

The Angels and the Shepherds in Bethlehem

Let us turn in our Bibles to Luke's infancy narrative as recorded in Luke 2. We will give our attention to the well-rehearsed event that took place upon the birth of our Lord and Savior, that of the angels' appearance and message to the shepherds on the hills outside the village of Bethlehem. We addressed this passage just over three years ago, when we were in the early weeks of our study of Luke's Gospel, but this is a timeless account that bears annual rehearsal and recurrent contemplation. Let us read the account beginning with Luke 2:1ff.

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. ³So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

⁴Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

¹⁵So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. ¹⁸And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Almost all of the contents of Luke 2 contain testimony of the meaning and extent of Jesus Christ bringing salvation to the world. After the initial telling of the birth of Jesus in verses 1 through 7, Luke then gave the testimony of three distinct witnesses revealing Jesus having been sent by the Father to be the Savior of sinners. We will address only the first of these three witnesses, but let us stand back for a moment to identify all three witnesses who testified of the person and work of this newborn child.

The **first witness** is what we have just read, the angel who announced to the shepherds that Jesus was born in order to bring salvation **to all kinds of people**, including those regarded as lowly in social standing among the people, that being the shepherds. We read in verse 10, "Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to **all** people.'"

The **second witness** to the Savior's birth is that of elderly Simeon in the temple, who recognized and acknowledged the infant Jesus, when His parents had brought Him to the temple at eight days of age in order

to be circumcised. Simeon testified that Jesus was born in order also to bring salvation *to Gentiles*. Luke recounted what occurred:

²⁵And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, ²⁸he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said:

²⁹"Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,
According to Your word;
³⁰For my eyes have seen Your salvation
³¹Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,
³²***A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles,***
And the glory of Your people Israel."

But Simeon also bore witness that this infant Jesus would be a judge and divider of the Jewish people, separating the people of Israel into two groups, one group of Jews destined for judgment, the other to receive salvation. Verses 34 and 35 record these words:

Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against ³⁵(yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

The ***third witness*** to Christ the Savior's birth is the witness of aged Anna, who declared that this Jesus was indeed the promised Savior of the Jewish people, but not of all Jewish people without distinction, but for those Jewish people who were looking in faith for their Messiah, who would redeem them from their sin. In Luke 2:36 through 38 we read these words:

Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; ³⁷and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. ³⁸And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him ***to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.***

But, again, this morning we will give attention to the first of these three witnesses—the angel's word if promise to the shepherds watching their flocks on the hills outside Bethlehem.

Now the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem had long and frequently been proclaimed among the expectant people of Israel. One of the clearest Old Testament prophecies is Micah 5:2, which reads,

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me
The One to be Ruler in Israel,
Whose goings forth are from of old,
From everlasting.

Now here the Messiah is set before us as the eternal Son of God, "whose goings forth are from old, from everlasting." But that He was born in Bethlehem, the city of David, also sets forth the Messiah to be the promised Son of king David. And so here is a verse in the Old Testament that speaks of both the divine nature and the human nature of the Messiah, who is both Son of David and Son of God.

And so, it was universally understood and believed by the people of Israel that Bethlehem would be the birthplace of their Messiah. There the promised king of Israel would be born, the one who would save them from the wrath of God that was upon them due to their sin. Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889) described the Jewish Messianic expectation in this way:

Such then was the hope of the promise made of God unto the fathers, for which the twelve tribes, instantly serving (God) night and day, longed—with such vividness, that they read it in almost every event and promise; with such earnestness, that it was ever the burden of their prayers; with such intensity, that many long centuries of disappointment have (had) not quenched it. Its light, comparatively dim in the days of sunshine and calm, seemed to burn brightest in the dark and lonely nights of suffering, as if each gust that swept over Israel only kindled it into fresh flame.¹

But though Bethlehem had long been recognized and regarded to be the birthplace of the Messiah, no Jewish person could have imagined, yet alone appreciated, the manner that God chose to bring about this birth that is recorded before us in Luke 2. Again, Edersheim wrote,

