

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Christmas Message

While shepherds watched their flocks by night

[English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction – the message of a Christmas carol

This year, we are again basing our Christmas message on a well known Christmas carol, or hymn. If you heard last year's message, you may remember that it was based on *Hark! the herald angels sing*.

Both '*Hark! the herald angels sing*' and the hymn which is our subject today, '*While shepherds watched their flocks by night*', are based on the incident involving the shepherds near Bethlehem, which is recorded by Luke in his gospel. But '*Hark! the herald angels sing*' takes that account as its jumping off point to explore and bring in many important truths found in other scriptures, truths about the Lord Jesus Christ and the glorious consequences which follow from His coming here, and being born at Bethlehem, all those years ago.

As we look at '*While shepherds watched*', however, we will much more be simply going through the story. The hymn paraphrases the story as poetry, but in a way which is very faithful to the scripture.

Let's begin, then, by reading the passage I've referred to, from Luke chapter 2, verses 8 to 14:

“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. 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 Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ 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!”

History of the hymn

Now that we've read the scripture on which the hymn is based, let's look at a few facts about the hymn itself. It is attributed to the Irish poet and writer Nahum Tate, who was also the Poet Laureate from 1692 until his death in 1715. Whilst the exact date of composition is unknown, it first appeared in 1700 in a supplement to the '*New Version of the Psalms of David*' published by Tate and another Irish poet, the Anglican clergyman Nicholas Brady.

Throughout the 18th century it was the only Christmas hymn approved by the Church of England. Perhaps for this reason, but also, perhaps, because of its straightforward metre of alternating lines

of 8 syllables and 6 syllables, usually known as Common Metre, it has been sung, at various times and in various parts of the world, to a great many different tunes.

The words in detail

Whilst the hymn has sometimes been printed with 3 verses of 8 lines each, it usually consists, certainly in my experience, of 6 verses of 4 lines each. That therefore is the way I'm now going to go through it, adding comments to each verse as we go.

Verse 1 reads:

“While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
all seated on the ground,
the angel of the Lord came down
and glory shone around.”

These words are a close paraphrase of the words of the scripture. The only bit added for poetic reasons is the statement that they were all seated on the ground, which may not necessarily be true. These men were on active duty, taking care of valuable assets in the shape of the flock that was entrusted to their care. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that at least one of them would have been on his feet at any given time, peering out into the darkness for any sign of approaching predators.

Now, it might not be unreasonable to ask why the Lord had determined that this history making news, that the long promised Messiah had finally come, should be announced to these humble shepherds. It was of course entirely appropriate that He who came in humility, laying aside all His glory, wasn't going to be announced with a fanfare in the King's palace, or to the nation's religious leaders, who were essentially politicians. But why shepherds? Maybe it was because they were the only ones awake at that hour. But perhaps, too, it was because of the great value which God places on the role of the shepherd.

These events took place on the outskirts of Bethlehem, and Bethlehem was the city of David. Let's briefly delve back into the history of the nation and to the background to David becoming, as he was without doubt, the best remembered of all of Israel's kings. Not long before his time, the nation was governed only by judges, whom God brought into prominence from time to time, people such as Deborah, Gideon and Samson. But the people longed to be like all the other nations round about, and they demanded a king to rule over them. The man who was installed as Israel's first king, Saul, started out well, but quickly proved that he was not a man of faith. David, who succeeded Saul as king, was described as a man after God's own heart¹, a remarkable, and somehow a very touching, statement. David was a man who exemplified what we might call God's idea of what a king should be.

And David had learned his life skills out in these same fields, the fields around Bethlehem, looking after his father's sheep. He had learned to trust God as the true Shepherd, and had written what is surely the best known of all the Psalms, Psalm 23, '*The Lord is my Shepherd.*'

To this little group of ordinary men, then, working this night shift in the vicinity of Bethlehem, an angel of the Lord appeared. An angel is simply a messenger sent by God. That's what the word angel means. Sometimes angels are described as being dressed in shining garments. There is no such description here, but we are told that the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds, so I think we should imagine that they suddenly found that they, the flock and the surrounding countryside were bathed in a very bright light. No wonder the scripture records that they were filled with great fear.

Verse 2 of the hymn reads:

“Fear not,’ said he - for mighty dread
had seized their troubled mind -
‘Glad tidings of great joy I bring
to you and all mankind.”

I remember listening to a friend of mine, a fellow preacher, referring to the words “Fear not” as “the angels’ password”, because in just about every instance in the Bible in which an angel appears to someone, “Fear not” is the first thing the angel says. Clearly, fear is the absolutely standard and normal human reaction on coming face to face with an angel.

