

The Angels' Song

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. Where are the really important things happening right now in our world? The really important things, the things that make a difference, the things that will decide where this world is going in the next hundred years.

Where are those things happening? Well, you'd think places like the White House in Washington, or Parliament, or the United Nations headquarters.

You know, these important places where important decisions are being made and important things are happening. Things that matter are discussed and decided here. Where are the really important things happening?

That's the question I want us to consider this morning, because this story recorded in the Bible in Luke chapter 2 that describes the circumstances around the birth of Jesus forces us to reevaluate that assumption.

And it shows us that when Jesus was born, the really important things in this world happen where you least expect them to happen. Now, let's look at this story.

[1 : 0 3] So it actually begins in Luke 2, interestingly, by setting the birth of Jesus in the context of the political movers and shakers of the day, the ones considered to be the important people who made the important decisions.

So have a look in your Bibles from verse 1. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Now, these people are mentioned because they are the people with power, the Romans.

And taking a census was a demonstration of just how powerful they were. Because in the ancient world, you don't just take a census for statistical reasons.

It was an establishment of power. When you counted the people that were under your control, you could work out how much you can tax them and how many people you could get to fight in your army. And so taking a census was basically Caesar saying, Hey, guys, I own you.

[2 : 0 6] You work for me now. And I'm the one with the power. That's what a census was saying, that these guys who are mentioned, they're the powerful ones. And Rome, of course, was the great power of the day.

If you know anything about ancient history, you'll know what a powerful and expansive empire they were. And they had invaded and conquered Israel with their legions about 60 years before this. And the Israelites knew who was in charge. They knew who they had to listen to. And that was the emperor Caesar Augustus. And so here he's issuing a census as a reminder of his power and control.

And yet when we read on, we discover it causes something very interesting to happen. Read on with me from verse 4. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house on the line of David.

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for a baby to be born. So she gave birth to her firstborn son.

[3 : 1 4] She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. Okay, so this is interesting, by the way.

We've got this picture of the inn and the innkeeper. There's no innkeeper mentioned in the Bible, by the way. The word for inn could also mean guest room in the big family house. And probably they didn't even have space in the guest room, so they had to make do with where the animals were kept, which was normally on the ground floor.

So that's, by the way, just what's probably happening. Anyway, Joseph and Mary, in obedience to their Roman overlords, they take this long trek from Galilee, right in the north of Israel, to Bethlehem, pretty much in the south.

That was Joseph's ancestral home. That's why they had to move there for the census. Now, they don't do this by choice. You don't take a full-term pregnant lady on a hike across country, right? That's a bad idea. They were only doing that because the Romans were forcing them to do that. And without the convenience of an air-conditioned train or bus, it's not a small journey for a pregnant woman to take.

[4 : 25] It's actually really bad timing, all of this, for Mary. But what can you do? They're the Romans. You do what they say. And on top of that, where they're going, there's no, you know, Bethlehem Central Hospital with a nicely equipped maternity ward.

It's a pretty insignificant town. It doesn't have the best facilities, as you can see. And so the best they could manage was an animal stall, of all places. They couldn't even get a room for her to give birth.

Now, we tend to cutify that. We tend to, you know what I mean, cutify the nativity scene. You get all these nice little cute nativity scenes, lovely things. I'm sure you've got one at home.

We've got one at home. But for Mary, this is far from cute. You can imagine her in labor, right? Surrounded by the stink of the animals.

Gripping Joseph's hand just a little bit too tightly. Why did your ancestors have to live in this stupid town, Joseph? You know, I'm pretty sure there was no Catholic Hail Mary full of grace at that moment.

[5 : 28] Joseph, this is not what I had planned for the birth of our first child. And yet, if we read this story closely, we discover it's exactly what God had planned. And we realize, as we read on, that it wasn't the Romans who sent them to Bethlehem.

Because there happened to be a little-known prophecy by an Israelite prophet called Micah that was written 700 years before this. That talks about the land of Israel being taken over by a foreign force.

But in the middle of it, a new ruler arising who would come, we're told, out of the insignificant little town of Bethlehem.

