

What Child Is This? Good News of Great Joy

by J. Glyn Owen

J. Glyn Owen's sermon emphasizes the joyous announcement of Christ's birth to humble shepherds, highlighting the significance of God's grace and the message of salvation.

Duration: 44:15

Scripture: Exodus 3:1-6, Exodus 13:21-22, Isaiah 6:1-7, Matthew 1:20-23, Luke 2:8-20, Revelation 1:9-18

Topics: "Birth Of Jesus"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the announcement made by a solitary angel to the shepherds. The angel reassures them not to be afraid, emphasizing the significance of this statement for someone who is witnessing the glory of God. The preacher highlights the good news that sinners no longer need to fear a holy God because a mediator, the Messiah, has been provided by God. The preacher also draws parallels to biblical stories, such as Moses encountering God in a burning bush and the Israelites being guided by a pillar of fire, to emphasize the divine presence and intervention in the birth of Jesus.

Transcript

Your New Testaments at Luke chapter 2, and there to join us as we try to expound the passage that was read earlier this morning, beginning with verse 8, and continuing to verse 20. Good news of great joy. It is amazing how Christ is being crowded out of Christmas.

It seems that the momentum of contemporary life and trends is such that very few people are aware in the outside world, and alas, there are some in the church who appear to be ignorant of the fact that the hinge of destiny is screwed into the manger of Bethlehem. Christ is Savior. That is the message of Christmas.

And if He is not Savior, there is no Savior at all for a lost world such as ours. We are therefore focusing in these days, as we've been studying during Advent, studying these early chapters, the first chapter and the beginning of the second chapter in the book of Luke, we have been focusing attention upon the very centralities, and I trust that the central issue may be very clear to us all, and clear to those that shall come to our homes and with whom we shall mingle at this Christmas time. May the central issue be clear that Christmas is all about God sending forth His Son to be the only Savior of mankind.

Now let's see what this wonderful passage has to say to us. Now in one sense we need special grace when we come to this passage because it's so familiar. You've heard it many times before, you've read it many times before, and you may be saying to yourself, well, there's nothing very much new that can come

out of that old passage.

So you're going to sleep. Well, please don't sleep. I'll ask you to do something far better.

Ask the Holy Spirit to give you fresh light upon the sacred page, and to enable you to see this morning, as you never saw before, the full significance of this remarkable episode. And who knows, you may be dancing before the end of the service. I hope you will.

Now it all centers then in the announcement of the fact that, not as the prophets said, He is going to be born, He is going to come, but the announcement that the Messiah, Christ the Lord, has arrived. And this is the first announcement, the announcement made to the shepherds abiding with their sheep on a cold winter night in the regions of Bethlehem. We're going to look first of all at the setting in which the announcement was made, because it is very important.

Now, in the first place, the announcement of the Savior's birth was made to the most humble of people in that ancient world. Now that may sound strange to some of us, because we think of the shepherds in terms of such twentieth century or nineteenth century shepherds as we may have known. And when I say that they were somewhere near the bottom of the ladder, socially, in New Testament times, it may strike you as if it were an exaggeration.

Well, now it's not. There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And I want to say to you that in that ancient society they were looked upon as the humblest of the humble.

They were, as a matter of fact, at that stage in history, almost universally despised. Now you may ask the reason why. Well, there are a number of reasons for that.

Generally, only the poorest of people would take on the job anyway. Of course, sometimes it happened within the family that there would be father and sons, and the children would in turn, perhaps, look after the sheep and the goats, as young David did for Jesse. But if shepherds had to be hired, it would only be the poorest of the poor that would take the job.

Then, whilst they were at their post, they would probably be very--mostly, at any rate--would be far away from Jerusalem, and would very rarely be able to visit Jerusalem for the great festal occasions of the Jews. For the same reason, because they had to look after the sheep day and night, summer and winter, they would not often find a way to the synagogue in the district where they might be. And for this reason, they came to be looked upon as somewhat of an irreligious crew.

The scribes and the Pharisees especially looked down upon them because they were not able to perform some of the ceremonial things that they required of people-- things superimposed upon the plain teaching of Scripture. For example, the washing of hands before meals. It was not a hygienic affair, but it was a ceremonial affair.

Now, they couldn't do that out in the fields. What provisions would they have? And a whole multitude of other such ceremonies. They simply couldn't do.

So they became looked down upon, frowned upon, as a kind of worthless people in society. Or, let us say, as useful as a child. For a child could--a young child could, as David did--sometimes look after the sheep.

