

## **The Birth Announcement of God's Son (Part 1)**

**Luke 2:8-20**

**December 15, 2013**

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Well, if you are in touch with the news at all, then you know that there was an event this year that made international headlines. On July 22, 2013 Prince George was born to William and Catherine, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. His birth was announced in many different ways. In fact, there was some scandal, I guess, among the British because tradition was seriously broken when the first announcement of the birth itself came through a press release through the palace.

But calm was soon restored when shortly thereafter, the traditional formal notice was posted on an easel outside of Buckingham palace. The bells of Westminster Abbey rang along with the church bells across the country and even around the world in other places friendly to England. It was something to be remembered, the announcement of the birth of this little baby, Prince George.

This is a long tradition though in English culture. The BBC tells us that when Edward the 7<sup>th</sup> back in 1841 was born to Queen Victoria, there were very clear rules for the announcement of the birth that were actually set in stone. The first and most important announcement came by the firing of the guns from the park and tower fortresses. But even before those guns had fired, the words of Edward the 7<sup>th</sup>'s birth had begun to be published by word of mouth, and the reason they were getting out by word of mouth was, in those days it was a custom to have cabinet ministers actually attend the royal births, which of course led to the news breaking as you might imagine very quickly.

Now that seems odd to us, but understand that the practice of politicians acting as witness and verifying royal births actually had begun back in 1688 with the birth of King James the 2<sup>nd</sup>'s son because there were rumors that had circulated that the baby had been still born and the royal child had been replaced with an imposter, smuggled in to the royal birth chamber in a warming bed pan. An official announcement was made, and there were 80 plus witnesses at the birth in order to confirm that in fact the son was a legitimate heir, an heir to the throne. Because of the values that are placed on succession and lineage in any sort of a situation where there's a king,

royal births have to be officially observed, officially announced, and officially recorded for posterity.

It's interesting when you consider all of that in contrast to Luke's simple account of the birth of Christ. When you read Luke 2 you are immediately struck by its quiet simplicity. Here was the royal birth, exalted above all others. And yet, rather than in the palace, this royal Son was delivered in a cave, a cave used for sheltering and feeding animals. Rather than an entourage of witnesses, representing the great and the influential people of the nation, only Joseph and Mary, His poor and obscure parents were there to witness the actual birth. Jesus' birth happened quietly, unnoticed, and unannounced.

But it was not God's plan for Jesus' birth to remain in such obscurity. Instead, God had plans. He had planned the greatest birth announcement in history for the birth of His only Son. The announcement is recorded for us in Luke 2 where I invite you to turn with me this morning.

Two years ago, we studied Luke 2:1 - 7. That famous passage of course records the historical event of Jesus' birth, the actual birth, and the circumstances immediately surrounding it. Today and next Sunday, I want us to study Luke 2 beginning at verse 8 and working our way down through verse 20. This passage is the divine birth announcement of Jesus. Let me read it for you, Luke 2 beginning in verse 8, very familiar words, but let me encourage you to read it as though you've never heard it before. You follow along as I read.

In the same region there were *some* shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. 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; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. "This *will* be a sign for you: you will find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

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.” So, they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.”

Now, let me remind you of the larger context in which these words appear. They appear for us of course in Luke’s gospel. Luke explains to us in the first four verses of his gospel why he wrote these accounts. He says that he wrote to a man named Theophilus, probably a high Roman official, and he wrote to him so that Theophilus could know the historical foundation, he could know with certainty about the historical events on which his faith in Jesus Christ was founded. It serves the same purpose for us as well. Luke tells us in the first four verses of his gospel that he carefully investigated all of the things about which he’s written. Not only were they handed down to him by the apostles, but he investigated them for himself as well.