That's listed, that's mentioned by name by the prophet Micah. I want to read that prophecy again. Because if you read, if you understand the context that Israel were under at the time of Jesus' birth, and you read this prophecy that was written 700 years before that, it's quite astounding.

So, we'll have it up on the screen. It's amazing what it says. Martial troops now, city of troops, for a siege is laid against us. A foreign power is coming.

[6 : 39] They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod. There will be oppression. But you, Bethlehem Ephathra, I always get that word wrong. Though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times.

Kind of puts a shiver in your spine, doesn't it, when you read this, knowing that it's talking about these events. But it was written centuries before. So, it talks about this invasion of a foreign power who will oppress Israel, and then a king coming from Bethlehem with supernatural origins. And that is, of course, exactly what we read about. We've been seeing in the weeks previously how these angels have announced that this is a baby of supernatural origins, whose origins are from ancient times, from of old.

So, this prophecy is being fulfilled quite specifically. But notice, it's something that couldn't have been engineered by Mary or Joseph. If they didn't plan to go to Bethlehem, they didn't plan for the Romans to be here and do a census.

And so, what we see in this story is God working to carry out his plans in spite of the powers and plans of men. You see, that's the first thing we need to realize is going on here.

[8 : 05] You see, it starts with these powerful people, Quirinius, Caesar. And we think that they're the ones calling the shots. But we read on, and with our mind back to the prophecy, we realize, no, they're not calling the shots.

They're not the powers in control of this. God is calling the shots here. And we've just got to pause there and think about that. Because it's an important reminder for us today in a world where it seems like it's out of control.

It's as important a reminder for us today as God's people as it was back then. And we think presidents and prime ministers and corporations are the ones calling the shots in our world. The ones who determine where this world is going and what happens in our lives. But we must remember, behind it all, just like we see in this story and throughout the Bible, behind all of what we see in front of us and read in the newspapers, God is at work.

God is at work to fulfill his ancient purposes from of old. Nothing is going to stop him. He keeps on doing it. But it's only with those with eyes to see, with those who open the Bible and see how it all fits together and see what God's plans are.

[9 : 22] If you keep the Bible closed, it looks like this world is just going nowhere, that we're in chaos and that we're under the control of powers much greater than us. But you open the Bible, you read stories like this, you realize, no, God is still at work behind it all.

Isn't that an encouraging thought? And the most important thing that's happening in this world today is not the UK elections last week or the rulings of parliament or the UN Global Summit on Climate Change.

No, the most important things are happening where God is at work, even when you don't realize it. So that's the first thing the story shows us.

But the story also shows us that he is at work in the places you at least expect him to be at work and through the people you at least expect. I mean, look at this story.

How would you expect a king to make his entrance into the world? You know, in those days, at the birth of a royal baby, there was, there was, it was a huge thing in a, in a capital city.

[10 : 25] A royal baby was born, a prince or a princess. There was great celebration in the city streets. And normally the, the government would give out all kinds of presents to the populace to celebrate the arrival of this royal baby.

You wouldn't be able to ignore it. And even today, I mean, in the few monarchies you have left, so-called monarchies. Think of all the spectacle of the birth of a royal baby.

Like with Harry and Meghan, they had their little children, was it, in May? You know, it was a big thing. It was all over the magazine covers, newspapers, reporters, public celebrations. And yet here in this story is born the king that has come to fulfill God's plans for the restoration of the world.

But it's far away from the city lights. He's born in the most mundane circumstances. And the announcement of his birth, of the royal birth, isn't made from the steps of some palace or broadcast over world news.

No, it's announced to some unimportant shepherds in the middle of nowhere. Shepherds.

Shepherds were the lowest of society. And not even the people in the village liked the shepherds because they used to conflict with their agriculture.

[11 : 42] And so these are really unimportant people. But it's also probably no mistake that the birth of Jesus happened in shepherding country. Because shepherds, we read about shepherds of all people, and suddenly we remember there's another king in Israel's history.

Who am I talking about? David. David. The king who wasn't the obvious choice. He was just a shepherd boy. And yet God chose him, not the choice of the people, to be the king who would rule God's people as a shepherd king.