To Bethlehem as the birthplace of Messiah, not only Old Testament prediction, but the testimony of Rabbinic teaching, unhesitatingly pointed. Yet nothing could be imagined more directly contrary to Jewish thoughts and feelings—and hence nothing less likely to suggest itself to Jewish invention—than the circumstances which, according to the Gospel-narrative, brought about the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem. A counting of the people, or Census; and that Census taken at the bidding of a heathen Emperor, and executed by one so universally hated as Herod, would represent the *ne plus ultra* (the highest point) of all that was most repugnant to Jewish feeling. If the account of the circumstances, which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, has no basis in fact, but it is a legend invented to locate the birth of the Nazarene in the royal city of David, it must be pronounced most clumsily devised.²

In other words, because the details of Luke 2:1ff are so out of character with what the Jewish people would have viewed respecting the birth of the Messiah as commendable, or even conceivable, the account can never be regarded as having been a humanly devised narrative. The account itself is so out of character, its very presence bears witness that it is an actual historic record of what God had wrought in history.

Let us first consider the angel that appeared to the shepherds.

I. The angel who appeared to the shepherds

We read in verses 8 and 9 these words,

⁸Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

This angel appeared to these shepherds resulting in them being terribly frightened, or “greatly afraid.” This is certainly understandable, for “the glory of the Lord shone around them.” If the Shekinah glory of God all of a sudden appeared before us, especially if we were outside and it was night, we would also be “greatly afraid.” One day when the Lord calls the human race before Him in judgment, all will react as these shepherds did this night. John foresaw this in advance, “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them” (Rev. 20:11).

Although it was but an angel that appeared, because the angel was always in the presence of God and because he was coming to them as God’s messenger, the glory of God emanated from and about this angel.

¹ Alfred Edersheim, **The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah**, vol. 1 (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), p. 180.

² Ibid, p. 181.

The Jewish people knew if they were to see God they would perish due to God's holy nature. But they also believed they would perish if they saw before them one of the holy angels, for the holy angels were always in the presence of their holy God.

Now we should say a few words about angels as they are set forth in the Holy Scriptures, for there is much misunderstanding and wrong teaching regarding the identity and ministry of angels. People do not become angels upon their death. Children who die do not become angels. Angels are personal beings that God created in addition to and separate from human beings. They are spiritual beings, not normally visible or physical in appearance. But they are intelligent, rational creatures who are able to appear in physical form, like human beings, when it is suitable or necessary for them to do so. We know that angels are multitudes in number (Matt. 26:53; Rev. 5:11). They do not marry and they are not capable of dying (Luke 22:35f). They are able to appear or move from one place to another at will. And many angels may concentrate in a small area of space (Luke 8:30). When originally created, God had placed all angels on probation, testing them whether they would continue in obedience to God or choose to rebel against Him. It has been suggested that as many as one third the holy angels fell into sin, becoming fallen angels, who probably are the demons referenced in the Bible (cf. Rev. 12:3f). But the many angels "who passed the test are now evidently confirmed in a state of holiness and immortal glory."³ Fallen angels are not offered or promised redemption from their sin. Holy or elect angels will not fall into sin. Fallen angels are never redeemed from their sin.

What role do angels play in God's purpose and work in history? Angels guard and protect true believers (Psa. 34:7; 91:11). They seem to have special protective oversight of the Lord's servants (Dan. 6:23) and of children (Matt. 18:10). They have great insight and understanding into the ways and will of God, but they are not omniscient. They are learning about God and His ways through the unfolding of God's work in history. Angels apparently escort the souls/spirits of those who die to their appointed place, whether to be with the redeemed in paradise or to be delivered to be punished among the damned (Luke 16:22). The Lord employs angels to serve His people, those whom He has elected from eternity unto salvation. The writer to the Hebrews wrote, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?" (Heb. 1:14). God employs angels to communicate His will to His favored people at unique and special times (cf. 2 Kings 1:15). An angel revealed the will of God to Daniel (Dan. 8:15ff). And here in Luke 2, we read that God sent His angel to reveal to these shepherds that the Savior had been born unto them in Bethlehem.

