

Gloria in Excelcis Deo! - Joy for the Heavens: The Angels' Song

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[0 : 01] Well, the coming of Jesus was marked with songs of great joy. Somebody once said that when Jesus came into the world, poetry expressed itself and music was reborn.

Let's listen now to the familiar story of the angels and the shepherds and the message that came to them through the song of the angels. That they sang to these shepherds and through them to the whole world.

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 round about them.

And they were filled with fear. 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 to you.

[1 : 04] You will find a 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. Gloria in its chelsea's dew. And on earth peace among those with whom he is well 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 that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe 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. 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.

[2 : 15] Just as it had been told them. Well now the angels, which of course are everywhere in our Christmas cards and decorations, they appear, don't they, as a picture of innocence and harmless sentimentality.

So you might wonder why on earth these shepherds we read about were utterly terrified when angels appeared to them. Sore afraid, as the old version puts it.

Sudden dread filled their troubled minds, says the carol. Well of course the reason is that real angels, as the Bible describes them, are an entirely different thing from the sentimental nonsense that we get in our Christmas decorations.

What these tough country farmers saw that night, says Luke, was a multitude of the heavenly hosts, the heavenly armies.

That's who the heavenly hosts were. A vast army bristling with the weapons of war. It was rather like today. Suddenly the flashlights of helicopters went on and filled the air with visions of special forces bristling with all kinds of modern weapons and shouting at you through a megaphone.

[3 : 31] That was really what happened to them. And you also would be sore afraid, let me tell you. So would I. In fact, the gulf between the popular imagination of angels and the reality illustrates the gulf between what's really just a sentimental fantasy that we tend to paint about Christmas and the reality that the Bible actually tells us about.

We tend to say, don't we, that Christmas is all about peace and goodwill. And we do our best, don't we, to create a feeling of that at Christmas. And we can do it. We can do it for a fleeting moment with the candles or the tree lights and the mistletoe and the wine and choir boys in dresses singing lovely desk ants in cathedrals and so on.

But it's fleeting, isn't it? It's not real. We all remember that story, don't we, about the trenches in World War I and how on Christmas Day, so the story goes, the British and the German troops came out into no man's land and had a game of football playing together.

But the very next day, they were back in the trenches blowing each other to smithereens. And in a sense, that's a bit how family Christmases might be for any family with young children.

By the end of tomorrow, they'll be exhausted, overfed, overtired, fighting each other for the new presents and all kinds of chaos will ensue. But on a more serious note, that actually is the reality about our world, isn't it?

[5 : 09] Real peace, peace between nations, within nations, that is something far, far more elusive than can be provided for with a few wistful feelings and some mince pies.

Real peace is hard to come by. Peace in a fractured marriage can't be restored by a few extravagant presents and a bit of mistletoe, can it?

That's just fantasy, it's sentimentality to think that. And you see, the Bible, when you really read it, is not sentimental at all, not ever. It's full of stark realism.

It tells us about the world as it really is. It never, ever lets us play, let's pretend, and let's hide from the truth. No, the Bible offers a real explanation of the world that actually fits the facts of our experience in life.

The Bible deals with real evidence about life. And it's becoming unfashionable today in many circles to think about evidence, real evidence, as being sidelined.

[6 : 11] We don't need evidence anymore, apparently. We just need experts to tell us what to believe about nearly everything. Whether it's the science, or whether it's medicine, or biology, or climate, or whatever it is.

We need to believe what the experts tell us so we're not on the wrong side of history, we're told. But the Bible is much more concerned that we should be on the right side of reality.

And the reality is that ours is not a world full of the pipes of peace. Ours is a world full of strife, and full of disorder, and full of violence. Our world's not a wistful world full of gladness and laughter all the time.

It's often a world that's filled with great sadness, with real pain. And we sense take down, don't we, that the world should be different. That peace, and joy, and harmony should be the things that reign in our world.

And that's why we dream, that's why we fantasize, because we can imagine something so different from the reality that we experience. And it does exist, at least, in the conception of our minds and our hearts.

[7 : 20] But you see, the evidence all around us tells us we can't pretend that the world is other than it really is. And that's the basic perplexity that lies at the heart of so much human angst.

It's why we ask that question so often. Why? Why? Why is there such violence and war and hatred in the world? Why can't families live in peace?

Why can't marriages not break down? Why does that child have cancer? Why does that young man have a brain tumor? Why? The Bible won't let us play let's pretend.

Let's pretend that everything is lovely and pain free. It tells us the truth. It tells us the world's in a mess. But it also explains why it's in that mess.

And it points us to the only real solution, which is not a fantasy of let's pretend. We're in the mess we're in as human beings because the Bible tells us we are living in a civil war with our maker.

[8 : 33] We've turned our back unilaterally on God. We've shut out his glory from his world with predictably disastrous consequences. As we heard read a little earlier the Apostle Paul puts it like this although they knew God they did not honor him as God but became futile in their thinkings and their futile hearts were darkened.