As opposed to the kings and governors that we're used to in this world, the power hungry and the corrupt. We don't think of kings and presidents as shepherds, do we?

And yet it's so important that the king that God has chosen to rule his people is a shepherd king.

And the fact that this is taking place in shepherding country, his birth, reminds us of that.

It takes our mind back to David. That's the kind of king God chooses for his people. A different king with a shepherd heart who will lead his people to green pastures and safety from their enemies.

[13 : 01] The true peace that Psalm 23 talks about. You know, being led beside quiet waters.

We've got this idea of a shepherd in the Bible, someone who really cares about his sheep and takes them to places of goodness that they can't find themselves.

Because they're stupid sheep. Those green pastures, those quiet waters, that's the peace in our life that we all yearn for, don't we?

To be in a place where nothing is bothering us, where there is nothing to worry about. We're not stressed. We all chase after and yearn for that peace, but we can never find it by ourselves.

Am I right? Would you say you're totally at peace right now in the Christmas season? I doubt it. And the reason we can never find this peace that we yearn for is because we're stupid sheep bumbling

around.

We don't know where we're going. We can't find our way to greener pastures. But we have a shepherd king who can lead us there. That God has chosen and who will be able to bring us to the true place of peace that we seek.

[14 : 15] And so here in this story, in shepherd country, we realize that God is once again choosing a king who you wouldn't expect. Just like he chose David.

Just like he chose David. Once again to lead his people to greener pastures. Because this king will be the ultimate shepherd king that David foreshadowed who will care for his people and, as he himself says in John, lay down his life for his sheep.

Isn't that the kind of king we need? And so take comfort, Christian. Your king is not like the kings and the presidents of earth.

He is the shepherd king who deeply cares for his stupid sheep and goes to every extent to bring them to green pastures and still waters.

Isn't that a comforting thought? That we have a shepherd king who can lead us to the place of peace we could never find ourselves. And all of those things, I think, are encapsulated and hinted at when we read about these shepherds.

[15 : 20] I must thank my brother Paul for his thoughts in his thesis about that, which inspired this. But also, though, the fact that this great king, chosen by God, is born out here in the sticks and announced to these lowly shepherds, doesn't only remind us of who he's going to be and link him to David, but it also reminds us that the important things of the world happen where we least expect them.

The power to change this world, to actually fix this world, doesn't reside in palaces and white houses and UN conferences and all the places we look to to fix the world.

No, the true power to do the important things resides in the places that the world overlooks. And that is what the song of the angels is really all about, which we now come to.

So look at verse 14, this song. Look how it begins, first of all. Glory to God in the highest. Glory to God. Hail God.

Not hail Caesar, which was the normal expression of the day. Glory to Caesar, which was where all the glory seemed to be. The glorious city of Rome that was bringing civilization and technology into the world.

[16 : 45] What great glory. And it was a glorious city of the time. And Caesar Augustus was a glorious Caesar. He was probably one of the best emperors that Rome ever had.

And the people loved him. He would have been on every magazine cover. He would have been the topic of every talk show. Like today, the things that the world sees as glorious.

Where are they? They're on the magazines when you're standing in the queue at Spa. And if the soccer's not interesting, you look at the magazines, you know. And you see all the glory of the world.

You see all the important people. All the beautiful people. All the movers and shakers of the world. The celebrities and sports stars and royals and world leaders.

That's where all the glory of the world is found, right? And yet that's not really glory at all. Because all those people on those magazine covers perish like the flowers of the field.

[17 : 45] Their glory fades. And they're replaced by someone else on that cover. They're here today and gone tomorrow. That's how the Bible talks about the glory of people.

That it's just temporary. It's fleeting. And the real glory in this world. The real thing that should capture our attention. The stuff that really matters and makes a difference.

Is very easy to miss. It's what you won't find in the magazine covers. Real glory. The real power to change the world. Was not located in Rome or in Jerusalem in this story.

But it was wrapped in cloths in an animal's feeding trough. It's very easy to overlook. And it's still like that today. Isn't it?

It's very easy for people to overlook Jesus. You know. Write him off as just some religious figure. But not just people out there who aren't in church this morning.