II. The shepherds to whom the angel appeared

The shepherds had been fearful, for they were but mortals and it was believed that a vision of heaven or of angels to mortals would bring sudden death. But it would not be so with this angel, for this angel was bearing good news. The first words out of the angel's mouth were intended to dispel the shepherds' fear and to lead them to rejoice greatly in what God had done. We read,

¹⁰Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

The substance of the message of the angel was this—there is no reason to fear God. Rather, they had reason to be filled with great joy. Why? Because unto them was born a Savior, Christ, the Lord. The emphasis of the angel's message is that this baby would be the Savior of "all people." The form of this expression, "all people", reveals that the angel was declaring the baby to be the Savior "of all kinds of people."

And to whom is this promise given? To whom do these words apply? In this context, this word of promise to these shepherds means that God is merciful and gracious to lowly people, including even ones

³ J. I. Packer, **Concise Theology** (Foundation for Reformation, 1993), 64.

like these shepherds. And so, we would assert that within the account ***this message was intended for these shepherds and on all people like them.*** These men were lowly men. They were shepherds. Shepherding was not regarded as a noble profession in biblical times. In fact shepherds were under a rabbinic ban; they were not allowed to participate in the religious observances of the temple, for shepherds were viewed as a lowly people occupying a lowly occupation in isolation. They were regarded as lowly by others and they no doubt viewed themselves similarly. More specifically, in what ways were they regarded as lowly?

A. Shepherds were regarded as *socially lowly.* Shepherding was not viewed as a desirable occupation. The poorest of people would be shepherds. They lived unsettled lives, traveling about with their sheep. They lived apart from most other segments of society. They were regarded as filling an essential role--somebody had to do it--but it was not an important role--anybody could do it. Because they lived about the local communities, but were not involved in the social life of those communities, they were viewed with suspicion. Shepherds were generally regarded as unreliable and thieves.

B. Shepherds were also regarded as *religiously lowly.* What we mean by this is that they were excluded from the religious life of the community. The nature of the work prevented shepherds from being regarded as ceremonially clean, as a result they were excluded from religious gatherings and temple ceremony. The occupation itself was despised by the populace. These shepherds must have regarded themselves as others regarded them--lowly, both socially and religiously. How could it be any different?

C. But these shepherds had a uniquely religious occupation. These shepherds, although lowly, had a unique responsibility, for it was in the fields of Bethlehem that the sheep were raised and kept that were destined to be the sacrificial sheep offered in the nearby Jerusalem temple. It was the duty of these shepherds to watch over these flocks destined for sacrifice. They were to inspect them continually for their fitness for such a purpose, to be offered as sacrifices unto God. Here we see these shepherds, these "inspectors for spotlessness", called upon by God to go and inspect this child lying in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes.

D. These shepherds probably viewed themselves as *excluded from the promises of God.* As Jews, they would have known the promises. They knew their history as a nation. Israel's sin as a nation had incurred God's wrath. The nation had repeatedly violated God's laws. The people had disregarded His rule over them. They had forged an existence which was in accord with their own desires rather than according to God's law. And God had judged them severely for it.

And yet even in the nation's rejection by God, God held forth the promise that He would send them a Savior, who would save them from their condemned state, who would bring full pardon for their sins so that the full blessing of God would be experienced and enjoyed by them. And based on God's promise, the nation waited in hope. But these shepherds must have felt excluded from the hope of participation in God's coming salvation, because they were a lowly and sinful band of men.

God had promised to send the Savior to their nation, Israel. The message of the prophets was known. The Messiah, the Savior, would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David, for the Messiah would be a king as was David. And these shepherds would have been uniquely aware and continually reminded of the promises. As they exercised special oversight and care, sending the sacrificial lambs and sheep to their slaughter, the awareness of their own sin would have been great, and the promises of God must have been vivid to them. These shepherds were lowly men in the eyes of others and lowly in their own eyes. Others regarded them as "sinners." But the shepherds regarded themselves as sinners also. They were vividly aware of their sin and the penalty of sin, which the temple sacrifice of animals taught the people.

