

## Luke 2

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn together to Luke chapter 2 and read once again verse 10.

And the angel said to the shepherds, 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 Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

From one point of view, the birth of Jesus is a remarkably simple story. But it's when you begin to think of how the events that took place in this chapter 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, what they meant to those who were involved in them, that you begin to appreciate a depth that perhaps you didn't otherwise perceive.

[ 1 : 29 ] For example, what did these events mean from Mary's perspective? She was right at the heart of what was taking place.

This was no ordinary birth, and I don't mean just because she was in a manger or in a stable. This was no ordinary birth in that she knew that she was carrying the Son of God inside her.

And she knew that from the time that the angel had appeared to her in Luke chapter 1 and announced to her that God had a special plan for her.

She was to give birth to the Son of God. Now, don't tell me there's anything simple about that. There is nothing straightforward about it.

Not only was there a mystery to this act that God was going to do in her and the baby that she was going to produce, but there was the shame of any woman who wasn't married and yet was expecting a baby.

[ 2 : 40 ] And she had to live with that shame. And I don't think we appreciate the stigma that must have been hers because of what she was doing in the service of God.

She said to God as a response, she said to the angel as a response to what he had commissioned her to do, that she was in the Lord's hands and that she gave himself to him for whatever he wanted her to do.

Now, that's faith. But faith is not easy. When you come up against the whisperings and the rumors of those who know you and amongst whom you live, and things were never going to be the same again until, of course, and unless those very people who were speaking about her came to know the Lord Jesus for themselves.

And so for Mary, it was no easy thing to carry and to give birth to the Son of God. It was a tremendous honor. And yet, on the other hand, there was a tremendous cost.

There's always a cost to being a Christian and to doing what God is asking and commanding us to do. And there was Joseph.

[ 3 : 55 ] Can you imagine his confusion? Never had this ever happened before that God came to a woman and she became pregnant and she was to give birth to his son.

It couldn't be explained. It was a unique one-off occasion. It would never, ever happen again and never will happen again. Can you imagine the confusion that there must have been in Joseph? How could he explain this to his family and to his friends? That's why Matthew's Gospel tells us that his intention was to divorce her privately or to put her away privately in order to save some of the shame that would have been on him and Mary.

And, of course, if it hadn't been for the dream that he had in which God told him not to do so, then he probably would have, of course. And, well, there's no point in thinking what would have happened then because it didn't happen.

He himself, he too, committed himself to the command of God, a man of great faith and commitment and ready to do what God, but at a cost nonetheless.

[ 5 : 02 ] Then there was the character of Herod. Herod who tried, and this is, of course, jumping forward some, a couple of years to when the wise men came and sought where the baby was because they had seen his star in the east.

Herod was a most peculiar and a most dangerous individual. He was paranoid. He probably had some kind of condition which had come upon him from all kinds of abuse of his own body and his lifestyle, which was a horrendous one.

He had lived a violent and a corrupt life. If ever there was a dangerous king, it was Herod, somebody that you couldn't trust. He couldn't. He killed his wife. He killed his mother-in-law. He killed his brother-in-law. He killed two of his own sons. He now lived in fear that his close family were plotting against him, and he kept on changing his will depending on which rumor he was believing at that time.

So when this news came to him, he just lost it altogether, and he commanded that all the babies, all the boys under the age of two would be put to death.

[ 6 : 12 ] Of course, that raises a whole list of questions, doesn't it? That even the birth of God's son himself meant the horrendous, the horrendous atrocity that was committed by Herod, in which every baby boy under the age of two was put to death.

And I know what you're thinking. Why did God not stop him? How can God allow, at the very moment of greatest joy in all the world, when he's sending his own son into the world, as a result of God's action, how can all these baby boys be put to death?

And I can only say that the culprit is not God. The culprit was Herod, and his monstrous reaction to being told that the king was born near to him.

That was his choice. We're all men and women of choices, and you can't blame God for what you do. You can't blame God for what other people do, in their anger and in their jealousy and rage, and in this case, paranoia.

You can't blame God. We live in a sinful world, and nonetheless, nonetheless, what happened was utterly, utterly unthinkable, wasn't it? It was just awful. Just like so many events that take place.

