

From the Manger to the Cross

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[0:00] Please turn with me in your Bibles tonight to the Gospel of Luke in chapter 2, Luke 2. We want to come to Calvary tonight by way of the manger.

This message was prepared in anticipation of Christmas. And of course now it is past Christmas, but we would do well perhaps to wrap up our thoughts about Christmas tonight by considering the death of our son.

Luke 2, notice verses 8 through 20. This of course comes just after the account of Jesus' birth. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

[1:14] Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger.

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. But Luke 2 is a story that we know well.

One that we think of often around Christmas time. One that you've no doubt referred to more than once in the last several weeks. We think about it at Christmas time because it records for us the story of the birth of Jesus, our Savior.

[2:28] It tells of Mary and Joseph, a stable and manger, shepherds and angels, a clash of two worlds, the divine and the human, the earthly and the heavenly come together in Luke 2.

Most of our Christmas hymns are drawn from this passage. We're very familiar with it and I hope that familiarity doesn't breed contempt tonight. I know that last Sunday morning, you heard a message on the birth announcement of our Savior Jesus.

And we're going to look at that announcement again tonight. You might find it odd to read of Jesus' birth on a night when we remember His death. The story of His birth is so joyful, it's uplifting, it's glad.

The story of His death, something so sad. But as the wise man in Ecclesiastes 3 tells us, there's a time for everything. And a season for every activity under heaven.

A time to be born and a time to die. He puts those things together and here we find them together in the announcement of Jesus' birth. There's an inescapable reference to His death.

[3:37] Did you catch it? In the words of the angel. The one born is a Savior. Christ the Lord. What does it mean for Him to be a Savior? Well, when the angel appeared to Joseph, he said of Mary, she will give birth to a son.

And you are to give Him the name Jesus because He will save His people from their sins. For this baby to be the Savior, he would have to save God's people from their sins.

And we know that without the shedding of blood, there can be no forgiveness of sins. Amen. And so when the angel announces the coming of a Savior, he's announcing the coming of one who would die.

The baby in the manger would one day be the man on the cross who died to take away the sins of His people. The son of Joseph and Mary is the son of God sent by God to accomplish His work. And if all of our remembering at Christmas stops at Bethlehem and ends at the manger, then we've missed it. We've missed the point of Jesus coming into the world. In fact, I would go so far as to say that you can't rightly remember the birth of Jesus without remembering His death.

[4:55] And I would also say that the very best way to celebrate His birth is by doing the very thing that we've gathered to do tonight. That's why every year, the Sunday closest to Christmas, we schedule the Lord's Supper.

Now we missed it this year because of ice and wind and power outages. But we come after Christmas now to celebrate His birth by remembering His death.

Partaking of these elements that represent His body and blood as we are spiritually nourished, feeding on Christ by faith. And so we want to have a look tonight at just how significant this announcement was and what it must have meant to those shepherds that heard it.

I want to think about the messenger tonight, the message, and the meaning. Very simply and very briefly. We start with the messenger, who of course is the angel of the Lord.

Now the shepherds are out one night. And they're watching their flocks. Nothing especially extraordinary except that a census was being taken in those days.

[5:59] And so people were going up to their own villages to be numbered. And that meant there had been extra people in Bethlehem. These shepherds, though, were regulars.

Tending their flocks. And we don't know what they were doing that night besides tending their flocks. Maybe they spoke together. Maybe they talked about all the visitors that had come. They were probably identifiable by the way they traveled.

Perhaps the way they spoke. The way they look. How much stuff they had with them. That they weren't locals. They were different than the people in Bethlehem. Different places you can identify tourists in different ways.

In Southern California it was by their sunburns. You knew that they were probably not from the area. Maybe they spoke of these extra visitors in town. Maybe they made fun of them.

Maybe they pitied them. Maybe they talked about the condition of their flocks that night. Maybe they were quiet. We don't know. But into that night there broke a great disturbance. Something unexpected.

[7:02] Something shocking. Something fearful. And it was a great light that shone around the angel. It was the glory of the Lord. And the angel of the Lord. And it made them afraid. And a lot of times we keep right on reading.

They were afraid. And the angel said, don't be afraid. But why would they have been afraid? At the appearance of the angel of the Lord. There could have been any one of a number of things going through their minds.

