

The Angels' Gloria in Excelsis Deo

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

This morning we're going to study another song for the Savior, the angel song, Glory to God in the High as we just sang it. But as we do, we're going to follow these shepherds to encounter their faith. And to encounter how we might receive and respond to the promises of Christmas. In a word, where we're going is let everyone rejoice and sing, the baby in Bethlehem is Christ the King. Let everyone rejoice and sing, the baby in Bethlehem is Christ the King.

We're going to break this out naturally in three points. The first one is the angel's news. The angel's news. The first scene in our passage this morning is similar to the first scene in the last two passages.

The angel of the Lord appears unexpectedly. Now we're kind of familiar with this now, but here he appears again unexpectedly. While Mary is giving birth, we're taking out into the night to find shepherds in the field.

[1 : 14] Without the distant glow of streetlights that are hard for us to escape, the only light in the night is the stars in the sky. And beneath them, the shepherds continue their monotonous toil of watching the sheep.

Throughout the night, suddenly, an angel of the Lord appears. And the glory of the Lord shone around them.

It's the glory of the invisible God reflected in these angels that just shines all around them and surrounds them. The shepherds naturally are terrified.

They're filled, the text says, with great fear. I mean, how would you respond if the Lord showed up in your bedroom tonight? I think you would respond, you'd be filled with great fear.

They're so terrified that the first word the angel says, the words we're familiar with by now, do not fear. But every word the angel said is important.

[2 : 18] Look at verse 10. He says, fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of 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 so the news is very transparent, very obvious, very normal to us to celebrate at Christmas. The news is that God has come to save through Jesus Christ. And this news is good news because it's all about salvation.

Now, have you ever wondered why each of these encounters with the angel of the Lord, they respond with great fear? Each of them begin with, do not fear. And surely they're caught off guard.

A sudden visitation from the Lord would catch anyone off guard. But their fear reveals something else. Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets promise again and again that when the day of the Lord, when the day of the Lord comes, it will be a day of terror for all people.

Joel 2 says it like this, blow a trumpet in Zion. Sound an alarm on my holy mountain. Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble.

[3 : 32] For the day of the Lord is coming. It is near. A day of darkness and gloom. A day of clouds and thick darkness. What it's saying, what the prophet is saying with one voice, the day of the Lord is a terrible day.

Sure, the day of the Lord will bring the deliverance of God's people, but he will deliver them through darkness and judgment. And so the angel, well, when the angel appears, everyone assumes this must be the day of the Lord breaking in.

Suddenly, a day of darkness and gloom. But he says, fear not, for today is a day of salvation. Now, what the shepherds are realizing and what the New Testament makes clear is that one day God will still come in judgment, but he's splitting his comings into two.

This day he's coming for salvation. So one day he will come. The day of the Lord will come. But this day of the Lord is a day of salvation. And there's a powerful emphasis on this dramatic transition that occurs in the New Testament and in this verse.

In the fullness of time, the Scripture says, after all the patriarchs of the faith had come and gone, after all the prophets had come and gone, after all the people had waited for 400 years, a new day arrives, the day of Jesus Christ.

[4 : 56] A different day is breaking in. This is not merely talking about a day on the calendar. This is talking about a day in salvation history, a new day, a new eon of salvation history is breaking in.

It's a day of salvation for all those who are far off. So look at what the angel says, for unto you is born this day in the city of David.

That theme of today, that's the word, this day, today, is repeated all throughout Luke's gospel to emphasize the day of salvation that's come through Jesus Christ.

You remember the story of Zacchaeus, the wee little man that climbed up in the tree so he could see Jesus, right? Jesus said, I must come to your house today, Zacchaeus, you wee little man.

Then inside he says, today salvation has come to this house. So which one is it? Are you coming or salvation coming? What Jesus is saying, salvation is coming.

[5 : 54] Salvation is breaking into this weary world through Jesus Christ. And in this age, salvation is today.

That's what he's saying. Salvation is wide open always today. Several months ago, Queen Elizabeth died. I just finished a wonderful book on the queen.

Ending her reign over the United Kingdom of 70 years. It's totally amazing. After there was a transfer of power that everybody is quite nervous about to her son, King Charles III.

And now, it's the day of his reign. It's the day of his rule. Well, the same thing is happening when Jesus Christ is born in this world.

It's a new historical day has arrived. For a day has arrived at the birth of Christ. A new king has arrived. A new day of salvation.

[6 : 57] I love the way John 3 says it. We often quote John 3, 16, but don't quote John 3, 17, which is just as wonderful. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Now, what's the grounding for knowing that whoever believes in him will have eternal life, will not perish? Well, the grounding is for God did not send his son into the world to condemn it, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

What he's saying is God didn't come with a day of judgment. He came with a day of salvation through Jesus Christ. God could have justly condemned the world.

