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[0 : 00] Well, friends, if we could just for a short time turn back to the chapter that we read together, the Gospel of Luke and chapter 2. I'd like us to consider the verses that we have in verses 8 to 21, that account of the shepherds and the angels.

Now, I think it's fair to say that over the past number of months and even last couple of years, we've all become quite accustomed to hearing different types of announcements.

We're switching on our televisions, our radios, we're scrolling through our news feed online, we're constantly anticipating what is going to be announced next.

And of course, the sad reality is that these announcements, usually relating to the pandemic we find ourselves in, are more often than not far from being good news.

These are messages that we find are filled with restrictions and uncertainties and worrying statistics, statistics that perhaps lead to fear and anxiety.

[1 : 22] And isn't it true, friends, on this, the last Lord's Day of 2021, that we all need to hear some good news.

In fact, we all need to hear, do we not, the best news of all, whether we're a Christian or not a Christian.

What we have before us here is an announcement that we all need to be reminded of. In this narrative, we have an announcement that in this announcement we hear of that greatest news that you or I could ever possibly hope for.

And so as we come this evening, just for a short time, to this good news story, we're going to answer three questions. Firstly, we're going to answer the question, who is it that receives this news?

Secondly, what was, what is this news? And then lastly and thirdly, what did the recipients of this news do with it?

[2 : 34] Let's look at verse 8 together. Here we have a revelation of who it is that receives this news.

Here we have shepherds in a field at night watching over their flock. Nothing unusual here. This is something that shepherds would often do.

They would, as it were, do a night shift in order to keep their flock protected from other animals, or perhaps from sticky fingers that sought to steal them for themselves.

And so you would have these shepherds. They would go out into the fields at night, and they would watch over the flock. These are men who were doing what they had so often done in the past.

Most of us gathered here tonight. If we've had an occupation, or if we have an occupation, there's much perhaps in our occupation that we do without thinking. It's just what we always do.

[3 : 46] It's part of our routine. And so it would have been with these men. As they found themselves on that fertile hillside outside of Bethlehem, as they tended to this flock on that evening, they would have been doing nothing unusual.

This would have been a night like any other. But that was soon to be interrupted. Because as these men found themselves on that hillside outside Bethlehem, we see that quite quickly their plans are interrupted.

Their plans are interrupted not by a Scottish government announcement, but by heaven itself.

Let's look at verse 8. 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 great fear. Seemingly out of nowhere, these men find themselves confronted with an angel, an angel that has surrounding it the glory of God himself.

[5 : 11] We don't know exactly what that glory looked like, but what we do know is that this was a glory that shone brightly. This was the light of heaven itself that illuminated the darkness of that hillside.

This was a light that interrupted the ordinary every day. But we might ask, why? Why is it that this angel chooses to come through the direction of God himself to reveal to these ordinary everyday men something of the glory of heaven itself?

Why these shepherds? Now we need to bear in mind just something of the context of shepherds. They were in this time by the Jews seen as the lowest of the low.

Nobody wanted to be a shepherd. A shepherd was an occupation that was seen to be below most people. And in fact, shepherds were seen to be ceremonially unclean, which meant that really they weren't allowed to come and join together with the people of God in the worship of God.

And so that leads to another question. If it's so that men couldn't stand to have shepherds with them to worship God, why is it that God is here choosing to reveal something of himself to these men who are seen as being ceremonially unclean?

[6 : 51] Why is it that he comes with this announcement, which we'll come on to shortly, to these men rather than to the priests or the scribes or to the religious leaders of the day, the elite of the church?

Why is it not them that he chooses to come to? Well, friends, it's in this very fact that we begin to see something of the significance of this announcement, this good news, the very fact that he has chosen to make this earth-shattering announcement to those who were looked upon as being completely insignificant by society, those who were effectively nobodies.

And that's what makes it good news. Because embedded in this revelation, what do we see? This is wonderful. We see something of the nature of God himself.

We can have our own ideas as to what God is like. And they can be so wrong, and they can be so anti what Scripture shows him to be like.