If they knew anything about the history of Israel. The angel of the Lord appearing had meant various things. You add to that just the fright of a dark night.

And all of a sudden a light being shined in your eyes. Have you ever had that? Have you ever been awakened to a light? And you're in the dark and a light shines in your eyes. And you can't see it from where you're blinded by it. Because all you can see is the light.

That's shocking. It's frightening. That in itself is terrifying. But then they see that it's the angel of the Lord. And in the history of Israel. The angel of the Lord had appeared to announce destruction.

[7:58] He had appeared to actually bring destruction. To destroy people and places. Was that his purpose this night? He had commissioned various of God's servants into service.

Could he be calling us to be a servant of the Lord? He had offered rebuke. He had provided guidance. Direction and protection. And often an angel had appeared to announce the coming birth of a child.

Many times. To announce that a child would be born. What would it be here? Maybe some of these possibilities are coursing through their minds as they wondered. Why here? Why now?

Why to us has this angel appeared? Well, they didn't have to wait long. This angel, the messenger, sought to put their fears at ease. Don't fear. This was a birth announcement.

But of a birth that had already taken place. Not of one that was yet to come. And so here is this messenger. This angel appearing in the night. But what was his message?

[8:58] Secondly. It was joyful. And comforting news. And yet if we really understand the words, they were sad words in some ways in the angel's message.

Because it meant the very death of the one whose birth was being announced. The angel begins, it was good news. That's gospel news.

But what could that mean to these shepherds? It could mean salvation. Psalm 96.2 Sing to the Lord. Praise His name. Proclaim.

That is, evangelize. Gospel. His salvation day after day. Good news could mean peace.

Deliverance from enemies. Isaiah 52.7 How beautiful on the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news.

Who proclaim peace. Who bring good tidings. Who proclaim salvation. Who say to Zion, your God reigns. This angel had beautiful feet. He had good news for them.

[9:56] Maybe Isaiah 52.7 flashed through their minds. Salvation. Peace. And just after Isaiah 52 comes Isaiah 53, which is the suffering servant.

The one pierced for our transgressions. Crushed for our iniquities. Could this be what the angel has to tell us tonight? The good news of great joy.

Of course, we're joyful when we receive good news. Listen to J.C. Ryle. He's the one who's going to study his book in Sunday school on Sunday mornings. He also wrote some helpful works on the Gospels.

And he writes about this joy. What the source of it is. He says, The spiritual darkness which had covered the earth for 4,000 years was about to be rolled away. The way to pardon and peace with God was about to be thrown open to all mankind.

The head of Satan was about to be bruised. Liberty was about to be proclaimed to the captives.

And recovery of sight to the blind. Good news. Great joy indeed.

[10:59] Because of this one who was born. And it's for all people. Not just Jews. Maybe that piqued the shepherd's interest. They knew it had been foretold that the salvation of God would extend to all nations.

Not just to the Jews. But then comes the earth shattering news. And good news indeed. Today, a Savior is born to you. A Savior.

A Savior. Salvation for God's people. Is this finally the day of the promised Messiah? Could it be that that long-awaited day of deliverance had arrived?

Micah 7.7 But as for me, I watch and hope for the Lord. I wait for God my Savior. My God will hear me. They had been waiting. Waiting.

Waiting. For the Savior. And this angel is saying, Good news. A Savior is born to you. Isaiah 62.11 The Lord has made proclamation to the ends of the earth.

[11:57] Say to the daughter of Zion. See, your Savior comes. Is this the promised one? Could this be Isaiah 9.9? For to us a child is born.

To us a son is given. Have you ever caught that? For to you is born this day. To you is born this day a Savior. And they remember Isaiah 9.9. For to us a son is given.

And to us a child is born. Could this be the wonderful Counselor? The mighty God. The everlasting Father. The Prince of Peace. To us a Savior is born. We don't know how well these shepherds knew their history of Israel.

But if they had just a hint, their hearts must have been racing at this point. And then, He is Christ the Lord. No doubt now. He is the Christ. The Anointed One.

The Messiah. The One that was promised. The prophet, priest, and king. The Lord's anointed. Not just David, but David's greater son. And not just a priest or a king or a prophet, but all three in one.

