

God's Highest Glory and Man's Greatest Joy (Luke 2:1-20)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on December 19, 2010

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The word “gospel” means “good news” or “good tidings,” and for those shepherds and all people living in the Roman Empire when Jesus was born, it was a word they were very familiar with. I talked last week about how the word was used when a messenger would bring “good news” of a military victory, and there’s also another way this word was used that I didn’t know and gave me some fresh insight into this familiar true story to share. The Greek word “gospel / good news / glad tidings” (*euangellion*) was often associated with peace, which the Greek-speaking world saw as militarily-accomplished, peace between enemies. It was a word they would use to glorify an Emperor in what is called the imperial cult, to celebrate a Caesar as Savior of the Empire. The worship of emperors had in part been started with Julius Caesar who had declared himself “the unconquered god.” Augustus was in his lifetime called “the savior of the world.” You may not know that Augustus, like Caesar, was not the proper name of the ruler of the world in that day, but was a title meaning “Exalted One” (his name was Gaius Octavian). Temples were built to honor him and cities were named after him, like Caesarea on the Mediterranean.¹

Euangelion was used in secular Greek for emperor-worship. Caesar Augustus had reigned since 31 B.C., and those shepherds and other Bethlehem residents would have heard this word “*good news/tidings / gospel*” used in their lives for news of this "divine" ruler’s birth, coming of an age or enthronement as well as his speeches, decrees and acts. Such *good tidings* brought (the Romans thought) long hoped-for fulfillment to the longings of the world for happiness and peace (though counterfeit hope and peace). The shepherds in the fields that night probably had heard 3-5 years earlier a *good news/gospel* decree for Caesar’s birth to be celebrated by the province:

“It is a day which we may justly count as equivalent to the beginning of everything—if not in itself and in its own nature, at any rate in the benefits it brings—inasmuch as it has restored the shape of everything that was failing and turning into misfortune, and has given a new look to the Universe at a time when it would gladly have welcomed destruction if Caesar had not been born to be the common blessing of all men ... Whereas the Providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere...and whereas the birthday of the God [Caesar Augustus] was the beginning for the world of **the glad tidings [gospel]** that have come to men through him ... proconsul of the province ...has devised a way of honoring Augustus hitherto unknown to the Greeks, which is, that the reckoning of time for the course of human life should begin with his birth.”²

In other words, their calendar of dating was to begin with the date of the birth of Caesar Augustus, by this royal decree heralded to the people great and small, and even shepherds would have likely known of this attempt to bring glory to Caesar Augustus for his birth. But in **God’s** providence, in what some historians say was only 3 years after that *euangellion* went forth ...

Luke 2:1 *Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken ...*

⁸*In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and **the glory of the Lord** shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, **I bring you good news** [same word “euangellion”] **of great joy which will be for all the people; ¹¹for today** [not few years ago, and not in Rome, but today] **in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord** [Christ = Messiah]*

This is the One who would be Lord of Lords and King of Kings! This is the One, the only One who can rightly have the title Savior and Exalted One and “divine ruler” and “God.” This One born in Bethlehem is the only One in the world deserving of our worship and the world is not enough, angels have to come down to join in. This is the only One whose birth should be called the *good news*. This is the One, the only One who could bring true joy and peace and happiness. This One born in the city of David is the only One who can truly give a new look to the universe. And it would be this One, not Caesar Augustus, but Christ, who would have calendars and modern dating revolve around His birth instead (B.C. & A.D.)!

¹²*“This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*
¹³*And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴“**Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men** [i.e., true peace with God through the Prince of Peace upon the men on whom His favor rests] *with whom He is pleased.**

This Jesus would later say to disciples who He set His favor on:

John 14:27 (NIV) ²⁷***Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*** [same as Luke 2:8]

Without the Prince of Peace giving us on earth other-worldly peace with God, unholy men like us have every reason to be afraid, when we get a mere glimpse of the glory of the Lord, like the end of v. 9. In the Greek it uses the word *mega* for their fear – they had “*mega*-fear,” or one version has “great fear” or another “*filled with fear*” or “*terrified*” or in the KJV it says “and they were *sore* afraid.”

