

The Greatest of All Joys

Luke 2:8-20 (12/30/18)

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Luke 2:10-12, *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; 11 for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

Most people want to be happy. I've never sat down and said, "I wish I was miserable." True, some find pleasure in being miserable, but not many. And some things really make us happy, really fill our joy cup. Finding that special person to marry. Finally graduating after those years of grinding study. Getting that job of a lifetime you can't believe you landed. That healthy newborn. That report from your doctor that you are cancer-free. A new SUV in your garage wrapped with a ribbon. Or a new house, as long as you can pay the mortgage. Of course, we've all seen people on TV jump and leap and scream for joy when they win the lottery.

But the angel here is talking about another kind of joy in verse 10 – "I bring you good news of great joy!" This is the greatest of all joys. It's the result of the good news he's going to tell us.

Wouldn't you like to live knowing your future is absolutely secure and that you have the brightest of all hopes? That even on miserable days and in miserable circumstances, you know that ultimately nothing bad is going to happen to you. Everything is going to turn out well for your highest pleasure, your greatest joy. How do you get this greatest of all joys? We're going to learn from this heavenly messenger. Let's get the context of his message.

A LOWLY PEOPLE Luke 2:8, *In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.*

Isn't it interesting the kind of people God chose to inform first about the birth of Christ? This good news of great joy came to a lowly, humble people. These shepherds were minding their own business, doing what shepherds who are on the night shift do. We're not told how large their flock was. Since Bethlehem was only five miles south of Jerusalem, many believe these sheep were for sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. We don't know why God chose to send this amazing message to these men, except God often chooses the lowly and the social rejects for His purposes. Shepherds were not highly regarded. They had a reputation for getting confused between what's thine and mine. They remind me of some of my fellow construction workers many years ago when their truck beds seemed to leave with more than when they came. Our foreman had to keep a close watch on them.

These shepherds weren't expecting anything unusual that night as they watched over their sheep. They had to be aware of noises and movements of maybe a bear or mountain lion coming for a sheep meal, the typical night. And our God often works this way. You're doing your thing, living your typical, humdrum life when suddenly God invades your life. Maybe you're a happy go lucky guy or a miserable, sad soul with everything going south on you when suddenly something happens. Out of the blue someone enters your life with truths from the Bible that change your life forever.

A MESSAGE FROM HEAVEN Luke 2:9, *And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.*

Picture the shepherds out on the hillside in the night's darkness, some clustered in groups while others wandered among the sheep keep watch. A quiet night so far with only a few wavering bleats of lamb here and there. Then suddenly a brilliant form stands before them in the darkness, BOOM! A bright, blinding

light is all around them, scaring the daylights out of these poor fellows. The text literally reads: "they feared a great fear." KJV says they were sore afraid, and I'm sure if you were camping out, sitting by the dying embers of your fire, and suddenly a figure appeared before you surrounded with brilliant light you'd be sore afraid, too! We don't know who this angel was, but he must have felt like the most privileged being in God's vast universe to be chosen to bring this good news of great joy to these shepherds. We can't see heaven, but I assure you that all of heaven is very interested in what's going on down here; especially since the Son of God has been born into the human race (1 Peter 1:12).

GOOD NEWS THAT BRINGS THE GREATEST JOY Luke 2:1, *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people. 11 for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

The angel immediately relieves the shepherd's terror by assuring them he has good news, not judgment, not a death sentence or condemnation, but good news. But what is this good news? There's no good news in another law like the Ten Commandments, or another philosophy to tell us how to live. Religious regulations or the best of man's moralistic ethics come up bankrupt; they don't change your heart. Do your best. Try harder. Keep these rules and you'll succeed. Be your own person. Esteem yourself. Take your own path.