[13:01] The long awaited day has come. The Savior has been born. And not He's going to be born. Not another anticipation. Wait. He's coming. No, He's here.

He's here today. And He is for you. Well, what is the meaning of this message of the angel? Of course, the only way this newborn Savior, who is Christ the Lord, could be the Savior is through the very means that we remember tonight.

It's unspeakably good news that Jesus died for sinners, but something unspeakably bad had to take place in order to bring it to pass. They were sad news. It's a sad words.

It's a Savior, which means He would die. That night was all joy and rejoicing, and rightly so. But the days to come would bring something far different. How would this Christ, this baby in a manger, be the Savior of mankind?

There would be no great revolution. This Messiah wouldn't overthrow Roman rule and reestablish the glorious Jewish nation of Israel as many, and maybe even some of these shepherds anticipated.

[14 : 15] He would live a rather ordinary life up to the age of 30. There were some things that must have been striking, though. There's the time in the temple when He surprised the teachers there as a boy.

And this one other thing that must have stood out. Yes, a rather ordinary life to age 30, but never once did an unkind word leave His mouth.

Never a complaint. Never an evil thought. Never one transgression of God's holy law. That must have stood out to His siblings, to the friends of His parents, to those that came into contact with Him.

There's something different about this one. Ever wonder if those shepherds came back around seeing, that's the baby in the manger. Is there anything special about Him?

Can you tell that He's the Messiah? Had they noticed His excellent behavior? But once His public ministry began, it became clear that it was no ordinary Israelite.

[15 : 18] He taught as one having authority, and not as their teachers. He reached out to the bottom feeders of society. He healed the sick and diseased and lame. He delivered from demon possession and oppression.

He raised the dead. He forgave sins, which delighted some and angered others, because only God can forgive sins. Could this be the very Son of God, Christ the Lord?

And eventually He created such a stir that the Jewish leaders of the day decided something must be done. Many times they had plotted to kill Him, to arrest Him, and finally they did have Him arrested.

and then in the greatest miscarriage of justice of all time. They, those leaders along with a raucous crowd, crying for His crucifixion, His execution, the passive assistance of a Roman governor, condemned to death, the one who had never done anything worthy of a scolding, let alone a death sentence.

And so off to the place of the skull it was, where the innocent Jesus, the Savior, the Christ, the one who was once a baby in a manger, so sweet and meek and mild, no crying He makes, yes He did, He cried, but that baby, now a man, nailed to the cross, hoisted up for all to see, pain and anguish beyond our comprehension or ability to describe.

[17 : 00] But looking back, we see that there was something far worse than the physical pain He endured that day on the cross as He died. This man was bearing the wrath of God against sinners.

He was saving us from our sins and the penalty of our sin. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? He cries out.

Maybe some around the cross wondered why He said that. We know why He said it. God turned His back on His own Son that day. And on the cross, the sinless Savior took on Himself the sins of all of God's chosen people.

And God punished Him instead of punishing us. They're the one who had done no wrong. died. So that we who could do no right might live.

The innocent suffered. So that the guilty might go free. The bread and the cup that we partake of tonight represent that body and blood of Christ sacrificed in our place.

[18 : 09] Tonight, don't let it be just another ritual. Something that you do without thought because we've always done it. It's what Christians do.

Don't let the celebration of Jesus' birth be without thought for the purpose of His coming. He came to die. He came to accomplish the will of His Father and we receive the benefit.

We don't face wrath and punishment because He did in our place. We're sons of God instead of enemies. Our sins are forgiven through this Jesus.

That's what we remember tonight. That's why our faith should and will be strengthened tonight if we come and partake by faith. Because there's greater blessing than we could ever comprehend here. That's what it meant for this one to be the Savior, the Christ. This is the same Jesus. The one in the manger. The one proclaimed by the angels. The one seen by the shepherds. This is the one who hung on a cross, who rose from the dead, and even now is sitting at the right hand of God.

[19 : 15] Now that's quite a night for the shepherds, isn't it? They go on their way rejoicing, praising God, having seen this angel, the message of salvation, seeing the Christ child with their own eyes.

But what about us? It could be quite a night for us tonight as well. No angel tonight. No sudden glorious light in the darkness.

