

# What happens when the angels go back to heaven

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now, before we look at this passage in Luke chapter 2, let's have a moment of prayer. God our Father, I pray that you will take my human words in all their weakness, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

I would be surprised if there's anybody here who is not familiar with the feeling of anti-climax that happens on Christmas morning.

The presents are opened, and the room is covered with coloured paper, and everything seems to go flat. But, it's all over in a flash. Been prepared for for many months, and indeed if you're a shopkeeper selling Christmas cards, it's been prepared for from June.

But, it's all over, it's all gone. And I'm sure many ministers feel this on the Sunday following Christmas. All the carols have been sung. Everything has been said.

Indeed, when I started preparing this about a week ago, my original headings were almost identical to those Willie had yesterday morning on Christmas Day. They're different letter, but the headings, the theme was very similar.

[ 1 : 33 ] But, in a sense, that's exactly what you would expect. The message of Christmas is not a different message from the rest of the Gospel. What happens is, the story of Christmas is one of those hourglass stories through which the whole of the history of the world comes.

Everything before leads up to it. Everything after leads from it. And my subject today is, what happens when the angels go back to heaven?

This feeling of anti-climax, the presents are opened, everything seems to have come to an end. Indeed, the angels have gone back to heaven. What is left?

I'm going to suggest that our passage, and indeed the rest of this Gospel, and into the Acts of the Apostles, tell us that everything is left. What have we got left when the angels go back to heaven? We have the Saviour, and we have the message about Him. That is what is left. And that is enough to keep us going in the last days between the comings. Indeed, already, we are going to look particularly at verses 22 to 40.

[ 2 : 41 ] We need to note a little detail in verses 19 and 20. That what is the true response to the wonder of what's happened, the message of the angels, the birth of the Saviour?

Mary, we are told, treasured these things, pondering them in her heart. Mary entered deeply into that experience. For her, this wasn't something superficial, just to be enjoyed while it lasted and then forgotten.

This was something that was going to shape her thinking, shape her heart, shape her living. And then in verse 20, the shepherds return, glorifying and praising God. The shepherds want to tell people about what has happened.

So this Sunday after Christmas, that is the message to us. The message, are we pondering that message, and are we praising and glorifying God? Has it touched our hearts?

Has it touched our lips? Has it touched our lives? Not just has it touched our pockets and touched our stomachs and so on, but has it touched us deeply?

[ 3 : 46 ] And as we look beyond this, into verses 22 to 40, two people set the scene for what is to follow. Anna and Simeon, by their words, by their actions, show us the true meaning of this event.

Not just for their time, but for all time. In verse 22, we are six weeks from Christmas Day.

If you like, we are well into February. Always winter and never Christmas, as Narnia says. The kind of gloom that descends in February. Now I know, of course, and don't please somebody come and tell me that Christmas Day wasn't really December the 25th.

I know that as well as you do. But I'm talking about our own experience. Because six weeks, forty days after birth, the firstborn had to be presented to the Lord.

So Moses says in the book of Leviticus chapter 12. It also echoes an earlier story in the Bible, which most of this, indeed most of Luke 1 and 2, do echo the story of Samuel and his presentation in the temple.

[ 5 : 01 ] Luke is writing history. And Luke is writing reliable history. As you can see in chapter 1, verses 1 to 4. He says he has listened to eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.

He hasn't listened to legends. He's not writing legend. And the little details there, for example, that they offered a pair of turtle doves and so on. Showing they were not a wealthy family.

Wealthy families would be offering lambs. But Leviticus says if you're not wealthy, the Lord will still accept what you offer. So the angels have gone back to heaven.

But the child remains. And he comes to the remnant who are waiting for him. So with that in mind, three elements in the story. First of all, we have praise that the waiting time is over.

It has been a long, long wait. Since that promise was given in the Garden of Eden, the descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. We have no idea how long that wait was.

[ 6 : 04 ] Probably Eve imagined it was going to happen yesterday. Because when we hear the promises of God, we always want them to be fulfilled immediately in our lifetime. Notice what Simeon says, verse 30.

My eyes have seen your salvation. Now how did this man look at this baby and recognize this was different?