[ 7 : 33 ] Who knows what's going on in Syria right now? Who knows? Amongst Christians. People who know and love the Lord, and all they want to do is to meet together.

I saw a photograph on Facebook the other day. It just was utterly, utterly unthinkable. A man who had gone out to preach the gospel, he came back, and his four children had been murdered.

And I know what you're thinking. I know I'm thinking it too. Surely the Lord could do something, and he doesn't. Unless, of course, that is his will and his plan.

And I know I'm being simplistic, but that's the sinful world, the fallen world to which we belong. Now, I'm not going to go into this, because this is a subject in itself.

It's one which we were thinking about, the fellowship the other night, and it raises all kinds of questions, but I really don't have time to go into it this evening. And then there was the shepherds, who'd go into the wise men, their perspective of the shepherds.

[ 8 : 33 ] If you're intrigued by the wise men, I'm equally intrigued by the shepherds. And my question is always this. Who were these men?

And why was it that God chose them to be the first people to hear about the birth of his son? Now, you know, when a baby is born, the first people to get to hear about it is a close family.

And it's kind of, to say the least, unusual. I remember when my young granddaughter was born two years ago. I saw it. I saw the birth through Facebook. It was really quite unusual.

But what had happened was that when she was born, her new auntie, my son-in-law's brother, sister, had been so excited. She didn't even think. Put it on Facebook right away. Actually, we were quite relieved because we had been on tenderhooks the whole day wondering what was happening, not hearing a single thing.

And so when we saw it, we were actually filled with relief and joy, at least that they were all safe.

But it was most unusual and I think words were spoken afterwards. But that's okay. We're all friends now.

[ 9 : 40 ] But that's what, the close family is who gets to hear of the birth of a baby first. You all know that. Everybody knows that.

It's a no-brainer. And I'm quite sure that Joseph had parents or brothers or sisters and Mary would have had parents or brothers or sisters. I'm not quite sure what they would have made of all this news.

They weren't even married and all the rest of it. But nevertheless, nevertheless, the baby was born. A son was born into the world. And close family have had. But no, God chose the shepherds. What was it about the shepherds? Who were these men? They were complete strangers. They were men in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph didn't even come from Bethlehem. They came from Nazareth. They had no connection whatsoever to Mary and Joseph.

And yet, God chose them. Sometimes you hear people speculating about shepherds. They talk about, well, humble shepherds watched their flock. Well, were they humble?

[10:42] Were they noble? Were they good men? Were they just ordinary men? Were they poor? Were they nice, respectable, decent people? And did God just feel sorry for them because they were so poor? Is that what it was? Well, historians tell us otherwise.

Tell us, historians, and I hate to break this news to you if you've never discovered this before, but historians tell us that shepherds were not humble. And they weren't nice. And they weren't respectable either.

They were thieves and cheats and liars. You couldn't trust them. You had to watch your pockets if you spoke to them. That's why people used to keep them on the outside. They weren't able to trust them.

They didn't like them. And they were like the tax collectors at the time. And that makes it even more intriguing, doesn't it? Why would God choose people who were on the margins of society, people who were cheats and liars and thieves, to tell about the birth of his son?

For exactly the reason that Jesus came into the world. I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners, he said.

[11:54] Who were Jesus' friends when he grew up and when he started preaching and going into the streets? Who were his friends? Were they the nice, decent, honest people of the day? No, they weren't. They were the margins of society, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the sinners of the day.

That's why people were so incredulous when they saw him. This man eats with sinful people, people who have a reputation for being the lowest of the low in society, in our town.

Nobody else would talk to them, but Jesus called them. He said, Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. That's who he came for, and he came to the shepherds.

It's no wonder. If that's true, I believe it is true, because I'm told that it's true. If that's true, then it's well seen why they were so... The passage tells us that they were filled with fear when they saw the angel.

They were filled with fear. And I'm not surprised if that's true, because this was the last thing they ever expected to happen to them. It was the last thing anybody would ever expect, but particularly the shepherds, because all of a sudden the light shone, and they knew perfectly well as soon as they saw the angel that this was God speaking to them.

[13:13] It's like driving a stolen car, and you see a blue light all of a sudden behind you. You know you're caught, and you know you're guilty. So it's no surprise to me that these shepherds, who they were and the kind of reputation that they had, all of a sudden seeing the glory of the Lord all around them.

