

# Good News of Great Joy

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[ 0 : 00 ] God came down, says the carol, to save us. But why was that? Why did we need saving? Well, our first reading this morning begins to tell the story of why that was so.

And Stephen Porter is going to read to us from Genesis chapter 3. If you want to follow, you'll find it on page 2 of our church Bibles. Genesis 3, verse 1.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, Did God actually say, You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?

And the woman said to the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden. But God said, You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.

But the serpent said to the woman, You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

[ 1 : 17 ] Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves loincloths. Now Emily Lobb is going to continue reading for us in Genesis chapter 3.

Genesis 3, verse 8. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, Where are you? And he said, I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.

He said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate.

Then the Lord God said to the woman, What is this that you have done? The woman said, The serpent deceived me, and I ate. The Lord God said to the serpent, Because you have done this, curse to you above all livestock, and above all beasts of the field.

[ 2 : 32 ] On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat, all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.

He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. To the woman, he said, I will surely multiply your pain and childbearing. In pain you shall bring forth children.

Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you. And to Adam, he said, Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it.

Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground. For out of it you were taken, for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

[ 3 : 40 ] Well, we're going to read again now, this time in the New Testament, in Luke chapter 2. And Joanna is going to read for us the first part of that story that tells us about how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.

It's page 857 in our church Bibles. Luke chapter 2 at verse 1. And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree 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.

We'll pick up reading again in Luke's Gospel, chapter 2, page 5-7, and reading on from verse 8.

[ 5 : 08 ] 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 clothes, and lying in a manger.

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 those with whom he is pleased.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which has happened, that the Lord has made known to us.

[ 6 : 16 ] And they went, with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. When they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Amen. May God bless to us all these readings from his word. Let's together bow our heads for a moment of prayer. Our gracious God, it is your message from heaven that brings good news of great joy.

And we pray that you will give us hearts to welcome and receive this news today and minds to understand it. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Well, my title for today is Good News of a Great Joy. And I want to speak very simply about Jesus Christ and why he came into the world 2,000 years ago.

[ 7 : 42 ] You might like to turn with me to Luke's Gospel, Chapter 2, which you'll find on page 857. These are very familiar words and I hardly need read them out. Luke, Chapter 2, page 857.

Now, in Verse 8 of our chapter, we read that there was a group of shepherds. They were out of doors in the fields near Bethlehem looking after their flock by night.

And these shepherds were suddenly visited by a dazzling, splendid angel. And not surprisingly, they were filled with fear. There are quite a number of times in the Bible when the Lord, or perhaps the angel of the Lord, appears to people and their reaction normally is to be afraid.

Well, that's not surprising. And that's what happens here. The angel appears, they are frightened, but the angel says to them, do not be afraid, fear not.

Why should he say that? Well, he gives the reason. For I bring you good news of a great joy. And this good news brought by the angel is without question the best news which has ever been brought to the dilapidated old world that we live in.

[ 9 : 03 ] And the joy produced by this particular piece of news is a foretaste of the joy of heaven. Now, there are three points, simple points, that I'd like to make from this passage.

And the first is that the angel brings good news, not good advice. People who aren't too familiar with the Bible and perhaps don't know much about the God of the Bible will always naturally think that the Bible is a book of good advice.

You just imagine that you're having a discussion with your friend who is not a Christian. And you say to your friend, here's my Bible, Tom. What kind of a book do you think this Bible is?

Well, says Tom, I think it's a book of good rules and good advice. The kind of book that does for life what the highway code does for drivers. This is a book of rules, isn't it?

I mean, you know the sort of thing. Love God with all your heart. Love your mother and father. Have a cold bath every Sunday. Don't kill. Don't steal. Don't commit adultery. Don't tell lies.

[10:06] Am I right? That sort of thing, isn't it? Yes, Tom, you're absolutely right. It does teach us rules for good living. Have you kept those rules, Tom? Well, not exactly, no.

Do you want to keep those rules, Tom? Not really, if I'm honest. Do you think, Tom, that other people might wish to keep them? No. I think most people will try to get around them.

So what you're saying to me, Tom, is that the Bible is a book of good rules that nobody wants to keep and good advice that nobody wants to take. Yes, that's about right.