But it was to these lowly shepherds, and to all kinds of people like them, that the message of God's salvation came. God sent His angel to speak to these men and ones like them this message:

Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; (even the disenfranchised, those who had formerly no part, the lowly, the humble, the sinners, can rejoice in what has occurred) for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the

Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger. You will find Him to be as one of you, lowly, humble, and in poverty. He is to be the Savior for you and such as you, “Glory to God on the Highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”

The angel had declared to the shepherds,

“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring **you** good tidings of great joy which will be to **all people**. ¹¹For there is born **to you** this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be the sign **to you**: **You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.**”

Now although the announcement in one sense seems quite universal—“all people”, in another sense it is quite restricted. At Christmas time cards are circulated by many of those who are not the Lord’s people with this very passage embossed in gold and glitter. But does this message apply to them? Well, yes, in a sense, but in the context of these words, the message was directly related to the shepherds, and all people like them.

A sign was given to the shepherds: you will find a baby wrapped up in cloths, lying in a manger, and when you see this sight it will be a confirming sign to you that God has designs for salvation on you. This baby, this Savior, will be wrapped in the swaddling cloths of a pauper baby. This infant would be humble and lowly. He will one day be the Savior of all who are humble and lowly.

Let us consider in more detail the angel’s pronouncement.

A. The shepherds were not to fear for unto them was born a SAVIOR, Who is Christ the Lord.

They were fearful for they were sinners, but it was for this very purpose that Jesus came into the world, to be the Savior to sinners. Do we fear God due to our sin? We need not fear, if we humbly come to our Savior to pardon and deliver us from that which defiles and condemns us.

This is cause for great joy, is it not? God stooped down that He might pick you and me up. He became a Savior to do for His people that which they could not do for themselves. And so His coming into the world was not to condemn man, but to save him from a fate that he had brought upon himself because of his sin.

Now when we speak of Jesus as being the Savior of sinners, it is often the case that people do not see or understand from what they need to be saved. Why do we need a Savior? For that matter, what is salvation? The answer to that question may be succinctly stated.

Biblical salvation is the work of God through His Son, Jesus Christ, to save His people from their sin that has alienated them from the life that is in God alone, from the sin that has incurred His damnation of them.

The result of salvation is that a sinner, formerly alienated and condemned before God, is brought into an eternal, covenant relationship with God. The Bible uses an expression to describe this relationship between God and His redeemed people. God has promised those who are saved from sin, “I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jer. 31:33). Sin had been an impenetrable obstacle preventing mankind from having a relationship with God. Death, both spiritual and physical, is the consequence of having been separated from God in whom alone is life. This obstacle of sin in all its forms and effects had to be removed, and God’s justice must be satisfied, but this could only be done by God Himself. Sin had its dire effects upon mankind, leaving all people in a hopeless, helpless, condemned condition.

There are a number of effects of sin that God would need to remedy in order for Him to bring salvation to a sinner. We may list some of these.

(1) Due to sin man is **ignorant** of his condition and ignorant of God to whom he is accountable. Paul wrote, “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him;

nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). God must **inform** the sinner of his condition and also of God's remedy of his condition through Jesus Christ. Paul wrote of this work of illumination by which the Holy Spirit enables people to understand the nature and need for salvation.

For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? **Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.** ¹²Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, **that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.** (1 Cor. 2:11)

(2) Due to sin man **refuses to believe and submit** to the true God as God, to whom he is accountable. Not only is he spiritually stupid in his ignorance due to sin, but he is also stubborn. Fallen man is opposed to God and refuses to submit unto Him.

⁷Because the carnal mind is **enmity** against God; **for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.** ⁸So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. (Rom. 8:7-9)

Man is not only guilty for the sins that he commits, but he is guilty because he is a sinner, one who desires and delights in his sin. This must change if he is to have a covenant relationship with God. And so, God must **regenerate** the sinner, that is, cause him to become born again, in order to implant in his soul the desire and delight to know and submit to God. This is a sovereign work of God. This is declared plainly in John 1:11ff:

¹¹He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. ¹²But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: ¹³who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

They had "received" Jesus in that they believed on Him. But they had believed on Him because they had been born again by the sovereign grace of God. Had God not caused them to be born again, they would not have "received" Jesus Christ, just as the preponderance of Jewish people—His own—refused to believe on Him.