We know that for two years Luke was Paul’s companion while Paul was in prison in Caesarea on the coast of Israel. It was probably during those two years that Luke went from the length and breadth of Israel visiting the places where Jesus had lived and taught and worked miracles, interviewing the people. In fact, he almost certainly interviewed Mary. Most scholars agree that that’s where these birth accounts come from. He may have very well interviewed one or more of the shepherds as well. Remember most of these people were still alive at the time that Luke was conducting his investigation. And it comes from Luke’s interviews with the first-hand witnesses, Mary and probably the shepherds as well, that we learn the details of what happened the night of Jesus’ birth. And specifically, it’s how we learn about the announcement of Jesus’ birth that’s recorded in the verses we just read together.

Now, in these verse’s Luke unfolds several amazing details for us about the divine birth announcement of God’s Son. And I want us to look at these details together. The first detail is the unlikely audience, the unlikely audience, who God chose in terms of announcing the birth of His Son. You see the birth of Jesus Christ is remarkable not for what happened but for what didn’t happen. You understand that the conception of Jesus was miraculous. It was to a virgin, “a virgin conceived in her womb.” But the birth of Jesus Christ was ordinary and pedestrian and

natural. It was like my birth, it's like your birth. It's remarkable for its utter simplicity, its complete lack of pomp and ceremony.

I want you to think for a moment about the people that God did not invite to the birth of His Son. There were no Roman political figures there to welcome the Son of God. At this point, Herod the Great, that wonderful architect, wicked man, but wonderful architect and leader of his people, was still alive. He could usually be found just a couple of miles away in Jerusalem, or if not there, six miles south of Bethlehem he had built that massive palatial structure called Herodian, and that's often where he was.

But he wasn't in Bethlehem that night. Quirinius the Roman governor of Syria, the one who had enacted the registration for the purpose of taxation, the very reason that Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem. He wasn't there. No Roman officials came from the nearby town of Caesarea. Not one leader of Israel was included. Jerusalem was only three to five miles from Bethlehem, but none of the 71 members of the Sanhedrin, none of the scribes, none of the Pharisees, not the high priest, none of them were there, not even the political leaders of the little town of Bethlehem.

And do you remember the reason that Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem? They're there because every Israelite was required to return to his ancestral town and register for the purpose of Roman taxation. Some of the most important and influential people in the nation of Israel traced their lineage back to David who was from Bethlehem, and so it's very likely that that night Bethlehem was overflowing with the rich and the powerful, the influential. They were right there but none of them were invited to the birth of Jesus Christ.

Now, let's just be honest with each other. If we were God, it wouldn't have been so. Some of those important people would have been included and been invited there to witness the birth of Christ. But that's not what God did. Instead, God chose a most unlikely audience for His divine birth announcement. Look at verse 8, "In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night." These shepherds we're told, were in the same region, that is they were somewhere near this town of Bethlehem.

The traditional shepherd's field, we can't be sure that that's where it is, but the traditional shepherd's field is about two miles away from the Church of the Holy Nativity where almost certainly, it's one of the few places in Israel where you can be fairly certain the event actually happened there. Regardless, they were in the fields that David himself had spent his youth in shepherding the flock. And they were living it says, staying out in the fields. Now some have sited the fact that these shepherds were living in the fields to argue that Jesus couldn't have been

born in the winter, because surely if it were winter they wouldn't have been staying out in the fields, they would have instead been elsewhere. It must have been spring they argue. However, Jewish authors tell us that sheep were kept in the fields near Bethlehem throughout the year.

Even to this day you can visit Bethlehem any point in the winter, and you will find shepherds keeping sheep, not for tourist purposes, but because that's what they do. And in fact, the rabbi's, the writings of the rabbi's tell us that sheep were kept year-round near Bethlehem because that's the source from which many of the sacrificial animals for the temple came. So, it may have been winter.