So where does that leave the human race, Tom, as far as God is concerned? Well, I suppose in a kind of cosmic doghouse. And what will God do to us when he sees that we have not taken his good advice or kept his good rules?

Will he welcome us to the party at the end or shut the door in our face? Well, I guess he might have to keep us out. Well, let's leave our friend Tom at that point.

[11:09] Tom is beginning to see that if there are rules from God and we have not kept the rules, we shouldn't be surprised if God, at the end, shuts us out of his life.

If the Bible were just rules, it would be utterly depressing in the end because we'd realize that we could never keep them properly. We could never come up to God's standard.

We'd go through life miserable because the bar would always be set too high. Just imagine if this angel had said to the shepherds, don't be downcast, boys.

I'm bringing you a great new fresh batch of rules. Would they have been delighted at the idea of a whole lot more rules? They'd have been wretched. But thank God that is not what the angel said. Instead, he said, fear not, for behold, I bring you good news. Now let me put it in a nutshell like this. Good advice and good rules are about what we have to do, whereas good news is about something that somebody else has already done.

[12:18] And the good news that the angel brought to the shepherds was the news that God had already done something which would transform the lives and the destiny of countless people.

Now, friends, you and I know what it is to hear bad news. We're constantly saturated, aren't we, day after day with bad news. You've only got to switch the radio on for five minutes, haven't you, to be thoroughly depressed.

Economic downturn, eurozone going into meltdown, stock market down again by 3%, global warming, polar bears facing extinction, winds of 165 miles per hour on the top of Cairngorm. You were happy not to be up there on that day, weren't you? Mrs. Merkel and Mr. Sarkozy and Mr. Cameron having yet another row, more misery in Afghanistan, corruption in India, vote rigging in Moscow, earthquakes, floods, famines.

We're so used to our brains being assaulted by all the bad news from within the world that we can find it hard to believe that there is good news from beyond the world.

[13:22] But there is, and the good news of Luke's gospel, chapter 2, verse 10, is far greater, far more significant than all the world's bad news from the whole history of all the world's nations put together.

The good news brought by the angel on that night in Bethlehem is the most important news that the world has ever received, and this news will stand for eternity when all the pain and sorrow of this world has been long forgotten.

The message of Christmas is good news to the human race about something that God has done and about someone that God has sent.

So there's the first thing. It is good news, not good advice. Now, secondly, this angel tells the shepherds that this good news is not just for them, not just for a small group of people, it is for all the people.

Good news, says the angel, of a great joy that will be for all the people. Now, there's great comfort in this. We're meant to understand that this good news can be received and held fast by people of all races, all nations, all colors.

[14:38] One of the problems that Jesus had with his contemporaries who were Jews in Jerusalem in the first century was that they thought of the Old Testament as a Jewish book, but they were misreading it.

At least, they were misreading it in part. They had begun to believe that the special relationship that Israel had with God meant that the Gentiles were beyond the reach of God's kindness and salvation.

But the Old Testament, right from the beginning, had always taught that the Jews were chosen by God so as to be the channel of God's saving love to the Gentiles.

You see, the Old Testament does not begin with Abraham, the father of the Jewish race. It begins with Adam, the father of the human race. God has made every human being in his own image. He has always been compassionately interested in every last man and woman and boy and girl. And ever since the good news about Jesus began to be preached, the people of Jesus have been spreading, taking root all over the world.

[ 15 : 47 ] There are nearly, I think, 300 countries in the world. And I'm not aware of a single country in the world where there is not a church of Jesus Christ, except possibly Antarctica.

But there are about a million penguins to every person down there, so it's hardly surprising. Now here in this church, I mean, just look around at the faces here. It's a joy to us and such an enrichment to our fellowship in this Scottish church, in this very Scottish city, to have fellow Christians here from many other countries around the world.

From, for example, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, China, Japan, Iran, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Korea. I'm sure I've left one or two out. Oh, even such faraway places as England, Ireland, and Wales. And it's not only people of all races who can take this good news to heart, it's people of all types, people who have had all manner of experience of life.

Now, it's important for us to see that, because there can be people who think, I'm not the right type of person to become a Christian. So one person might think, I'm just too old, I'm too set in my ways, could there really be a new start in life for a person of my age?