(3) Due to sin man is **guilty** and **condemned** before God for having transgressed God's laws thereby incurring God's wrath upon him. God must **pardon** the sinner of his guilt in order for God to receive justly the forgiven sinner unto Himself. Sinners need to receive God's forgiveness of their sins, if they are to be brought into a covenant relationship with Him.

(4) Due to sin fallen man **lacks a positive righteousness** in order to enable him to stand before God in the Day of Judgment. The sinner must be found on the future Day of Judgment not only pardoned of his sin, which is secured through the death of Jesus Christ on His cross, but he must be found to be righteous before the Judge of the world. The only possible way that this could occur is if God provided the **righteousness** of Jesus Christ Himself to be granted fully to the sinner through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

And the gift (of righteousness) is not like that which came through the one (Adam) who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. ¹⁷For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of **the gift of righteousness** will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:16f)

(5) Due to sin man is **alienated** from God and the people of God. Fallen man is an enemy of God. God must **reconcile** the sinner to Himself, incorporating him into the family of God, declaring the believing sinner to be his child forever. Paul wrote of this: "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God

through the death of His Son, much more, *having been reconciled*, we shall be saved by His life" (Rom 5:10).

(6) The sinner needs to have *the power of sin* dethroned in his life so that he becomes compliant, obedient to God, ordering his life according to the righteousness of God's law revealed in His Word. God accomplishes this aspect of salvation, the believer's *sanctification*, working progressively through the life of every true believer through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (see Rom. 8:3-14)

(7) The sinner needs *deliverance from the very presence of sin* that dwells within him. God will one day deliver all of His people totally from the presence of sin upon their death and the ascension of their souls to be with the Lord. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism rightly answers question 37: What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death? Answer: The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory.

(8) The sinner needs his *corruptible body* to be replaced with an *in corruptible body*, whereby he is enabled to dwell with the Lord in eternity. This will take place at the second coming of Jesus Christ when He will raise His people from the dead unto resurrection life. This is also declared in the Westminster Shorter Catechism in answer to question 38, which reads, "What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection? Answer, "At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory."

(9) If God is to save sinners onto Himself, He must enable them to stand *exonerated on the Day of Judgment*, when Jesus Christ will judge the entire world according to their works. On that Day He will sentence the damned to everlasting punishment and He will grant entrance into eternal life unto His people. All of those who are redeemed from their sin through faith in Jesus Christ will be *acquitted* before the judgment bar of Jesus Christ; they will "stand" in the judgment through Jesus Christ.

The Shepherds were not to fear for unto them was "born a SAVIOR, who is Christ the Lord." He would secure for them all for which they were in need, bringing them salvation.

B. The Shepherds were not to fear for unto them was born a Savior, Who is CHRIST the Lord.

Jesus is the *Christ*, which is the translation of the Greek word, *χριστός* (*christos*). The word means "the anointed one." It identifies one whom God has called for a great work on His behalf. Jesus of Nazareth was appointed and equipped to accomplish God's work of salvation in you, if you come to Him. This indeed is a cause of great joy.

Now more specifically, the term, "Christ", speaks of our Lord's being anointed to His three-fold office, and each is needful for our salvation. We need a Prophet to reveal God to us. We need a Priest to intercede with God on our behalf and make sacrifice for our sin. And we need a King to subdue sin within us, to lead us and enable us to live righteously in life, and to preserve us to His heavenly Kingdom. And our Lord Jesus was anointed by the Father to perform this three-fold function on our behalf. In Him alone were all of these duties entrusted, and He alone was equipped to execute them.

In the Old Testament there were examples of men endued with two of these three offices. There has been a kingly prophet—David. There has been a kingly priest—Melchizedek. There was also a priestly prophet—Samuel. But only our Lord Jesus was anointed with the oil of gladness above His fellows to possess this three-fold office to execute on our behalf. Thus He is to us a **Priest**: having sacrificed Himself on our behalf and He lives to pray to God on our behalf. Thus He is to us a **Prophet** Who declares and reveals the will of God to us; He is our Teacher. Thus He is our **King** Who delivers us, leads us, and provides for us. And so in Him *is* all that we need. We have cited many times the little catechism, a series of questions and answers taught to children to instruct them in the Christian faith:

Question: Why do you need Christ as a prophet? Answer: Because I am ignorant.

Question: Why do you need Christ as a Priest? Answer: Because I am guilty.

Question: Why do you need Christ as a King? Answer: Because I am weak and helpless.

Here was a true King who could bring true peace to His people; He is equipped to do just that. This is in contrast to what a mere earthly king can do. As an ancient writer described Caesar:

“While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief and envy. He cannot give peace of heart, for which man yearns more than even more than outward peace.” (Epictetus)

But our Savior can and does for all that come to Him in their needy condition and look to Him in faith.

C. The Shepherds were not to fear for unto them was born a Savior, Who is Christ the LORD.

This is extremely significant. In verse 9 we read of an angel of the “Lord” and in verse 15 the shepherds desire to relate the news that the “Lord” had given them through the angel. Surely, the term “Lord” is a reference to God Himself. And then in the angel’s message, we have, “Do not fear, I have news of great joy for born unto you is a Savior, Christ the LORD.” God Himself has been born unto us. We have the incarnation, the union of God and man in one person, which can only bring great benefit for you if you are a believer, for ***unto you*** has this child been born.

He is one with us. As we were babies, so was He, though He is God over all, blessed forever. You need not fear, if you are a child of God, for God is one with you. That gulf that had been so vastly set between the Creator and man His creation, has been bridged in the person of Jesus Christ the Lord.

III. The praise and pronouncement of the multitude of the angels

After the angel communicated his message to the shepherds, he was joined by a “multitude” of angelic beings who in a united voice gave great praise to God and a great declaration to this fallen world. Here are verses 13 and 14.

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

These few words of the angels are some of the most often repeated during the holiday season. These words are heard frequently; they are seen frequently. The expression is on many of our Christmas cards. One can read the saying on billboards. It is a frequent statement in the media. The words are taken from Luke 2, but with a different kind of message, one which spoke of ***global peace*** rather than the peace that God made possible and realized with sinners through the life, death, and work of Jesus Christ. And so, the original intent of the message designed to announce that peace was now available between God and guilty sinners through Jesus Christ, has been transformed into a politically correct statement about the desire to stop war. Let us consider these words in their original context, which was the declaration to some shepherds from a host of angels, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*”

A. What the message does *not* suggest and was *not* meant to convey

1. It does not mean that God intended to cause war to cease between nations. It is not a statement about *world peace*.

There is no word of promise in the Bible that there will be peace in this world between nations this side of the second coming of Jesus Christ. In fact, the opposite of peace is the rule; “wars and rumors of wars” characterize the age.

It is important that we understand this. If the message of the angels was to mean that God intended to bring a general state of world peace between nations *in this age* through the birth of Jesus Christ, then God is shown to have been well intentioned, but quite incapable of bringing to pass His intention. It must be concluded that God desired the best, hoped for the best, gave forth His best effort, but His design has been frustrated. The creature checked the Creator. One would conclude rightly that God is impotent. But it has never been God's purpose in the course of the history of this fallen world to end all warfare. God has never intended that the nations cease to fight between themselves, or else they would have done so.

2. The message does not mean that God intended that Christians would be at peace with everybody. This certainly cannot be so. We know so for at least two solid reasons.

a. The Lord Jesus' own words

The Lord Jesus Himself declared that the Christian would *never* have peace in this world. He declared, "In the world you shall have *tribulation*" (John 16:33). Also in John 15:18f we read, "If the world hate you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love his own, but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." Here the Lord Jesus clearly declared that His people will be hated by those who are of the world because they belong to Him. A state of hostility exists between the people of God who are truly living for Christ and those who are opposed to Him. The state of hostility breaks out frequently in war.

The "spiritual warfare" even enters the family. Luke 12:51ff reads,

Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

Here we see that it was not even the intention or calling of Jesus Christ to bring peace to families. In fact, His coming into the world would result in family hostility and division.

In another place Jesus told a church that they were going to suffer greatly. He gave a message to the church at Smyrna telling them that they would experience everything except peace. He told them:

Do not fear any of those things that you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev. 2:10).

Rather than peace, these Christians could anticipate things would grow worse than they had previously experienced. Jesus said to them, "Do not fear any of those things that you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days" (cf. 2:10a).

Have you experienced difficulty for being a Christian? Are you weary from living for Christ in a hostile environment? Suppose the Lord told you that He understands your predicament and just how hard it is, but then He said, "Hold on, things are going to become worse." What would your reaction be? This is what He told this church. The Christian life is not an assurance of ease or peace in this world. You may have the peace of God while you endure difficulty, but you will not escape difficulty for being a Christian. Jesus said these words to His disciples, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

b. The testimony of history and of our own lives

History has borne out the fact that there exists a general hostility for Christians by the world. This has always been the case. And we should note that because we are now living in the 21st century and the world that the potential for hostility toward Christians has not lessened. It has been claimed that more Christians have suffered death for their faith in the last 100 years than any other 100-year period of church history.

3. It does not mean that because of the birth of Jesus, now God is at peace with everybody.

The KJV translation of these words are quoted most frequently at Christmas. It reads, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” It is falsely construed from this translation to mean that God was bringing peace to all men without distinction. However, the ESV has rendered the better translation, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Whereas the KJV translation may be construed as God’s good intentions toward all, the better translations emphasize God’s good designs for some. The ones who benefit from Christ’s birth are the ones who are the objects of God’s saving grace and mercy. God never promises peace to those who cling to their sins. Twice in the Old Testament are these words: “**‘There is no peace’**, says the Lord, ‘for the wicked’” (Isa. 48:22, Isa. 57:21).

B. What the message *does* suggest and *was* meant to convey

The proclamation of the heavenly host, “peace on earth”, suggests at least three facts. First, the angel’s message suggests that there had been a state of hostility, even warfare, between God and mankind. Secondly, message suggests that through the birth of this child, the hostility could/would come to an end and peace could once again be the norm between God and man. And thirdly, the angels’ message declares that this promise is not given to everybody, but the promise is for those whose favor God rests, but for them only. In short, this is a glorious promise that is for many, but not all, for the many on whom the grace of God rests.

To declare or teach from Luke 2:14 that God is at peace with those on whom His favor does not rest, is to proclaim a false message. In the Old Testament we have a repeated description of false prophets. They are false messengers because they gave false announcements about the peace of God toward people. The Old Testament reveals that a false prophet is one who pronounces and assures that the peace of God abides on wicked people. We read in Jeremiah 6:14, “They (the false prophets) have healed also the hurt of the daughter of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace’; when there is no peace.” Again in Jeremiah 8:11, “For they (the false prophets) have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace’; when there is no peace.” And Ezekiel declared, “‘the prophets of Israel which prophesy concerning Jerusalem, and which see visions of peace for her, and there is no peace,’ saith the Lord God” (13:16). It is a false message to declare that God is at peace with all people, when they are still in their sinful rebellion toward Him.

Who are the legitimate recipients of the promise of God’s peace? Who are these ones who have legitimate claims to being at peace with God? What characterizes them? First, **they are believers in Jesus Christ.** One day Jesus declared to a woman who believed on Him, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50). To another woman He said, “Daughter, be of good comfort: your faith has made you whole; go in peace” (Luke 8:48). And then the apostle Paul wrote, “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 15:13). Secondly, the ones who are the objects of God’s promise of peace are ones who are no longer in rebellion toward God and His rule over them. Paul described believers of the church at Colossae, “And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death” (Col. 1:21f). And so, the ones who may have the peace of God pronounced as theirs are ones who are no longer estranged and hostile toward the Word of God. They no longer resist God. They no longer ignore Him, defy Him, or rebel against Him. We hear a great deal about the insurgency in Iraq. These are ones who are resisting and rebelling against the authority that has been established. People all over this world are insurgents against the authority of God. They reject His right to rule over them. They reject His laws. They resist and fight against Him. There is no peace between them and God as long as they continue in their

defiant ways. And thirdly, the ones who are the objects of God' promise of peace are ones for whom Christ died, whereby peace with God is obtained and secured.

Those who truly believe on ***Jesus Christ as the Savior, Christ the Lord***, have an ***objective peace*** with God; that is, God is no longer at war with them. A state of peace exists between God and them. Romans 5:1, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have ***peace*** with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The reason that God is at peace with them is that they have been ***reconciled***.

Reconciliation is a word that describes the cessation of hostility between two warring factions, resulting in peace between them. And how does this reconciliation take place? It can only take place when first, their hostility and rebellion ceases and the justice of God toward their crime has been satisfied. God is at war with sinners and has purposed to punish them for their sins because they have violated His laws. Justice is in order. They must answer to the Judge of all the earth. The reason that Christians alone can escape the condemnation of this unbending, inflexible justice, is that Christ Jesus bore their punishment on their behalf, when He died on the cross. And so by Him, through faith in Him, they may be reconciled to God.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to ***reconcile*** to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making ***peace by the blood of his cross***. And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him" (Col. 1:19-21).

But believers in ***Jesus Christ as the Savior, Christ the Lord***, also receive from God a ***subjective peace***, that is, they are entitled (and they alone), to a sense of well-being, a feeling of peace because they know experientially, based on the Word of God, that they are at peace with God and because they know that He has good designs on them. To them God in Christ gives assurances: "Peace I leave with you, my ***peace*** I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). To believers in Jesus Christ God gives fresh manifestations of this grace of peace, as Paul wrote, "To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and ***peace*** from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." We might also consider these verses:

- 1 Cor. 1:3, "Grace be unto you, and ***peace***, from God our Father, and [from] the Lord Jesus Christ."
- 2 Cor. 1:2, "Grace be to you and ***peace*** from God our Father, and [from] the Lord Jesus Christ."
- Gal. 1:3, "Grace be to you and ***peace*** from God the Father, and [from] our Lord Jesus Christ"
- Eph. 1:2, "Grace be to you, and ***peace***, from God our Father, and [from] the Lord Jesus Christ."

None but true believers in the Son of God who was born into the world to die for sinners, may rightly enjoy the peace of God in their souls. The unbeliever deludes himself that things are right between him and God. God is his enemy until he sues for peace through faith in Jesus Christ.

C. Nevertheless, we recognize that the message of the angel does signal *an offer of peace* to all by a good and gracious God.

God was very gracious to His people Israel in sending them Christ. In sending Him, God was offering them, all of them, peace. Acts 10:36 reads, "The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all)." It was not that God had ceased to have wrath on them, rather in, through, and during the ministry of Jesus Christ, God had inaugurated what we might describe as a temporary cessation of hostility, giving Israel an opportunity to repent and experience His peace. Of course they refused, for the most part. Later the Lord Jesus would say respecting them,

If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your ***peace***! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children

within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation. (Luke 19:42ff)

God offers similar terms of peace to all men through the gospel. We read of the Lord Jesus expressing this same idea to would-be followers:

Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of *peace*. So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:31ff)

God offers terms of peace to any and all. He says in effect, “Cast down the weapons of your warfare. Cease your rebellion against Me, your Creator and Lawgiver, believe and submit to Jesus Christ the Lord and Savior, and we will be at peace.”

In conclusion, let us be encouraged to use this Christmas season to offer to people the gospel of peace. We should always be ready; we should always have our “feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15). And 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 read,

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,¹⁹that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. ²⁰Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

Using every means, let us offer peace to all in the gospel, but do not assure peace to any, unless they meet the terms of the gospel--an awareness of personal sin and God's wrath upon sin, repentance from sin toward God, faith in Jesus Christ as the Reconciler, the only one who can bring peace.
