

Christmas 2011 (Part II)

- ✓ Micah 5:2-5 – But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth... And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace.
- ✓ Luke 2:1-12 – In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

Introduction

When the shepherds saw the glory of the Lord, they were mortally afraid – they were terrified and filled with fear – and rightly so. But the angel said to them, “Fear not”. *Why?* Why should we not fear? Why should *we* not fear? Because as of “*this day*”, this *very* day, the dreadful, unapproachable glory of the Lord has come down to us veiled now in the humble garb of a newborn baby... wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. God has *veiled* and *hidden* Himself in Christ, so that in Christ we might *see* and *recognize* God as our *Savior*. As Luther said: “[The baby in the manger] is that veil in which the Divine Majesty with all His gifts presents Himself [to] us... there is no fear here; there is sheer sweetness [and] joy”.

I. Luke 2:13-14a – And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “*Glory to God in the highest.*”

Has this ever seemed strange to you? After all, the *angels* don’t need any salvation. So why do the *angels* praise and glorify God for the *Savior*... when the Savior came *not for them*, but for *us*? Here is a beautiful reminder that the goal of Christ’s coming as a baby in a manger was not *first* of all our own salvation, but the *display* of God’s *glory*. Even the holy angels, *who needed no Savior*, were still amazement and overwhelmed when they first beheld God’s plan for *our* salvation. When they saw the baby in the manger, they cried out and burst forth in worship and in adoration! “These angels, having been associated with Christ in heaven before his incarnation, knew something about his glory, riches, and majesty... [and now] the very birth of Christ in a

condition of poverty and deprivation must have caused these angels to stand in awe of God's indescribably marvelous love" (Hendriksen). The angels had never seen or imagined such an infinite display of pure *grace*. The angels looked at us and they saw very clearly that none of us were worthy (Rom. 3:23). They saw that all of us like sheep had gone astray and turned to our own ways (Isa. 53:6). They saw that our hearts were deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). They saw that we had declared ourselves enemies of God and were by nature children of wrath (Rom. 5:10; Eph. 2:3). And then they saw the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger – and they knew who He was. And they couldn't possibly fathom or comprehend. All they could do was *worship*. All they could do was worship God for the wonders of His grace in a salvation that was not even for them. "Glory to God in the highest." If the angels worship God for this display of mercy and grace (who need no mercy and grace) – how much more should we – who were by nature children of wrath and enemies of God, hostile in mind and engaged in evil deeds (Col. 1:21)?

II. **Luke 2:14a-b** – *Glory to God in the highest*, and on earth *peace* among men!

✓ Isaiah 48:22 – "There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked."

For the wicked, there is no peace with the world around him. There is no peace of conscience within. And most of all, there is no peace with God.

✓ Isaiah 57:20-21 – The wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."

And yet the angels announced *peace* among *men*! Peace with the one sitting next to you in the pew. Peace of conscience. And most of all peace with God. This is the peace of true fulfillment and wellbeing in the midst of all circumstances. This peace is the fruit of righteousness.

Isaiah 32:17 – And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.

When the angels announced *peace* they were announcing all the fullness and the riches of *salvation* itself. But how can God be at peace with His *enemies*? How can God be at peace with those who are by nature the children of His *wrath*? How can God be at peace with those who are *hostile* in mind and engaged in evil deeds? How can *God* be at peace with *us*, when there is no peace for the *wicked*? What is the meaning of the baby in the manger?

III. **Luke 2:14** – *Glory to God in the highest*, and on earth *peace* among men [lit. of good pleasure/good will]!

What does this mean? Who are these "men of good pleasure/good will"? Are they people who have good and willing hearts? Is the angel proclaiming peace among men who are good-willed? May it never be... for then I would be cut off from all hope. But thank God these angels are not glorying in man and his merits, but rather in God and his grace (cf. Hendriksen; see also Schrenk, TDNT; Nolland, WBC).

So then who are these “men of good pleasure”? Luke was writing in Greek, and his Greek grammar here is very good (as we can see from the fact that some scribes actually tried to correct it for him. – Or should we say “for the angels”?) But the bad grammar was no mistake. Instead, Luke is reproducing in Greek a *Hebrew* figure of speech where “men of good pleasure” actually means something like “sons” or “children” of good pleasure. The angels proclaim peace not among good willed children, but rather among the children of good will. But the children of *whose* good will... the sons of *whose* good pleasure? Not of our own(!), but of **God’s!** The angels are not glorying in man and his merits, but rather in God and his grace. Glory to *God* in the highest, and on earth peace among the children of *His good pleasure!* And so even as the angels announce the good news of *peace* among *men*, their focus remains fixed on *God*, and the glories of *His good pleasure*. As they behold God’s mighty salvation, wrapped now in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger, they burst out in praise of God’s free and sovereign grace. God’s peace does not come to *all* human beings, but *only* to the children of His good pleasure and will. *This* is what amazes the angels and drives them to *worship*... that God’s peace should come to humans who are so completely undeserving that the *only* possible way to explain their salvation is the sovereign good pleasure of *God*. Let it be forever fixed in our minds that *we* are so undeserving that the only possible way to explain our salvation is the sovereign good pleasure of *God*. This is a great mystery. For by grace we have been saved through faith, and that not of ourselves... it is the *gift of God* (cf. Eph. 2:8). See how when the angel’s announced *our* salvation, it was “*God-centered*” from beginning to end? “***Glory to God*** in the highest, and on earth peace *among the children of His good pleasure!*” Our salvation is *from* God, and *through* God, and *to* God from beginning to end – to God be glory forever. Amen. (cf. Rom. 11:36)