What we see here is a God who's not interested in this announcement being made with pomp and ceremony. Of course, he had every right to have all the pomp and ceremony he wanted.

[8 : 19] He has every right to that. He is God. But that's not how he chooses to reveal this announcement, but rather in the darkness of the night on that hillside outside Bethlehem to ordinary, everyday shepherds.

He chooses to defy cultural and sociological and even religious protocol. And this isn't the first time he does this, or the only time that he does this.

Because we see this, do we not, after the resurrection. When Jesus has risen from the dead, who does he reveal himself to first?

Does he go into the temple with all the leaders of the day in front of him there? Does he make a big show of his revelation? Is that what he does? No. Instead, he reveals himself to one who, again, society would have deemed fairly insignificant.

A woman. Of course, we know that no woman is insignificant. But yet that's how the society of the day saw woman.

[9 : 32] Yet who does Jesus choose to reveal himself to? A woman. That's the nature of our God. That's the nature of the King that we come to worship this evening.

The one who continues to reveal this good news. Good news that is in no way reserved for a certain type of person. It's not reserved for a particular culture or creed or country.

It's not good news that it's only for us here on the Isle of Lewis. Far from it. Let us never think that. Let us never think that somehow we are more entitled to the gospel than others.

And perhaps that the gospel that we have is better than the gospel that others have. That is pride. Every nation, tribe, and tongue.

That's who this good news is for. And for all of us gathered here tonight who can call him Father. It is by the grace of God that we are what we are.

[10 : 41] No entitlement. No lineage. The grace of God. Sometimes, of course, we know of this good news.

And perhaps this is you this evening. You know of this good news. You've heard of this good news. But you haven't yet known it in your heart.

You don't know the relevance of Jesus to you. And perhaps you have your own doubts and your own fears. We see that here with the shepherds.

Firstly, we see that as heaven appears to them on earth in the form of an angel, we see that these shepherds, they are greatly afraid.

And, of course, that's not surprising. Here they are minding their own business. Here they are doing what they always did. Put yourself in their position. This happened on earth with real men.

[11:41] And sometimes we can fantasize these narratives in Scripture as if they took place in another world. They happened here with real people. And so, of course, they were greatly afraid.

If you were out in the croft doing whatever you were doing and an angel appeared to you, the chances are you could be greatly afraid. Often when there's a divine visitation, we can be afraid. Maybe you're afraid tonight, friends. Maybe you're not a Christian. Just the whole thought of being a Christian fills you with fear.

Here you are in church and you're faced with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Essentially a divine visitation because this is the very voice of the very God himself.

Not my voice, but the voice of the words that we have in his Bible. His word. But yet we can be afraid. I know myself before I was saved.

[12:44] I was filled with fear. What would my life be like if I became a Christian? Surely my life would be over. Surely all that I knew and enjoyed in this world would somehow have to be put to one side.

What I didn't realize, and only grace could teach me this, was that anything that I perceived that I would lose would be replaced by the wonderful fullness and satisfaction that is the joy of the Lord, which is our strength, meaning, and purpose in this life.

And of course our fear can lead us to hide, to turn our back. When we're confronted with God, we turn our back.

We go in a different direction. Or perhaps we can be filled with anger or cynicism or bitterness, perhaps even towards the church. And so we put obstacles in the way between us and God because we're afraid.

We're afraid of the unknown. And of course, that's what faith is. Faith is believing in the unseen. It's as if we're watching, as it were, an announcement on our television.

[14:05] And before it gets to the important part, what do we do? We switch off. We switch off. And because of that, we don't allow ourselves to fully investigate what is being said.

And because of that, we're not as fully informed as to what this message from heaven is. Don't take my word from it. Don't take the word of any other Christian.

If you're unconverted here tonight, find out for yourself. That's all I plead with you this evening, the end of this year. Find out for yourself. Go and read the Bible.

Read it with a spirit of openness, though. Be willing to hear God's voice. It's easy to come and put ourselves over Scripture and impose on Scripture our own perception of what Scripture is.

