

A King and His Army Proclaim 'Peace'!

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[0 : 00] But perhaps you'd turn with me now to your Bibles. If you don't have a Bible with you, there are some outside that we have for visitors and friends, so do pop out and grab one if you like.

There's plenty there. We're going to be reading this morning in Luke's Gospel, Chapter 2. Josh Johnson has been leading us through these first couple of chapters of Luke, and we come today to a very familiar reading.

But sometimes readings are very familiar. We think we know it. It's good to listen carefully, and we're going to study it carefully together this morning. So I'm going to read from Luke, Chapter 2, down to verse 21.

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.

[1 : 17] And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, 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 a field, keeping watch over their flocks 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 a 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 the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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.

[2 : 35] And the angels went away from them into heaven. Then the shepherds said to one another, let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. And 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. And Mary treasured up 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. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. We'll do open your Bibles once again to Luke chapter 2.

[3 : 48] In the summer of 1999, right here in the UK, there was a big event that was to happen.

Buzz and excitement abounded. This was an event that hadn't happened in over 70 years and wouldn't happen again for nearly 100 years. No, it wasn't St. Mirren winning a football match. It was a total eclipse. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see it. I'd heard all about it, but when it came to the day, I ended up missing it completely, stuck inside with my eyes glued to the TV screen.

A significant event missed out on completely. I'd been swept along amongst all the hype. I'd heard all about what it would look like, briefed on what it would be, when it would be.

But when it came to it, time slipped away and the event passed me by. Well, Luke doesn't want that to happen to any of us regarding the message and meaning of Christmas.

[4 : 55] The message and the meaning of the incarnation. Luke puts before us the birth of Jesus Christ and it's not accompanied by anything like what we would expect for such a momentous occasion.

It's a picture of obscurity. But Luke makes clear that it is a message of the utmost significance, not one to be missed out on. We've been seeing over the last couple of weeks that Luke in his gospel is primarily interested in showing us how Jesus is the fulfillment of all that has been promised from the very beginning.

And here in this passage, as we return to Mary and Joseph, Luke wants to give certainty to us that this was no ordinary birth, no ordinary event. He wants to make clear that history has aligned or rather history has been lined up to bring to birth a king, Jesus.

And Jesus is no ordinary king. And as we've seen in the last couple of weeks, Luke describes for us real events. He's a historian. And then afterwards shows us a song that brings explanation to the significance of these events.

And the same is true today. We have the event, Jesus' birth, and then the explanation, the appearance of the angel and the angel's song. And so firstly, Luke wants us to be certain, verses one to seven, of the heritage and humiliation of the Savior.

[6 : 23] The heritage and humiliation of the Savior. God's providence is always at work to establish and build his kingdom under the reign of Jesus. Now we see in these verses, Jesus' family line brought into sharp focus, but we also see Jesus' future life in shadow form.

And so notice, firstly in verses one to five, that these are all about Jesus' heritage. These verses parallel the birth of John at the end of chapter one. In both accounts, we come across the birth, the naming, and the circumcision of the two babies that had been promised by the angel Gabriel.

We see in verse 21, Jesus is named and circumcised. But the similarities end there. Remember, there was bemusement about what Zechariah and Elizabeth proposed to name their child.

They were breaking with custom, not going with the family name. John was the forerunner. He was but a voice calling in the wilderness. And so his family line, his lineage, was not significant.

But Jesus' was. And so Luke spends these five verses making clear this child's lineage. Verse four, the very heart of this event is spelling out for us in light that this miraculous child was to be born in Bethlehem.

[7 : 46] Bethlehem, the city of David. Because Joseph was of the lineage of David. This family line matters a great deal. Jesus, through his mother's marriage to Joseph, would be a child in the line of David.

Luke is showing us that Jesus is fulfilling yet another Old Testament promise, that Christ had to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. That's what had been prophesied by Micah. Micah chapter five, verse two tells us, but you, O Bethlehem, Ephrata, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth from me one who is to be ruler in Israel.

Micah's prophecy, from its uttering, had a foreboding character to it. He had been prophesying about the disintegration of David's dynasty. And then Micah speaks to Bethlehem.

