

A moment never to be forgotten

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[0 : 00] Now, if you will forgive me, I'm going to refer to the angels again, but I promise it will be the last time at this time of Christmas that I'm going to at least say it.

Maybe somebody else will. I did wonder if it was going to be a little bit like a primary school preparing the nativity, and they practiced and practiced, and the teacher says, one more time, and the kids don't want to be an angel anymore.

They don't want to be a shepherd. But please, hang in there with me, because I think I feel sure in my heart at least that God's got something very special to share with us today. I always love to give my sermons a title.

That helps me to keep on track, but hopefully will help you as well. And as it says on this slide, I've entitled it, A Moment Never to Be Forgotten. It did occur to me that many pastors have moments that they would prefer to forget, because some can be very difficult.

And it's no reflection on John at all, this, but it is a story about a pastor who had preached a very long and boring sermon. Clearly not about John.

[1 : 09] And the congregation began leaving the church saying nothing to the pastor, which isn't a good thing, is it? Towards the end of the line of people leaving was the thoughtful person who always had a comment to say to the pastor about his sermons.

And he said, Pastor, today your sermon reminded me of the peace and the love of God. And the pastor's heart was so warmed and so happy. And he said, No one's ever said anything like that about my preaching before.

Tell me why. And he said, Well, it reminded me of the peace of God because it passed all understanding. And the love of God because it endured forever. I hope that's not going to be the case with this sermon.

Okay, so, Oh, I hope you can read that. I thought I put it in bigger font. But anyway, do your best. Anything that is in capitals, as we've done in the past, is for you guys to say.

And to say out loud, This is the word of God. And it's not just for fun. It's to try and get it deep into our hearts. If I just read it to you, often you can just blank out.

[2 : 14] But if you follow it and say it when it's appropriate in capital letters, hopefully that will help. So it's Luke 2, 3 to 20. Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared.

Now, don't forget, there was one angel at the beginning who said, Don't be afraid. Everybody was afraid. And then just to make matters more glorious, the whole company of the heavenly hosts appeared.

They didn't say, Don't be afraid. But I'm sure that the shepherds will have remembered this to their dying day. So suddenly, a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

Just a thought there. They could so easily have decided, Well, the shepherds and the angels were exciting. It was interesting to hear what they say. But I can't be bothered.

[3 : 27] Sometimes I think we're prompted by God to go somewhere, that God wants to bless us, and sometimes we just think, Too tired. I just can't really be bothered.

Got too much in my diary, whatever it is. But thankfully, the shepherds obeyed God's leading, even though they didn't really know what was going to happen, except there was going to be a baby born, this special baby.

I've forgotten where I'm up to now. Oh yeah, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that's happened, which the Lord has told us about. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

When they'd seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. What a wonderful thing to do. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they'd been told.

[4 : 40] Next slide, please. You know, if they hadn't bothered to go, if they'd been too tired or whatever, made an excuse, they would not have come back, glorifying and praising God for all the things they'd heard and seen.

Because it wasn't just a baby. It was an incredible moment in history. So, a moment never to be forgotten.

When they arrived at the manger where Jesus was born, the shepherds watched him in awe and wonder. They would have been speechless when they realized that this was the Son of God. This was Messiah. This was Jesus. This was Emmanuel. And you know, when they arrived at the stable, Mary and Joseph wouldn't have been surprised in the least to have some people come. And I think it's so precious that they were shepherds, not kings and queens and people of authority or whatever. Just those lonely men which I'll come back to in a moment.

[5 : 48] Have you ever had a moment in your life where God has touched you and in such a moment where you feel so close to God that you almost feel you could touch Him and you're in awe and wonder, speechless?

Next slide, please. I'm so sorry. I missed a page there. There is a number two somewhere.

There it is. Thank goodness for that. So they would fall on their knees in the presence of Jesus.

They were looking at the Savior, Savior of the world in stunned silence.

What can you say in a situation like that? How can you put into words when you're in that presence of Almighty God in the form of that baby? How could you possibly say anything that would be appropriate?

They would have fallen to their knees in the presence of Jesus. You know, I've had so many people say to me, on judgment day, I will stand before God and I'll tell Him what I think of Him.

[7 : 02] And the reality is they won't. Because of the holiness and the awesomeness of God, it will have all of us on our knees either in fear and trembling of judgment or in joy that our sin has been forgiven.

They were stood before Emmanuel, knelt before Emmanuel, God with us, God with them. And O come all ye faithful, that great hymn, that great carol that we've sung, says this, O come all ye faithful, yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning, Jesus to Thee be glory given.

And then, word of the Father, now in flesh appearing. Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing. O come, let us adore Him.

To put that in perspective, John chapter 1, verse 1 to 5, says this, in the beginning, the Word already existed. The Word was with God and the Word was God.

He existed in the beginning with God. This is Jesus, the Word. God created everything through Him and nothing was created except through Him. The Word gave life to everything that was created and His life brought light to everyone.