When was Jesus born? Let's take that question for just a moment. When was this, first of all, considering the year? As to the exact year of Jesus' birth, the best evidence, and you can read about this if you are interested in an excellent book by Harold Hoehner called *Chronological Aspects in the Life of Christ*, as the title suggests, it's not for the faint hearted. But in that book he points to the best date probably being December of 5 BC or early January of 4 BC. And the reason for that is we know Jesus was born before Herod the Great died. And we know Herod the Great died in April of 4 BC. So, he had to have been alive long enough to have received the magi and to have sent out the order to massacre the infants in Bethlehem. So, December of 5 BC is a very possible date.

Now, as far as specifically what day and month, we can't be sure. But I will say this, I know that it's popular among Christians today to sort of trounce on the date of December 25<sup>th</sup> and say no way it could ever have been that, that's a pagan date. I don't agree with that. I don't believe that. There is an ancient tradition that goes back on the date of December 25<sup>th</sup>, in fact before Constantine, in the writings of a man named Hippolytus who wrote in the early 200's, we know he died in 236 AD, and he wrote in his commentary on Daniel these words, "For the first advent of our Lord in the flesh when He was born in Bethlehem, was 8 days before the calends of January."

The word "calends" is just a word for the first day of the Roman month. So, eight days before the first of January, December 25<sup>th</sup>. That was in the early 200's AD that he wrote those words. So, although we can't be sure of what day Christ was born, it's not recorded for us in the text of Scripture, December 25<sup>th</sup> has been the traditional date, and it has been so since the early 200's, and it is very possible that it is true.

Now, what we can be sure of, Luke tells us that these events notice verse 8, were unfolding at night. During the day time the sheep were allowed to graze the fields. But at night they were placed into crude pens or sheep folds in order to protect them better from predators and thieves. On that winter night there were several shepherds who were watching this one flock, it's called a flock singular, together.

Now if they were doing what was normally done, typically the shepherds would each take a watch of the night. There were four watches of the night typically divided up and the others during the time they were off, would try to catch some sleep. The early evening, they would all be awake together, and then they would sleep until it was their watch and so at some point during the night, we're not told what watch of the night or how many were awake, initially these shepherds are there. It was an ordinary night like so many other ordinary nights on which they had kept sheep.

Shepherds. Now you are so familiar with the shepherds being a part of the Christmas story that it just seems right and natural, but if you had lived in the first Century, and you were hearing this story for the first time, you would be shocked perhaps appalled that shepherds were involved. Because you see although two of Israel's greatest leaders in history both Moses and David had served their stint as shepherds, and although God Himself is called the Shepherd of Israel, in everyday life shepherds were often despised. They were considered to be the lowest of the low. This became increasingly true in the post New Testament era. In fact, according to the Talmud, the Jewish Talmud, there were several reasons that shepherds were simply not respected, were looked down upon.

First of all, because of the nature of their work, those who became shepherds tended to be of a lower class. Shepherds were filling a role that was just a notch above a day laborer. They were at the very bottom, and therefore, were looked down upon by the rest of the culture and society.

Secondly, they were nomadic wanderers, really not having a home, not having a settled structure of family life. They were responsible to move from field to field finding pasture for their sheep, and therefore, the lifestyle that comes with that was theirs.

Because of that, thirdly most people considered shepherds to be thieves. They were considered as those who had a hard time as they wandered around distinguishing between what was mine and thine. It was so bad that the rabbis eventually included shepherds in their list of occupations known for thieving and cheating.

Like when I was in college in seminary working my way through school, I worked as an electrician and within the building trades, certain trades are known for having people who engage in certain kinds of sin, who are known for certain kinds of things. In the first century it was that way with the shepherds. To be a shepherd was to immediately be suspected of being dishonest. In fact, it was eventually forbidden to buy wool, milk, or a goat from a shepherd, the rabbi said, because you had to assume that those didn't belong to them and that they had been stolen. They were considered so dishonest that, in the time of the Talmud, they were not allowed to serve as judges or even as witnesses in court.

