

Song of Glory (Christmas Eve)

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Great to be with you at this Christmas season. Even with all the restrictions that are in place for us at the moment, it's still a great joy to be able to at least hear those Christmas carols and be reminded again of the great news of Christmas.

I'd like to pray for us as we launch into this text. If you'd like to get your Bibles open at Luke 2, that would be wonderful. Gracious God, we thank you again for an opportunity just to stop as we do week by week, but particularly at the end of each year and to reflect on what has been, but also what is in the Lord Jesus and what is available to us.

And so as many of us have heard this news year in and year out, I pray that this would be news that would strike to the core of our being and shape our lives.

Give us true peace this Christmas in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more.

With sad farewells, we each prepared to settle back to war. But the question haunted every heart that lived that wondrous night, whose family have I fixed within my sight.

[1 : 26] Those are some of the words from a song, which we can't sing again this year, written by John McClutchin back in 1984, the song titled Christmas in the Trenches.

What the song does is it depicts an historical event across the Western Front in World War I, during World War I.

It was a widespread, unofficial ceasefires during and around the Christmas period of 1914.

Collectively, these ceasefires are known as the Christmas Truce.

So in the week leading up to Christmas, French, German, British soldiers stopped killing each other at the end of each day and ventured into what is called no man's land between the trenches of the two warring parties to mingle with each other, to exchange food, souvenirs.

There were joint burial ceremonies and prisoner swaps, while several meetings attended, in fact, in carol singing in different languages.

[2 : 39] Men even played football games between one another, creating one of the most memorable images of the Christmas Truces. And then immediately afterwards, they settled back into their trenches and started killing each other the next day.

The nations were at war, and yet there was a sense of peace in those moments at the end of each day as hostility ceased.

The reality is that we know in the world in which we live, real and enduring peace is something that is so elusive. World War I was described as the war that would end all wars.

Of course, peace did come on the 11th hour of the 11th day, the 11th month in 1918, but it didn't last very long. World War II was just around the corner.

And in fact, since the end of World War II in 1945, there have been a total of 26 days globally without a conflict.

[3 : 49] 26 days where there has not been a declared war between one power and another power. That's all. And yet we sing every Christmas, there is a promise of peace.

Luke chapter 2, we just read it, verse 14. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

John McClutchin's song is a song that is looking for peace, longing for peace. As individuals, we desire peace in our relationships.

And the irony is that at each Christmas, approximately one third of family gatherings come to some form of blows.

One third of family gatherings come to blows. As you are pushed together with people that you don't really want to be with. And with alcohol and other things, it just degenerates.

[4 : 57] Our world is in desperate need of peace. And this bit of the Bible promised us peace. And has been doing so for 2,000 years. So what is the peace that the birth of Jesus Christ promises?

How do we get this peace? And how should we respond, therefore, to the birth of Jesus? You see, the claim of Christianity is that Christmas is all about the Son of God, Jesus Christ, coming into his creation in order to rescue his creation.

So what? How do we make Christmas more meaningful? So I've got three things I want to say really briefly this morning. I want to say treasuring the message, finding peace, and living fearlessly. So treasuring the message. Really hearing the Christmas story again and again, year after year, isn't so easy to do. We become familiar with it.

Too familiar with it. To hear well is a crucial thing in this Luke 2 passage. The shepherds were told something by the angels.

[6 : 08] And then they went and saw that it was just as they were told. Then in verse 17, when they saw Jesus, they spread the word about everything that was told to them about this child.

In verse 18 we read, And there's even a deeper hearing in verse 19.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. So what we're hearing here is not just merely the hearing of the nightly news bulletin.

We all hear news. We swipe it on our phones nowadays. And on the most part, we just keep swiping it. It has no particular impact on us. Those of us with children know the experience of telling them something and not being followed through on when you've told them something.

Those with husbands know the same experience. Did we hear the information? Yes. Did we give it our attention? Think out the implications? Really understand? Well, no.

[7 : 22] See, firstly, we're told here that God speaks to and through the ordinary. God gives us his word.

God speaks to us through the ordinary. The shepherds got the extraordinary. The shepherds got the angels appearing to them.

And there was no doubt what was happening for them at that moment. Everyone else gets a shepherd. Just ordinary, low-class shepherds.

The biblical authors got, if you like, special revelation. Thank you, John. He's moving already. Pardon me.

Thanks, mate. The biblical authors got special revelation from God. Moses, Isaiah, John, just to name a few. The rest of us get a book.

[8 : 31] It's a book that is so easy to not pay attention to. How many of us have started our years with New Year resolution?

Well, this year we're going to read the Bible in its entirety. And somewhere around Leviticus, we get tripped up real quick. And it falls by the wayside.

Secondly, we are told here that Mary is a model for us in listening. She heard the news from the angel and now she hears it from the shepherds and she doesn't disregard the shepherds.