And I think they even helped to make society think of them in this way because, for good or ill, be it true, be it false, they gained notoriety as petty thieves. Now, I can't tell you whether that is true, but it was a generally accepted thing that you couldn't trust the shepherds. And if they brought their sheep somewhere near your home--perhaps there was some common land or mountainside--and if you saw them bringing their sheep, you'd be on the alert because they put their hands on what doesn't belong to them.

In consequence, you never accepted the testimony of a shepherd in a court of law. If you were charged with a crime and you were really innocent, and a shepherd knew that you were innocent, his testimony simply wouldn't count. You would stand still on your own.

In other words, what I'm stressing is this. The shepherds were, for better or for worse, they were really down at the bottom rung of the social ladder. Even so, can't you sense the thrill of it? The announcement that the Savior, who had long been promised, has at last arrived, came from the lips of an angel--an angel of Almighty God--to the humblest of the humble, in the darkness of the wintry night, as they were about their business.

And they believed it and received it. That night, some of them were probably sleeping in the little hut of leaves and things like that, that they gathered together from trees and sheltered under them, whilst in turn, three or four of them would be out watching, keeping watch over their sheep. And the angel of the Lord came down, and the glory of the Lord shone around, and they heard the good news.

They were the most humble. Now notice, the announcement of the Savior's birth was made not only to the humblest of the humble, but in and through the mediation of an angel. It wasn't a prophet that made this announcement, but an angel.

Now again, we've got to go back to the New Testament for an understanding of this. An angel often mediated between God and men. And when Stephen is addressing the Sanhedrin, he goes out of his way to say that the law on Sinai was given by the mediation of an angel.

Oh, God was there. The glory of the Lord danced on the summit of Sinai, and everybody knew that the great Jehovah was there on Sinai. The thundering and the lightning bespoke of the presence of the God of Abraham and the God of glory.

But, says Stephen, and he seemed to have the Spirit of God upon him as he spoke, so he must have been speaking the truth. The law was given by the mediation of angels. Now for that and a number of reasons, an angel was looked upon as a singular being, not an unimportant person.

And an angel of the Lord was dispatched to make this announcement to the angels. But that's not all. Please wait a moment.

Hold your breath. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. Now, I wish I had the tongues of men and angels in order to try to express something of the wonder of that event.

The glory of the Lord shone round about them. Again, if I may go back to Stephen, he spoke of God as the God of glory, who appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. The God of glory.

When we read of the glory of God in the Bible, it means that there is some unspeakable excellence to his attributes that manifests itself in the sheath of light. And God was known in the Old Testament, you see,

as the God of light, or as light. You remember, for example, Moses, also acting as a shepherd in the backwoods, and he saw one bush, and there was something strange about it.

There was a light in it, a fire. It was lit, and it was burning, but it was not consumed. And Lord, at last, a voice came out of the bush, and we discover the one speaking from the bush speaks of himself as, I am that I am.

The great eternal Jehovah God manifested himself to Moses as light, as the God of glory, in a sheath of light. When you come on in the history of Israel, you'll find that the same thing happens. Do you remember how the Israelites moved out of Egypt, went through the deserts? How were they guided? Well, they were guided by night by a pillar of fire, supernaturally kindled, supernaturally moving, moving ahead of them when they were supposed to move, stopping when they were supposed to stop, guiding them through the pilgrim land towards the land of promise.

God was the God of glory manifested in light. Now you see, this is what we have here. These humble shepherds are not simply addressed by a messenger of God, but by an angel of God.

Yeah, but wait a moment. By an angel of God himself speaking in the presence of God. For the glory of God shining round about them meant that God himself was present with those shepherds.

God was personally there, personally present in the neighborhood of Bethlehem that night as his angel spokesman declared that the long-awaited Messiah, the Lord, had arrived. And we read that they were terrified. Well, what do you expect? There is a natural fear in the human heart, a dread of the unseen and the unfamiliar.

Sometimes it's like a snake coiled up and sleeping, slumbering. But when something happens, that fear is released, and we just don't know where to turn. But it is especially so when the all-glorious Lord God of the universe manifests himself to a frail human being and a sinner.

Those who had the vision of God, like Moses, didn't know quite what to do. God said to Moses, take your shoes off. You're standing on holy ground.

When Isaiah saw the glory of God in the temple, you remember, he said, ah, I'm smiting my breast because I'm a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. Mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. And right on at the book of the Bible, when John, the writer of the Apocalypse, the saint John, the man of love and compassion, when he saw the glory of Jesus Christ as it is portrayed in Revelation chapter 1, he says, I fell at his feet as dead, stunned.

I couldn't move. I couldn't talk. I couldn't do anything.