But then v. 10 begins with these wonderful words, the first words of the gospel “*Do not be afraid ...*” – those are some of the most precious words in the Bible and we see them again and again to us, who need to hear them again and again, and God in His grace again and again condescends to befriend fearful men like them and like us with these words “*Do not be afraid.*” And the reason we’re not to fear is not that we have no reason to fear humanly speaking, it again and again has to do with the work of our Lord and Savior.

It’s an interesting study to see how many of those “Do not be afraid” statements have to do with the presence and power of our Lord as Savior, the good news or good tidings of His redemption.

We don’t need to fear if God as Savior is with us, and that’s what the name and nature of Christ is as Emmanuel = “God with us.” If we believe in Jesus as the Savior, Christ the Lord (like Luke 2:11), we don’t need to be afraid, as He told a synagogue ruler in Mark 5:36: “*Do not be afraid, only believe.*”

If you are here today and you fear the wrath of God on you for your sin, if you've turned from your sin and believed in Jesus as Lord and Savior, trusting that He bore the wrath of God on the cross as your substitute and as your redeemer, then you do not need to be afraid, and your fear can be turned to joy as you hear the words of Luke 2:10 again:

I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior

If you've never known Christ as Lord and Savior, this good news is for you today if you believe and receive it, He's born for you, too. The "good news" the angels proclaimed presumes you know the bad news, that you're not an angel, that you're closer to the devil than to heaven in your natural state. The bad news is that you have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and God's glory is the highest reality in the universe (v. 14). You may not sense the bad news or how bad sin is to God if you just compare yourselves to others, we can all always find people who we consider worse than us. But the Bible says the standard is not others, it's God's glory that we fall short of. "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). "Be holy for God is holy" (1 Peter says).

That's bad news. But there's good news, that a Savior has been born who is as perfect as God the Father in heaven is perfect, and as holy and righteous as God. We need His perfect righteousness. The bad news is we can't do anything to save ourselves, but the good news is Jesus can and has and is and does for sinners like us. Once you recognize you're a great sinner in need of a great Savior named Christ the Lord, and that your only hope for heaven is if He gives you His perfect righteousness as a gift by sheer grace alone when you place your faith alone in Christ alone as Savior, then you do not need to be afraid ever again, because Jesus Christ the Lord promises to never leave you alone or forsake you now or forever!

That's not just good news, it's great news, the greatest news ever heralded or announced, and with it is not just joy, but GREAT joy! Verse 10 has same word *mega*, this time *mega-joy!* Massive joy! Their mega-fear from v. 9 is to be replaced with mega-joy in v. 10! Sinful men are naturally fearful in the presence of the glory of the Lord around them, but in v. 10 there's a glorious Savior from sin.

¹⁰ *...I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people* ¹¹ *for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* ¹² *"This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

If you're looking for a king to conquer your enemies, this doesn't seem like a very good start or very noble birth, a common couple in a less than common and less than sanitary place to be born! For those looking for a political solution or revolution leader to solve the Jew's concerns with oppressive government, heavy taxation, or laws made by pagans, they're not going to find it in this manger, either. But for those who know their greatest problem is not pagan legislation, or taxation, or government, or anything out there but the greatest problem is in here (sin in your heart) this is good news. Christ came to save sinners not to slay Romans. Christ is Lord, not some little genie in a bottle who exists for man's wishes. We exist for His glory and to enjoy Him forever, doing what the Lord wants. And the enjoying / joy of v. 10 is linked to God's glory in v. 14.

