

## **Luke 2:14: The First Christmas Carol**

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

### **OUTLINE:**

God's glory  
Man's peace

### **INTRODUCTION**

What does the birth of Christ mean to the world today? Those who do not believe the Christmas story as teaching that the saviour of the world is born; many still celebrate the story because they believe that it teaches and affirms that the birth of every child is precious. As true as it is that every human life is precious, the remembrance of Jesus in the stable is not a celebration of human life, no matter where it is born. No, the significance of the birth of Christ is one of the most profound moments, ever. In order to get at some of the significance of Christmas we are going to look at the first Christmas Carol ever sung.

The setting of our first Carol is an outdoor service in the fields outside of Bethlehem. The MC for the evening was one of the angels, and the choir performing the short carol were the angels of heaven. No doubt no amplification was needed as the Bible speaks in proverbial terms of the 'voice of an archangel', and here we see a great host appearing. If you were one of the shepherds, and you were sitting listening, how do you think it would have appeared, the lighting, the volume, the harmonies, the beauty? And how earnest do you think the angels would have been in their praise? It profits for us to reflect on the attitude of the angel's worship in this carol. When we come to Christmas it is very easy for us to sing without meaning, to sing out of tradition without worshipping. To sing enjoying the camaraderie of the moment without turning our love towards God, enjoying the tunes, the awakening of our sentimentality, and the novelty, more than all that we should be doing in worship as we sing, is easy and wrong. Try and imagine it. The angels who had been witnesses to God's creation, to his work in the saving of Israel, who see him face to face. Now they behold the greatest act of God, a new work, an act where he does not act upon another but himself, where his power and glory are revealed not in displaying, but in concealing. The wonder that must have gripped their hearts, the anticipation that must have been satisfied as they had been waiting, watching God work out his purposes, guiding all to this moment. Putting yourself in another's position is an obvious way to enter into a new appreciation of their situation. Try putting yourself in the angels position that evening, and let that warm your hearts with a new appreciation as you approach the manger this year.

But let us not forget the shepherds. What audience has been invited to such an illustrious concert? What important people have been sought out to hear the announcement and witness the overflowing joy of heaven, as they burst into spontaneous praise. A few shepherds in a field. Have you ever stopped to wonder why God chose to reveal himself to shepherds, why his greatest deed was done in a stable, before shepherds, in an oppressed nation. Some might think that God appeared to shepherds to indicate that Christ would be a type of shepherd. Some think that Christ was born poor, and that his announcement was given to poor shepherds, is God's way of identifying with the poor and sending a strong political message against all oppression. I think the truth is more focused on God's glory than political correctness. If Jesus had been born a Spartan or a Roman, or of some other great nation or city, people would brag like football supporters do, that it is in some virtue of

where they were born or who they were born to. But rather he was born in unstable conditions, away from home, to a poor family. God knows that we are weak and cannot save ourselves, that all of our great, economic, political, military, and spiritual prowess is a show, we are here today gone tomorrow, but are always pretending to be stronger and more independent than we really are, just like a kid on the school playground. The present crises that are hitting the world reveal how fragile our strength really is. And so God makes his strength known through weakness, that he might get the glory. He knows that if he gives us the slightest opportunity to take glory for ourselves we will do it. In the Christmas story, God comes as a dependent baby to a teenage mother, of a poor family, of a people that are politically oppressed, born in a stable with only lowly shepherds as the witnesses of the greatest birth of all time. And so when Jesus lives and dies and changes the world, we cannot say, look at what good the human race can achieve, for he was conceived of a virgin, and was the God-man, Jews cannot say, look at how great Jews are and could not boast of their religion being the best in the world, the poor cannot say, look at our suppressed talent that lies dormant, royalty cannot take credit for his life, the greatest world power Rome could not take credit for what he has done. God uses the weak things of this world to dumbfound the wise, to show his strength, that no flesh will glory in his presence. With that let us now turn to consider the words of the first Carol.

### **God's glory**

How many people are going to be singing about words they do not think about or mean this season? Staggering amounts of people are going to be mindlessly mouthing the words of the Gospel and God praise, with hearts that have no treasure in these things. The words of our worship are important. To approach God with thoughtlessness is to say to God, 'I don't think that you merit my full attention'. God is Holy and we are to reverence him, yet so many come casually to the God that has the destiny of their eternal souls in his hands. Thoughtless worship is an insult so let us consider the words that angels offer as a meaningful offering to God.