That's what we read. All around. There's no place to run. The glory of the Lord doesn't allow you to escape. They were filled with fear, and they had to be told, fear not, do not fear, for I bring you.

It's the last thing they ever expected. I wonder sometimes whether people are so surprised by the gospel that it just defies your logic, isn't it?

If you are conscious tonight of your life and all the sinfulness and the shame that there is in your life, if God was to meet you tonight, you would expect Him to do to you what you deserved.

And it wouldn't surprise you if He was to meet you in all His glory and say, depart from me, you workers of iniquity. But when He says to you, do not fear, for I bring you good tidings of great joy, that doesn't make sense because you don't deserve it and I don't deserve it.

[14:43] But it's true. That's why Jesus came into the world, to bring forgiveness through His death on the cross. A forgiveness that defies our logic and a forgiveness that doesn't make sense to us because we know that if we were to stand before Him and just like the psalmist says, if God was to mark our iniquity, nobody could stand.

And yet, with you, there is forgiveness. Whether it accords with or denies our sense of logic, I don't care.

What's important to me is it's true because God is gracious. Somehow or other, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

And I believe, I can only speculate, that this was to be, at least for many of these shepherds, the turning point in their lives when they saw the grace of God and when you see and believe in the grace of God and accept God's grace into your own heart, into your own life and come and accept Jesus, then that marks the turning point in the life of anyone.

But in any case, time's going on. I actually wasn't going to talk very much about these people. I was going to talk about angels and the birth of Jesus as it was seen by the angels.

[16:16] Now, if we're intrigued by the wise men and we're intrigued by the shepherds, how much more might we be intrigued by the angels? But I can't get away from them. They play such a crucial role.

Now, I reckon, we have to be very careful here that we don't spend so much time talking about angels that we don't talk about Jesus. I don't think we've done that. I think we've spoken. We've recognized that He is the central figure in this passage.

And the angels wanted not for them to focus their attention on them. They never do that. We're not to become so intrigued, I believe, that some people, they become so intrigued and curious about angels that they spend all their time researching and wondering and asking and discussing and writing about angels, almost as if angels were to be worshipped.

They're not. And yet, angels play such a significant part in many parts of the Bible that we can't get away from them. It's a reality. I don't have any problem in believing in angels.

I know that it sounds ridiculous, but really, the Bible is, as far as the world outside is concerned, the Bible's ridiculous anyway. It's ridiculous to believe that Jesus walked on the water or they changed water into wine or they rose from the dead.

[17:31] It's all miracle. I don't have any problem believing that if God can create me to be what I am and you what you are, then he can create another order of being.

He's not restricted to flesh and blood. He can create any kind of being that he wants and he tells us that he has. We are not the only beings in the universe.

There are spiritual beings and that's all we can say. We don't know what that means even. I don't know what a spiritual being is because it doesn't obey the laws of science and physics and chemistry because we're talking about a different order of things altogether.

One which we'll never be able to research or examine because that's outside our bounds. But God has nevertheless created an order of beings that he has called angels.

There are thousands, millions, tens of thousands, thousands upon thousands of them and each one of them we're told lives in perfection. They have never fallen. Apart from, of course, the fallen angels, we know that some of them rebelled at some point before the world was created.

[18:41] That there was a rebellion amongst the angels and that some of them under the leadership of Lucifer or Satan, he fell. We don't know how that happened. We don't know the circumstances in which it happened.

But that's, these are the facts. And that he brought with him thousands of angels who followed him. And they're called fallen angels or demons, if you like.

Again, I have no difficulty in believing in Satan. I have no difficulty believing in Satan's angels.

They were created by God. They were not created by God to be what they are at the moment. They were created in the original condition from which they fell.

But what I want to concentrate on, and I know how many questions that there are. There are loads of questions about angels.

[19:44] Like, for example, is an angel in the image of God? Is an angel, was an angel made in the image of God? Well, my answer to that would be that whilst an angel, whilst there are many, many God-like properties, there is consciousness, there is reasoning, ability, there is communication, but I would say, no, they're not in the image of God.