This was more than just a baby. Notice verse 26. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Now, back in chapter 1, it is the Holy Spirit who came upon Mary, who overshadowed her, who produced that life in her that became Christ the Lord.

Here the Holy Spirit is working again in the way that he continues to work, revealing to people that this baby, this man, Jesus Christ, is the Lord.

[ 7 : 03 ] You can see how the Spirit is working right from the beginning, showing this. And we are told that he was waiting for the consolation of Israel, verse 25. Echoes of Isaiah 40, these great chapters, promising comfort, consolation, the coming of the Messiah.

And so he breaks into one of the great hymns, the Nunc Dimittis. Commentators love these Latin titles, I suppose, because it makes you imagine they know Latin.

They probably don't. But anyway, this great hymn, which is the climax of Simeon's earthly life and service. And what is Simeon praising for?

He's praising because of the fulfilment. The pages of the Old Testament simply rustle with expectation. History, prophecy, story, sacrifice.

Everything in the Old Testament is saying, wait, he is coming. It's going to be a long wait. It's going to be a difficult wait. He's going to come. This is he whom seers of old time, as we sang, chanted off with one accord, whom the voices of the prophets promised in their faithful word.

[ 8 : 16 ] See, that's why Christmas is so dull to many people. Because it's totally disengaged from what comes before and what comes after. You see, if you regard Christmas, if you regard God as a Christmas visitor, it's going to be like great Aunt Matilda coming to see you at Christmas.

Something you endure rather than enjoy. And that is why Christmas is so divorced to many people from what it means, from what happened before.

See, what Simeon is doing, what John the Baptist is publicly to do some years later, which we read about in chapter 3. Simeon is saying, look, he is here.

John the Baptist, remember, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And here Simeon is rejoicing. The waiting time is over. It's been a long, hard, difficult, wearing time, but it's over.

And he also praises, because it is good news, verse 32, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel. This is to be the great subject of Luke's second book, is it not?

[ 9 : 27 ] Revelation to the Gentiles, revelation to the nations. This message, the Jewish Messiah, is not just for the Jews. He is the glory of his people Israel.

And even that phrase, if you unpack that phrase, the whole of the Old Testament flows throughout the glory of God, the visible presence of God, which hovered above the Ark of the Covenant.

This is now here in human form. The appearing of God himself to Israel, but not just the Jewish God. This is the God of the whole earth.

So the first element, then, is praise, because the time of waiting is over. Now, of course, we are still in the time of waiting in one sense, because we are waiting the coming again.

As I said earlier in this Christmas season, Advent in the early church was not primarily preparing for Christmas, but primarily thinking about the last things, heaven, hell, death, and judgment, and the coming again, when Archbishop Cranmer, in his great prayer for Christmas, spoke about our Saviour visitors in great humility.

[10:42] He linked that with, on the when he shall come again on the last day, in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead. So as we look back with rejoicing, we also look forward, and we praise, because we are still in the time of fulfillment.

But there is a second element, not just praise that the time of waiting is over, because Simeon's message is a bitter message, as well as a sweet message.

Look at verse 34. Simeon blessed the parents and said to Mary his mother, Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also, so that thoughts from many hearts will be revealed.

So there is not just praise that the waiting time is over, there is a warning that there are hardships, there is danger ahead.

You see, the shadow of the cross already falls over the cradle. Some of you may have seen a remarkable painting of the manger, and Mary holding the child, and the shadow of the cross falls over the cradle.

[12:04] That's absolutely true to what Simeon is saying here. And that's an important theme in Luke. In chapter 9, verse 51, Luke is going to say, from this time, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, right here from when he's in the cradle.

And this prevents us sentimentalizing the story. I think that's so important. The piercing of Mary's heart, because we cannot divorce Christmas from the cross.

That's another reason why many people find Christmas just something that comes and goes. They want to divorce it from the past, from what happened before it. And they want to divorce it from what happened afterwards, the cross and the coming.

And there are echoes here of Isaiah once again, the stone, a sword that will pierce, a sign that will be opposed. And in Isaiah, that is the stone, the stumbling stone over which many will fall.