[ 17 : 11 ] Or another person might think, I have been such a scoundrel, I've spent my life as a cheat and a twister, surely I'm too bad to be associated with Jesus Christ.

Somebody else might say, I'm too, I'm too bowed down with depression and anxiety, I'm too miserable, is it possible that Jesus could help somebody like me? Well, let me tell you something very encouraging.

In the church of Jesus Christ, there are huge numbers of people who have been gangsters, alcoholics, drug addicts, murderers, prostitutes and swindlers.

And lots of other people equally anti-God on the inside, even if on the outside they've been more respectable and have had clean shoes and side partings and PhDs.

This good news is for everybody without exception. That's why the angel says here in verse 10 that it's for all the people. The only person in this building today who will find no joy in the good news is the person who is refusing to believe it.

[ 18 : 18 ] The only barrier is hardness of heart. Well, we've seen so far that this is good news of a great joy and it's announced to all the people.

But we need to read on now into verse 11 to see exactly what this good news is all about. So here it is in the words of the angel. Verse 11. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Now the good news is this and this is my third point that there is a Savior. And I want us to linger on that wonderful word and try to draw out its meaning.

God has sent into the world God has made available to all the people of the world a Savior. Now a Savior is someone whose work is to rescue those who are lost.

And the fact that God has sent a Savior into the world shows just how valuable human beings are to him. Now think of this in a very homely way.

[ 19 : 25 ] If you had a little puppy and your puppy strayed out of the house on a dark and stormy winter's night you would go and search everywhere for that little puppy until you found it.

Wind and rain would not keep you indoors. You'd put on your Scottish waterproofs. You'd take your torch. You'd spend hours all night if necessary searching the roads and lanes and fields for your puppy.

Why? Because you value it so much. And if you lost a child you would never stop searching for that child.

There have been parents who have spent years who have traveled all around the world looking for their lost children. Parents who have never given up. Why should they behave?

Why should the parents behave like that? Because these parents have been made in the image of God who values his lost children so much that he was prepared to send a rescuer to search them out.

[ 20 : 27 ] A rescuer who in the end could only rescue them by dying for them. How much God values each of us. Now you may be sitting there thinking but surely God doesn't value me.

my life amounts to so little. What contribution have I made to society? I've been more of a liability than an asset. Now friend don't think that way.

If you think like that you're wrong. It is perfectly true that you may not look very impressive in the eyes of the world or in the eyes of Glasgow but you're mightily precious to God.

And the reason you can know that for certain is that he sent a savior to rescue you and to find you. Let me ask why are you here this morning? What power has brought you here to this church to listen to this good news?

Surely it's the loving hand of God which brought you here because you need to hear this message of the gospel that there is a savior for you because you are so much valued.

[ 21 : 33 ] But God sent a savior not only because we are valued but because we are lost without him. Lost.

Later in Luke's gospel when Jesus was a grown man he said about himself the son of man has come to seek and to save the lost. And let me say this to the Christians here as well as to those who may not be Christians.

Have we forgotten friends that all of us started out as lost souls? When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden they took the whole human race with them.

None of us was born in paradise if I can put it like that. We were all born in the wilderness. And all of us who are Christians now were lost at some time in the past perhaps for many years until we reached a point in life where our eyes were opened and we realized that there was a savior who had come to rescue us.

I can tell you I was utterly lost as a young boy. I went to church regularly. I read the Bible at school. I was taught the Bible. I went to services at the school chapel where we sang hymns and psalms and listened to the readings from the authorized version.

[ 22 : 49 ] But I thought that being a Christian meant being a good boy. I thought it was all about me that if I was polite to grown-ups if I obeyed the teachers at school if I washed my hands and combed my hair and didn't hit my sister too often and said thank you to my grandparents when they slipped a fiver into my pocket.

If I did all these things I'd be okay with God. I'd be a good boy. I'd be allowed into heaven. But a few years passed and I realized that it was not about me and trying to behave decently which was actually quite beyond what I could do anyway.