She doesn't go, oh, these guys are not important. I got it from angels already. She heard it and it says here she treasures it. She ponders in her heart what she has heard.

The word ponder here is really crucial. It's to put it into context what she's heard. It's to connect what she's heard. It's connecting this news that she has heard with the rest of her life.

[9 : 39] How does this news explain my life? What does it mean for the way I'm living? It's a focused mental discipline.

Treasuring it in her heart is a little bit different. Excuse me. It's a little bit more emotional. It's to keep it alive, to keep it burning in my heart.

It's to relish it. It's to savour it. You see, Mary doesn't just know the news of the arrival of God intellectually.

She fans the flame of this news in her heart, in her affections. She takes this news into the centre of being until it means everything to her.

Treasuring is an attitude. We shouldn't underestimate our ability to hear, and yet not hear, the good news of Christianity.

[10 : 54] The gospel. The word of God. Jesus told a story about the parable of a sower. Same sower. Same sower. Same seed.

But for four different responses. Most people hear, but don't listen to the word of God.

They don't listen to the gospel. Some people hear it and don't believe it at all. Some people hear it and say they believe it, but they don't treasure it. They don't ponder it. They don't let it come into the centre of their lives and change them.

We don't want to be like the crowd that just marvels. We want to be like Mary and ponder and treasure and hear well. Because when we hear well the good news of the gospel, when we hear that well, we discover a remarkable promise, and it's the promise of peace.

Have a look at verses 13 and 14 with me at Luke chapter 2. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

[12:13] That is a very specific promise of peace. It's peace for those whom God's grace and favour and mercy rests.

On the surface, this looks like a promise just for a very select group of people, but it has to be read in light of verse 10. Verse 10 reads, The angel said to them, Do not be afraid.

I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. Luke is saying here that one of the great benefits of grasping the great news of God's grace is you now, right now, can have peace with God.

You see, one of the important themes of the New Testament is that before we embrace God's grace and mercy, we need to understand that we are at war with God.

[13:21] It's one of the great themes of the New Testament. Romans chapters 5 to 8 in particular spell this out for us. And most people don't believe that. Most people do not believe that they're actually at war with God.

Most would say that they don't believe in God or that they are, if you like, indifferent to God. They believe in God in some sense, but it doesn't really have any impact on my life day by day.

But hardly anyone says that I'm angry with God and I hate God. Romans 8 verse 7 says, The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God.

It does not submit to God's law. It refuses to listen to God's word. Our relationship with God is not fundamentally disbelief and indifference.

It is hostility. The irreligious person is overtly asserting their hostility against God. Their, if you like, independence from God.

[14:28] They openly declare that they want to live life their own way. However, the religious person covertly asserts their independence against God.

The religious person reads the Bible. They pray. They follow the commandments. They gather at Christmas time with the expectation it wins God's approval in his goodwill.

It's an attempt to control God. It's a declaration that I don't trust God. No matter who we are in our nature, we are hostile to God.

And we cannot stand the idea that he's in charge. Left our own devices, we are all committed to the idea that we will be truly happy as individuals if we are in charge of our own lives.

Left our own devices, we truly believe that we will be happy if we are left to control our own lives. Left our own lives.

[16:08] What God has done for us through Jesus Christ, that declaration, that moment, that is a peace treaty. The war is over.

Grace and peace come together. His grace to us results in peace. Those who grasp the grace of God are those who have peace with God.

At the very least, it means that Christians ought to be peacemakers. At the very least, it means that. It's what Jesus called his disciples to do in the Sermon on the Mount.

Peacemakers are people who have admitted their wrongs, their flaws, their sins to God. And they have swallowed their pride. They have found peace with God. And when that happens between you and God, it means that you go out in the world and you do it between you and others.

Christians know how to admit that they are wrong. They know how to forgive.

[17:10] They know how to reconcile. They know how to reconcile. Peacemakers between races and classes. Family members. Neighbors.

Colleagues. Peace comes to those who grasp God's grace. Thirdly, when you're at peace with God, you live fearlessly.

So peace is possible to those who listen well to the word of God, who grasp the gospel of God's grace. And being at peace means that you live fearlessly. Have a look at verse 8.

There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. The shepherds were terrified.

[18 : 24] The angels even tell them, don't be afraid. Because that's exactly what happens when an angel shows up. In fact, they actually say to them, do not be afraid because I bring you good news.

Embracing the good news of Christmas means we can be at peace and we can live without fear. You see, what normally happens in the Bible is that when God shows up, people are terrified of his presence.

It happens every time when a person who is flawed is put beside perfection.

You will immediately see your flaw. When you think you are powerful, but then you're put beside someone who is truly powerful, you realize you're not powerful. The first time is in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned.

They had a great relationship, walked and talked with God in the cool of the evening, and then they chose to put themselves at the center of their lives because they thought that true happiness would come when they revolved life around them.