Usually, in such angelic encounters, the angel follows the “password” with some explanation of why he has been sent, and goes on to make some important announcement. This appearance to the Bethlehem shepherds fits that pattern. “For behold, I bring you good news of great joy”, the angel continues, “which will be for all the people.”

At this point, can I just explain that the word gospel is the English translation of a Greek word in the Bible, and that from that Greek word we get the other English words evangelist, evangelism and evangelise. The word angel, which we can perhaps see is embedded within these words, and which, as I said earlier, simply means a messenger, indicates that the basic meaning of this Greek word has to do with a message or news. In fact, the prefix ‘ev’, in the English words I’ve just listed, comes from the Greek prefix meaning good. The gospel is, quite literally, the good news, or “glad tidings”, in the old fashioned language of the hymn.

No other item of news ever heard in the whole of history can compare with the Christian gospel, and it was essentially that gospel which the angel was announcing to the shepherds. The coming into the world of the Lord Jesus was the first step along a road which would lead ultimately to His death upon a Roman cross, His triumphant resurrection and the announcement to sinners like us, throughout this world, that salvation from our sins, and all their consequences, is freely available. This is indeed good news of great joy!

It is because of these all-important, once and for all, historical events that Paul the apostle can later sum up what the Christian gospel is, when he writes to the Christians in Corinth:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures”²

When the angel says that this good news will be for “all the people”, the Shepherds would no doubt understand that as meaning all the people of Israel. But in fact the application of this wonderful proclamation is far wider than that. The gospel is for the whole world. To again quote Paul, this time from his letter to the church at Rome:

“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek [that is, non-Jew]; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”³

Moving on now to the next verse, verse 3, we come to the words:

“To you in David's town this day
is born of David's line
a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be the sign:”

Once again, these words closely parallel the divinely inspired account in Luke. All that has been added is the statement that the new-born babe had come of David’s line. That of course was true, although it is not included in what the angel is recorded as saying.

The prophet Micah had placed on record that Bethlehem, the city of David, was to hold the great distinction of being the birthplace of the promised Messiah, in these immortal words from chapter 5 verse 2 of his prophecy:

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”

Micah’s prophecy, and those of the other prophets, were now beginning to be fulfilled, with the birth of “a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.” Much that is of vital importance is packed into these last few words from the hymn. It describes the Lord Jesus in three ways. Let’s now just examine them in turn.

Firstly, He is a Saviour, the Saviour in fact. The Christian gospel really only begins to make sense to us when we appreciate that we need to be saved, and that we need a Saviour.

We might hear some day, via the news media, that there has been a terrible fire somewhere, but that the Fire Service were able to save people from the blaze. We might hear of a boat being overwhelmed by heavy seas, but that those on board were saved. These everyday uses of the word ‘saved’ give some idea of the meaning of the word in the Bible. The scriptures teach us that we are indeed in deadly peril. But here we are not talking about the peril of physical death, such as by fire or drowning, but of spiritual, eternal death, on account of our sins which cry out to God for His judgement upon them.

There is a little piece of dialogue near the end of the 1997 blockbuster film '*Titanic*' which I find indescribably sad. Rose, one of the film’s two central characters, is speaking about Jack, the other central character. She says “he saved me, in every way that a person can be saved.” What she means is that at one point in the story he had talked her out of throwing herself overboard, and that later on he had persuaded her to opt out of the future which her upbringing had destined her for, the monotonous high society lifestyle which would have been so oppressive for a free spirit such as hers. But how tragic, to see portrayed in that film a soul who is apparently completely oblivious to what is by far the most important way in which any person can be saved.

When it is a matter of salvation, not in an earthly, physical sense, but in an eternal sense, the salvation of the soul, there is only One who can help. Praise God that the Saviour was indeed born that day in Bethlehem!

Secondly, He is Christ. This title comes from a Greek word, since the New Testament was written in Greek, and has the same meaning as the Hebrew word Messiah. Both of these titles mean ‘the anointed One.’ Anointing, with oil, was an important idea in the Old Testament. The priests were anointed, and the kings were anointed. Anointing signified a divine commission to carry out a specific role.

Thirdly, He is the Lord. The Greek word here has a particular significance. Not only does it have the normal meaning of Lord, but it is the word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was in use in Israel at the time, to translate the divine name '*Yahweh*', which had been considered for centuries to be too holy to even speak, and which was therefore replaced by ‘the

Lord.' To say that He is Christ the Lord is therefore in effect to say that He is God, which indeed He is.

Verse 4 of the hymn reads:

“The heavenly babe you there shall find
to human view displayed,
all meanly wrapped in swathing bands
and in a manger laid.”