There's another reason that they're considered to be the lowest of the low and that's because their kind of lifestyle caused them to be banned often from the synagogues and from the temple. The kind of work they did kept them from keeping the normal religious observances that were required by the law. They were also kept from being ceremonially clean, much of what they did exposed them to being ceremonially unclean, and therefore unable to worship in a synagogue on the Sabbath or at the temple.

The Midrash, an ancient Jewish commentary on the Old Testament says, "No position in the world is so despised as that of the shepherd." One rabbi asked with amazement how in view of the despicable nature of shepherds one can explain the fact that God allows Himself to be called Israel's Shepherd. That's who the shepherds were. They're not the polished ivory figures of our manger scenes and crèches, and yet, shepherds were the only ones God invited to the celebration of the birth of His Son.

John Calvin writes, "It would have been to no purpose that Christ was born in Bethlehem if it had not been made known to the world. But God's method of doing so described by Luke appears to us very unsuitable. First Christ is revealed, but to a few witnesses, and that too in the darkness of night. Again, though God had at His command many honorable and distinguished witnesses, He passed by them and chose shepherds, persons of humble rank and of no account among men."

It's really no different for us, is it? Like the shepherds, we too are utterly unworthy to receive God's grace. We too, are utterly unworthy to worship the Son of God, but like them, God has shown us grace in spite of what we are, in spite of what we deserve. You see if you ask yourself the question, "Why did God choose the shepherds?" The answer is because this is how God normally works.

My mind goes immediately to First Corinthians 1. You remember Paul's words to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:26, "For consider your calling, brethren, there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble;"

There are some, but there are not many who are wise in the world, not many who are mighty, who are people of nobility. But instead look at 1 Corinthians 1:27, here's how God normally works.

"... God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are," [In other words, God typically chooses the nothings and the nobodies. Why? Well he explains it in the very next verse.] "so that no man may boast before God."

I can promise you this, not one of those shepherds ever walked around saying, "We deserved to be there that night." God alone got the glory. It's the same with us, shepherds, a most unlikely audience for the announcement of the birth of Jesus Christ. But they were there. And an announcement they got. Look at verse 9. "And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them,"

The angel Gabriel, you remember, is the one who had made the earlier announcements in the book of Luke. It had been 400 years of silence. God had not spoken for 400 years. It had been more than 400 years since an angel had shown up, more than 400 years since a miracle had occurred. And then the angel Gabriel shows up while a priest named Zacharias is in the temple, in probably his once in a lifetime opportunity to present the incense in the holy place. He's an old man, probably the only time in his life he's done it. It was only allowed once. You, the lot fell to you once in your lifetime as a priest to do this. And while he was in the holy place presenting the incense, he's in there alone, suddenly the angel Gabriel appears.

It was Gabriel as well in what we read a few minutes ago from the enunciation to Mary who showed up in the little village of Nazareth in the home of a teenaged girl named Mary to announce that she had been chosen by God because of His grace, not because of anything in her, to bear the Son of God. And so, it's possible that this is Gabriel as well, we don't know for sure, but I think it's possible.



It's a sad thing, I think, that our culture has robbed us of an appropriate view of angels. When our culture pictures angels, typically they're cute chubby little cherubs, or they're women, or they are effeminate men. But, in the Bible, when an angel shows up, there's always one common reaction, and that is fear. This is the angel, perhaps the angel Gabriel from the presence of God. Remember, it was one angel in Old Testament times who in one night killed 186,000 Assyrian soldiers. These are powerful intelligent beings, and there's fear. But the presence of an angel was not the only cause for their fear, notice how verse 9 continues, "and the glory of the Lord shown around them;"

Along with the appearance of the angel came a blinding display of the glory of God. This is important to note, because sometimes in the Old Testament, when an angel appeared, he could present himself in such a way as a male human so that the person to whom he was speaking didn't even realize he was an angel. In fact, even in the New Testament era the writer of Hebrews says that there were those, and I think this still happens to this day, who had "entertained angels without knowing it, unawares."