I came to see that it was all about Jesus. That he knowing I was lost had come looking for me so that he could find me and save me. What then does it mean to be lost to pick up that Bible word? What do we need to be saved from? We mustn't underestimate what a terrible thing it is to be lost. Being lost is not a matter of losing our way in life.

A person is not lost for example because he finds it difficult to make friendships or difficult to hold down a job or because he's indecisive or fearful or feels emotionally unstable.

[ 24 : 10 ] Being lost is nothing to do with our psychological condition. In the Bible being lost means being far from God. It means being estranged from him cut off from him and worse than that it means being under his anger and his condemnation.

As the Apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians, you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. You were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

Every last one of us was born a child of wrath. No one of us was born with an overwhelming desire to love the Lord or to serve him. We had a deep and natural desire to serve ourselves and to love ourselves but we didn't love God.

We had no more love for him than we had for the planet Pluto. He was far away from us out of our sight. In Paul's phrase, we were dead towards him.

And those who have taken the crown off his head and placed it on our own heads can only expect to come under his anger and judgment.

[ 25 : 25 ] That's what it means to be lost. It is to be rightly condemned by God because of our natural hardness of heart towards him. He made us and he loves us and yet we have disregarded him.

By nature all of us have been children of wrath. So what we need saving from is not our psychological difficulties or our personal immaturities.

We need to be saved from the judgment of God. and it is from that judgment that Jesus came to save us. That's why I say we mustn't underestimate what a terrible thing it is to be lost. To be lost from him in Bible terms is to be lost forever in hell from which there is no return. But God has loved each one of us so deeply that he sent a savior to rescue us from eternal ruin and to bring us safe to eternal life.

If you have never yet given yourself up to your rescuer, will you do it now while there is still time? Let me illustrate it like this.

[ 26 : 35 ] In April 1912, the Titanic was steaming westwards across the Atlantic Ocean, the unsinkable Titanic as it was called, and it was a calm and still night.

And as the ship steamed towards New York, it was hit by an iceberg or hit an iceberg, and after just a few hours, it went down. Now, if the weather had been rough on that night, I guess nobody would have been rescued.

But in the calm weather, several hundred people managed to get off the stricken liner into life rafts and life boats, and there they sat on the ocean until morning.

And when morning came, the sea was still calm, a large ship called the Carpathia came to the rescue and picked up the survivors. Now, if you had been in one of those life boats, would you have shouted up to the captain of the Carpathia, go away, I don't need you.

I can get to New York under my own steam, thank you. Of course you would not. You would have gladly allowed him and his crew to haul you up to safety. Would any human being dare say to Jesus Christ, go away, I don't need you, I can get to heaven under my own steam.

[ 27 : 53 ] People have treated him like that, and they have been lost. Why should any person treat the Lord Jesus like that?

There's only one reason, and that is human pride. It's pride that refuses to admit that we need to be rescued. There are some people who obstinately hold on to their pride, even if it costs them their eternal happiness and peace.

But I would call that a bad bargain. Don't hold God at arm's length. He doesn't want any person to be shut out of his kingdom. Let's all of us listen again to the voice of the angel.

I bring you good news of a great joy. This good news is that God has acted. God has done something decisive and stupendous. And this good news, says the angel, is for all the people.

No one is excluded except for those who exclude themselves. And the good news is this, that at Bethlehem a Savior has been born.

[ 28 : 59 ] The Savior has come. We cannot save ourselves, but God has provided us with his own son whose death on the cross has dealt with the penalty of our sin and rebellion.

He is the Savior of all those who turn to him and trust him. If we have never yet given ourselves up to the rescuer before, let's do it today.

This is the message of Christmas. Good news of a great joy for all the people. The good news is of a Savior. Savior. And if we don't come to the one Savior whom God has provided, there is no one else to whom we can turn.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God in heaven, we thank you so much for the love, your wonderful love that lies behind the sending of Jesus.

We thank you so much that it was never your desire that we should have to spend eternity far away from you. We thank you for this wonderful rescuer, your son, the son of your own heart whom you love, whom you sent because you have loved us so much.

[ 30 : 20 ] And we pray therefore that you will open the hearts of all of us to receive him as our Savior, to submit to him gladly and to make him the captain and master of our life from here on.

And we ask it in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.