From Bethlehem would come a ruler according to promise. From Bethlehem would come the forever king in David's line who was promised in 2 Samuel 7. But this was foreboding because it signaled that before the arrival of the Christ, everything would be stripped away back to the beginning.

It was not out of Jerusalem, the capital of the great kingdom of David and Solomon. No, that was all to go. It would be out of Bethlehem, the place where David was birthed, the place where his line and dynasty had started previously.

[9 : 15] Here was a promised restoration, a recreation of David's line by a true son of David, but with a reset. Back to Bethlehem. Right back to the stump of Jesse.

As one commentator says, there will be no royal starter kit still available in Jerusalem. The divinic dynasty will have been cut off. A foreboding prophecy, but a prophecy of hope nonetheless.

There would be a greater David to come, the Christ. And after the dark days of David's dynasty disintegrating, the Christ would come from Bethlehem, just like his great father David.

And so Luke includes this account of Jesus' birth with the clear purpose of establishing that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, as was always promised. But then notice the details about how this comes

about.

Jesus' birth in Bethlehem chooses God's hand of providence. There's real history here. Luke isn't interested in fantasy. Verse one. Caesar Augustus issued a decree that the whole world should be registered.

[10:24] He calls a census. The first census, whilst Quirinius was governor of Syria. There was a more well-known census by Quirinius around AD 6.

But Luke is wanting to be clear, I'm not talking about that one. This is real history. He's talking about the first census a few years before. But as well as real history, notice what Luke is wanting us to see here.

We'd left Mary and Joseph back in Nazareth, in Galilee, about a hundred miles from Bethlehem. So how could this promised child be the fulfillment of all that was promised?

How could he be born in Bethlehem? Well, not for the first time. God stirs the heart of an emperor for his own purposes. Look again at verse one.

This isn't just historical detail to help us date things. No. We see how God crafts history to his own ends. Here, just like with King Cyrus, as we've been seeing in Ezra, hundreds and hundreds of years earlier, here again, God works out his plan as emperors seek to solidify their own power.

[11:32] Jesus can be born in Bethlehem because a decree was made by an emperor, but also because a decree had been made in eternity. All that God has planned and promised will come to pass.

God's plans aren't hindered by even tyrants and dictators. They're furthered even through tyrants and dictators. So we can take heart.

The ordering of history and politics, the ordering of our own circumstances are not outside of God's control and purpose. He decreed that a decree be made to hold a census so that great David's greater son might be birthed in the city of David according to the promise of God.

God can even use red tape for the furtherance of his kingdom. Now, there's also a sense of irony in this wonderful providence of God. A census was typically called so that an emperor could have a firm handle on taxes in order to fund his army for the maintenance and expansion of the empire. Commentators reckon that the Roman Empire at the time of this census had a population of up to 100 million people and it covered close to 3.5 million square miles. For context, the whole country of Europe today is about 4 million square miles.

[12:54] Augustus was ruler of a vast, vast empire. But his attempts at consolidating his power through this registration were actually the moves of the Lord to establish his own king.

The real story is not in Rome, is it? The real story was in the little town of Bethlehem. Luke shows us a mighty emperor and then moves him very quickly off to the side because actually the arrival of Jesus puts all earthly rulers in their place.

Christmas, the incarnation, is God moving to put all earthly powers in their place. That's why the angels rejoice later in verse 14. Christmas, the incarnation, incarnation, is God moving to raise up and establish a king who will rule forever.

First from heaven in this age and one day to rule over a recreated earth with a rule that will be made visible to all. It is God moving to establish a king whose reign will spread over this whole world, a reign that will be irresistible and a reign that will be wondrously good for all those who belong to the king.

Doesn't this assure us that the working out of God's plan is utterly secure? We've seen already the absolute certainty of God's word.

[14:15] God's word and his promises are unbreakable so that even nature in years can be turned back allowing an aged and barren woman to conceive. We've seen that the ordinary rules of nature cannot contain God's purposes as the virgin Mary conceived.

But now we also see that geography and political powers cannot and will not be an obstacle to God's purposes. Indeed they can even be a vehicle for it.