But in this case, God wanted the shepherds to know that this was an angel, and what he was speaking came directly from God. And so, God surrounds the angel and the shepherds with a visible display of His own presence. The word "glory" refers in this context to the splendor that is often associated with a visible display of God's presence.

Now, you understand that God is a Spirit. He doesn't have a form, He doesn't have a body like you and I have. He's a Spirit. But at times God chooses to specially manifest His presence. He's present everywhere. It's not like He's present in one place and not in another, but at times He chooses, even as a Spirit to specially manifest His presence in one place so that people know He's present, without question. And when God does that in the Old Testament, He often does so in what is called in Hebrew "the Shekinah," the glory cloud, a blazing flashing cloud of brilliant bright light. It indicated God's personal presence.

You remember the glory cloud accompanied Israel on most of their journey out of Egypt in the exodus. It was the pillar of fire that led them by night and the blazing cloud that led them by day. When the tabernacle, and later the temple, was built, God brought His presence in a visible way, in the Shekinah. It settled down, that blazing cloud settled down on the tabernacle and on the temple in order to demonstrate to His people that He really was present among them. That holy of holies was His own personal throne room from which He ruled His people. But sadly,

because of Israel's sin and her rebellion and her idolatry, eventually that manifestation of God's presence, that brilliant blazing cloud of light deserted His people.

If you've ever read Ezekiel, you've read the tragic story as Ezekiel pictures that glory cloud, the Shekinah lifting from the temple, lingering for a moment over the gates of the temple, and then going to the gates of the city, and then to the mountain overlooking the city, and then disappearing into the distance as the visible manifestation of God's presence leaves. That was 600 years before Christ, and there was never again another appearance of that blazing glory cloud until that cold December night.

It happened just shortly thereafter again in directing the wise men to the magi to the house where Jesus was living with His parents in Bethlehem. That wasn't a celestial event, couldn't stand over a house and direct them to a particular house, it was the glory cloud, almost certainly. We know for sure that it was the glory cloud at the transfiguration. In Jesus' ministry when the disciples were overwhelmed, the three disciples were overwhelmed by this demonstration of the glory of Christ. It appeared yet again at the ascension, when Jesus left this earth. It says the clouds received Him up. Don't think white puffy clouds, think the blazing glory cloud of God's presence. There was no question but what Christ was all that He claimed. The next time the Shekinah appears, it will be at the second coming. He comes with clouds.

But that first Christmas night the blazing cloud of God's glory appeared, and it flashed and brilliantly lit up the entire area around the angel and the shepherds that night. When you understand that, it's perfectly understandable that verse 9 says, "they were terribly frightened." An angel and the Shekinah, they knew they were in the presence of God. And they knew the voice they heard was an angel speaking for God. So, these poor despised shepherds are the unlikely audience of God's birth announcement for His Son.

Next, in Luke's narrative, he shares another detail with us, and it's the grand announcement itself, what God said. It's found in verses 10 - 14, notice verse 10, "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;" Notice, he begins his message and now you understand why, with "do not be afraid."

Can I just stop here and make an important theological point? You and I ought to fear God in the sense that we stand in awe of Him. We respect Him. We honor Him. We fear disobeying Him and bringing displeasure to Him. That is absolutely right, but we ought not to live in slavish fear and dread of Him. I love Romans 8:15, if you're a Christian, if you're in Christ this is what Paul

says, “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!”

First John 4:18 says, “There’s no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.” John is saying, listen, when you come to understand God’s love for you in Christ, and when you respond in love to Him, then that abject terrorizing kind of fear that drives you away from God is no longer a reality. Instead, you experience the right kind of fear of Him, what Derek Kidner calls “the poles of awe and intimacy.”