But above all, we're going back to the beginning once again, because in the beginning, as anticipated the end, the descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent.

[13:17] Now, all that was known at that stage was that one day, a champion, a serpent crusher, would come. No idea who he was, when he would come, where he would come from.

And yet, that little statement in Genesis 3.15, I often say to the Cornhill students, where is the first mention of the second coming? In the Bible. And it's there, of course.

Not just the second coming, but the two comings. Which, of course, in biblical thought, are really part of one coming. We are living in the last days, the time between these comings.

As we saw a few weeks ago, on Sunday evening, in Revelation 12, the great cosmic drama, where the child was born, and the dragon tried to devour him, and then he snatched up to God, and to his throne.

This points to the time, Simeon is looking to the time, when he would meet the serpent dragon, and deliver him a deadly blow, but himself be crushed and bruised.

[14:17] And it's John who tells us of Mary, standing at the cross, weeping, as this prophecy comes true. And also, this child is going to divide humanity.

This is another warning. Verse, once again, the fall and the rising of many in Israel, the thoughts from many hearts, will be revealed. See, all will rise or fall, depending on their attitude to that child, and who he is.

How humans respond to God, in other words, will become clear, in how they respond to Jesus. Let's say, it's easy enough to be sentimental, baby Jesus, of course, is very popular, because baby Jesus, belongs in the nursery, along with Santa Claus.

No threat to anybody, no problem, no difficulty. But this Jesus, is going to make demands. This Jesus, is going to call, to the way of the cross.

Jesus himself, is to die on the cross, and he's to say, your discipleship, must be cross-shaped. There is no Christ, there is no gospel, without the cross.

[ 15 : 26 ] There's also no Christian, without the cross, because this is the way, that people, are going to have to follow, this child. So, as we rejoice, as we praise, that the time of waiting, is over, as we praise, that the promises, are fulfilled, fulfilled, we also have this, solemn warning, that the cross, is part of the story.

If the cross, does not happen, then the rejoicing, will simply evaporate. If the cross, does not take place, then the, then it will all, indeed be froth, and bubble.

It will indeed be like, all the presents opened, and the colored paper, lying around, and the tinsel, and the turkey eaten, and the, everything, everything becoming bare, and dry, and dull.

So you see, there are two elements, in Simeon's, what Simeon has to say. There is joy, because of birth, and there is anguish, because of the cross.

Some of you will know the poem, by T.S. Eliot, The Journey of the Magi, which, which very realistically, and very powerfully, tells that story. And one of the Magi says, I had seen birth, and death, but thought, that they were different.

[ 16 : 41 ] Simeon sees birth, and he sees death, and he says, this child, is going to reveal the thoughts, going to reveal, what's in people's hearts. But that, that will leave, the story, unfinished.

Praise, that the time of waiting, is over. Secondly, warning, will not be easy. Let's come to Anna now, and watch, and her, her part in this.

verses 36 to 38, which I'm calling, reassurance, that all, will be well. Now this is the importance, of the testimony of Anna.

Anna isn't just introduced, as a, irrelevant character, to say exactly the same, that Simeon is saying, and some of the commentators, pretend. Rather, she is introduced, to, at exactly the right point, as we'll see in a moment, to bring this, great story, to completion, at this point.

Verse 36, there was a prophetess, Anna, same name as Hannah, in Hebrew, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. Once again, notice the little details there. This is not fantasy, this is not some, mythical figure.

[ 17 : 55 ] This is a real woman, who has a real, a real parentage, and so on. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband, seven years, from when she was a virgin, then a widow, until she was 84, most of her life, she had been a widow, rather like the late, Queen Mother, who lived for almost, 50 years, after the death of her husband, King George VI.

She had lived most of her life, as a widow, but she had not, wasted that life. Notice verse 36, 37, sorry, she did not depart, from the temple, worshipping with fasting, and prayer, night and day. Remember at this point, the temple, is still, is still the place, where God reveals himself, until Jesus, is to turn his back, on the temple, you read about this, in Luke 22, this is still the place, where God reveals himself, this is the fulfilling, of the prophecy, that the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come, to his temple, as Malachi had said, for 400 years, before.