Because of the glory of God. They were terrified. They're in good company.

Had they not been terrified, we would have been questioning whether they had really seen an angel at all. Certainly the glory of the Lord. But the very fact of their terror bespeaks of the reality of the situation.

Have you got the setting? A humble people. And an angel comes to them. And an angel announces to them that Christ has been born.

But not a bare announcement. An announcement beneath a canopy of a sheath of Shekinah glory. Compelling.

Assuring them that this was no dream. But real. The carol puts it so clearly.

While shepherds watched their flocks by night. All seated on the ground. I'm not sure whether that's true or not.

But the angel of the Lord came down and glory shone around. The setting in which the announcement was made. Now the subject.

The content of the announcement itself. I think it divides into an introduction. And then an addition to the introduction.

Let's take it like that. First of all. One solitary angel makes his announcement.

Here he is. The divine messenger first allayed the shepherds fears. In these words 210.

The angel said to them do not be afraid. Now we take that all too easily. And too cheaply.

And as if it were but an ordinary statement. But you see to somebody who is seeing the glory of God. That's not an ordinary statement.

Can a man see God and live? Can a man drawn near to the Almighty One. The Holy One of Israel. And live? Part of the good news of great joy that these angels are bringing to earth is this.

No longer does sinner man need to cringe before a holy God. Because God has provided a mediator. A Messiah.

The Lord. The Savior. His Son.

To stand between us. And to bring us near. Fear not he says.

Jesus has been born. The Savior has come. You don't need to fear as once you did.

That is to have a kind of cringing. Awful dreadful fear of hell. Opening up for you.

Of course we still need to have that other kind of fear. A respect of the Holy One. A respect for our Creator and our Savior.

But not the kind of cringing. Soul destroying fear. That puts us out of our mind.

And the divine messenger gradually affirmed the reason for the command not to fear. And he goes on to say I bring you good news of great joy. Now can you see the contrast there? They were terrified.

To a terrified people he announces good news not bad news. God is near but God is not near to judge, to crush, to damn, to condemn. Good news of great joy to people who are afraid.

Maybe some people in this very service this morning who are afraid of God. And afraid of death. And afraid of judgment.

And afraid of eternity. You've never known that there was a provision whereby your fear can be taken away. I want to announce it to you.

The first thing the angel said was this. There's no need anymore to fear if you believe what we tell you and receive whom God has given. God is the only one that can deal with a basic fear of a sinner.

And he does it through Christ his Son the Savior. Now all that's but the introduction. The angel's amplification of the message continues.

Now let's come to that. The great event he says has actually taken place that very day. Today he says in the town of David a Savior has been born.

It's a wonder they didn't know. It's a wonder nobody told them. How could they be so ignorant of it? What do the angels know? Where are they coming from? What do the angels know what's going on in Bethlehem? They're watching their sheep.

They're guarding their sheep in the neighborhood of Bethlehem. Not all that far away. What do the angels know? Listen my friends.

It takes us an awful long time to get it in. To take it in. Heaven knows more of what's going on down here on earth than we know ourselves.

And if we could get that into our thick skulls we would be able to meet life much better. Heaven knows more of what's going on down here than we who live in the situation actually know. Heaven knew what these shepherds didn't know.

What no one in Bethlehem knew. Had they known what was happening I'm sure they would have found room for Joseph and Mary somewhere other than in the inn. But you see no one knew about Mary.

No one had ever heard about Mary in Bethlehem. Who knew about Mary of Nazareth? She was an unknown quantity. And whoever would have known that an angel Gabriel had been dispatched to tell Mary that she was going to be the mother of the incarnate Lord.

No one on earth knew anything about her. No one knew anything about Joseph there in Bethlehem. But God did.

See? And God had arranged things just like this. And he had caused that the whole region should be taxed. Using a pagan emperor to organize, I'm sorry, to be registered, a census.

And he had arranged it just at this time that Mary should be in Bethlehem. Just at this time when the baby was due. In order that the word of the prophet Micah should be fulfilled.

That in Bethlehem Ephrata he should come forth who was to be the deliverer. God knew all this you see. God breaks the news to this angel and to the others that may have been listening through this angel to the shepherds all around however many of them were listening.

Do you begin to see the wood for the trees? Do you see the emerging picture? God Almighty has come down to these humblest of men to stand in the background as his herald angel announces that the Savior is born. And the time for dread, fear of lostness is over. The baby born to be Savior was identified by the angel in these marvelous words as Christ or Messiah the Lord.

I'm not going to dwell on that this morning. Not because it isn't important but you can't say everything. You can't dwell on everything that a passage like this tells you it's too rich.