So, after an angel, or God Himself appears to man, the first words most often are what? Do not be afraid. The angel continues, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news.” The expression “I bring good news” is actually one Greek verb. It’s one of Luke’s favorite words. In fact, he uses this word more than any other New Testament author, in Luke and in the other New Testament book he wrote, Acts. It literally means “I announce or I proclaim good news.” Sometimes it’s translated “I announce or I proclaim the gospel.”

Understand the word gospel is not a Greek word. The word gospel is an English word, an old English word made up of two Old English words, “gôd” meaning “good” and “spel” meaning “story or news.” “Gospel” is simply “good news or the good story.” It’s an English word. The Greek word simply means, “I announce or proclaim good news.”

Initially, this Greek word was used to describe the announcement of good news of any kind. Eventually, it came to be used more specifically. We use the word good news like this, I mean right, you walk up to someone and you say, “I have good news.” But eventually in the New Testament it came to be used almost exclusively of the good news of spiritual salvation through Jesus Christ. This good news was the focus of the ministry of John the Baptist. Turn over to Luke 3:18, we read this, “So with many other exhortations, John preached the gospel.” Literally he announced or proclaimed the good news to the people. That was the focus of his ministry, proclaiming the good news. Same thing was true with the ministry of Jesus, look at Luke 4:42,

“When day came, Jesus left and went to a secluded place; and the crowds were searching for Him, and came to Him and tried to keep Him from going away from them. But He said to them, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also,” [Literally, I must announce or proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also. In other words, I have come with a message of good

news that you can get into My spiritual kingdom. And notice what He says, at the end of verse 43,] “for I was sent for this purpose.” [Jesus said, listen, I came to bring the good news about you’re being able to enter the spiritual kingdom over which God rules.]

When you survey this word throughout the New Testament, it’s interesting because you’ll find attached to it the content of the good news. If you search the word that we’re seeing here throughout the New Testament, you’ll hear the good news described like this. It’s described as liberty for captives, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the spiritually blind. It’s described as good news about the kingdom of God as we just saw. It’s described as good news about Jesus Christ, good news about peace with God through Jesus Christ, good news about Jesus and the resurrection, good news about the unfathomable riches of Christ, good news about the promise of a Savior made to the fathers. No wonder when the angel says it’s good news, he immediately explains that this good news, notice verse 10, will be a source, “of great joy,” great joy.

You know I know these are busy and distracting times, the holidays. I know that many, perhaps you, are going through great hardship in your life. Those can be causes for discouragement, for being despondent. Listen, if you really understand what’s being announced and what you’ve come to participate in, you can have great joy. John Calvin writes,

“These words show us that until men have peace with God and are reconciled to Him through the grace of Christ, all the joy that they experience is deceitful and of short duration. The commencement or the beginning of solid joy is to perceive the love of God toward us which alone gives tranquility to our minds.”

It’s only when you begin to understand the love that God has demonstrated in Christ, and you respond to that love in faith and obedience, that you really experience great joy. There is no greater joy than the reality of the salvation brought to us in Christ. I really don’t care what’s happening to you right now and how bad it is. If you can grasp this announcement, if you can grasp the reality of what we celebrate in this season, you can experience great “mega-joy,” the Greek says.

Remember when the disciples came back from their missionary ministry? And they were all excited about what God had enabled them to do and in Luke 10:20, Jesus says this to them, “... do not rejoice ... that the spirits are subject to you, but [instead] rejoice [or find your joy in this]

that your names are recorded in heaven.” There’s something to be joyful about, it doesn’t really matter what happens here. Your name is recorded in God’s book. Your eternity is settled. You’re God’s child.