We've shut God out and so God has turned his benevolent face away from us. Paul says God gave humanity up to dishonorable passions to debased minds.

And as a result of that he says we inhabit a world which is filled with all manner of envy murder strife maliciousness people are boastful he says inventors of evil disobedient to parents foolish faithless heartless ruthless not much sentimental fantasy there is there?

But that is pretty much what you saw in today's news. And what it describes is all the disordered relationships of our world on a personal level on a national level on a global level and it all comes back to the root cause which is a disordered relationship with God our maker who is the sovereign lord of the world.

Human beings the apostle says are responsible for it all we are without excuse he says but God has judicially done it God has given the world up he's given it up to the vanity and to the power of man we wanted to run the world our way and this is the world that we have made for ourselves we've been a thoroughly good job of wrecking the world but here's the problem we have proved totally unable to fix it politicians can't fix it that's for sure the police can't fix it no amount of laws that politicians pass or the police enforce can reverse evil can they they might restrain it a little bit if they're good laws that is but there are bad laws too aren't they and they just add to the evil now only an act of God can actually put this world to rights a divine intervention is needed if ever the primary problem is to be addressed the problem of the wrecked relationship we have with God himself but according to these fearsome angels in the coming of Jesus into our world that is what has begun and what those terrified shepherds that night were going to learn is that in the very birth of Jesus is good news of great joy for all the people of this fractured and broken world it's quite extraordinary really when you think about it that an event which passed almost unnoticed on the whole earth set the whole of heaven ablaze with song but that's what happened so it's worth us looking at the angel song just to see what the joy of these fearsome heavenly soldiers was actually all about first of all it was about real rejoicing in heaven above all they proclaimed a message of glory to God in the highest gloria in excelsis deo as we sometimes sing what they are singing about is God acting to bring himself back into the center of this world forever so that again he will have the preeminence in everything the Christian message you see is first and foremost the message about God it's about God being vindicated in the eyes of the whole world and being seen to be the God of glory that he actually is some people are very mistaken they think

[12 : 38] Christianity is centered on people that it's really a crutch for feeble people who need something to believe in to help them through life and the difficulties of life who sort of need a big Santa Claus in the sky to answer their prayers to bring fulfillment to their lives and so on the real Christmas message is the absolute antithesis of that it's about the true God the only God showing himself to be the true and only Lord of glory in this world in a world that's rejected him and far more importantly even in a world which God himself has distanced himself from because of our rebellion the Christmas message is good news first of all because it's a message about God coming back into the center of his world and not leaving our world's story to end in total disaster it's so ironic really isn't it because in many ways today Christ is almost airbrushed right out of Christmas

I googled Christmas the other day and all the first things that came up were trees and songs and decorations and presents but nothing about Christ now we might complain about that but by the way the angels weren't complaining were they the angels weren't coming and starting a petition to parliament to say please can't we put God back into Christmas no no no they are proclaiming the fact that God himself has acted to put himself right back into the center of this world he has done it even if no one on earth even noticed apart from a few peasants apart from a few shepherds out in Palestine and in doing so he has glorified himself in the highest and all the hosts of heaven can see it and are singing about it because they see what the coming of Christ will really mean for this world there is real rejoicing in heaven in Jesus' birth because through Jesus and through him alone there will at last be real reconciliation on earth there is peace that's what this warrior army of angels are shouting peace among those with whom God is pleased now now that has nothing to do with a seasonal bonhomie over mulled wine and mince pies this is the real peace that follows peace only where God has his rightful place in the world for he is lord over all the people of this world you see for for an estranged people for people who are in revolt against God that peace can only come after something after real reconciliation can't it and we all know how hard real reconciliation is especially in the face of terrible crime terrible injustice can't just airbrush injustice away can't just play let's pretend let's pretend

I wasn't robbed let's pretend you weren't beaten up let's pretend she wasn't assaulted and raped let's pretend I wasn't cheated on in my marriage and so on you can't do that you can't pretend into reconciliation there's a real cost in true reconciliation if it's ever going to happen and you know how costly that is don't you if you've ever had to forgive somebody for something really huge it's very very costly like often it's so costly you just can't forgive that's why very often relationships are poisoned permanently isn't that right cannot forgive it's just too costly well God himself is the abused party in every way in our world and so only he can ever bear the cost of that forgiveness and bring reconciliation that's real to human beings and yet the message of the angels is God is the great reconciler he has come as savior to bring real reconciliation for unto you is born a savior who is

Christ the Lord God had said long ago through his prophet Isaiah I am the Lord besides me there is no savior only God can ever sort out the real mess in this world but now he's saying in the birth of the long promised messiah the Christ the king in David's line now God himself has come to be that savior he came in human flesh to make peace between God and man to bring that real reconciliation and yes it was at a great great cost a terrible cost because justice cannot be ignored sin must be punished but Jesus Christ was born the Bible tells us to bring peace through making peace through the blood of his cross God himself came as savior and to bear in himself in human flesh the awful consequences of human sin and he did it so that he might reconcile rebellious human beings to himself in love so no wonder the angels are singing songs of joy and glory even they marvel at what God's doing

