has already used many times for God himself. This baby is God in the flesh. Now, I've noticed lately that the language of salvation is coming back into usage just a little bit.

I read an article in the Atlantic magazine a month ago on how to stop all our fighting, all our troubles and all our strife in the world.

There's a book that's been produced by a Harvard professor whose name is Joshua Green. And it is about, quote, the central tragedy of modern life. And that is our well-documented knack for bigotry, conflict, atrocity and tribalism.

He's a very clever man. And with the use of neuroscience, he says our trouble is in our genes.

[9 : 37] Our genes have been shaped by natural selection so that we would live in small hunter-gathering groups. And what we need to do is we just need to think bigger.

And he says, quote, We fight not because we are fundamentally selfish, but because we have incompatible views of what a moral society should be.

You understand? So the problem with the world is we don't just have one. All we need really is one global moral philosophy. And you'll be surprised to know that Green has the answer for us.

And he offers us a form of utilitarianism. And he says it will be very difficult, but all we need to do is adopt this one form of moral behavior.

And he calls it the key to salvation. That's the language. It is a self-salvation project. And in the article, the journalist who is writing about this finishes by saying that we ought to be suspicious of any intuition that the other guys are the problem and we're not.

[10 : 50] In other words, I can be thoroughly well-versed in a moral system. I can know everything about it and be committed to that moral philosophy. I'm still not going to keep it.

I'm going to fail. And you are too, I think. Because every self-salvation scheme is doomed to failure. Because I cannot save me. I cannot save you.

And you cannot save yourself. What we need is a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this is why the angel is so excited. And he brings good news of great joy.

When Leo Tolstoy was 50, he was very famous. He had just finished Anna Karenina. And he was, he had money, he had fame.

And he fell into deep, deep despair. And he wrote these words. He said, the very simple question that lies in the soul of every human being is this. Why should I live?

[11 : 49] Why should I wish for anything? Why should I do anything? Is there any meaning in my life that wouldn't be destroyed by death? You see, the angel is speaking to him and to everyone who asks that question.

He says, good news, great joy. A Savior is born for you. And at this point in the story, we want to ask, well, how are they going to find a newborn, this newborn baby?

Because there's probably a whole group of newborns in Bethlehem. And so the angel gives a very specific way of identifying this Savior, Christ.

There's a sign. He says in verse 12, the baby will be wrapped in rags and lying in a food trough. In other words, all the glory of God will be in an animal food trough.

And the angel is amazed at the lengths to which God will go to embrace us and save us. And then in verse 13, 14, the choir starts up.

[13 : 02] A big burst of praise to God. And these words were written, I think, for this very occasion. What gives them joy and praise is that in Jesus Christ, heaven and earth come together.

Heaven and earth meet. They sing glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. The angelic reaction simply means that God is doing something entirely new.

That God has begun salvation, bringing his saving, ruling life. And that nature has never seen anything like this before.

The son of God, not bringing a self-salvation project. But bringing peace, shalom, the positive good. And the angels are very excited. And in the end, they give glory.

Glory to God in the highest. Secondly, then, what's the response of the shepherds? Verses 15 to the end. Well, of course, everything about the shepherds, from a human point of view, is wrong, isn't it?

[14 : 12] I mean, these guys are serious outsiders. Ever thought about the fact, heaven doesn't make the announcement to Jesus' parents, but to shepherds.

They don't even go to immediate members of the family. They go to these shepherds. And shepherds are not well regarded in Israel. They were doubly outsiders, which is very good news for anyone who has felt like an outsider.

Because the birth of Jesus is a much bigger thing than a family affair. More than that, a point is made here that the angel does not go to Caesar or Quirinius the governor.

Caesar is summarily dismissed in the first couple of verses. The function that Caesar performs, ironically, is to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem so that Jesus will be born in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

Do you think about this? From a human perspective, it's all wrong, isn't it? I mean, Jesus, he should have been born in Rome or in Jerusalem or in the temple or somewhere like that.

[15 : 22] But the wrongness of the shepherds, you see, is precisely because they've got no status. They've done nothing to deserve this.

They've done nothing to commend themselves to God whatsoever. And I think that's the point. In the darkness of night, when they're sitting there minding their own business, probably wondering how to get a better job, perhaps.