He lives a life, totally focused, on serving God, not on self-pity, but on serving God, and it's no anti-climax, now notice, first of all, she praises, she begins, to give thanks, to God, read Luke 1 and 2, again, and see the sheer, volume of praise, the whole universe, is bursting, into song, humble people, on earth, angels, in heaven, the whole, choir of nature, is bursting, into praise, this is he, he's arrived, it's absolutely, wonderful, we need to praise, praise God, like some of the great Psalms, everything that has breath, praise the Lord.

But there's also, another element, in Anna's testimony, and that is proclamation. She began, to give thanks to God, and to speak of him, to all who were waiting, for the redemption, of Jerusalem.

[ 19 : 55 ] You see the point, of putting that here, it's not just, the repetition, of what Simeon, has said. It's not an irrelevant, little detail. We've already, faced, and had to face, the cross, the sword, piercing through our soul.

We know, that's going to happen. We know, the story, of the consolation, of Israel, the redemption, of the world, is not going to happen, without the cross. But now, Anna, is reminding us, that while the cradle, is not the end, the cross, is not the end either.

The end, is in fact, redemption. This great, word, this decisive, act of salvation. This word, that takes us back, once again, to the great, Exodus story.

The story, of redemption, salvation, from Egypt, and liberty, in the promised land, back to Isaiah. It sets the mood, for the whole gospel, this.

At the end, of this gospel, Joseph of Arimathea, is waiting, for the kingdom, of God. And on the Emmaus road, the two, dejected disciples, we trusted, that he would, redeem Israel.

[ 21 : 06 ] So you see, the final word, from this little episode, to Joseph, and to Mary, and to us, is this. That the kingdom, will come. That Satan, will be defeated.

This is reassurance. Because, if we, if we simply, look at the cross, and don't go beyond it, to the resurrection, to the triumph, and to the coming, then we also have, a truncated gospel.

Gospel is not, simply that Christ died, but that Christ rose again, on the third day, and Christ, Christ died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

That's the gospel story. And just a quick word, about verses 39 to 40, which I want to read as well. You see, ordinary life, continues.

They went back, to their own town, of Nazareth, and Luke gives us, one more glimpse, in verses 41 to 52, and I wonder, is the temptation, to talk about these verses, because they're, a tremendous subject, in themselves, gives us, one further glimpse, of the boyhood, of Jesus.

[ 22 : 19 ] The point is, the angels, have gone back, to heaven, but the message, of the angel, remains. The message, which is embodied, in the saviour, himself.

And thus, Mary and Joseph, can go back home, and live their, ordinary lives, in faith, and in hope. And that's the message, to us as well, isn't it?

When the angels, have gone back, to heaven, when Christmas day, is over, when the celebrations, are passed, for another year, we return, and we, what do we do?

Verse 39, we obey, perform everything, according to the word, of the Lord, we obey, and the child, grew, and the favour of God, was upon him, obeying the message, and growing, in that obedience.

There's one more word, about the angels. The angels, came at the very beginning, of Jesus' earthly life, and announced, and announced, the message, to you as born, this day, in the city of David, a saviour, who is Christ, the Lord.

[ 23 : 25 ] At the very end, of his earthly story, and this indeed, is particularly told, in the second part, of Luke's account, in Acts, what did the angels say?

This Jesus, whom you saw, taken up, into heaven, shall come again, in the same way, as you saw him go. So you see, how the message, hangs together.

He has come. The message, is true. He has gone, but he's not gone, permanently. He will come again. So, what is left, when the angels, go back to heaven?

We have the saviour, and we have the gospel. And that is enough, for us, until he comes, again. Amen. Let's pray.

And I want to use, that great prayer, of Archbishop Cranmer's. Almighty God, give us grace, to cast off, the works of darkness, and to put on, the armour of light, here, in the time, of this mortal life, when our saviour, came to visit us, in great humility.

[ 24 : 34 ] So that on the last day, when he shall come again, in his glorious majesty, to judge the living, and the dead, we may be made like him, in his eternal kingdom, where he lives, and reigns with you, and with the Holy Spirit, one God, now, and forever.

Amen.