The words of the first Carol focus on the two effects of the birth of Christ, God is glorified, and peace is given to men. This highlights that the birth of Christ affects both spheres of activity, the Heavens and the Earth, indicating that his birth affects the whole universe. God's highest good (not implying that God is lacking that he needs to be benefited), and man's highest good. The first line is, 'Glory to God in the highest'.

So let us seek to answer this question, in what way does the birth of Christ glorify God. Well firstly, we have to say that glorifying God means displaying his glory, proclaiming his beauty, putting forth his magnificence. So rephrasing the question, in what way does the birth of Christ, show forth God's magnificence, proclaim his beauty, or display his glory? The answer is, in every way.

There is not one aspect of God's being that is not brought into our thoughts as we consider God becoming man. Every attribute of God, like the facets of a diamond, are reflected in the act of Jesus being born. Creation teaches us some things about God, for example, the extent of the universe teaches us about God's vastness. The power needed to create such a universe teaches us about his strength, the beauty and wisdom of it shows us his genius, and beauty. But creation is a poor reporter on God's magnificence compared to the birth of Christ. We can think of any aspect of God's being or character and we can consider it through the birth of Christ in pristine clarity.

God's being as existing as a Trinity is brought into focus as we see one who is God, and was with God becoming flesh and dwelling among us (Jn 1:1,14). We see the working of the Trinity in the birth of Christ when the Holy Spirit exerts his power and conceives Christ within the virgin Mary (Lk 1:35).

God's strength is forced into the limelight as we see the miracle of the conception of Jesus becoming man but without sin, and more so in the fact that the almighty God limits his power and accepts the finite existence of human life.

God's wisdom is seen in how he has worked things that are beyond our ability to understand, like, Christ being one person, but with two natures. Christ the everywhere present God, located in one human space. The all knowing Son limited to human understanding, and all the while never ceasing to be God. If ever you want to feel the limits of your intelligence and marvel at God's infinite wisdom try and penetrate these mysteries.

But there is more, we see his grace in the value of a gift we do not deserve to have given to us. We see his mercy in the fact that he has thrown himself into saving us at great cost to himself to rescue us. We see his holiness in the perfection of Christ's humanity, and in the fact that a perfect human life is required to satisfy the requirements of God's law. We see his justice in the payment being necessary, and God not sweeping our sins under the carpet but paying for them. We see his faithfulness in the fact that God has kept the many promises that he made in the OT that he would send a saviour to rescue us (Isaiah 53). There is so much of God that is seen in this beautiful moment that we are ungrateful and calloused if we allow the many other things that have come to be emphasized to hijack Christmas. Why fill our minds with snow, especially in the tropics, Yule logs, Santa, trees, Rudolph, sleigh bells, and all the many other trappings which merely deter our thinking from Christ. What will you sing about this Christmas, will you be in synch with the angels, would you be out of place in their choir? You shouldn't be!

### **Man's peace**

The angels announce the second benefit of the birth of Christ, 'And on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests'. There are many today who say that the Christmas story teaches us that we should stop war for the sake of the children. No doubt this is a worthy sentiment, but not the idea behind the word 'peace' in this text. At the time of Christ's birth the Roman world had affected the *Pax Romana*, a state of peace through out the Roman empire. This was in fact a notable achievement due to the many wars that were incessantly fought. Although Israel was occupied it was living under this forced peace. If you had told a Roman citizen that Christ has come to bring peace from war, the Roman would say, too late, Augustus Caesar has already done it. This however is not the peace that the angels are newly announcing.

The angels are announcing a peace treaty to end the war between God and sinners. We are the rebels that have rejected his rightful rule, each one has proclaimed himself king, and has done damage to God's creation that he gave us to manage under him. God deserves to put us all to death for high treason, but instead, the Son has come to give his life, that our crimes might be paid for, and we can be received back as loyal citizens. When the Gospel is preached to any person who has not yet repented and believed, they are being brought to the table of signing where a pen is being put in their hands. They are being asked to sign an unconditional surrender, and return to faithful service. The full debt of their crimes being wiped out, a full amnesty offered because Jesus will pay whatever debts we have.

The birth of Christ is the beginning of God's actions to bring the guilty rebels back to himself, to pay for their crimes and have them fully restored to him. Christ was born so that he could die our death, that we could receive a full pardon, and full acceptance. This is something to sing about. Compare the theme of the angel's Carol, with Rudolph the red nosed reindeer, or 'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas'. These songs are trifles, insignificant ditties, a waste of breath and voice compared to what our voices could be employed singing about.

As we approach Christmas time, my prayer is that your songs and thinking will be after the hearts of those who sang the first Christmas carol, that you would be enraptured with the glory of God and the peace deal that he offers.