

“GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY”

Luke 2:8–20

Key Verses: 2:10–11

“And 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.’”

During this month of Advent, we’ve thought about the hope that Jesus gives, the peace he brings, and the love he shows. Today we’re going to focus on the joy that is found only in Jesus. It’s a fitting finale. Why? Well, if we have hope, and peace, and love, all put together, we cannot *but* have joy, right?

Today we’re looking at the meaning of Jesus’ birth in Luke 2. Right after his birth, God sends an angel to tell some shepherds that it’s happened. These men learn not only that Jesus is born, but what his birth means. Basically, the birth of Jesus is joy to the world. What a statement: “Joy to the World!” And when these men act on the angel’s message, they experience this “great joy” for themselves. Why is the birth of Jesus such great joy? How can we have this joy? And why should we? May God speak to us through his word today.

In chapter 1 Luke told how the birth of Jesus (PICTURE) came about. In history God made many promises about the coming of Jesus.¹ And in the fullness of time, God kept all his promises. But the way God did it was so unusual. The forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist, was born to very elderly parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Then, Jesus himself was born to an unwed teenage girl, Mary. God chose to work in such unlikely ways to show us his grace. It also was to show us that nothing is impossible with God (1:37), and that God still works through anyone who believes his words.² In chapter 1, overjoyed when they realize what God is doing, both Mary and Zechariah sing joyful songs of praise to God.

Then, at the beginning of chapter 2, Luke tells us, in quiet understatement, how Jesus was born. Though Mary and Joseph were from Nazareth, God worked it out through a decree of Caesar Augustus for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. God caused his Son to be born in the city of David, in the house and lineage of David (2:4), to be given the throne of his father David (1:32,69). Luke also highlights some details of his birth. Joseph and Mary were helpless and poor. Though the time came for her to deliver her baby, there was no place for them in the inn; so, when he was born, he was placed in a manger, in a smelly, germmy barn (2:7). Jesus was born under oppression, into poverty, and was despised and rejected. At first, it’s hard to see what’s so joyful about that.

¹ 1:55,70,72–73.

² 1:20,38,45.

Nothing about his birth is explained until the next section. Look at verse 8. “And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.” In this passage the shepherds appear three more times (15,18,20). So far, Luke’s main characters have been an elderly couple, a teenage girl, and now, shepherds. It tells us that in every generation God works to scatter the proud and exalt the humble (1:51–52).

Where are these shepherds? This field was in the region of Bethlehem (PICTURE), up in the hill country of Judah, a little over five miles south of Jerusalem. Originally, Bethlehem was the place where Jacob’s wife Rachel died.³ Bethlehem also was the hometown of Naomi, where Ruth met and married Boaz.⁴ Most of all, Bethlehem was the hometown of David.⁵ When he was called to serve as King Saul’s musician, David used to commute from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to continue caring for his father’s sheep (1 Sam.17:15). So Bethlehem became known as a shepherd’s town (PICTURE). Centuries later, the prophet Micah predicted that a shepherd-like ruler would come from this little town of Bethlehem.⁶

And what were these shepherds doing? Verse 8b says they were “keeping watch over their flock by night.” Night was a time when harm could come to the sheep, in the form of thieves and wolves. It’s a metaphor for spiritual darkness, when those like thieves and wolves come to disturb and harm God’s people. The shepherds represent God’s servants, keeping watch to protect and defend the flock entrusted to them, faithfully, before the eyes of God. To the world’s eyes they are nobodies, but to God, his shepherd-like servants are most important.

Look at verse 9. “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.” For the third time Luke tells us how an angel appears to explain what’s going on.⁷ But this time, the angel is accompanied by “the glory of the Lord” shining all around them. It’s the light of the presence of God himself. No wonder these shepherds are filled with great fear—they realize they’re in the presence of the Holy God. It’s not just the shepherds’ silly story. Our God is an awesome God. From generation to generation, his mercy is for those who fear him (1:50). To really fear him, we should not be too wise or shrewd in our own eyes (Isa.5:21). But we can get so proud, over literally nothing. Our pride causes many problems. Worst of all, it causes us not to listen to God. On the other hand, reverent fear of God is key to experiencing great joy.⁸ The Bible tells us to “worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness” and “tremble before him.”⁹ It urges us to offer God “acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28). God still looks to the one “who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at” his word (Isa.66:2,5).

³ Gen.35:19; 48:7.

⁴ Ruth 1:1–2,19,22; 2:4.

⁵ 1 Sam.16:1,4,18; 17:12.

⁶ Mic.5:2; cf. Matt.2:5–6.

⁷ 1:11–17; 1:26–37.

⁸ 1:50; e.g. Matt.28:8.

⁹ 1 Chron.16:29b–30; Ps.96:9.

Read verses 10–11. “And 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.’” We need to fear God. But based on these words, there’s a reason we don’t need to be afraid. What is it? It’s because Jesus was born to save us. From what does he save us?

First, Jesus saves us from our sorrows. Outwardly, most people seem rather happy. But underneath, many have hidden sorrows. We become sorrowful when our circumstances seem too hard, when things turn out so differently from what we had hoped, when we think about a loved one we lost, or when we realize life is so fleeting and empty. All these sorrows come from living in a world ruled by death and the curse. In such a world, people suffer in so many ways: from disease and sickness, from random difficulties, and from injustice.