But God sent Jesus into the world so that we might be saved. This is the good news of great joy. Salvation is free for all who will come near.

So he says, fear not, for behold, this day is born to you a Savior. This news is good news because it's for you.

[8 : 18] Look at verse 11. For he says, unto you is born this day in the city of David's Savior.

There's a wonderfully specific offer to the shepherds here. Now, perhaps when you hear those words, for unto you, your mind goes to Isaiah 9.

For unto us a child is born. For unto us a son is given. And I think that's actually an allusion to Isaiah 9 right there.

But when the shepherds heard those words, for unto us, they knew that Isaiah was not talking about them. They weren't welcome among the people of God.

For unto them Jesus did not come, according to Isaiah 9 and their understanding of it. So when the angel says, for unto, he does not say unto us. He says, unto you, shepherds.

[9 : 20] Unto you, you despised, sinful shepherds. A child is born. And if the child is born for shepherds, then the child is born for all.

That's what we're meant to see right now. So it's not just the angel's message, though, that assures us that Christ is born for all. It's the way he came. The angel says the baby is a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Nowhere else in the New Testament, those three words occur together. Savior, Christ, and Lord. This baby is a Savior. Now, he's already said that. He's the Savior. He's the one who brings about a day of salvation, though this baby is also the Christ.

That's just a word. It means Messiah, the anointed one. He's the promised son of David who will reign on the throne forever. Isaiah 9, 2 Samuel 7, other places.

But not only is this baby a Savior and the Christ, he's the Lord. A title reserved for Yahweh himself. This baby is not just another messenger or another prophet or another priest.

[10:26] He's fully and completely God, able to mediate between God and men as the son of David and the son of God. And we should rightly ask, but so why is he in a manger wrapped in swaddling cloths?

There's nothing in the Old Testament that demands he be born this way, born outside of town, born in a cattle stall.

Why? As one author has pointed out, the life of the Lord Jesus has some unusual bookends. Born in a cattle stall in Bethlehem, crushed between two thieves on Golgotha.

Why? Because he's one with the transgressors. He's one with sinners. John Piper helps us here in his little devotional, Good News of Great Joy.

He says, God's will was that through Christ, though Christ was rich, yet for your sake he became poor. The no vacancy signs over all the motels in Bethlehem were for your sake.

[11:34] For your sake he became poor. The Calvary road begins with a no vacancy sign in Bethlehem and ends with the spitting and scoffing of the cross in Jerusalem.

Why did he come like that? Piper helps us. Why did he die like that? For our sake in our place. You know, it's no surprise that no other individual in the history of the world has inspired more art and literature and music than Jesus Christ.

It's fascinating. I took a class in college called Images of Christ, studying different images all throughout the history of the world and what things they said. There's pictures of Jesus in Byzantine and Roman icon.

Ancient Ethiopian art. Sculpture and stained glass from the medieval periods. Renaissance painting. Arts of all kinds from many places in the world.

Not to mention all the art and music and movies from Western culture. Even the blue-eyed velvet Jesus found in thrift stores everywhere. It's hard to make sense of the art about Jesus Christ.

[12:43] After all, what do we make of early African portrayals of Jesus as a black Christ? Are the pictures suggesting that Jesus, the Jew from Palestine, was actually a black African?

That's not it at all. The African portrayal of Jesus as a black Christ is underlining the incredible truth that people of every tribe, tongue, and nation come to realize that Jesus came for them.

And they draw him like themselves. Because that's how near he is. He became like us in every respect, yet without sin.

So he might give grace and mercy to anyone in need. He has come for all. He's come for you.

That's what the shepherds are beginning to realize. When they hear this sign about him in Bethlehem, there'll be a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

I think the seeds of faith are beginning to bear fruit in their heart. Point two, the angel's song. The angel's song.

[13:56] The scene shifts immediately to this angel's song. Look at verse 13. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest.

This word suddenly captures how immediate and unusual a spectacle happens. Suddenly on them the angel of the Lord is speaking to the shepherds. One moment later a whole host of angels is singing.

You know, in our little nativities we may have like one angel hovering above the manger. But this is not one angel or a trio. This is a multitude of angels singing.

And lest we be confused, the angels are not singing to the shepherds. This is not a performance. This is not, they're not putting on a show. They're singing to God.

These angels are those creatures who are always before the throne of God. It's mysterious. We don't even know what's going on. Why did God create angels? Why did he create creatures that worship him day and night, give him the glory that he alone deserves?

[15:03] And so these angels are unveiling actually what heaven thinks about what's going on. They're giving us heaven's perspective. They're giving us the throne room's perspective about the birth of Christ.