And the reason I say that is this, and again, I'm conscious of the time, that when God, in the beginning, Genesis chapter 1, he created man in his own image, and in the image of God, he created him, male and female, he created them.

The next words are that God blessed them, and he said to them, be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the living thing that moves on the earth.

That's why I believe that angels are not made in the image of God as man is, because it was to man that God gave the responsibility of ruling and governing in a lesser form, in a devolved government, if you like.

That is what the image of God means. Not just a reasoning ability, but in the position that God gave to human beings in being able to rule and to govern over the authority that God gave him in ruling and governing over the earth.

[ 21 : 16 ] Now again, I could go into this in much more detail, and I'm not going to, I'm not going to do that. I'm just going to, I'm just going to focus on one or two features that I think apply to this passage.

Fascinating and intriguing features. Angels are able to transcend heaven and earth. They're able to transcend the earth, and they're able to transfer their existence from being on earth.

Remember what Hebrews tells us, that they're ministering spirits, and they are sent by God to minister to those who are the heirs of salvation. That's you and I if we belong to the Lord Jesus tonight.

We are heirs of salvation, and there is, unbeknown to us, some kind of connection. I am not sure how this works, but there is some kind of connection between us and angels.

And that doesn't mean that we all have an individual guardian angel. I don't hold to that view at all. But nevertheless, there is a connection.

[ 22 : 21 ] And angels have a work. They have a ministry. They have a work to do for our good. They are sent to serve. Even although Psalm 8 tells us we are made a little lower than the angels, the angels are given the job of serving those who are lower than themselves.

But angels also are able to see the face of God. We can't do that. We haven't got that ability. We have no access. Well, we have access in another way, but we don't have the access that they have in being able to go to heaven in order to transcend this dimension into the other dimension and to see the face of God, the Father, in heaven.

And they have always seen his face. They have always been in his presence. They have always been, apart from those who fell, they have always been perfect. And they are able to perfectly worship with an understanding that we don't have and with a perception that we don't have here and now.

And they're able to, they have seen for all time what God has done and what he's chosen to show them. And they've seen what he's done, his creation of the world. They were there when he spoke the universe into existence.

They saw the whole thing coming into being. And they were there when he made man in his own image and when he placed them in the garden of Eden. And I, I can't help but wondering what in the world did angels think when God said to Adam and Eve, do not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil because the day you eat thereof you shall surely die.

[ 23 : 59 ] And the angels witnessing the scene that followed where the serpent went to Eve and he said, did God really say do not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? And she said, yes. She said that God said we must not touch it or we shall surely die.

And the serpent said no you shall not surely die. And the woman looked at the fruit that she saw how good it was to look at and to, and she took it.

And I just wonder, I cannot help but sense the gasp and the cry of horror the moment the moment she reached out her hand.

How can you? You who are made in the image of God and his likeness with a knowledge of God that we don't have with a relationship to God that we don't have all he's asking you is this one simple thing this one simple task and you so flagrantly disobeyed and so easily disobeyed just by listening to the voice that you know is the voice that is anti-God.

How can you? Because everything I think you know we forget the heavenly dimension don't we?

[ 25 : 32 ] We don't think of it. I suppose it's partly because well we don't see it but nevertheless it's there there is a heavenly dimension which in which the Lord is observing his creation he knew he saw what was happening and so did the angels see what was happening and just as they waited patiently to see what was going to happen and all the way through the Old Testament angels have accompanied every one of God's plans and they have been sent out there's no time there's no way

we would have enough time to talk about how the angels visited Abraham and Moses and Joshua and all the way through the Old Testament very often to bring about God's acts of judgment remember the angel of death going through the city of Egypt the land of Egypt putting to death the firstborn son of all the Egyptians passing over it was the angel that was sent to do that it was the angel that was sent to bring fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah and so on these are only one or two examples of the kind of tasks sometimes they were there to encourage

God's people to strengthen them like the angel who came to Elijah and so on there are so many passages that tells us of how angels are sent to minister to God's people and yet at the same time they know that God is doing something they've heard his promise they know that the whole of Old Testament history is working towards this great moment I'm not sure how much they knew of what God was going to do I'm not sure how much God told them did he really tell them that Jesus was going to die on a cross or did they just have access to the same kind of information as we have in Isaiah chapter 53 for example I'm not sure but they knew he was doing something they knew they knew the scriptures and they were in the confidence of God and yet they are the only created beings who tonight are able to see the glory of God like I said versus the sinfulness of man can you imagine what it must be like for