No baby in a manger. But don't we have it better than the shepherds did? No, we don't get to see Jesus face to face yet.

But we do see Him, don't we, in this picture that He Himself has left us. It's what the sacraments, the ordinances are. Pictures that God has given us of His Gospel. We see Christ tonight as we partake of His body and blood represented in the bread and the cup.

We see Him in His Word that He's given to us and we rejoice that the Lord's anointed, the Messiah, came and brought salvation. As we remember His death tonight, we rejoice in His birth because had He not been born a man, there would be no sacrifice for sin.

[20 : 28] Had He not been born, we would still be under the wrath of God. had He not been born, we would be without hope. Had He not been born, we would be looking to an eternity of suffering instead of an eternity of glory.

Had He not been born, we would be of all men most to be pitied. but He was born. The account in Luke 2 is not a fairy tale.

It is not fiction. It is not a neat little story to tell at Christmas time to make ourselves feel better that we've kept Christ in Christmas or that we've remembered the reason for the season.

It is the truth of God's Word. Amen. Amen. And we are to receive it as such. And so we can go on our way tonight glorifying and praising God for all the things that we have heard and will see even this night.

We rejoice in His birth, His life, His death, His resurrection, and His ascension. And so we should rejoice tonight.

[21 : 39] We mourn tonight because it was our sin that put Him on the cross, but we rejoice that we have forgiveness of those very sins through Christ. Be glad tonight.

Be thankful tonight that Jesus was born and that He died in our place. And tell others, that's what the shepherds went and did. They went and proclaimed it.

to all they saw. And we should do the same. I mentioned this a moment ago, but have you ever wondered what happened to the shepherds?

Or the all who heard it in verse 18, who were so amazed at what the shepherds said to them?

Where were they? Where were these shepherds? All the people that heard the announcement.

Where were they when Jesus died? I don't know. Maybe some of them had died by then. It was 30 some years later. And perhaps some of them had already left the earth themselves.

[22 : 45] Maybe they had been among the crowds watching Jesus' miracles, hearing His teaching. Maybe they were among those who went away when they found out their bellies wouldn't be filled with another miraculous multiplying of fish and loaves.

could it be that they were among those shouting, crucify Him? We simply don't know. But I wonder about some here tonight who love to talk about the birth of Jesus at Christmas time.

Who read the Christmas story before they open their presents. Who want nothing to do with His life and death. I fear that hell will be full of people who celebrated Christmas but never saw the true significance of His birth.

I hope that wasn't true of the shepherds. I hope they didn't celebrate His birth and despise His death. I would love to meet them in glory. And hear their story. And to see what they were thinking when that angel first appeared to them.

And to talk to them. And to see what it was like to see that baby in the manger. I hope I get to hear their story in glory. And I hope that you will be there in glory.

[23 : 58] I hope that you will be able to talk to those shepherds if they're there. I hope I'll be able to talk to you. And to speak to you of what Christ did for you in your life. And how He showed you the significance of His birth.

That it wasn't just a neat story at Christmas time. But that He came to save sinners. I hope that I'll be able to talk to you about all those times we celebrated the Lord's Supper.

But how we don't have to anymore. We don't need a picture anymore. Because we will see Him face to face. Just like the shepherds did only way better. Because we'll all be in glory.

I hope that you'll be there to share that with all of God's people. if you're sitting there and you know that if you died tonight you wouldn't be in glory.

You can come to Jesus. The Savior who is Christ the Lord. You can come to Him tonight right where you sit. And you can cry out to Him for mercy. And He will hear you.
[24 : 58] And He will forgive you. And He will take you home with Him. Because He's not just a Savior for some people. The really good people. The really special people.

This news is for all people. It's for all who will believe. All who will come to Him in faith. Your sins can be put on the Savior. Your sins can be forgiven by His life and death.
And so as you watch those around you partake of these elements tonight you remember what they represent. the body and blood of Christ broken and shed for His people.
And may it fill you with a holy desire to be able to partake yourself. You come and trust in the Savior tonight and He will receive you. The benefits can be yours.
Peace with God. God and sin are reconciled. The things that we sing of at Christmas those can be yours. And if they are yours tonight rejoice and be glad as we contemplate these things in the body and blood of our Savior.