And because of that, there's a barrier. Come openly acknowledge, I'm willing to hear your voice, God. Speak to me. And you know, friends, He will. He will.

[15:10] He will. This leads us to the second point. What was this good news? Well, we read in verse 10 that the angel said to them, fear not.

For behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. The angel tells the angel.

The angel tells the men, you do not need to fear. There's nothing about my presence that you need to be scared of. Quite the opposite.

Because what I bring is good tidings, good news. News that if you receive in your heart will bring you great joy. I wonder, friend, do you have great joy in your heart?

As we all reflect within, do we have any joy? What even is the source of our joy? Perhaps we've had joy over the past days as we've spent time with our loved ones.

[16:14] These are undoubtedly times of joy. But yet they're temporary. People can give us joy. That is true. But yet that joy is interrupted, is it not?

And this is reality. By anger and frustration, even with our loved ones. Places can give us joy, but only for a time. Things can give us joy, but only for a season.

But this joy that is spoken of here is a joy that cuts deep. A joy that permeates the very core of our being.

Not that we're always going around with a smile on our face. But rather a peace and a joy that enables us to say in our heart of hearts, because He lives, I can face tomorrow.

That our reason for living is based on the very fact that we have a life beyond this, which is founded, of course, on the finished work of Christ.

[17 : 24] A joy that meets our deepest need in this world. What do we see in verse 11? For unto you, rather, is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

That is the good news, friends, that if you know today in your heart, will give you this joy unspeakable and full of glory. Now, we know at this time of year, many pay lip service to the birth of Christ.

Christmas is, of course, at least on the surface, a celebration of the birth of Christ. But how many friends leave it at that?

They will acknowledge on Christmas cards and messages and everything else that, yes, this is an acknowledgement of the birth of Christ, but they say no more.

And, you know, friends, there is no good news in that. There's no good news at all in that. It's like if we were to make a cake and we were to put all our ingredients in a bowl.

[18 : 43] We take all our time to do that and mix it up beautifully, ready to go in the oven, and we put it in the oven. And if we put it in the oven and we take it out, just after a minute or two, it's not even began to bake.

And a half-baked cake is no good to anyone. And so it is with a half-baked view of the incarnation. Jesus, yes, was born into this world.

That is true. And there is nothing wrong with acknowledging that. But he was born, friends, for a reason. For unto you is born to you this day in the city of David what?

A saviour. That's good news. Not that Jesus was born a first minister or a prime minister or an economist or an ecologist or an epidemiologist.

All of these things are good in their own place and important too. But none of them, bar none, will meet our greatest need.

[19 : 58] The need of our saviour. The need of that great gulf between us and God to be filled, to be bridged. A gap that can only be bridged and covered by the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The blood of the God who condescended to come into this world as a human being. Not, as we see here, with any pomp or any ceremony, but with the greatest gift or spirit of humility.

Let's just look at the scene. What do we have here? A babe. A babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in the feeding trough of an animal, surrounded by the muck of the animals.

And who is this? This is God. The God who stooped to such depths of depravity. Why? So that He could identify with you and with me.

A humility that would lead Him to live in this world, to grow up in this world, just like you and I did. To put His hand to the tools and to become a carpenter as no doubt some even of you here tonight have done.

[21 : 28] What humility. He did not choose as God incarnate to isolate Himself in an ivory tower away from the people, lording it over them from a distance.

That is not the God we worship tonight. And if that's who you think God is, He is a God of your imagination and not a God that any of the Lord's people would profess to know.

He is near. He is amongst His people. He is an ever-present God. A God whose humility and humanity was born out of love.

You know, even in the church we need to keep a check on this and to remind ourselves of this. that we don't even as ministers or elders or deacons or even members, that we don't somehow elevate ourselves over others.

That in our communities we don't think that we are greater than others and go around with this air of superiority and pride.

[22 : 39] That's not the spirit of Jesus. Jesus. And if that is you, friend, you are defying your profession and your Savior. He was in the feeding trough of an animal.