[8 : 21] The light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never extinguish it. Ever found yourself in a place of darkness? Almost where that darkness is tangible because of the evil presence there.

But this truth in the Bible says the darkness cannot extinguish the light of Christ. This was simply the most phenomenal sight anyone had ever seen.

An unimaginable privilege to these simple guys, these men who worked with sheep on the hills. And it occurred to me that they, in that moment, would have had the biggest smiles and the tearful eyes.

Those who have had the privilege of being at the birth of a child, be it your own, a grandchild or whatever, those smiles just appear, don't you, with those incredible moments.

That little child is now required to have help from its mum and dad, grandparents, and everybody else. But it brings the biggest smile.

[9 : 28] Your eyes fill with tears, with the joy. And the shepherds shared together a joy that was inexpressible. Something they would never ever have seen or felt that joy ever before in their lives.

Yeah, they may have sort of had times where they had jokes together or seen a sunrise, seen a sunset, been to a wedding, done something. Things that would be just great fun, but never something.

Ever something. At this level. This inexpressible joy that can only come from God. And as we heard earlier that the Bible tells us that Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart, but I imagine the shepherds did too, to some degree.

Almost the sense of this is so incredible, I've got to remember this so I can tell people. And wouldn't we if we were in the same position? But they also must have asked, why us?

Why me? Why would Jesus suddenly arrive in their corner of the world? Why would God send angels to them? This can't be happening, they must have thought.

[10 : 43] But it was, and they were personally invited as front row VIPs. They didn't deserve it, but that wasn't the point. None of us would deserve it, but by grace, God lavished blessing upon them that day.

And this invitation didn't just come from angels, it came from the Father heart of God to those men. Next slide, please. Luke's gospel makes no mention of the shepherds doing anything but just looking at Jesus.

And this is so important. They'd left their work on the mountain where they would be doing stuff all day, all night with their sheep, caring for them, protecting them, etc.

But they weren't invited on this occasion to do anything. They were invited to be with someone, with Jesus, the Messiah.

You know, Christmas has become, for most of us, if not all of us, a crazy, busy time of stuff to do. And certainly, our Christmas, with having the extended months of the build and stress of that has become a season of not particularly doing, but a season of sleeping.

[12 : 03] Jesus simply wants us to enjoy the unimaginable privilege of resting in his presence at Christmas. Don't get me wrong, we've got things to do and I understand that.

But sometimes, we kind of have too many things on the list that we forget to just be with Jesus, to be with him. for us to have those biggest smiles and tearful eyes, those moments of intimacy with Jesus.

And it's equally true in our daily walk with God, not just at Christmas. Jesus simply wants to invite us to be with him every day, to take time aside.

And at times, I'm the worst to do that. But to take time aside and just be with him. to observe at Christmas the miracle of his birth, to recognize the gift of his presence with us and thank him for the invitation to be with him for all eternity when we put our trust in him through his death and resurrection.

And wonderfully, the Bible reminds us that God wants to be with us, not just us, to be with him. He chooses to be with us.

[13 : 20] Emmanuel. That word, that name given to Jesus wasn't just an add-on. It was a very special plan before the creation of the world that Emmanuel would be with us.

And for God to want to be with us is so extra special, isn't it? And Deuteronomy 31.6, a very familiar verse to many, says, be strong and courageous. The Lord your God goes with you.

He will not leave you or forsake you. Or Joshua 1 says, don't be frightened, don't not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. The shepherds were the first to hear about the birth of Jesus and being a shepherd in first century Palestine was not considered a privileged position in society.

And the Jewish leaders often criticized the lifestyle of shepherds because they were unable to keep to the religious rules and regulations. Not all God's plan, really, because sometimes the religious leaders added more difficult, the difficulty to their lives.

But it shows that the message of Jesus was for all people, even those considered to be insignificant and marginalized by society. Even for lepers who were marginalized to a great degree.

[14 : 45] Even for those, in our case, let's say, these days who don't come to church. People who don't consider themselves to be Christian or whatever it is. Christ died and came for all of us.

But yet God chose them to hear the good news and share the good news. You know, when the shepherds heard this, they may have stored it in their minds to tell that God fired them up with a

passion on that day that they would tell no matter what.

And there was no way that the shepherds when they returned home would not have told their family or friends or community that they had met this baby called Jesus. And the wise men as well met Jesus when they came back to their own land.

They would not have kept it to themselves. Who could? I know many of us, when we first became a Christian. We were just compelled to tell because it was such an incredible change.

And in the same way that the angels said to the shepherds, fear not, God speaks to our hearts with an intimacy that bypasses all of human convention. And that fear not will calm a troubled mind or heal a broken heart.

[16:00] He places a passion with us that cannot be contained. And as we take a step of faith and open our mouths, it's amazing what God will say through them to convince a lost soul of their need of Christ Jesus as Savior.

But of course, we panic when we face a situation in our own strength. Yet Jesus can bring peace in any circumstances if we put him first in there.