[18 : 47] You know what? It's easy for you and me to overlook Jesus in our own daily lives. Isn't it? To give Jesus a back seat. And focus him in our minds on Sundays when we're at church.

And we're singing these great songs. And we're hearing the Bible preached. Then we're thinking about Jesus. Sure. And maybe a few minutes during our quiet time during the week. Before we, of

course, turn our attention back to the important things of life.

Our jobs. And our money. And politics. And what's going on. And Facebook. And things we really need to fix our lives on.

And the things that we really glorify. Because that's where our attention is. On those things. Hey. In daily life. On the important things.

Not so much on Jesus. We'll get to him when we read the Bible tonight before bed. So the things we really glorify. You know, you want to know what you glorify in your life.

[19 : 47] Look at what you spend your time on. Look at what you think about the most during your day. Those are the things that have glory in your life. Your job or your hobby.

Or your girlfriend. These things that you look to to make you happy. To fix your life. That's the things that are getting glory in your life. Those are the things that you're hoping are going to make you, make your life better.

Going to restore you to happiness. And yet, if what we read here is true, we need to be corrected. We need to learn to redirect that attention and glory in our lives back to Jesus every day. And we need to realize that he's the only one who can fix our lives.

You prayed earlier. It struck me actually. You prayed for your church leaders to warn you. Grants that the ministers and stewards of your faith may likewise make ready your way.

[20 : 52] By turning the hearts of the disobedient to the ways of the righteous. That at your second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in your sight. You prayed that ministers who open God's word make you ready for Jesus to come back.

Well, one of the ways that you can be ready for Jesus to come back is start glorifying him in your daily life. More than your job or your hobby or the things that you look to for happiness.

Because he's the only one who can lead us stupid sheep to green pastures. And the next part of the angel's song actually tells us why he's the only one who can lead us to greener pastures.

And why he needs the glory and why we need to give him the glory in our lives. Because look at the second line of the song. And on earth, peace to those on whom God's favor rests.

So the reason Jesus is the only one who can fix us is because he is the only one who can bring us true peace.

[21 : 56] That's what these angels were declaring. Not Caesar. Or any human government. And one of the reasons Caesar Augustus was so loved by the people is because he ushered in the grand era of what was called Pax Romana.

The Roman peace. But the truth is when you actually look at history, you realize he didn't bring any real peace. You know what? When you were a Visigoth and the Romans were attacking you, that wasn't so much peace to you.

You know, that wasn't peace. The Romans brought peace at the edge of a sword. And besides, it didn't last. That's because true peace, true peace in every way.

Political peace. Personal peace. Peace between people. True peace is something that no government can give us.

No matter who's in power. What party is in power. No matter who you vote for. Governments can't bring you. Human governments today in this world cannot bring you true peace.

[23 : 06] Because true peace, of course, is more than just political peace. Even if they could bring you that which they can't. True peace is actually living in a world where everything is working right. That is true peace.

The Jews had a word for shalom. And shalom is far more than just I'm not fighting any enemies at the moment. It's a holistic peace, if you like.

Every area of your life is at peace. There's no anxiety because you have everything you want and everything is working well. That's what true peace is. Which I think we can hardly even imagine with wet coal and living in South Africa.

You know, we can't imagine a society where everything is working right, can we? The train's always on time. There's always power. There's no water restrictions. I think we've become disillusioned about any hope of having a properly functioning society.

We've just written it off as a pipe dream. And yet the Bible actually says, no, that's God's plan. A properly functioning society. In fact, Micah, the prophet who prophesied about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, prophesied about this society just the previous chapter in chapter 4.

[24 : 15] Listen to how he describes the society that this shepherd king will bring about for his people when he leads them to greener pastures. Listen to how this society is described.

In fact, you need to change your weapons to agricultural tools just to be able to get all this amazing, plentiful production that God is giving you in the earth that is no longer cursed.

In a restored creation. And also no unemployment. Did you notice that? A 0% unemployment rate. Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree.

There'll be no need for land expropriation without compensation because everybody will have all the land they want and need to provide for all of their needs. And a world with no violence, no crime, no one will make them afraid.