That's humility. That's love. That is your example. That is my example. Let us never, ever be carried away with any other notion of what it is to be a Christian other than the example of our Savior.

The one who cared for people. The one who came alongside people. The one who was interested in people. The one who didn't look down on them but rather drew the marginalized to himself.

The lepers, the demon-possessed, the immoral woman of the day. All of them, he drew them to himself and he interacted with them and he gave them his time.

That is our God. The suffering servant. And this is the one who calls to you tonight to come and get to know him more because he's worth getting to know, I can tell you.

[24 : 02] So that what we have here is the best news ever. that he died in the greatest act of humility on Calvary's hill.

Taking to himself that punishment that should have been yours and mine. Would you do that for anyone? Would I? I doubt it. Yet he did.

All he asks us to do tonight is not to jump through hoops or to go through a checklist.

All he asks us to do tonight, friends, is to believe. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Not my words, his.

Believe. which brings us on to our final point. What is to be done with this glorious reality before us? What do we do with this good news?

[25 : 01] Well, we see in the narrative here, we see reactions, do we not, to this news in verse 13. 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.

What a picture. Here we have the shepherds on the hillside with the angel in front of them and as soon as this announcement is made, the greatness of this announcement is so that heaven itself cannot be contained.

A heavenly host comes in and joins in with the praise and adoration of the Savior. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

They knew. They knew that the incarnation of Jesus was going to lead to God being glorified in a way that he'd never been glorified before.

Bishop J.C. Ryle put it like this. Speaking about Jesus, he says, he by his life and death on the cross would glorify God's attributes of justice, holiness, mercy, and wisdom as they were never glorified before.

[26 : 37] Creation glorified God but not so much as redemption. A redemption that would result in peace on earth.

What does that mean? Tonight, what does it mean to have peace on earth? Well, we might think it's an end of wars of man's inhumanity towards man and we would dearly love to see that but yet the fact is that when these words were inspired by the Holy Spirit, this was a time known as Pax Romana, a time where there was peace on earth in terms of wars.

But the reality is that even when wars cease, peace is still required. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, he sums it up quite nicely, I think.

he said this, while the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion and grief and envy.

He cannot give peace of heart for which man yearns even more than outward peace. It doesn't matter how many wars cease, we're still going to have that inner turmoil and battle raging whereby we're looking for peace, peace where there is no peace, going to the wrong places for that peace.

[28 : 14] We might be contented for a short while but then we find ourselves moving on to something else and something else and so we never find ourselves finding that peace.

We're on this perpetual journey towards peace but never finding it, not in Christ. Because what is offered here is peace between a holy God and sinful mankind.

That is a provision in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the greatest gift of all. Peace that could only ever be purchased not by our own good works, not by our respectability, not by how good we are as neighbors, not even by our church attendance, all good things, don't hear what I'm not saying.

But yet that peace can only ever, ever be purchased by the precious blood of Christ. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

These angels knew nothing of this redemption, they didn't need to, they hadn't fallen. But they knew something, they knew the glory and the wonder of what it was to be in perfect harmony, and they know, present tense, the glory and wonder of what it is to be in perfect harmony with God himself, and they desired it for these shepherds.

[29 : 46] They desired it as they looked upon mankind in this world, struggling, lurching from one day to the next, from one year to the next, from one decade, to the next, a world and a life that has many highs undoubtedly, but many lows also, a life alienated from God, and yet they knew that it didn't need to be like this, and that's why they praise and worship and adore.

Christian friend, do you praise and worship and adore? God, I say this to myself as much as to you, what impression do you give of the gospel to others?

Are you dragging your feet? Is your Christian walk characterized by dure morbidity? That is dishonoring to God.

The joy of the Lord is our strength. Our righteousness is not in ourselves. if we are going to continually reflect upon our sinful hearts, we know we are not what we would like to be.

That is true. But if our focus is solely on that, we are never ever going to come to that place of freedom and liberty whereby we cast ourselves on our Saviour and we cry out, Hallelujah, what a Saviour.