Jordan Peterson is a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto and very popular these days, with over a million YouTube followers. He lectures with authority and common sense that resonates with people tired of political correctness. His international best seller is *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. "Discover in this book of exceptional power 12 simple yet profound rules for sorting yourself out, setting your house in order, and improving the world by first improving yourself." (Amazon) Rule #1 is drawn from the lobster's nervous system: "Stand up straight with your shoulders back." Rule #11 is "Don't bother children when they're skateboarding." These rules are helpful and make human sense, but have only horizontal value. They don't deal with the heart before God. Christ is missing. The good news that brings great joy is not here.

Many of us watched the interview between Ben Shapiro and John MacArthur. We really like this young Jewish pundit, but for all his charisma and conservative values, he also cannot offer the good news that brings the greatest of all joys. He's an orthodox Jew and tries to keep the 613 commandments of the Old Testament. He thinks Christians and Jesus are nice people, but Jesus is certainly not God or the Messiah. He doesn't believe the good news this angel is talking about. He is a Jew much like Paul before his Damascus Road experience – a smart, self-righteous, believer-in-the-law Pharisee. May God open his eyes to hear this good news from heaven about that child in that feeding trough in Bethlehem who is the only Savior.

This angel's sermon in three verses (vss. 10-12) is filled with some of the greatest theology and exciting truth in your entire Bible. And it's all the greatest of all joys if you receive it and feast on it. There is no greater joy in all of life or history. In verse 10 he says this greatest of all joy is for all the people. Who is that? All people is first all of Israel, to whom God promised a Deliverer. All people also includes all Gentiles who will receive Him. This good message is universal in scope, to all people throughout the centuries down to you and me.

When did this happen? Today! Not a long time ago or in the future. Not even tomorrow. This good news is for you, Jew or Gentile, today. He was promised ever since Genesis 3. And down through all of Israel's long centuries they said He was coming. Isaiah 9:6 declared to you a child is born, a son is given. And now He's here! Right now. The angel tells the shepherds, "God has done something you fellows will be able to see and hear and even feel today!" Let me add, God is always working with us *today*. *Today* is important. If you will hear His voice *today*, trust Him, worship Him, live for Him. *Today*, if you hear His voice, don't harden your heart. A time will come when all the todays of our lives will be gone and we'll be in eternity. This good news of the greatest joys is for you today.

And then, where did this happen? Not just anywhere, but in a place God specifically designated. The place is in that village of Bethlehem these shepherds could probably see in the distance, where Rachel was buried, where Naomi and Ruth and Boaz lived, where the great King David was born and shepherded his father's sheep, maybe right where these shepherds were standing. Micah told that this is where the Messiah would be born and there He is on the particular "today" God chose. Born for all people. God controls all of history.

HE'S YOUR SAVIOR

Now this angel gets to the meat of his message. Who is this infant that is such good news and brings such great joy? Listen, this is what you've got to get right. Your true and eternal joy rests on Who He is and why He came. The world gets this totally wrong. Who is He and why did He come?

- He wasn't born to be a Jewish nationalistic deliverer from Rome's rule.
- He wasn't born to be the latest and greatest philosopher to go up to Athens and debate the great minds of Rome and Greece.
- He wasn't sent from God as a therapist to help us cope with our syndromes and dysfunctions.
- He wasn't sent as the world's latest and greatest guru on how to build wealth and success.
- He wasn't born to be the most popular self-esteem preacher, telling us how wonderful we are, urging us to try harder, that we can make it if we try and just think noble thoughts about ourselves.
- He didn't come to assure us that God accepts us no matter who we are or what we've done, to relax and realize we are all God's children.
- He didn't come to tell us to imagine there is no heaven or hell and that all religions are equally valid expressions of our inner sense of godhood.

The angel reveals His identity with three titles. First, He's a Savior. God told Joseph in Matthew 1, "Name Him Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins." He came to save sinners! Your greatest of all joys comes from the good news that this Savior will save you from your sin! He'll take away your condemnation and guilt and give you eternal life. He'll grow up and die bearing the sins of many, enduring the wrath of God, and take us to heaven. He came to go down into the corruption of our ugly sin and carry it to the cross. "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men, by whom we can be saved." Acts 4:12.