He was the anointed one. He hasn't come from nowhere. God has anointed him as prophet, priest and king to do his saving work.

His messianic work. And he's the Lord of all creation. Destiny is in his hand.

Messiah the Lord has come as a babe. He's born in Bethlehem. The setting for the announcement, the subject of it.

Now the last thing, the certainty or confirmation offered to the hearers of this glorious news. If you heard something like this out on a cold wintry night keeping watch over a few sheep, how would you feel? Would you not be skeptical? Would you not say, oh I must be dreaming. The frost is getting into my bones.

We usually say the heat is getting into my head. Well this is the other way around. The cold is getting somewhere.

And we're really dreaming. This thing's not real. You know God is so gracious.

He knows our problems before we have them. Certainly before we're aware of them. Or can put them into words.

God gave them a sign. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling, in strips of cloth.

I'm going back to the King James. Swaddling clothes it says they're wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger. Now the sign was as unexpectedly strange as the glory was unspeakably brilliant.

In the words, unambiguous. What a sign. The angel announced, the angel announced that Messiah had come.

That the Messiah was the Lord. And here the angel is announcing this under the canopy or in the sheath of the outshining glory of God in the blackness of those of those fields at night. And yet this is what he goes on to say.

You will find Messiah Christ the Lord as a baby. Doesn't make sense does it? A baby wrapped up with cloths. Not one cloth.

But with strips of cloths and lying where? In a manger. Christ the Lord wrapped up in strips of cloths like a baby. Lying in a manger like an unwanted thing.

Surely he could lie somewhere better than that. Christ the Lord. A baby in a manger.

A baby in a manger. Another thought of such a long-awaited person. A person of divine qualifications being born as a child had its own difficulties.

To conceive of his being born in Bethlehem in that outlandish place was really it was unbelievable. It could hardly be taken in unless you knew the scriptures. But to think of him lying in a manger was something out of this world.

Well this is the sign said the angel. This is the sign. This is a sign for you.

I'm giving you a sign says the angel. Heaven wants you to recognize him. Heaven wants you to be able to find him out.

You may find other children born in Bethlehem tonight for all that. But you won't find one just like this. Wrapped in strips of cloth.

Lying not in a little cradle. But in a manger. This is the sign.

You won't find any other babe like this. Lying in a manger. Yet he is Christ the Lord.

Lying in a manger. Now notice what happens at that point. When I can almost see.

My imagination may be running away with me. But I almost. I almost hear the the shepherds say.

Oh please don't say any more. This is too much for us. And suddenly the lone.

The lone angel is accompanied by a crowd who bear witness to the truthfulness of his statement. Thirteen fourteen. Suddenly.

Suddenly. Nobody saw them coming. But suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel.

Along with the angel. Praising God and saying. Glory to God in the highest.

And on earth peace to men on whom his favor dwells. And you see what's happening. Heaven has dispatched now a vast chorus of unnumbered angels.

To glorify God. And as it were to confirm the testimony of that lone angel. It's all true.

It sounds too good to be true. But it's true. Hence they're coming and singing.

After the original announcement by the lone angel had been given. You see. If this great choir had come in the first place.

It would have been a bit of an anticlimax for the angel to announce that Jesus was born. But the crowd came after the announcement was made. And the initial shock had been received.

And the crowd of angels gather. Oh God orders things so beautifully. The crowd of angels come and they gather.

And they sing. And they worship. And it is all a kind of seal upon the fact that what this solitary angel has said.

Even though it sounds too good to be true. Is nothing else but truth. And the angels together continue to amplify just a little of the message that had been given.

They've been told a lot already. Albeit in shorthand form. But the chorus of angels.

The choir of angels says glory to God in the highest. And on earth peace to men on whom his favor dwells. The birth of the Savior guarantees the glory of God.

Not only demands that we give God glory on account of it. But the birth of this person guarantees that God will be glorified. Oh my friends this thrills my soul.

See wherever Jesus is preached and received and obeyed. There God will be glorified. And since one day the whole universe will receive him.

God will be glorified. North to south. East to west.

And there will be nothing in this universe. But that it will dance to the glory of God. The coming of the Savior guarantees that men who have given themselves to trivialities and to sin will be redeemed.

And made anew. And the feature of their new creation and regeneration will be this. They'll begin to give glory to God.

And at last they will do so forever and ever. Peace on earth. On earth peace to men on whom his favor dwells.

There was a kind of peace that they made much of in those days. The Pax Romana. Because Rome made it impossible for one part of the empire to rise up against another.