[31 : 15] Because we reflect all the more on the wonder of what He has done for us. I fear we've lost this. We become so embroiled even as God's people and tittle-tattle nonsense.

And our eyes are taken from the cross. And when our eyes are taken from the cross, we lose the joy of the reality and the implications of the cross for ourselves.

We forget. Let's come back to the cross. Let's come back to Jesus. Jesus, not by mere profession by our lips, but that which is in our hearts and in our lives.

We see that with the shepherds. We see that they respond in verse 15. When the angel, time is gone, I'm nearly done with this. 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 baby lying in a manger. Now we could devote another sermon to this whole scene when they come around Mary and Joseph lying and Jesus lying in a manger.

[32 : 40] We don't have time for that. But what we do notice is this, that after they find themselves filled with fear, they're brought to that place of realization.

And when they come to that place of realization, what do they do? Do they hum and haw? They had every reason to stay back. They had their flock to tend to.

But yet what we read is they say to each other, let us go. And they go with haste. You know, there's a picture here that's worth, I think, showing, casting some light on, and that is the fact that these shepherds, as they found themselves tending this flock on the hillside, they may very well have been tending the very sheep that would be used for the sacrificial temple worship.

And now what's happening? The great shepherd himself is saying, forget those sheep, forget them just now, and come and see me, not only the shepherd, but the sacrificial lamb.

What a picture. And you know, that's what he's saying to us tonight, to you. forget what you esteem to be so important in your life.

[34 : 17] Not that you necessarily turn your back on it, that's not the point. We're not called to be nuns and monks in the gospel kingdom, that's not what we're called to do.

But what we are called to turn our back on is an end of ourselves and our own self-righteousness. self-righteousness that shows itself in what?

A life lived without God. We might say we believe, but do we really believe? If we believe, we will go.

We will go to the sacrificial lamb ourselves. We will cast ourselves on him. and we will cry out to him for mercy.

You know, friends, he delights in that. He delights in all those who come to him. Don't put any stumbling blocks in your way. Come as you are and cry out that old prayer.

[35 : 28] Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Come and you will receive the greatest gift of all.

Yes, the gift of eternal life, that is true. But the gift of knowing God intimately as your father, as your friend, as your saviour.

What more could you want in this world? Christian friend, as I close, let us not think that somehow this doesn't apply to you and me.

We need to keep coming. We need to keep coming to the sacrificial lamb of God each and every day. We can never tire of the same old story, because it's the only story.

And it's not only just a story, it's a person, a person who died for you, who gave himself for you and for me.

[36 : 38] Come to him, dear friend, each and every day and have your faith reignited all the more, so that you are lively and vibrant in your witness to your saviour, the one who held nothing back

from you.

Let us pray. Lord, we give thanks for the wonder of your gospel, a gospel that is for all gathered here tonight, a gospel that knows no bounds and barriers, a gospel that permeates every culture, creed, and tongue.

We pray, O Lord, then that if there are any here this night who in their hearts long to call you Father, that you would in a very real way, in your loving kindness, reveal to them the wonder of who you are in Christ.

For what shall it profit a man if he should gain the whole world, yet lose his soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Bless in your word preached in our time together and forgive us for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, friends, we'll conclude our time of worship. We're going to sing to God's praise and sing Psalms in Psalm 66.

[38 : 12] Psalm 66. Psalm 66. Reading at the beginning of the psalm, shout loud with joy to God, all earth your chorus raise, sing loud the honour of his name, and glorious make his praise.

Down to verse 5, come see what God has done, his mighty works of old, his deeds towards the human race. This is the sentiment that we should have every day as his people, his deeds towards the human race, how awesome to behold.

Singing these verses to the praise of God. Shout loud with joy to God the Lord, all earth your chorus raise.

Sing loud the honour of his name, and glory has made his praise.

Speak loud to God the Lord, and raise the judy name.

[39 : 59] le They sing on out your fame. They never cease to celebrate the glory of your name.

Come see what the God's done His mighty works of all.

His feet to watch the human race are awesome to me all.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit rest on and abide with you now and forevermore. Amen.

Amen. Amen.