God's perfect being to visit this world one moment and to see the corruption and the lies and the unbelief they must wonder at our unbelief they must wonder at a world gone so far wrong tonight when they compare it with the holiness and the righteousness of God which in a place which they love completely and perfectly they must wonder tonight how in the world we can explain how we can use the birth of Jesus Christ as a pretext for selfishness and for gain and for greed and for making money how can you do that how can you exchange the glory of God for a lie how can you how can you prefer to worship the created being rather than the creator himself they can't understand that can you understand it like it or not you are made in the image of God we are made for

God and we will never find our rest our true identity what we are until we return to God we can only do that by accepting what he has done for us in Jesus Christ now fast forward fast forward to the moment that Jesus is born and there's another gasp this time it's not a gasp of horror it's a gasp of absolute joy because at last at the end of all these hundreds of years of promises and preparation God is now putting into effect everything that he has planned and he has come into this world himself in order to redeem lost mankind so it's no wonder that the angels are coming to the shepherds and they're saying glory to God in the highest and they mean it they're filled with joy themselves they're not just saying to the shepherds well you should be filled with joy but they're saying

God has done something absolutely marvelous that he has never done before and he'll never do again and it's for this world it's for you no matter how lost you are and how guilty you are and how much of a thief and how much of a sinner you are God has done this for you he sent his son into the world the angels are able to perceive as no other created being not only the glory of God versus the corruption and sinfulness of us but they're able to perceive as no other created being what God did himself in coming down into this world that's what we call the incarnation you know what the incarnation means I know most of you know but just in case there's somebody here doesn't know what the incarnation means it means when the son of God God himself took flesh and became a human being that's what it means incarnation when God took flesh and I believe tonight that God's beings they absolutely marvel at how

[ 31 : 43 ] God chose to take it upon himself he never asked one of them to do it but he took it upon himself to come into this world as one of us and to be conceived God himself being conceived in a mother's womb God in gestation God in birth God in lying in the womb in the hands and in the arms of his mother Mary and being taught how to talk and to eat and to walk and everything else a mother teaches her baby and she goes with him into this life and he doesn't know how to talk doesn't know how to fend for himself it's incredible isn't it it's either the biggest load of nonsense or else it's the greatest moment in human history so please don't tell me that you're celebrating

Christmas if you're not prepared to accept the truth of God coming into this world because otherwise it's a sham and angels not only know the condescension of God but they know what God did not only the marvel of the incarnation but the marvel of the atonement because that's why Jesus came into the world to make atonement for our sin by himself suffering the pain and the agony of the cross it's no surprise to me that the angels were there at the resurrection once again a cry of

hope and promise and joy that God had now completed his work the work that had been planned for hundreds thousands of years and man's salvation was now secure and God was now he had paid the price himself for our sin and for our guilt angels are different to us in many many different ways they like I say they have features and faculties that we don't have and yet we are in far far more privileged position than they have we have something that they don't have we have many things that they don't have they can never say the son of God loved me and gave himself for me that's not a position that they have they can never say that they have been brought in that they have been adopted into the family of God the way that a follower of Jesus can they can never say with John the apostle behold what kind of love the father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God and that is what we are they don't have that all they can say is and I'm not taking away from it at all they can say holy is the Lord of hosts the whole earth is filled with his glory and that is who they are and that's what they do but we can say our father in heaven hallowed be your name your kingdom come your will be done we have a right of access that they don't have and we also have are closed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ something that they do not have so that means that tonight we have a better celebration than the angels if the birth of God's son meant rejoicing in heaven and on earth amongst them how much more should we rejoice tonight at the salvation which we have through his blood and there is one other occasion when there is a gasp of utter utter euphoria in heaven a deafening deafening song in heaven a celebration amongst the angels the kind of celebration that you and I have never seen in this world Jesus tells us about that celebration he says that there is joy in heaven amongst the angels over every sinner who repents I wonder tonight if there will be that kind of joy as God looks on this gathering of people let's bow our heads in prayer God thanks