There'll be no need for house alarms and armed response. That true peace that we're waiting for our political leaders to give us. But no human system, no political movement can achieve that.

[25 : 47] Because true peace with our world and with each other can only happen when we first have peace with our creator who put us in this world.

Unless there is peace with God, there can be no peace between people. There can be no peace in society. And that's why there's a qualifying statement.

Did you notice it at the end of the song? That says who it is who can ever enjoy this true peace that the prophets talk about. This true society. These greener pastures that God has planned.

Who can actually enjoy it? Well, look at the song. On earth peace. Who? To those on whom God's favor rests. In other words, you can only ever have true peace if you are on the right side of God.

If you are not in the right with the creator of the world, you will never experience true peace in his creation. And he will make sure of that. We, for holidays, go camping.

[26 : 51] We love camping. And there's this little place by Rafir Sauna Ent that we go camping. And one of the benefits of this campsite is that it allows you to take pets. So dogs are allowed.

Cats are allowed, I suppose. I've never seen a cat there. But people bring their dogs. And it's great. We bring our dog, Finn, and he runs and plays with the other dog. But something bothers me. And that's when other dogs from other campsites come and sniff around in our campsite.

And they come close to our food and they want to see what's going on. Now, if strange dogs come along in the campsite who don't belong, I don't give them a moment's peace.

Right? I make sure they know this is not their territory. I make their time in our campsite very uncomfortable for them if they're not in my good books. Of course, they will be if Finn makes friends with them.

But still, I don't want them around. They can go run somewhere else. But if that dog, if some strange dog from another campsite is not in my good books, if my favor does not rest upon it, then it can't stay in my campsite.

[27 : 56] But, well, if we are not in the right with God, if his favor does not rest upon us, we can't stay in his world. And that's why we die.

And that's why this world is not currently a place of peace. Because it's filled with rebels against God and his rule. It's amazing, in fact, that he allows us to stay at all.

But there's good news. And the good news is that it's really easy to be on the right side of God. And to have his favor rest upon you. It's possible for people, even like these lowly shepherds in the story, to be on the right side of God.

All you need to do is what they did at the end of the story. And that is to recognize and give glory to this shepherd king that God sent to earth to lay down his life for his sheep.

Recognize who that is and glorify him as king. So that we can have our sins washed away and have peace with God and eternal life in his world. That is how this shepherd king leads you to greener pastures.

[29 : 00] By bringing peace between you and God through his death on the cross. And you know, when you do that, when you name Jesus as your Lord and you resolve to follow him in your life.

Then you begin to realize something else these shepherds came to realize. As they walked away from that animal stall. As verse 20 tells us. Glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.

Which were just as they had been told. Glorifying and praising God. Why were they doing that? Well, because they just realized. That they had been witnessed to the most important event in history.

They realized. And they, in fact, were the first recorded witnesses of the fact. They realized that the real important things. The things that will really change this world.

Were happening in that animal stall. Because that's where the Messiah was. The king that God has chosen to fulfill his plans for this world.

[30 : 05] That's where the important things are happening. So where is the Messiah today? Where can he be found today? Or here. In his church.

His body on earth. He is here. Working to fulfill his father's plans. From of old. And so even though we might not look like much.

You know, we're not much more impressive than a smelly animal stall. Here at St. Mark's in Plumstead. Even though we might not look like much.

This, in the middle of nowhere, amongst the unimportant people of society. This is the most important organization on earth. God's church. Because this is where God is really at work.

And this is the place from where his glory will be made known to the world. And so let's pray that that would happen this Christmas season. Lord, we do thank you for this reminder of the important things in this world.

[31 : 12] And that they happen where we least expect them. Lord, we thank you for fulfilling your plans to send your shepherd king to earth. To lead us to greener pastures.

To a new society. A restored creation and eternal life. Help us, Lord, to glorify him. And not to sideline him in our lives. And Lord, we pray that this church, during the next few weeks and beyond, that you would honor us with glorifying your name through us.

Doing the important things. Saving souls for eternity. Through our work. As we proclaim the name of Jesus our king. And obey him. We pray this all in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[32 : 25] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.