[19 : 39] We all do it. It's the lie that has entered all of our hearts. And one of the great sources of our behavior as a human race is we've got over 7 billion people in the world thinking the world revolves around them.

And Adam and Eve did not experience fear until they started to live independently of God. When we have a perfect relationship with God, there is no fear in life.

The vast majority live lives of fear. We live lives of fear of rejection, failure, bad things happening to us, the future, death.

Fear is connected to not trusting God. Instead, we live each day trying to earn our self-worth and people's respect.

And if we don't constantly get affirmation and love from people, we just die internally. We are slaves to our performance and other people's perceptions.

[20 : 51] It's a fear of life because we know we cannot control any of those things, let alone the future. It's hard enough trying to manage people's perceptions of us, let alone the futures that we desire for ourselves.

It's why when bad things do happen, such as COVID-19, we freak out because it's just another reminder that we're not in control. Just one more reminder.

One more God to us. We are especially afraid of death. In death, we lose everything. We are filled with fear.

But what we do is we fill our lives with distraction instead in order not to think about the fear.

Distraction so that we can't listen well to the good news. So that we can't treasure and ponder. We are all our own masters and we are unqualified for the job and we know it.

[21 : 57] That's the deep fear in our hearts. And that is why we live with fear every day. We have taken God's crown and we have placed it on our own heads, so to speak.

And we are way over our heads. We are usurped to a throne that we don't deserve nor are qualified for. And on the first Christmas, the real king turned up and we are terrified.

His beauty shows us our ugliness. His power shows us our impotence. His light shows us our darkness.

So Christmas is the solution for us. Verse 11. A saviour has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. Jesus Christ is the saviour.

To have peace and to live fearlessly, we need to abandon every form of self-salvation and self-confidence and rest in the salvation that only he offers.

[23 : 00] The baby born in that manger is the Lord. The Lord here is translated from the Greek word kurios. It is a very significant word in the New Testament.

It's parallel in the Old Testament is the word Yahweh, the covenant name of God. The baby born in the manger is not just the saviour.

He's not just the sage. He is the creator God. That's who he is. If the God who made all things is prepared to be humble himself and to come into this earth, his world, at the very least you can say he's trustworthy.

He ought to be listened to. He has come into this world, into our very presence in order to rescue us so that we might live fearlessly.

Way back in 1961, the Soviet Union put a man into space for the very first time.

[24 : 08] 27-year-old Yuri Gagarin. He orbited the earth in 89 minutes. That's moving pretty quick. 89 minutes. Nikita Khrushchev was head of the Soviet Union at the time.

And he said of the event that they have been into space now and God was nowhere to be found. God does not exist.

Been up there. We've checked it out. He's not there. Nowhere to be found. The great Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis wrote an article in response to that comment from Khrushchev.

And the comment, the response was called The Seeing Eye. He wrote this. The Russians, I am told, report that they have not found God in outer space.

Looking for God or heaven by exploring space is like reading or seeing all of Shakespeare's plays in the hope that you will find Shakespeare as one of the characters.

[25 : 17] Shakespeare is in one sense present at every moment in every one of his plays. But he is never present in the same way as, for instance, Hamlet is present in his play.

My point is this. If God does exist, he is related to, he relates to the universe more as an author is related to a play than as one object in the universe is related to another object in the universe.

He went on to then ask the question, how then do we find God or, more importantly, attempt to avoid him?

He first answered how we avoid God. How do we go about avoiding God? And he says very simply, avoid silence.

Avoid solitude. Concentrate on money, sex, status, wealth, and on your own grievances. Keep the radio on. Live in a big crowd of people.

[26 : 24] Use plenty of sedation. If you must read books, select your books very carefully. He said, but you'd be better off sticking to the newspapers.

To some, he says, God is discoverable everywhere. To others, nowhere. Nowhere. Lewis wrote that he had less advice out about, in fact, finding God.

He said, because it's actually God who finds us. God comes to us. He said his point was that the only way to know the God who made everything is for this God, the author of life, to write himself into his story of history.

You see, and that's the claim of Christmas. And it's wonderfully, wonderfully, it's a beautiful story. Infinitely wonderful. Christmas means that God has looked at the world that he created. He could see the trouble that we are in. And he wrote himself into history as one of the characters of history in order to redeem us from the story that we created for ourselves.

[27 : 50] He didn't come simply to embrace us, but to die for us. He came to save us. He lost his glory so that we, the unimportant, could have glory with him forever.

He lost his peace so that we could be at peace with him forever. You can trust someone who's prepared to do that for you.

You can trust him with your future. You can trust him with your life. You can trust him with history. Do not live a life of fear.

Look to Christmas. To the degree that we grab hold of the good news of Christmas. And ponder it. And treasure it deep in our hearts. Connect our lives with it. To that degree, our fears are diminished.

[28 : 56] And our peace rises. Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas.