

Title: "The Song of Heaven's Army" (Luke 2:13-14)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

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On our last broadcast we began considering the very familiar account of the announcement of the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ two thousand years ago that we find in Luke chapter 2. In particular, we are focusing on the announcement by the angelic host to the shepherds. And so, as we conclude our consideration of this account together, let me read it for you once again. I'm reading from Luke chapter 2, beginning at verse 8. Luke chapter 2, beginning at verse 8:

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

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. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

So 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."

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As I mentioned in our last message, these are very familiar words for all Christians. We read these words at every Christmas season. But I think that very often, because these words are so familiar to us, we do not really stop to think about the meaning and the importance of this account.

In particular, we have been focusing our attention on the words that we find in verses 13 and 14. Let me read those words for you once again. Luke chapter 2, beginning at verse 13:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'

In our last message, we began to consider three very important questions about this account. And as I mentioned, it is important always for us to ask questions as we read the Word of God. We need to ask questions, and we need to find the answers to those questions, so that we can make sure that we understand what God is saying to us through His Word. Because after all, the words that we are reading are not merely the words of men. These are not merely the words of a man named Luke the physician. These are the inspired, infallible, inerrant words of God.

And so in order to understand Scripture we must understand exactly what God Himself, God the Holy Spirit, intended in giving this account to us. And so, last time we began considering three questions about this passage.

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God's Angelic Army

First of all, we considered the question of the identity of these angels. Who were they? And we found that these are not the counterfeits of angelic beings that we often find on Christmas cards or in Christmas decorations or in works of art. These are mighty angels. The heavenly host that appeared to the shepherds were in fact the angelic army of God.

And that brought us to a second question: Why did these angels come? Why did they come at this particular moment? We found that this multitude of God's heavenly soldiers came with the Lord Jesus Christ as He came into this world, as He came into Satan's realm.

We read in Ephesians chapter 2 verse two that Satan is "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the Sons of disobedience. " We read in Second Corinthians chapter 4 verse four that Satan is "the god of this age." And we read in Ephesians chapter 6 beginning at verse 12 that "we [Christians] do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

Satan also has an army of angelic beings. And we saw in our last message occasions in the Old Testament where we are given glimpses of that warfare between the angelic army of God and the angelic army of Satan. And so it is no wonder that an angelic host would come into this world, into Satan's domain as it were, when their Commander, God the Son, came into this world to be born into a

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body of human flesh as Jesus Christ. Jesus was coming into this world, as we read in First John chapter 3 verse eight, "that He might destroy the works of the Devil."

The angels came to the shepherds bringing the most stupendous announcement that was ever made to mankind. God Himself had come, taking on the form of human flesh, to redeem a people for Himself, and to redeem indeed the entire created order from the curse of sin. At such a moment, we can understand that Satan would have arrayed his forces to do battle against the Christ of God and against the army of God.

And this brings us today to a third question. That question is, what was the message that this heavenly army brought into the world? What was the message that they announced, indeed that they sang to shepherds on that night 2000 years ago, the message that is recorded for all time and for all eternity in Holy Scripture? And more specifically, what is the significance of that message for believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? And what is the significance of that message for the world at large? And so today, as we conclude our consideration of this passage in Luke chapter 2, let us turn our attention to this very important question.

What The Angelic Message Was *Not*

Let me remind you again of the words of their message as we find them in Luke chapter 2 verse eight: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." That is how the words are given to us in the King James Bible and in the New King James translation. Some other translations render the original

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Greek of this passage in the same words. But actually those words are not the best rendering of the original language.

I think it is unfortunate that we have the words as we have them in most English Bibles, for this reason: So often, when people hear these words and read these words, the message that the angels brought into the world is misunderstood – even in the church.

There are many popular misconceptions about this message. But the message of the angels was not anything like the popular conception that we have today – or I should say, the popular *misconception* of the Christian message and the Christian Gospel. Because what we have here in Luke chapter 2 in the message of the angels is in fact the core, the essence, of the Christian Gospel. The message of the angels is vastly different from the message that is popular today that is mistakenly called the Christian Gospel. The message of the angels was not something vague and indefinite. It was something clear and concrete. We need to understand that, and the church needs to proclaim that.

Because of the way in which this message is often misrepresented, people easily get the mistaken idea that the message of the angels is a message of unqualified, unconditional tolerance. And in fact, the corrupted Greek text that has been used for most Bible translations during the past 125 years supports that mistaken idea.

But this is not a statement of unconditional peace. This is not a statement or a prediction that men on this sinful earth will be at peace with one another. This is not a touchy-feely, subjective kind of message. This is a message that is rooted

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and grounded in objective truth – the truth about God, the truth about the Son of God, the truth about the condition of man, the truth about the condition of the world.

This is not a message, as we hear it said so often, that is rooted in man. This is not a statement that nations will be at peace with one another. This is not a message that is intended to give us a false sense of hope that somehow men are going to work out all their differences and be at peace. The message of the angels announcing the incarnation of the Son of God was not a message of “peace between men of good will” or “peace and good will between men.” It is not a song of empty sentiment. God tells us plainly, in Isaiah chapter 48 and again in chapter 57 that "there is no peace for the wicked." There can be no peace for fallen man. Fallen men have no peace with God, so they cannot possibly have peace among themselves.

This earth, and mankind on earth – every man who has ever lived in all of history and has not trusted in Christ for salvation – all of them, and all of this universe, still stands under judgment of the righteous God against sin. And that judgment will come.

But when God the Son came into this world in a body of flesh, when God the Son lived the perfect life that sinners could not live, when God the Son died the death that they deserved to die, and when God the Son rose from the dead in declaration of the fact that the justification of sinners by grace through faith alone had been purchased in full by the shedding of His blood – when those monumental

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events happened, the entire cosmic picture changed. For four thousand years, the sacrificial blood of animals had postponed the inevitable judgment of God, but the blood of bulls and goats could never remove the curse of sin. Only the blood of Christ could. All of the accumulated works of righteousness of sinful man could never destroy the works of the Devil. Only the work of Christ could.

A Threefold Message

And so we have the Song of the angels in Luke chapter two. It is the battle song of an army invading the dominion of Satan, led by their Captain, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."

Now I mentioned a moment ago that this is not the best rendering of the original language. And so I think it is important for us to understand exactly what is being said by the angels. It is important for us to understand the meaning and the significance of the battle song they are singing. What they were singing, literally, is this: "In the highest, glory to God; and on earth peace; and in men, good pleasure because of grace." Let me say that again: " In the highest, glory to God; and on earth peace; and in men, good pleasure because of grace." It is a threefold message, and it speaks of three different spheres:

First of all, "In the highest [in Heaven] glory to God."

Secondly, "On earth, peace."

Thirdly, "In men, good pleasure because of grace."

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That is a literal rendering of what we find here. Let us briefly look at this threefold message. What is the significance of this message for the people of God? What is the significance of this message for the world at large?

" In the Highest, Glory to God"

First of all, as Christ is born into the world, the angelic army sings, "In the highest, glory to God." In the highest, glory to God." Why? –

Because God had kept His promise to crush the head of the serpent through the seed of the woman. God had kept His promise to destroy the works of the Devil through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Second Corinthians chapter 1, verse 20: "For all the promises of God in Christ are Yes [given in the prophets], and in Him Amen [fulfilled in Jesus], to the glory of God through us."

Ephesians chapter 1, verse five: God has "predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved."

"In the highest, glory to God" – because He has kept all of His promises in Jesus Christ. "In the highest, glory to God" – because He has crushed the powerful and bitter enemy of the saints. "In the highest, glory to God" – because of the glory of the grace by which He has made us accepted before Him in Jesus Christ.

"Who is the King of glory?" – Psalm 24, verse eight – "The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle." This is the God whom the angels glorified.

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God who won the victory for us over the powers of darkness through the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the first great statement of the Song of the angels.

"On Earth, Peace"

And then we have a second statement in the great song of the angels. Secondly, as Christ is born into the world, the angelic army sings, "On earth, peace." "On earth, peace." Why? –

We must understand the nature of this peace. This is not a peace treaty between nations that will soon be broken. This is not the empty peace that men seek in false religions, or in material possessions, or in worldly philosophies, or in psychology, or in many other things of this earth. This is not man making his peace with God. I have sometimes heard preachers extend what they say is a Gospel invitation by saying to people, "Have you made your peace with God?" That is a false invitation. Man cannot make peace with God. God must make peace with man. That is why He sent His Son.

Jesus said in John 14 verse 27, "My peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give to you." And what is the nature of that peace? Jesus tells us in the verses that precede this great statement about peace. He says that the peace of the Christian is a peace based on knowledge of the truth of God and the Word of God. It is a peace that comes through the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit who has been sent by the father and the Son into the heart of every Christian. "He," Jesus said, John 14 verse 26, "will teach you all things, and bring to your

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remembrance all things that I said to you." That is the nature of peace on this present sin-cursed earth. That is the only way there can be any peace on this earth.

Colossians chapter 1 verse 20: Jesus has "made peace through the blood of His cross." And it is because of this that God is able "to reconcile all things to Himself, by [Christ], whether things on earth or things in Heaven..." The ultimate peace of the New Heavens and New Earth is only possible because Jesus Christ came onto this earth. "In the highest, glory to God", and "On earth, peace..."

"In Men, Good Pleasure Because of Grace"

And then we come to the final words of the angelic song. As Christ is born into the world, the angelic army sings, "In men, good pleasure because of grace." We have this phrase in many of our English Bibles in other words, but they do not give us the full weight and power of the original. Some of our Bibles render it, "goodwill toward men." Others render it, "peace toward men of goodwill." But in the original language, the statement is much stronger: "In the highest, glory to God; on earth peace." And then finally, "In men, good pleasure because of grace." That is a literal rendering of these words in the original. "In men, good pleasure because of grace."

Romans chapter 5, verse one tells us that "therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

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We who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ enjoy the good pleasure of God because of grace. Our sins have been taken away as far as the east is from the west, our sins and iniquities are remembered against us no more, because of the person and work of the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ.

And we have the great promise of God given to us in Second Thessalonians chapter 1, that just as the Lord Jesus Christ came into this world the first time accompanied by His mighty angels, He will also, Second Thessalonians chapter 1, verse seven, be "revealed from Heaven a second time with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God... [And when He comes, verse 10] in that day [He will] be glorified in His saints..." He will be glorified in us on that great day. We will experience the ultimate, the consummation, of His good pleasure because of grace.

The Song of the Angels Is the Song of the saints

And so, not only at this Christmas season, but on every day of our life on earth, as soldiers of the Lord Jesus Christ on this earth, we can truly say, and we can truly sing, with the angelic army of God, "In the highest, glory to God. On earth, peace – the peace of Jesus Christ. And in men – in the chosen people of God – good pleasure because of grace." The song of the angels of glory is also the Song of the saints of God.

The song of the angels announcing the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ underscores the words of benediction that we find at the end of the book of Jude:

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Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, Who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24-25)

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