Even more than that, they're telling us what we should think. Darrell Bach says it like this. Angels reveal to the shepherds through praise what the result of Jesus' coming should mean. Heaven addresses earth about Jesus' significance. So the veil is torn back for a moment and we're able to see what God, what heaven thinks about the birth of Christ. And the angels say, glory to God in the highest. And on earth, peace among those with whom he is pleased. The first line, there's actually running through this, there are three parallels. Between glory and peace, highest heaven and earth, God and men. The first line pertains to God. Dress to God.

[16:04] Glory to God in the highest. Glory to God in the highest.

The angels are praising God. What's the appropriate response to the birth of this one? Praise and glory and honor to God. They're not adding to the glory of God or increasing the glory of God. They're acknowledging the greatness and the glory of God display. What is this baby all about? It's about displaying the greatness and the glory of the God in the gift of Jesus Christ. Glory to God in the highest is the very heart of worship. To say glory to God in the highest is to say that God alone is the source of all good, right, all that is good, right, beautiful, powerful, gracious, kind, and saving.

It's so much more than a little thank you before you devour your dinner. It's so much more than a little chest bump when you run through the end zone. It's saying glory to God. It's saying that all that you are, all that you have, and all that you have received through Jesus Christ is pure, 100% unmixed gift.

[17:15] That's what he's saying. Glory to God is saying this day. What the angels are saying this day is pure, 100% unimaginable, unmixed gift of God so that he deserves all the glory.

That's the only appropriate response to Christmas is glory to God. I love the way Martin Luther said it, who was famous for his love for Advent and for Christmas. He said, oh, we are so often cold and indifferent to this great joy that has been given to us.

For this is indeed the greatest gift with far exceeds all else that God has created, yet we believe it so sluggishly. I appreciate his candor.

Even though the angels proclaim and preach and sing, their lovely song sums up the whole Christian faith. For glory to God in the highest is the very heart of worship.

You're not going to be a Christian if you can't learn to say glory to God in the highest. My life is 100% gift.

[18:27] My new life, praise God, is 100% gift. The second line pertains to us. On earth, peace among those with whom he is pleased.

Heaven receives the glory. Earth receives peace. Peace. We hear the words peace and often think of signs saying peace, not war.

But peace biblically is not the absence of war. Peace biblically is the presence of a reconciled relationship to God. You can have an absence of war and have no relationship with God and you lose.

Biblically, that's not peace. Peace. The angels are saying not only is this child going to bring glory to God, this child will do all that is necessary to bring reconciliation and peace between God and man. Ephesians 2 says, he himself is our peace. Who's broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us. Reconciling us both to God in one body.

[19:30] He came and preached peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near. What's the peace? So that through him, through Jesus Christ, we might have access to God. To rip the curtain in two so that we might have a relationship with God.

The second part is translated in different ways. On earth, peace among those with whom he is pleased. KJV says, peace, goodwill toward men.

That's probably the one you grew up listening to. Or peace to those on whom his favor rests. In IV, the differences come in understanding who receives this peace.

Literally, it's men and women of his pleasure. It's not peace for all, is what the angels say.

Regardless of what you think or feel or believe about Jesus Christ. It's peace for those who believe. And only for those.

[20 : 36] Romans 15 says, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing. So that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope.

It's precisely here that the message of Christmas doesn't solve all the world's problems in one fell swoop, does it? Jesus came to bring peace to his people.

But he did not come to bring peace to the world. I didn't come to bring peace. I came to bring a sword. I promised that the world would still have trouble.

Tribulation, sorrow, sickness, and suffering. In the midst of the Civil War, the poet Henry Longfellow wrote the sobering Christmas song, I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.

His wife had died two years prior. His son had just been severely wounded in the war that was ripping apart America.

[21 : 35] On Christmas Day, 1863, he wrote these words. I think we have them for you. He said, I heard the bells on Christmas Day. It would be the church bells. Their old familiar carols play, and wild and sweet, the words repeat, a peace on earth, goodwill to men.

That's our text. He continues, And thought how, as the day had come, the bell towers of all Christendom had rolled along the unbroken song.

Just the same song always. A peace on earth, goodwill to men. Till ringing, singing on its way, the world revolved from night to day.

A voice, a chime, a chant sublime. A peace on earth, goodwill to men. Seems like it's going great. Then came, then from each black accursed mouth.

The cannon thundered in the south. And with the sound, the carols drown. The song of peace on earth, goodwill to men. They're not even making sense. And in despair, I bowed my head.

[22 : 42] There's no peace on earth, I said. For hate is strong, mocks the song of peace on earth, goodwill to men. My guess is right here, you could etch in your own verse.

There's no peace on earth. Not when injustice abound and cancer spreads, betrayal occurs and devil prowls. Not when children starve, marriages dissolve.

And wars continue. Just this week, I received an email from our friend, Michael, in Ukraine. This is his quote from his email this week.

He said, there are nine months of war in Ukraine. And I still can't get used to the fact that this is possible in the 21st century. Every time I wake up, I still think it's a bad dream.