Very much as it is in Poland this morning. By sheer power. Kept down any trouble.

Kept it under the mild might of Rome. Kept down all turbulence and rebellion. That was the Pax Romana.

But even the pagans like Epictetus wrote in that very first century. I quote. While the emperor may give peace on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion.

Peace from grief. Peace from envy. He cannot give peace of heart for which man yearns more than for outward peace.

But you see, Jesus brings us peace of heart. We need not fear. And not only peace of heart.

One day his peace shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. When he returns to reign and complete what he has begun. The sign of which the angel spoke.

The song with which the heavenly host underscored what the lone angel had announced. And lastly, the summons that was implied in that announcement. It's not written here in so many words.

But it is clearly implied. And what the lone angel announced. And what was confirmed by the chorus of angels was virtually an invitation.

To check and see. Why do you think God gave them a sign? Why did God announce through the angel. Look, this is a sign to you.

You shall find the bed wrapped in strips of cloth lying in a manger. Why did God say that? We see God wraps up his invitation sometimes. And we've got to pause and see what he's getting at.

He wants us to think. You shall find the bed. Well that means that God was expecting them to look for him.

It was an invitation to look and to check up and to see. Is the angel telling the truth? You see, God wanted them to discover the thing for themselves. So we read in verse 15.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds got the point. And they said one to another. Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.

Which the Lord has told us about. Let's go and see. Let's go and check whether this sign is really divinely given.

Is it genuine? Is it true? They not only found a baby there. We read they hurried off and they found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in a manger. But they not only found a baby, but a baby born that very day.

A baby clad as the angel had said and laid, laid, believe it or not, in a manger. And this was the sign. Nowhere else in Bethlehem could they find a baby laid in the manger born that day.

But here they found one. And that's exactly what the angel had said. That was the sign.

And so we read in verses 17 to 18. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what they had been told. Or what had been told them about the child.

And all who heard it were amazed at what the angel said to them. Of course. See, having recognized that this is true and the sign was genuine.

And it was exactly as the angel had announced. And as the chorus of angels had confirmed. And as the glory of the Lord around the whole seemed to underscore as being right and proper and true.

They found it just as the announcement had been made. The sign was genuine. Jesus was born.

Christ Messiah has come and he's Lord. In verse 20, the passage ends like this. Not only did the shepherds tell everybody about what they had seen and what they had heard and how they had proved the sign to be genuine.

But the shepherds returned home now. See them going back to the fields. The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.

Which were just as they had been told. Just as they had been told. Just as they had been told.

The sign was genuine. Just as they had been told. Now I'm closing.

Everything that is of God ultimately leads men who recognize and accept the fact to worship him. To worship him. To worship him.

Genuinely divine action kindles devotion and a spirit of worship when it is recognized. And notice in this case the transformation is considerable. We see it in the shepherds.

The shepherds first appear as terrified. Terrified. Then we see them as inquisitive inquirers into the sign that had been given them.

Into the truthfulness of the announcement and the real significance of the sign. When they found that to be true then they become witnesses and heralds and they told everybody they met about it. But now they go home worshiping.

Singing. Not for others to hear but for God to hear. Praising neither men nor angels.

But the Lord God almighty. The architect of it all. He who planned it all.

He who conceived it all. And he who out of sheer unadulterated love for a lost benighted world sent forth his. Hallelujah.

Where are you this morning? Terrified? Still wondering whether the sign is true? Never seen how they checked up? Never appreciated their testimony? They even left their flock that night. Shepherds don't often do that. They left their sheep.

And they went to see that this thing was true. And they found it was. And it made worshippers of them.

The truth transformed the men. And the humblest of the humble joined the angels. In spirit of worship and praise and glory.

You belong to that choir. Are you in this choir this Christmas time? What's in your heart? Oh mighty God gather us in under your baton. And make us dance and make us sing and make us worship.

Give us such a knowledge of the Christ. That we shall know him. Whom to know is life from the dead.

Let us pray. Father we come in the name of your dear son to ask that you will bring us along the way to such a an experience and such a knowledge of yourself as will make worshippers of us. Men and women boys and girls who have lost ourselves in you.

In the praise of your name. In the declaration of your glory. In the expression of your grace.

Because we have found you. In the Christ who has found us. Go with us into this new week we pray.

And help us to see that your glory is undimmed wherever our pathway may lead us. Into places that are lonely and dark and difficult. Or wherever.

God of glory shine round about us. And let your angels assure us of your will and your purpose. May the confirmation to our souls of your presence with us.

In Emmanuel be such as will keep the song in our hearts and in our souls forever. Amen.

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