HE'S YOUR MESSIAH (Christ – "anointed One")

I did some research on what traditional Judaism says about their Messiah. They've been awaiting a Messiah for centuries, but he hasn't come yet. He'll be a great political leader descended from King David, a law keeper, an inspiring military leader who leads Israel in victories. Above all, He'll be a human and not a god. He'll rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and rule over the world. "Jews do not believe that Jesus was the Mashiach.... Jesus did not do any of the things that the scriptures said the messiah would do." (jewfaq.org/mashiach) That's a sad statement. Paul says In 2 Corinthians 3 that a veil lies over the Jewish heart until he turns to the Lord.

But this messenger, this angel straight from heaven, assures us that this baby indeed is the Messiah, the Anointed One, which is what Christ or the Greek word "Christos" means. He fulfills the Old Testament promise of the Messiah perfectly. He is first your anointed Prophet who teaches you the truth of the gospel. Then He is your anointed Priest who sacrificed His own life, shed His own blood as the final sacrifice, that you might be forgiven and cleansed and prepared for heaven. And last, He is your anointed King who rules us with His gentle and loving heart. Let me assure you, the happiest people in the world are the people ruled by Jesus Christ, who said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

HE'S YOUR GOD

The third title, "Lord," here means God. This is what Isaiah prophesied seven hundred years earlier. :

Isaiah 40:9, Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; Lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

That's the good news that brings us the greatest of all joys, the very presence of God Himself, Emmanuel, "God with us!" Maybe you're not feeling so happy and joyful right now. Fight through your difficult circumstances and human trials and discouragement, even tragedies. Go to the reality that Jesus is your Savior, your Messiah, your God, your Lord. Many years and centuries have passed since then, but He hasn't changed. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is God incarnate, God in human form, the God Man, two natures in hypostatic union in One Person. He is your greatest of all joys.

HEAVEN'S WORSHIP TEAM Luke 2:13-14, *And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."*

Suddenly a vast host of angels were praising God and announcing the gospel of true and lasting peace for all whom God has chosen to be His people. That child is God's greatest glory. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). And through His work on the cross He brings us justification, the imputation of His righteousness by faith alone. Romans 5:1 says that we have peace with God forever, rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.

SEEING AND TELLING Luke 2:15-17, *When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. 17 When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. 20 The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.*

This multitude of angels trails off into the sky, returning to heaven. And there go the shepherds, hurriedly on their way to see the baby. And after they saw the baby, they went out and told others about Him, probably for the rest of their lives. There joy was so great, they had to share it.

We experience this greatest all of joy today through faith in the same Person. This is what I love about our church. When I look out there, I see people who believe this good news with all your heart. You aren't ignoring the truth of it all and you're not bored with it. Like these shepherds, you know this greatest of joys and gladly talk to others about this Jesus. You eagerly invite them to come to hear the Word of God, the good news of salvation that brings forgiveness of sins and life-changing joy. You invest yourself into the lives of others. You want them know this Jesus so they can go tell others about this Person who now reigns at God's right hand.

TREASURING AND PONDERING Luke 2:19, *But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.*

Here's this young mother Mary, treasuring and pondering all this. If she lived in 2018, she'd have so much to post on Facebook. She'd have the best New Year's family letter of all time. "Dear loved ones, this has been quite a year. Nine months ago an angel appeared to me...."

I hope you honestly believe this good news of greatest joy. The traditional Jew does not know Jesus as his Messiah. Neither does the atheist who says there is no God. The agnostic says there may be one, but he doesn't know him. The humanist says he doesn't need a Savior. Some misguided souls claim to be a god so they don't have this joy. The fool wishes in his heart there is no God. And many professing Christians know all about it, but they don't really believe in a genuine way. For them it's just a story told over and over each year. But the biblical, born-again, trusting man or woman, boy or girl says, "Jesus is the best news and the greatest joy of my life. He's my Prophet, my Priest, and my King. I can't continue life without him. For me to live is Christ, to die is gain!"