God's mighty heavenly army is looking on this whole scene in absolute wonder instead of God commanding his army to go and destroy human rebellious enemies God himself is entering this horrible hostile evil world to give his own blood to reconcile these enemies to himself what kind of God is that well it's not the God of terrorists and suicide bombers is it it's not the spirit who animates want and taking of life for glory no this is the true God this is the God of the Bible this is the living God who created the world and who so loved the world even in its bitter hostility to him so loved the world that he gave his only son so that there would be real reconciliation through real costly forgiveness for rebellious human beings and that's why you see the message of the angels is so important and it can't be ignored not just by the shepherds then but not by anyone ever because it's so magnificent it is so vast it is the greatest revelation of God there ever can be in this world so to ignore it would be such a monumental refusal of reality well that could only lead to total and complete disaster there is real rejoicing in heaven because

[20 : 05] God the Savior has come and there is real reconciliation on earth through the blood of Jesus which is costly and terrible and yet utterly wonderful and so there must be also a real response a real response in time and in history from every single one to whom this message is sent God sends his message of peace into this world for a response there can't be peace can there with somebody who refuses peace peace peace has got to be accepted reconciliation is something that must be entered into responded to we know that there's no such thing is there as reconciliation in theory real reconciliation is about re-entering a relationship so that it's restored so that it's renewed so that it becomes real again it can't be any other way than that and so it is with

God's peace God is gracious God is merciful he is infinitely merciful but he's not soft he's not sentimental certainly not unjust he offers peace but it must be received must be welcomed his peace is for those with whom he is pleased says the angel not because they're better people than anybody else they earn his favor not at all no but because they're humble people they're people who will receive his favor people who respond in obedient faith to God's marvelous reconciling work in Jesus Christ the message of Christ the message of Christmas calls for that response a personal response an urgent response a response before it's too late and those words of the angels they're still prophetic you see the peace that they speak about will one day fill this whole world be in no doubt of that when the

Lord Jesus comes again he promised that his people will inherit this earth and he will reign and he will establish his peace cosmically forever but then then he's not coming to offer peace he'll be coming to establish it by the force of his ultimate judgment he will judge the nations declares the prophet Isaiah and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their shields into pruning hooks and neither shall they learn war anymore and that's another verse you know that's been sentimentalized away into sort of wistful hopes about the brotherhood of man one day no no no that is a picture of abject surrender the powers of this world throwing down their weapons before the Christ the king of glory when he comes to judge this whole world and that day is coming friends that day is coming maybe much sooner than any of us think but on that day it will be too late it will be too late to respond to the offer of peace from God

Jesus himself tells us that on that day those who have not received his offer of peace now will be swept away forever in a terrible flood of judgment he tells us that in his own lips now is the favorable time now is the day of salvation says the bible on that day it will be too late that's why Luke wrote this gospel for his readers for us you've never read it take one from the back and I'd be glad for you to have it and read it it's a message to bring rejoicing it's a message about real reconciliation but it is a message that demands a real response now before it's too late and what he's saying to us in this episode here that he's recorded that we've read tonight he's saying look look how these shepherds responded when they heard the news do as they did because they got it right you see what they did they came didn't they they came personally let us go they said let's go and see this thing that the

Lord has revealed to us they were humble enough to know that they needed a savior that the angels were speaking about and many people you know today many people are too proud to think that they need a savior God will accept me as I am I don't need any of that stuff yes you do says the Lord there's no other way to be pleasing to God than by submitting your life to the son of God the Lord Jesus Christ you must come personally penitently to God through Jesus there is no other way they came personally and notice also they came urgently let us make haste that wasn't putting it off that's another stumbling block isn't it for many people especially young people there's plenty of time for all that later on when I'm older you better be very very sure of that haven't you

[25 : 44] I'll never forget one year the day before Christmas Eve when I had to bury an 18 year old student who just a few days before had been hale and hearty and healthy a terrible Christmas none of us know do we how much more time God has given us how much we have left but what we do know is that God has sent a message from heaven itself a message of real reconciliation and we can have with him before it's too late to bring rejoicing with him through the Lord Jesus Christ but it is a message for receiving it's not a message for rejecting I hope you've all received Christ I hope you've all here tonight receive and find that wonderful joy but if not my message to you tonight which I have to give to you is make haste don't delay do as the shepherds did come personally to him and when you do you will find exactly what those shepherds find you will find that everything you discover about Jesus

Christ the Lord is just as it has been told you through the angels and through every other wonderful word in the scriptures that God has given us there's no fantasy there's no let's pretend there's only truth and reality and great great abundant joy so may we all join the joy and the song of heaven this Christmas time amen let's pray almighty God give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light now in the time of this mortal life in which thy son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility that in that last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead we may rise to the life immortal through him who lives and reigns with thee and the holy spirit one god now and forever amen