The Apostle Paul tells us that this good pleasure of God is from all eternity – “before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 1:3-5). Before there was any earth or stars in the sky, God graciously chose us to be the children of His good pleasure. But how can this be, when we were born into this world dead in sins and by nature the children of His wrath? How could God choose *us* and set His love upon *us* when there was nothing good to see in us – when there was not even a hint in us of any true obedience, or even of faith itself? How could God choose us even before the foundation of the world when all there was to see *in us* was hostility of mind and deadness in sin?

- ✓ Ephesians 1:3-10 – Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us ***in Christ*** with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, *even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons ***through Jesus Christ***, according to the **good pleasure** of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us ***in the Beloved***.

God chose us ***in Christ*** before the foundation of the world.

- ✓ 2 Timothy 1:9 – [God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us ***in Christ Jesus*** before the ages began.

Perhaps we could think of it this way: God's choice of us is not a "naked" choice, as though He made it in a vacuum. And yet God could not choose us because of *anything* that He foresaw in us. Therefore, even before the foundation of the world, He chose us... *in Christ*. What is the meaning of the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger? When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain...

✓ Luke 9:35 – A voice came out of the cloud, saying, "*This is my Son, **my Chosen One**.*"

And we read in Matthew:

✓ Matthew 12:18 (cf. Isaiah 42:1; Mat. 3:17; 17:5) – Behold, my servant whom I have *chosen*, my beloved with whom my soul is *well pleased*.

God chose the baby Jesus because contrary to every other baby that has ever been born, this baby was well pleasing in God's sight.

✓ Hebrews 10:5-7 – When Christ *came into the world*, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me... Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book."

And so we see that God chose Christ because He was pleasing in His sight. And then, because it was the pure good pleasure of His will, God chose *us... in Christ*. When there was no faith and no obedience to be seen in us... when we could only be seen as dead in our sins, hostile in mind, enemies of God, and children of wrath... when there was *nothing in us...* God chose us *in Christ*. Because before the ages began or the foundations of the world were laid, God had purposed in His pure good pleasure to unite us with Christ. By *grace* are we saved.

✓ Romans 6:23 – For the wages of sin is death, but the *free gift of God* is eternal life *in Christ Jesus our Lord*.

Conclusion

The angels looked at us and they saw very clearly that none of us were worthy. They could see that all of us like sheep had gone astray and turned to our own ways. They saw that our hearts were deceitful and desperately wicked. They saw that we were hostile in mind, dead in sins, and by nature children of wrath. And then they saw the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger – and they knew who He was. And they couldn't possibly fathom or comprehend. All the holy angels could do was worship and praise and adore. And that will never, ever change, for all eternity.

✓ Revelation 5:11-12 – Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

If the angels worship God unceasingly for His mercy and grace (and they need no mercy or grace!) – how much more should *we*, who were dead in our sins and by nature children of wrath?

- ✓ Luke 2:13-14 – 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 among the children of His good pleasure!***”

Today we come and behold the baby in the manger, and we know that it was ***in Him***—*in this* very one lying in the manger—that God chose *us* before the foundation of the world. Chosen *in Christ before* the foundation of the world... and now late in time ***behold*** Him coming!

- ✓ 2 Timothy 1:9-10 – [God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus *before* the ages began, and which *now* has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus.

**“To thee, O [Christ], alone is due all glory and renown;
Aught to ourselves we dare not take, or rob thee of thy crown.
You were yourself our Surety in God’s redemption plan;
In thee his grace was given us, long ere the world began.”**
(Augustus Toplady; quoted in Hendriksen, Ephesians)

Teaching our Children

- ✓ Reflect with your children on the miracle of the baby in the manger from the perspective of the angels (See I.)
 - ✓ Reflect with your children on the *peace* that the angels announced to the shepherds (See last two par’s under II.) Then help them to feel the tension with the first two passages from Isaiah under II.
 - ✓ “***Glory to God in the highest***, and on earth ***peace among the children of His good pleasure!***” (See last nine lines of first paragraph on page 3)
- Q. Even before God made the world, He chose all of us who have believed to be His children (2 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 1:3-5). But how could God choose *us* and set His love upon *us* when there was nothing good to see in us? – When there was not even a hint in us of any true obedience, or even of faith?
- A. See Ephesians 1:3-10 on page three, and then everything until the conclusion.
- ✓ Reflect with your children on how the angels are *still* worshipping God for the baby in the manger. (Read Luke 2:13-14 on page 5 and then read Revelation 5:11-12 on page 4)
 - ✓ Call your children first of all to faith in Jesus Christ (By *grace* are we saved *through* faith).
 - ✓ Then call your children to worship, praise, and adore God for His amazing salvation. (If the angels worship God for His salvation, then how much more should we!) (**See the last three sections of the Conclusion – this page**)