Notice the angel says that this great joy, this good news which produces great joy, verse 10, “will be for all the people...” The most common meaning of this expression, when it’s used in the singular as it is here, “the people” singular, is the people of Israel. And certainly, God was bringing salvation for His people Israel. Zacharias mentioned this in his prophecy. You remember in Luke 1:68 after John was born and Zacharias could speak again, he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he prophesied, verse 68 of chapter 1,

“Blessed *be* the Lord God of Israel for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of David His servant - As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old- Salvation FROM OUR ENEMIES, And FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US; To show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant, The oath which He swore to Abraham our father,”

Israel certainly would benefit from the good news, but the angel here means more than just the Jewish people. This message of good news is universal in its scope. In fact, look at Luke 2 just a few verses later. Luke 2, you remember that Jesus is presented at the temple, according to the law of purification, and there Mary and Joseph meet a man named Simeon. Verse 28 of Luke 2, Simeon took Jesus in his arms and blessed God and said,

“Now Lord, You are releasing Your [slave] ... to depart in peace, According to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation,” [This child is the One who is going to bring salvation. And notice it is a salvation] “Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,” [Plural] “A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, And the glory of Your people Israel.”

So, when the angel said, “shall be for all the people” he meant it is a piece of good news for the whole world. But what is the good news that produces great joy and is intended for the whole world? The answer comes back in 2: 11. “For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Here is the heart of the gospel. Here is the reason we celebrate at Christmas. Through this child, God is bringing a Savior. He will accomplish man's complete spiritual rescue. In fact, this is the reason Jesus came. It's not a coincidence that God commanded Joseph to name the baby Jesus, to call the Messiah Jesus. You see the Greek word for Jesus is a transliteration of a Hebrew word, a Hebrew name, in English it's "Joshua," in Hebrew it's "Yehoshua." The name "Jesus" is simply that, it's "Joshua," it's "Yehoshua" into Greek. What does Joshua or Yehoshua or Jesus mean? It means "Yahweh saves, Yahweh rescues."

That's why in Matthew 1: 21 the angel Gabriel says to Joseph, "She," [Mary] "will bear a Son; and you shall call His name ... [Yehoshua,] for He will save His people from their sins." [Call Him "Yahweh saves," because He will save His people from their sins. He came as the Savior.] John 3:17, "... God ... [sent] His Son into the world ... [so] that the world might be saved through Him." John 12:47, Jesus says, "I" [came] ... to save the world."

Now what do we mean when we talk about Jesus saving us, or rescuing us, or His being a Savior? The Hebrew word is often, used in the Old Testament of rescuing someone from physical danger, or physical harm or distress. Sometimes, occasionally, the Hebrew word is used of spiritual rescue. But when you come to the New Testament, the Greek word to save and the noun form Savior refer primarily to spiritual rescue, to God's personal rescue of a person from the penalty his sin deserves at the judgment. Did you hear that? That's the rescue. It's God rescuing sinners from what their sin deserves when they stand before Him at the judgment.

But don't miss the crucial point this word "Savior" makes. Jesus is the Savior. He is the one who must do the rescuing. You can't rescue yourself. You contribute nothing to your rescue. Our spiritual rescue was initiated by the sovereign work of the Father in eternity past. It was accomplished by the sovereign work of the Son in His voluntary death for sin. And it is applied to individuals by the sovereign work of the Spirit who, like the wind, blows wherever He wills. God is always the Savior. He is the One who has to take the initiative in man's salvation.

Think about the very first sin, Adam's sin. How did Adam respond when he sinned? Did he go looking for God? No, he hid. He hid from God, and that's how man always responds to his sin. He runs from God, he hides from God. That's why Paul says there is no one who seeks after God. Instead, with Adam, the Second Person of the Trinity went searching for Adam. Adam where are you? He knew where he was, He wanted Adam to know where he was. And the rest of the Old Testament is filled with God seeking sinners, taking the initiative to rescue them.

The New Testament is filled with similar examples. I love the example of the Apostle Paul. Listen, Paul wasn't seeking Jesus Christ. He was on the road to Damascus to imprison, torture, and kill those who were His followers. But Jesus rescued Paul from himself.