But war is our cruel reality. With thousands of deaths, hardships, destruction, and suffering, we serve refugees, and every day we hear dozens of stories of their sufferings.

[23 : 53] My old parents are in the occupied territory and left without medical care. And there's nothing I can do to help.

Several of my friends and also the deacon of our church were killed. Peace on earth. Mr. Longfellow, fellow, wrote, Feller, sounded good in Southern, wrote one final verse.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep. God is not dead, nor doth he sleep. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail with peace on earth.

Goodwill to men. I think he actually in the end gets it right. The peace Christmas brings does not solve all the world's problem. But it is a down payment.

It's a comfort. It's a comfort. That God is with us and will be with us to the end. Point three, the shepherd's faith.

[25 : 05] The shepherd's faith. The final scene comes no less quickly. It's just a succession of scenes that land us, or that guide us through this passage.

Look at verse 15. When the angels went away, they probably came just as quickly as they, I mean, they went away just as quickly as they came. When they 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.

I just love the vividness in the, Yeah, let's go do this, you know? Let's go see this thing that has happened. And then they go, they make haste, and they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger.

It says they go with haste, not because they went quickly, but because they obeyed completely. They heard the promise. They immediately wanted to make their way to Bethlehem.

They believe. That's what's being described. They believe. They demonstrate true faith. They act on the promise that there's a baby in Bethlehem that's the Savior of the world.

[26 : 17] It's a scandalous promise. I mean, it doesn't make sense. Yes, babies in Bethlehem make sense, but not a baby that's the Lord, that's the Savior of the world. But they cling to him by faith and the promise by faith.

And when they arrive in Bethlehem, they find everything just as the angel promised. Their faith leads immediately to witness and worship.

Look at verse 17. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning the child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

Their faith immediately led them to begin to tell others. When they saw it, they made it known. In the same way that the angel of the Lord had made it known to them about this baby, they made it known to others.

Their faith led to witness, to sharing with others, to evangelism. And then it led to worship. Look at verse 20. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and saying, as had been told them.

[27 : 32] They returned to their sheep. Even that's instructive. They believe. But they do not believe that they must renounce everything else.

They go back to their day jobs. But they're not the same shepherds anymore. They're praising and glorifying God. This final scene helps us see something very important, that witness and worship are bound together by a shared sense of wonder.

Witness and worship are bound together by a shared sense of wonder. In so many ways, we often think witness and worship are just miles apart. Like, I'm so good at singing on Sunday morning, but this witnessing and telling others, singing to people that do not know about Jesus is just so far apart, but they're actually bound together by this sense of wonder.

The shepherds are overcome with wonder. They immediately begin to share with others what the Lord has done. When something wonderful happens to us, we're the best evangelists. We find a new job or get a new girlfriend or discover a new restaurant.

There's no one we will not share it with. We have to share it. The engine of evangelism, therefore, is not duty but delight. It's not work but wonder.

[28 : 51] Did you notice the effect immediately of their testimony? All who heard it wondered. Mary treasured these things up in her heart. If you want to grow in evangelism, grow in wonder.

Grow in the miracle that God made man, but not only that, that God made man for you. Who this Christmas do you need to share the wonder of what Christ has done?

I'm not a good evangelist. Taylor's a great evangelist. But several weeks ago, we were in Vietnam, sitting with my— this is what the Lord has to do for me to start evangelizing.

I was sitting with one of my cousins. I last saw 10 years ago. Finished dinner. We're sitting there talking. He says, how do I prepare to die?

I'm like, heck yeah! I can answer that question. Talk about, you know, the evangelists talk about breaking the pain barrier, you know, when conversations get uncomfortable and you start to talk about Jesus Christ.

[29 : 55] I had the privilege of sharing with him about all the things you'll immediately lose as he prepares to die. And the only thing that'll matter is whether he knows Jesus Christ, whether he believes in him, whether he's turned from him.

You can pray for him. His name's sung. And I offered the gospel to him. Tried to share the wonder of what God has done, why Kim, my wife, and I were dunked.

They saw pictures of that. We're trying to figure out, what's going on? You're thrown down in the water and you're brought back up? We understand sprinkling, but not that. Well, we heard a message about a man named Jesus Christ and he saved our soul.

You don't have to be an orator. You don't have to be a persuasive salesman. You just have to be a witness that shares with others what you have witnessed.

So who needs to know the wonder? A family member, co-worker, a new neighbor? One of your children, one of the best, probably the most strategic evangelism so many of you are caught up in is evangelizing your children.

[31 : 13] Tell them your story. Call them to Jesus. The shepherds are overcome with wonder.

They immediately witness, but they immediately also worship God. The passage begins with the glory that shines upon them. It continues with the angels saying, glory to God in the highest.