And so for those who belong to the Lord for those who have reached out with the empty hands of faith to cling on to God's promises we can be equally sure that God's purpose for you and me that the bringing to life of Jesus within us the virgin birth of faith in our hearts and the rule of Jesus over us and for us as individuals these things cannot be foiled.

God's providence is always at work to establish and build his kingdom under the reign of Jesus. However things appear God's purposes for Jesus and through Jesus can and will be worked out.

It can be hard to see that sometimes can't it? In the midst of painful loss in the midst of hard trials in the midst of unrelenting opposition can be hard sometimes to see that but God's purposes through Jesus for this world and his purposes within and among his people are unstoppable.

[15 : 43] we may at times have a fearful dread about world affairs we look around and see the crumbling of great nations we know all about the threat of war and discord well Caesar ruled the world but the real story here was the person of Jesus and that's something that's still true today the real story today is still the person of Jesus and when that's true in our own lives the rulers of this world won't get a look in but Luke isn't just interested in showing us Jesus' heritage and God's guiding hand upon it he also shows us that Jesus' arrival is cloaked in humiliation verses 6 and 7 verse 6 at the time came to give birth in verse 7 Mary gave birth to her son and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn now there's no innkeeper in this story it may not even have been an inn the word can also be guest room that's how it's used later on in Luke's gospel but either way

Luke makes one thing clear here was a king arriving very inauspiciously not in a palace not in Jerusalem nor Rome though instead he's placed in a manger a feeding trough even at his birth the theme the pattern begins that Jesus would not be welcome in this world there was no place for him here begins in a shadowy form the reality that he came to his own and his own did not receive him hanging over this birth is the whole shadow of the savior's suffering pictured in verse 7 is Jesus immense humiliation not only in taking on human flesh condescending to be like us to become one of us but he would know greater humiliation still and it began even at his birth out of sight laid in a manger not welcome in this world foxes have holes birds have nests but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head except a feeding trough

Jesus arrival is all so lowly listen again to Ralph Davis how very incarnate the incarnation is and yet what encouragement is here for if Christ stoops so low to such a common level does this not sanctify all that seems common and ordinary and unimpressive in the lives of his people Jesus feeding trough suffuses all the glamorlessness of our callings with a touch of his humble glory but look also shows us Jesus humiliation even from birth because this is all of a piece with how his rule would come to be I think look means us to see even here an echo of Jesus departure look at verse 7 Mary wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger and listen to Luke's words at the end of his gospel when we come across another

Joseph who asked for the body of Jesus and then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid him in the tomb and then we read that Peter roos and ran to the tomb stripping and looking in and he saw the cloths by themselves and he went to marveling at what had happened Jesus was the king who was born to die the significance of this birth cannot be separated from the significance of his death the cradle and the cross go together but even the shadow of his humiliation the shadow of his rejection and death here is overshadowed by his resurrection he begins life in this world in lowly ways marked from the off by rejection wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger but those cloths will be left in his tomb when he been raised from death Jesus destiny hangs over him from the very beginning and so because of that we see secondly in verses 8 to 21 the hope of the saviour the hope of the saviour

Jesus arrival is the beginning of a conquest that will guarantee peace on earth the glory and beauty of Christmas is the message of peace but not some nostalgia driven quest to do one another good not some sense of festive cheer that somehow will transform how we interact with one another with some sort of warm glue for one such a thing doesn't and will not last but also that is to misunderstand what makes a great declaration of peace from the heavens such good news it is to misconceive our great plight well we have the question then what is the significance of this birth we've had the event a divinely orchestrated one an event that has the shadow of suffering and rejection and resurrection hanging over it and Luke tells us now the significance of this birth then through another visitation from heaven verse eight somewhere near Bethlehem there were shepherds out in the field how fitting that shepherds are involved when David's great son is born verse nine there's another angelic appearance and with it the glory of the Lord shone around now we're meant to picture this notice verse eight it's night time night time in Bethlehem but it's also a long dark night of waiting for the son of righteousness to rise and then suddenly there's a burst of bright shining glory in the sky that lights up the skies for these shepherds and of course they're filled with fear an angel is not some sort of cute and cuddly little cherub they're frightening but listen to the message of the angel verse 10 once again fear not for behold