His words, his presence, his promises, his assurance give peace to any and all circumstances we face. And he's truly the prince of peace.

As somebody once wrote, the price of peace between us and God. The shepherds' immediate reaction after seeing Jesus is to go to their community.

People who hadn't met Jesus, people who hadn't been there and they just would have spilled out this knowledge of, it's just incredible what's happened. And there were so many other people in the Bible who had did the same thing, particularly the woman at the well of Samaria.

[17:12] She wasn't loved by her community, but she went to them having met Jesus and said, come and see this man. He knows all about me. Come see this man. David Wilkinson, author of Crossing the Switchblade, the book I'm speaking to Josh about, which I've ordered on eBay, so it'll be coming soon, I hope.

God uses people, he says. He uses burdened, brokenhearted, weeping men and women to fulfill, filled with his love, to fulfill his purpose. You know, when we experience that intimacy with Jesus, we're in a place of incredible love, not just the place of a baby.

Everything God does for us is based on love and holiness. And I love the way somebody paraphrased a few verses from 1 Corinthians 13, which is known as God's love passage to many. Let me just read the way he's written this. A guy called David Sanford. Just think of sitting in the presence of Jesus and you hear that the love that came down from heaven in the form of this baby and the love that God showed in Jesus all the way through his life and particularly on the cross.

This is the paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13. Love comes and sits with you when you're feeling down and finds out what is wrong. It empathizes with you and believes in you.

[18:42] Love knows you'll come through just as God planned and love sticks right beside you all the way. Love doesn't give up or quit on you or diminish or go home and leave you.

Love keeps on keeping on even when things go wrong in our eyes and the feelings leave and the other people don't seem as special anymore. Love succeeds from God's heart 100% of the time and that my friend is what real love is.

God's inexpressible love if we are to share this love of God with the world we are to share this God love with the world. We have to show them that we care which is very different from just telling them we care.

Rick Thomas a Catholic priest from El Paso in Texas works with the poor who live in a refuge tip in Juarez in Mexico and his congregation decided to literally live with them in the refuge tip so they could show them the love of God.

Because let's face it if the lepers were on the outside of the town Jesus went to the lepers if the poor were living in a refuge tip Jesus would have gone and sat with them there.

[19:59] Wonderfully Jesus didn't live in a king's palace he wasn't born in a kingly location as everybody expected and somebody wrote that Jesus had no servants yet they called him master he had no degree yet they called him teacher had no medical training yet they called him healer had no army yet kings feared him he won no military battles yet he conquered the world and he committed no crime yet they crucified him he was born in a tomb yet he lives today.

This is the baby that was born in the manger in Bethlehem that the shepherds were invited to see. Front row invited so carefully specifically chosen the Christmas message the angels proclaim

proclaim sorry is that there is hope for a broken community and humanity all to start through this baby in the manger.

I say this because so many people have the inspiration have this sort of sense and perception that Jesus almost remained a baby but he didn't as we know. Media reports very little hope on our TVs nowadays and radios but with Christ there is always hope because when he came the angel said to the shepherd this will be great joy for all the people and hope for sin forgiven a royal pardon by the king of kings for all those who put their trust in Jesus.

and an atheist once said in a conversation I envy Christians I have no one to forgive me you have Jesus. A hope of peace with God Romans 8 says if you put your trust in God there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

It's not just knowing about him it's knowing him and the hope of heaven's glory facing the sure and certain hope for those who put their trust in Jesus that when we breathe our last on this earth that we will be welcomed into heaven not by any good that we've done but by grace alone.

[22 : 12] The fear of death has been removed as believers we will step by undeserved grace into the unimaginable breathtaking wonder of heaven's glory which was so similar in one sense to what the shepherd saw in that manger that night Jesus that we will spend eternity with him and that's great news great joy for all the people so to finish this Christmas is this good news Christmas isn't wishful thinking or sentimental sugary frothy kind of stuff make believe Christmas is that good news which is true and real and profound and we can trust it wholeheartedly Charles Wesley wrote in his Christmas carol hark there will angels sing glory to the newborn king peace on earth and mercy mild God and sinners reconciled you know if someone had said on that night when they sat and looked at the baby in the manger you know this child will die a terrible crop a death on a cross for the sins of humanity that would have looked horrendous people couldn't have imagined it but he was born to come and die for you and I and that carol goes on to say mild he laid his glories by put them to one side born that man should not die born to raise the sons of earth born to give us second birth it's so biblical that basis of so many of the carols have that bit in there that is so biblical and so true so indeed it is good news that brings great joy to all the people the baby in the manger was born precisely in order that he might become the offering on the cross he's the lamb of God the perfect sinless lamb of God given to us by the father and this joy brings a smile to our face and I hope a thrill to our souls the biggest smiles and tearful eyes at so many locations at so many times when we have an intimate time close to God so tangible and it's simply the most phenomenal life that anyone could ever experience an unimaginable privilege to not just know about God but to be known by him and know him as a child of God

Amen