The brilliance of heaven opens and glory breaks upon them, announcing the fulfillment of God's plan. And Luke draws our attention to their response, because their response is delayed.

You see, the angel gives them a sign, which opens up a space for their response to be delayed.

They are told the sign, but then they have to take action before they see if God is a person of his word. They have to follow through on what God has said before they can see the child.

[16 : 30] God doesn't force us to believe. He reveals himself in Jesus Christ. He speaks to us in the scriptures. But we have to move. We have to respond before it becomes real.

If the shepherds had stayed out there in the fields, salvation would just have remained words to them. But they follow through on the sign. They go to Bethlehem, and they prove for themselves that what God said is true.

In verse 15, we have to go over to Bethlehem to see this thing the Lord has made known to us, they say. And it is exactly the same for us. God has revealed to us his good news in his son, and he expects spiritual movement from us toward Jesus.

He has spanned eternity to come among us, to be born as one of us. And now he calls us to come close to Christ, to draw near to Jesus Christ, to go out of our hearts towards him, to see him with our spiritual eyes, and to see in him our hope and our joy and our future.

This is what God is calling on us tonight for. To turn away from every self-salvation project, and to enter into this salvation by bowing to him as Lord.

[17 : 55] And when they go, verse 20, they find it just as it had been told them, which is exactly the way we should respond to God.

And I think this is why the story is told this way. This is why there's a delay. First they hear the good news, then they come to see Jesus as the Christ.

And that's exactly what's happening for us. You see, you think back on this year. For you, throughout this year, God has been speaking to you, calling you to himself and calling you to Jesus Christ.

In the pleasure and in the pain, in the conscience, in the difficulties. And the question is, have you listened to what he's saying? And have you responded?

Have you moved towards Jesus Christ? Because in the end, the true response of the shepherds is given to us in verse 20. They glorify God.

[18 : 54] They glorify God. Which is exactly the same response that the angels had. Glory to God in the highest. It's not, thank you very much, God. It's not, we're very fortunate.

That was a great experience. This is worship. It's adoration. It's declaring to God, we do not deserve this. And we love you.

And it's very interesting, as just we finish off the story. There are two other responses that are very quickly mentioned. One is the people who listen to the shepherds.

In verse 18, we're told they wondered at what the shepherds told them. And lots of people wonder at Christmas. They marvel at all kinds of things about Christmas.

But amazement and marveling is very different from faith and worship. In fact, during this gospel, in Luke's gospel, to just wonder is the sign of someone who just has a superficial brush with Jesus, a temporary thing with Jesus.

[20 : 01] And they never follow through. And in the end, they turn away. We have to move from wondering to welcoming. And how we do that is shown us in Mary's response in verse 19.

We read, She treasured these things, pondering them in her heart. Because there's more here than meets the eye. There's more here than we could possibly imagine or hope for.

These things, brothers and sisters, they've got to be treasured in our hearts. So we constantly judge by appearances. You can be a Christian for decades and still judge things by appearances.

But the birth of Jesus moves from the cradle to the crucifixion. And everything that God does is unconventional and not the way that we think it ought to be done.

This is the way God works though. He sends the King of Kings to be born in poverty and obscurity. He places the Lord of Glory, his son, in a food trough as a baby.

[21 : 07] He has the saviour of the world wrapped in rags by a teenage mother. It is a stunning act of humility by God. It demonstrates his love.

And it's interesting as we finish that the angels and the shepherds in the end respond the same way. The angels who do not need saving, they respond with glory and worship.

And the shepherds who do need saving, they have to respond to God's word and go to Jesus. And then they respond with worship and glory. And that's the same for us tonight.

We hear the good news. We act on what we hear. And we move spiritually. We draw near to Jesus Christ. And as we see him, we see the salvation that God has for us in Jesus Christ.

We turn from every self-salvation project and we move into worship. So let's bow our heads and just pray for a moment. Just a moment of quiet as we recognize the enormous love and condescension of God in coming for us.

[22 : 32] The angel message which comes afresh to us tonight. Good news. Great joy. To you is born a saviour who is Christ the Lord.

We ask, Father, that you would teach us to continue to draw near to him so that we might have salvation and joy. And we ask this in his name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.