[22 : 03] 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 saviour a saviour who is christ the lord and so firstly this birth is good news of great joy despite appearances despite the manger the inhospitable environs good news because jesus has been born a saviour a saviour who is christ the lord the significance of jesus arrival is that as christ the lord he is the saviour jesus heritage as a son of david and his humiliation as god becoming man comes to an awesome crescendo in him being the saviour but that begs a question doesn't it what's the predicament what's he going to save people from well the good news is that now finally at last one had come who could finally put this world to right he's going to save people from all that corrupts this world and all that corrupts the heart of man notice this declaration from the angels is accompanied by a song of praise verse 14 glory to god in the highest and on earth peace jesus as saviour and lord means to bring peace he means to deal with all that robs this world and us of real peace and so his battle is against the power penalty and presence of sin and it's against these things that he will act as saviour i don't think it's a shocking thing to say that our world is so very far from knowing peace the bible doesn't hide that the bible isn't interested in being a bit of make-believe a bit of fantasy to try and escape the horrors of this world the bible isn't a crutch to help us manage to get through life with all of its strife the truth is that disharmony comes so naturally and easily to us relationships break down all the time conflicts are never far off whether it be nation against nation or some smaller scale ways this world is littered with bitter disagreements rivalries and ruptures self-interest wreaks destruction all around it's so evident that peace is out of our grasp and as much as we would like to decry it as a problem out there something wrong with the world outside the reality is and this is where the bible is crystal clear the reality is all of the strife all the destruction and darkness that cast the shadow over this world and over our lives is born out of the twisted and sinful heart of man born out of our desire to be like god to be the ones at the steering wheel setting our own course so that we displace god from the throne and take his place that's what our first father adam did all the way back in the garden and we've been doing it ever since it's all born out of our refusal to acknowledge that god is god we're not when we feel to recognize god as lord in our lives it will always lead to disharmony certainly disharmony with the god we're rejecting but also disharmony in this world and among people if we're all honest we can see that this world is not as it should be all we have to do is open our eyes and pay attention and see what's going on all around the world what's going on even in our own country our own neighborhoods and if we're all honest we also know that we are not all that we could and should be and we knew don't we that however much we would want to or try to remedy all that's wrong we're just not able to because the problem is so deeply rooted within us we cannot

help ourselves but that is what jesus has come to do he comes as savior and lord to take his place as lord of our lives and in so doing to rescue us from all that sin deserves from wrath but also to rescue us from further ruin by establishing his rule in our hearts but the truth is that things like peace things like freedom from tyranny are usually only possible at immense cost usually a price paid in blood and there will be blood his blood jesus who was wrapped in cloth and laid in a manger was also wrapped in cloth and laid in a tomb for us the savior and that's what would secure the victory that brings peace now notice this frightening encounter with the angels gets ramped up the angelic messenger is joined verse 13 with the heavenly host praising god now this might sound like a lovely choir of angels who are singing a lovely song but that is to miss the picture the word host means army here is the army of heaven assembled to light up the night sky the world might not be noticing this little baby he might be born into obscurity but the heavens knew exactly what was happening the arrival of jesus was first and foremost glorious good news in heaven this mass army could see the wonder of what god was working out they could see his plans unfolding in the birth of this child the peacemaker and so they fill the skies with a song of glory to god for his grace and his favor for he will bring peace to earth don't miss that the angelic army are declaring peace they are certain that a victory is coming and it won't be achieved by their blades but by this child's blood glory to god on earth peace is their song listen to the book of revelation describe that peace that jesus will bring he will wipe away every tear from their eyes death shall be no more neither shall there be mourning or crying or pain anymore for the former things have passed away that is real peace sin dealt with and so god himself able to be present dwelling with his people able to be the comfort of his people wiping away their tears no more death it's dark spectre gone because sin has been dealt with no more sadness never again will there be mourning or crying or pain good news of great joy indeed but look again at verse 14 it is peace among those with whom he is pleased