Christ's birth is announced. Shepherds have been told where to go, what they need to know - this good news for their great joy. But I want you to notice the text doesn't jump from here to Bethlehem and the shepherds showing up at the nativity scene. The message isn't done – there's something even higher and greater than this, and an angel is not enough, the world is not enough, heaven's choir needs to come down to earth. The greatest number of angels is needed for this greatest cantata ever for this, God's highest glory:

¹³*And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,* ¹⁴**“Glory to God in the highest** ... [this is an even higher word than “mega” joy – this is a superlative, this is where God's glory is its greatest and highest!]

We could look at many Scriptures today that say God's glory is the highest reality in the universe and the highest reason for all that God does. This is where that highest purpose hits its highest point. This is our purpose on the planet, but it's bigger, the universe. This is where heavenly choirs reach their highest note, when peace comes to men through Christ who has come to earth and has made them pleasing to God by what He did here. Redemption, salvation, the good news of the gospel, is where God's glory hits its climax.

When the Most High God comes as the lowest to be born in the lowliest of places (a little town in a little feeding trough) and when the birth party announcement goes out to the lowest of society (shepherds, considered unclean and men whose testimony wasn't accepted in court, they are the only ones on the birth party invite list), when God stoops lowest to save the lowliest sinners, God's glory is at its highest and greatest. Some people talk about all hell breaking loose; well, this is where all *heaven* breaks loose in joy! “Glory to God in the highest” is the culmination or climax of the message of “good news of great joy for all the people” – that is, for all the people who receive it – glad tidings of joy to the world!

The good news, the glad tidings, the gospel, is not just about the birth of a baby, the angels said this is about the Savior who is the Lord and who is the Christ / Messiah. In other words, the One who the OT prophesied would come and be born in the city of David (ex: Micah 5:2-5).

The angels are telling these Jewish shepherds outside this little town of Bethlehem, today, this Savior, this Messiah has been born! The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight! Of all the faithful believers in the past who longed for this day, you of all people get to see it and to see Him first with your own eyes! There were Magi from the East on their way who would see Him later but it's you who we're bringing the good news to first, and you get to be the first human heralds of these glad tidings to others.

I know this story is very familiar to us, but I hope we don't miss how astounding this must have been sounding to these shepherds that the Shepherd who David knew as Lord in Psalm 23, they of all people in human history would get to see Him that evening in a way David and no one else ever had before. They who were raising lambs, some of which were probably used for Jewish Passovers, they would get to meet the One who would be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world for all who trust His sacrifice on the cross for their sins. These simple men watching over flocks by night were about to meet the One who guards His flock Israel and who never slumbers nor sleeps, the One who had other sheep not of this fold (not only Jews) and came to seek those lost as well.

These very ordinary men, considered very lowly by their society, were chosen for this extraordinary event of God's highest glory! He wasn't born in a palace, or announced to the rulers in Rome, or the world's movers and shakers, the mighty or the nobles, or even the wisest scholars in Jerusalem ... it was a class of people that much of their society despised and considered base-level workers.

This is very relevant and very good news to us ordinary people as well who see ourselves spiritually as the lowly and are as amazed as these shepherds that *we could hear such good news of salvation*. We didn't get this amazing gift to be able to physically see Jesus in Bethlehem, but we who know Christ as Lord and Savior were all given the amazing gift of being able to see Him spiritually in the pages of scripture as glorious in the highest as His favor rests on us

1 Corinthians 1:26 (ESV) *For consider your calling, brothers: **not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful** [or "influential" NIV], **not many were of noble birth.** ²⁷ **But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;** ²⁸ **God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,** ²⁹ **so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.***

That's the point of the gospel / good news – all glory to God for it, in the highest as His grace and peace comes to us lowest of people! In the humble beginnings of a little town barely on the map, to a couple who can't even get a bed for the night for a young woman already going into labor contractions, much less a somewhat warm bed or semi-sanitary place to give birth, only a cold place fit only for animals. No medical staff, just a manger and manure smell. No epidurals, just animals standing around. The Son of Man had no place to lay his head except for where the animals were eating from that same day. In this place a normal-looking newborn comes into the world who would change the world and who will one day recreate it! The One who created those very animals in the stable is now *in their food trough as they look on!* And then the animals are disturbed further when some other people show up to see the baby.