How does Jesus save us from our sorrows? The Bible says Jesus was “a man of sorrows” (Isa.53:3). Jesus, who went through all kinds of sorrows, deeply understands our sorrows. His understanding makes us feel better. But he came not just to understand but to resolve our sorrows. How? By showing us that death is not the end. Through his resurrection, Jesus defeated Satan and broke the power of death over us. Through his resurrection he became our Christ and Lord (Acts 2:36). The Risen Jesus promises us victory (1 Cor.15:57). And the Bible tells us he will restore all things in his eternal kingdom (Acts 3:21). He shows us that even in a world filled with tragedy and grief, God is sovereign over all. God uses all things, even the worst ones, for a good purpose (Rom.8:28). We all need to come to Jesus personally and let him heal our sorrows.

Second, Jesus saves us from our sins. Zechariah prophesied that Jesus would become “a horn of salvation for us” (1:69). “Horn” implies power or strength. And this “horn” points to a spiritual battle that can leave us crippled for life. It may start out small, with some kind of doubt after something bad happens. Then Satan’s influence on us gradually grows. Soon, we face the passions of the flesh that wage war against our soul (1 Pet.2:11). Each time we give in, Satan impales us with his horn. Wounded by him, we lose all strength to resist. This spiritual wound is fatal. Through Satan’s wounding, darkness, hatred and rebellion begin to reign in us. We become angry, bitter and fatalistic for no obvious reason. No amount of ability or willpower can save us. But if we accept Jesus as our horn of salvation and depend on him, he saves us. As we look to him who suffered and died on the cross for us, the Bible says that “by his wounds we have been healed” (1 Pet.2:24). Jesus heals our sin-sickness. He helps us taste the greatness of God’s forgiveness. He enables us to forgive others. He sets us free from the idol of materialism. He helps us see how we’ve been enslaved to the empty way of life, living for vain, selfish ambition, or struggling just to survive. He replaces this with a glorious mission, to live as his witnesses and spread his good news all over the world. Ultimately, he redeems us fully and brings us back to his eternal kingdom. When we learn to stand by faith only in his grace, we rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Rom.5:2). His grace of salvation becomes our source of real joy.

The last part of verse 10 says that this good news of great joy is “for all the people.” It’s for the very religious and the not-at-all religious. The good news of great joy is for people of all races and cultures, and for everyone in between. It’s for the most successful and the most

shameful. It's for people not a part of our community. It's for all those around the world who've never even heard of Jesus.

Right after I was born, my mom had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. My dad had to raise us kids like a single parent. I don't remember my mom until I was four years old. She continued to be in and out of the hospital and got worse and worse until she could no longer care for herself, not to mention us. As a little boy I prayed for her every day, but it didn't work. Often I cried myself to sleep, wondering why God let this happen to my mom. Soon, my heart toward God began to harden. During my teenage years I became rebellious and did many things I knew were wrong. I was young and ambitious, but inwardly I was sick with guilt and condemnation. Sin was ruining my life.

At the end of my freshman year of college I was invited to UBF Bible study. Through the patient love and prayers of his servants, God helped me confess all my sins and led me to Jesus. I finally believed God's promise that Jesus suffered and died in my place, and God set me free from my darkness. Jesus my Savior gave me his hope, his peace, his love and his joy. He truly changed my sorrow to joy. I wanted everyone around me to experience it, too. By his grace God called me to be a shepherd and Bible teacher and saved me from a self-glory-seeking life. I felt it such a privilege to follow my Lord Jesus and serve his purpose for my life. Everything else seemed like rubbish. When I shared how Jesus saved and healed me, people were surprised because he erased all the sorrow and sin in my soul. Nothing and no one could ever give me joy like he does. Not family, not material things, not ministry, not a position—only Jesus. May God forgive me for forgetting his grace and looking for joy elsewhere. This Christmas may God help us all experience the true joy that's found only in Jesus.

In chapter 1, to help Zechariah believe, the angel gave him a sign: he would not be able to speak until his son was born (1:20). To help Mary believe, the angel gave her a sign, too: her elderly and barren relative Elizabeth had become pregnant (1:36). Now the angel gives a sign to the shepherds. Look at verse 12. "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." These cloths were commonly used on newborns. But a baby lying in a manger, an animal's feedbox, was really strange! And there's more to help the shepherds. Look at verses 13–14. "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!'" This angel chorus helped the shepherds not only to believe, but also to understand why the birth of this baby is the source of the greatest joy.

In the last part of the passage, we see how the shepherds act on what they hear. They go to Bethlehem to see what had happened. Just as the angel said, they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger (15–16). What did they do next? Read verses 17–18. "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." When these shepherds realized that what the angel said was true, they immediately began telling others. They didn't keep it to themselves; they began sharing the good news. Mary "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (19). But the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had

heard and seen, as it had been told them (20). It shows how they came to experience the good news of great joy for themselves. They went and saw, then they made it known. Like them, if we act on the word we're told, not only our conviction but also our joy in Jesus grows.

This Christmas, may God help us accept the good news of great joy that Jesus was born to be our Savior. May we newly experience that he saves us from our sorrows and all our sins. And may we act on this good news of great joy and tell others, so his joy may spread to all the world.