christmas isn't a message that benefits you by default the fruit of jesus arrival is not automatic to all people everywhere no there is peace real peace it is offered but it's to those who will greatly gratefully receive it it isn't that some people deserve it more than others no no we've already seen in mary's song that god's mercy is for those who fear him it's not for the proud it's not for those who would set themselves up as deserving or set themselves up as mighty no god delights to exalt those who have a humble estate those who come to him hungry he will fill with good things there is peace for those who come to jesus with empty hands seeing that he is your only hope my only hope jesus comes

as a savior as christ the lord one preacher puts it like this god did not send an economist because our great need is not poverty our deepest need is not poverty nor a philosopher because our trouble is not incoherence he didn't send a psychologist for our problem is not maladjustment not an entertainer for our problem is not boredom nor an administrator for we're not disorganized nor a religious leader because we are not not many of us anyway are religious no he sent a savior who is christ the lord such is the proclamation of christmas now christmas can be full of festive cheer we can throw ourselves in fully into the carols to the christmas trees the christmas dinner we can be caught up in the music of christmas we can appreciate the lights and sense of wonder we can cherish the family gathering but if that's all that it is for us then it's no real cheer these things will quickly evaporate as a new year arrives no christmas is all about the savior we need to get excited about all the trimmings of christmas and miss the message that the angels sang the message that lights up heaven is to miss out on the true wonder of christmas because christmas the incarnation is a message a hope a promise that christ can be born in you that christmas can begin within each of us that faith can be birthed miraculously that jesus himself can be birthed within our lives to grant us peace to restore god to his rightful place on this james phillips says apart from this apart from christ being born in us apart from this there can be no real joy in christmas a man remains desolately wistfully outside the glory he looks in with hungry longing eyes but he does not enter into its reality and so how do we take hold of the real joy of christmas how does this announcement of good news become great joy to us well as before luke wants us to pay attention to the reactions in these events verse 15 the angels return to the heavens and notice the response of the shepherds the shepherds model the responsive faith for us now like the other angelic visitations the shepherds also receive a sign there's something that will confirm to them the vision the message god doesn't leave people fumbling around in the dark to work out if he is who he says he is and will do what he says he does no there's a sign zechariah had his muteness mary had elizabeth's pregnancy and verse 12 the shepherds have a baby wrapped in cloth in a manger you will see something that's far from typical when you go to bethlehem go and find the baby he'll be in a manger and then the shepherds model the responsive faith in three ways firstly they go to jesus verse 15 they receive the message of the angels and say let us go and see this thing that has happened not let's see if it has happened not let's go and sound people out about anything that may have happened no let's go and see the lord has made it known to us so let us go and see jesus verse 17 they go and find exactly what god had said that's the first thing we have to do to take hold of the true joy of christmas come to jesus jesus maybe you're here maybe you're here and you've never done that before you've wanted to keep him at arm's length luke bids us to come to jesus that's the only way that you can have certainty about him the only

way to receive the joy of christmas come and bow down at jesus feet come and acknowledge and admit that he is lord nobody else and that he's the only one who can see and you'll find that he is exactly what he says he is come to him but also secondly come urgently verse 16 the shepherds went with haste there's urgency to this the time to come to jesus is not tomorrow it's today it isn't to be put off let's make sure the sheep are all safely tied up here they head with haste because it's the encounter that brings life peace don't wait who knows what tomorrow might bring come to jesus with haste do not delay and then thirdly coming to him will begin rejoicing coming to jesus verse 20 always leads to glorifying and praising him the shepherds return from their encounter with jesus with a song of gladness in their hearts they return from seeing the good news they return with great joy don't get caught up in the hype of christmas without knowing the heart of christmas don't let the event of great significance pass you by listen to the angels behold i bring you good news of great joy let's pray gracious father by your grace would you cast away all doubts and pride that lurks within our hearts cast away anything that might prevent us from sharing this song of joy with the angels in heaven and grant to us amidst whatever we're presently experiencing grant to us a deep joy in the gospel of christ this christmas season a joy that will be undeterred for we ask it in jesus

name amen