Verse 16 says the shepherds *"came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.* ¹⁷*When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child.* ¹⁸*And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds.* ¹⁹*But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.* ²⁰*The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.*

Notice they're glorifying God. How? Praising, and telling others. May we do the same. May we who have seen Christ for who He is also make it known like v. 17 says. In some ways, this month will give more opportunities to speak of these things than the rest of the year. May we also like v. 18 wonder or marvel afresh at these things, at the wonder of Christ coming into this world. May we like Mary in v. 19 treasure these things in our hearts and ponder them beyond our time this morning. And like v. 20, may we go back to our work-places, glorifying and praising God for what we have heard and seen in the pages of Scripture, just as had been told us.

If you don't know Christ as Lord and Savior personally, may you trust in Him today, not just that He was born, but that He lived and died for our sins and rose again, and that if you don't trust in what you have done or can do to get to heaven, but if you trust in Christ alone and what He did for you, this *great joy* can be yours eternally

This isn't the first time the phrase "great joy" is used in the Bible. It was first used in the OT when the Son of David became King, during Solomon's coronation and celebration: *"All the people went up after him, and the people were playing on flutes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth shook at their noise.* (1 Kgs 1:40)

Now the world is rocked again with greater joy because a greater Son of David as come named Jesus. Jesus Himself said *"One greater than Solomon is here"* (Matthew 12:42 NIV). Matthew's gospel uses the same phrase "great joy" also for the wise men or Magi from the East who came to Bethlehem: *When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.* (Matthew 2:10)

In Matthew 28, the next time the NT uses this phrase "great joy" is also a very important and notable occasion, this time of literal ground-shaking and another message of an angel on the morning of Christ's 3rd day in the tomb as the ladies came:

² *And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.* ³ *And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.* ⁴ *The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men.* ⁵ *The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified.* ⁶ *"He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.* ⁷ *"Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you."* ⁸ *And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.* ⁹ *And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.* ¹⁰ *Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me."*

The first time "great joy" is used in the NT, they see the child. In Luke 2, the shepherds are told of good news of great joy, and the angels tell them to come and see the Savior lying in a manger. Now in Matthew 28, Jesus the man had died and was lying in a tomb. But angels show up again, telling the women who believed in Jesus *"Do not be afraid"* and they have good news for them.

This time the angels don't say "come see where He's laying," they say "come see where *He was* laying, where He's not, because He has risen from the dead." The Savior had now completed the work He was born for, completing the good news and their great joy. In v. 8 is the 2nd time in the NT the phrase "great joy" appears, and it is not at the birth of Jesus or even the death of Jesus, but at His resurrection. This is the heart of the "gospel" in 1 Corinthians 15, not just that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. He was buried and *was raised* and appeared to His disciples. If you don't have the resurrection, you don't have the full good news.

So let's not leave Jesus in the manger today, and let's definitely not leave Him on the cross or in the tomb in the gospel. The good news is Christ the Lord who conquered death *by rising from it*, and He is now in heaven as the Mediator for all those who trust Him.

Luke 24:50 ⁵⁰*And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them.* ⁵¹*While He was blessing them, **He parted from them and was carried up into heaven.*** ⁵²*And they, after worshiping Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy,* ⁵³*and were continually in the temple praising God.*

Jude 24 *Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of **His glory blameless with great joy,*** ²⁵*to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, **be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever.***
Amen.

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 392-93.

² NIDNTT, Vol. 2, p. 108, citing E. Barker, *From Alexander to Constantine: Passages and Documents Illustrating the History of Social and Political Ideas 336 B.C.-A.D. p337*, (1956) 1959, 211 f.