Again, this verse is a poetic paraphrase of the words of Scripture. Even in our “post Christian” world, I think most people are still familiar with the Christmas story, and remember that the baby Jesus was cradled in a cattle stall. The very familiarity of the story may dull our sensitivity to the enormity of what was happening. We’ve just been considering the implications of the angel’s announcement that the baby just born was “a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.” Here was God Himself, not only taking on human form and being born as a baby in order to grow up and live among us, His creatures, but also, choosing to be born into the lowliest imaginable circumstances.

Just a few verses earlier in Luke chapter 2 is the account of how it came about that the Lord Jesus was indeed born in a stable. The popular image, depicted in ever so many nativity plays and retold in countless songs, is of Joseph and Mary trudging the streets of Bethlehem late at night, with Mary heavily pregnant, desperately seeking a room for the night. Everywhere is full, but at last an innkeeper takes pity on them and allows them the use of the stable.

A careful reading of the account given by Luke, however, indicates, I would suggest, a rather different sequence of events. They had been forced to make the journey from Nazareth, where they were living, to Bethlehem, because of the decree of the Roman Emperor that everyone had to go to his ancestral home in order to be registered. As an aside, how wonderful it is to think that the whole of that vast empire was put through this huge logistical exercise, so that the scriptures would be fulfilled!

Now it seems unlikely that a precise date and time would have been set for their registration, and much more probable that they would need to lodge in Bethlehem for several days, whilst the Roman officials worked through whatever procedures were involved. What the scripture actually says, in Luke 2 verses 6 and 7, is

“And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

To my reading of it, then, they were already staying in the inn, probably in some kind of crowded, communal accommodation, when Mary went into labour. The accommodation they were in was all very well up to that point, but they needed somewhere more private and more spacious for a woman to give birth.

This understanding of events brings home even more forcefully than does the traditional one, that it was not for Mary and Joseph that there was “no room in the inn”, but quite literally, it was for Jesus that there was no room. The symbolic significance of this fact should strike us with power. Symbolically, it underlines the message that when the Son of God came into the world His hands had made, it had no room for Him. And in its heart of hearts, this world has not changed.

Verse 5 of the hymn reads:

“Thus spoke the seraph, and forthwith
appeared a shining throng

of angels praising God, who thus addressed their joyful song:"

I would love to know why Nahum Tate chose to refer to the angel here as 'the seraph.' The word 'angel' would have fitted the metre just as well, and would not have left us speculating as to whether or not this particular angel was indeed a seraph.

If you are wondering what exactly a seraph may be, then I could say that so am I, for as far as I can see Scripture gives us little to satisfy our curiosity on the question. To the best of my knowledge seraphim ('im' on the end of a Hebrew word signifying that the word is plural) are only mentioned once in the Bible. This is in the vision which was given to Isaiah the prophet and recorded in Isaiah chapter 6. In this vision the seraphim were continually praising God in the temple and crying "Holy! Holy! Holy!" They are clearly angelic beings, and Isaiah describes them as each having six wings.

If you search online for the meaning of the word seraph, you will probably read that there is a complex hierarchy of angels and that seraphim are the top rank. This may be why Tate decided that this angel, who was the spokesman for a large contingent of "the heavenly host" must have been a seraph. But as far as I can see all of these ideas, about different ranks and orders of angels, have originated in man's imagination, and have become entrenched in religious tradition, but do not actually have any basis in Scripture. Taking Scripture as our only authority, then all we can say about him is what Scripture says, that he was an angel of the Lord.

"And forthwith", says the hymn, "appeared a shining throng." The scripture says that the multitude of the heavenly host appeared suddenly. To me this suggests that the proclamation that the angel had just delivered, announcing to the world that the Saviour, who was the promised anointed One, and was also God Himself, the eternal Word become flesh⁴, simply could not be allowed to pass without some further comment from heaven. So glorious were its implications, that nothing short of this burst of praise poured out by a vast throng of heavenly beings could do it justice.

And so the angelic host appears, proclaiming glory to God and peace to men on earth, as paraphrased in the final verse of the hymn:

"All glory be to God on high,
and to the earth be peace;
goodwill henceforth from heaven to men
begin and never cease!"

The second half of the angelic host's message speaks of peace on earth, and goodwill, or good pleasure, in men. We often hear this part of the message at Christmas time. I want to conclude this talk by pointing out that these things, things which people generally speaking long for, can only follow if the first part of the quotation is included, instead of being missed out, as it usually is. We need to begin by acknowledging God, and giving Him glory - "all glory be to God on high" must come before "and to the earth be peace."

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today Christmas message based on the hymn "While Shepherds watched their flocks by night" talk T1230, scriptures were quoted from the English Standard Version.

¹ Samuel 13:14 ²1 Corinthians 15:3-4 ³Romans 10:12-13 ⁴John 1:14

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