Or the story of Zaccheus, listen Zaccheus wasn't looking for spiritual redemption that day. He climbed the tree out of curiosity to see what everybody else was seeing. But Jesus stands at the base of that tree, and what does He say to him? Zaccheus, come down because I have to go to your house today. And you know how Jesus finishes that story? In Luke 19:10, He says, "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." That's the reason He had to go to Zaccheus' house that day.

God is still pursuing sinners today. He does so through the message of the good news explained again. He's doing it right here as I'm speaking to you. Let me show this to you, turn to what you know is my favorite passage, 2 Corinthians 5. Second Corinthians 5, Paul says in verse 18 that he has been reconciled to God through Christ, God has done this, and God has given to Paul the ministry of reconciliation, telling other people they can be reconciled to God, verse 19,

namely, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself," [God was saving, God was initiating this reconciliation, and He did so through the death of Christ.] "... not counting their trespasses against them ..." [but against Christ, as verse 21 explains.] "and He has committed to us this message of reconciliation." [Now watch verse 20, Paul says,] "Therefore, we are ... [Christ's ambassadors,] we are His official representatives. And when we share this message of reconciliation it is] "as though God were making an appeal through us..." Paul says when I share the good news it's as if God is speaking through that message appealing to you to be reconciled to Him. He says, verse 20, "we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

In other words, Christ also, it's as if He is pleading with you through us to be reconciled to God. Listen, you know I believe strongly in the sovereignty of God in salvation, but God, whenever the gospel message is proclaimed, whenever the gospel is preached as it is here this morning, God is in that message pleading with sinners to respond and to be reconciled to Him, because God doesn't delight in the death of anyone.

At Jesus' birth, the angel made it clear that the purpose of Jesus' life and ministry was not to be a teacher of morality. He didn't come into this world to serve as a social reformer correcting all of

the social ills of first century Israel and the Roman Empire. He was not a political reformer who through His non-violent resistance came to bring about desperately needed political change.

Instead He came to be the Savior, the rescuer of the world. He came to seek and to save individuals who were desperately lost. He came to save His people from their sins as Gabriel said. Listen Christian, as you celebrate Christmas this year, I want you to remind yourself that the reason Jesus came in the form of that little infant, the reason He became everything you are except for sin, is because He was sent here on a divine rescue mission, a rescue mission from God. It was a mission, Christian, to rescue you from the absolutely certain verdict and sentence that you would receive someday when you stand before God at the judgment.

If you've not believed in Jesus, then understand that even as I'm teaching this morning, as Paul said, God and Christ are in the words of the good news I've shared with you, pleading with you to be reconciled to God, because if you don't, if nothing changes, someday according to Hebrews it is appointed that a man, once to die, you're going to die, and after this the judgment. You are as certainly going to stand before God in judgment as certainly as you will die.

And if the story is unchanged before that day, Jesus says the verdict of guilty and the sentence of eternal hell are absolutely settled, and He came to rescue you from that verdict and that sentence that your sins deserve. But you must repent of your sins. And you must put your faith in Jesus Christ. The heart of Christmas is this – there has been born for you a Savior, a Rescuer.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we are amazed by Your grace. We're amazed that You would create such a plan at such a tremendous cost to Yourself. But we thank You, O God, that You are by nature a Savior. You are by nature a Rescuer, and You sent Your Son on a rescue mission. Thank You that You initiate our rescue, that You accomplish our rescue, that you apply by Your Spirit that rescue to our own souls.

Father, we love You. We can never adequately thank You. But help us in this Christmas season to celebrate with great joy that there has been born for us a Rescuer.

Father, I pray for those here this morning who don't know You, and Lord I know there are those here for whom that's true. I pray that even in this season, they would hear You through the good news of a Savior sent, they would hear Your plea to be reconciled to You, and may they give up



their rebellion, and bow their knee to You, and seek the forgiveness that's found only in Your Son.

It's in His name we pray, Amen.