

Good Christian Men, Rejoice

Luke 2:8-11

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If you have your Bibles, we'll begin in Luke 2 at verse 8. And, if you'll open your hymnals to number 207, we will cross-reference from Luke 2 back to the hymnal again.

We've said in this series on the Songs of Christmas that it is our desire to do at least three things. One is that we want you to understand the words of these familiar and beautiful and beloved carols better; we want to look at the texts that we have perhaps been singing since our very earliest memories, and make sure that we understand what it is that we are singing.

Secondly, we want to use these carols as a window onto the Christmas story, the story which is recorded for us in the word of God, that truth which has been recorded for our salvation in the Scriptures, and especially the glorious passages about the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ: His incarnation, His coming into this world, the God-man and His infancy.

But thirdly, we want to illuminate the words of these carols by Scripture. That is, we want our understanding of what God says to us in Scripture to enrich the praises and petitions that we lift up to God through these carols. And so, we want to do all three of those things as we look at these beautiful Christmas carols together.

Tonight we're looking at *Good Christian Men, Rejoice*. Now, if you'll look down at the bottom of your hymnal, on the right-hand side you'll see that the tune to this carol is *In Dulci Jubilo*. That is a Medieval German tune which has been associated with this carol since that period of time, and it has been used with it ever since this carol was translated into English in the mid-nineteenth century.

If you look on the left-hand side at the bottom, you'll see that this Medieval Latin carol was translated by John Mason Neale. John Mason Neale was a very famous Anglican hymnologist. He was a student of hymns; he wrote a few hymns, a few that we still sing today. But more than writing hymns, he collected hymns. He studied hymns from other cultures and languages. He translated them

from their original languages into English and set them to tunes and produced various books of hymns.

This particular Medieval, Latin and German carol first appeared in his hymnbook *Carols for Christmastide* in London, England, in 1853. It's a very interesting song, because it was originally, apparently in both Latin and Old German. We have some access to the original from which Neale very freely translated. In fact, oftentimes at Christmas celebrations you will hear this hymn sung in the Latin, though not very often in that Old German. You've perhaps heard a choir sing, using the Latin to this particular tune. It's interesting. The carol itself dates from the late fourteenth century in German, when it was becoming a little more common to have vernacular language used in carols.

And of course the Reformers, a century or so later, would use this to introduce congregational singing in the vernacular. If you had been in a church in Medieval Europe from, say, the eleven hundreds to the fourteen hundreds, chances are you would have sung very little. You would have listened to the choir sing to you in a language that you did not know. In fact, you would have known very little of anything in the worship service. The worship service would have been entirely in Latin, and if you were anyone outside of about the upper four percent of the population, you would have never have been trained in Latin. You would have had absolutely no idea what was going on in the service. But in these carols, which were sung by the common people in the course of their day-to-day life, some German or other vernacular languages in Europe began to creep into the things that they were singing, and so the Reformers used this as they promoted congregational singing in the vernacular in the services of worship.

Now, tonight as we look at this carol, I want to begin by looking at Luke 2, looking at three things in particular that happen in Luke 2. And then, when we get to the third thing, I want to use the carol to elaborate on the message of grace and joy and glory which had been brought to us by the angel. Let's look to God's word, then, in Luke, chapter two, beginning in verse eight.

Before we do, let's pray and ask for His help.

Our Lord, we thank You for the truth of Your word. We thank You that this is more than simply a mind-bogglingly great story. We thank you that it is true. We thank you that it happened. We thank You that it is history. We thank You that there was a time in Your universe, and a place in Your universe, the real universe, the universe in which we live, in which the infinite God, through His Son, intersected space and time; came into our world; lived as a human being; served in the most difficult of circumstances; died a horrendous death; all for our poor flesh and our poor blood. All for us. We thank You that we have the privilege now of hearing the word which You inspired about Him read. Grant that we would hear it not as a beautiful story filled with memories and sentiment from days gone by, but that we would hear it as if the God of the universe Himself were speaking

in our ears, in our very presence, for that is precisely what You are doing; for there is no way that You speak so directly to Your people than when Your word is read. And so, as we hear it we also ask that You would bless us as we consider it as it is proclaimed, as we seek to understand it. Use it for our spiritual nourishment. If there are those who do not believe this word, if there are those here who have never trusted in Jesus Christ, we pray that the truth that they are about to hear will be used to show them the glory of Christ, their need of forgiveness, and the only way of salvation. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the word of God.

And 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. And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ [or Messiah] the Lord."

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it.

There are three things I want you to see in this passage. I want you to see the recipients of this message; I want you to see the reaction of the recipients to the messenger; and then, I want you to see the good news held out to the recipients. And as we look at that good news, I want to walk through the three stanzas of the carol which we're considering tonight, because it actually elaborates perfectly three parts of the comforting good news that these angelic messengers bring to these shepherds.

I. The recipients of the message.

So, let's begin by looking at the recipients of this message, in verse eight. You read there that in the same region, the same region where Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus were, in the region of Bethlehem, there were some shepherds. And they were out in the fields with their flock at night, and they were watching over them.

Now, you may remember, we've studied this before, shepherds were not particularly esteemed in the Middle East. Egyptians had a particular distaste for shepherds. Even in Israel, by Jesus' time shepherds were held in such low esteem that they were not allowed to give court testimony in judicial cases, or civil cases, because they were known to be untrustworthy. These were not men that were highly esteemed by their peers and their culture as a whole; and yet,

the Lord makes His Son's birth known to them first of all. Outside of that little circle of Jesus' family, the Lord chooses to announce to these shepherds first the coming into the world of His Son.

And I want to suggest to you that God shows His grace in the recipients of this angelic message. In the ones that He chooses to reveal this message to us, He shows us something of His grace. And I want to say that it's a portent of things to come, because Jesus Himself would one day say that He did not come for the righteous, but that He came for sinners. You see, the righteous, those who are self-righteous, those who are satisfied, those who do not see their need of forgiveness—they need no Savior. At least, they don't think that they need a Savior. And so, it is precisely their self-righteousness, their self-confidence, that blinds them to the good news of the gospel, because they don't think that they need that good news.

But God in His grace and mercy comes to a group of men who knew their own sin, to sinners; and He announces the coming of His Son into the world to these shepherds. And it reminds us of how He reaches out to the very least...His mercy is great. And if we have been redeemed by that mercy, it not only says something to us about our own self-discovery (that is, that we have looked into our own hearts and we have realized that we are sinners, and we stand in need of grace, and that we cannot do anything to aid ourselves in restoring communion with God, and that only God can do that—we are all sinners) ...it not only says something to us about that self-discovery that has been wrought in us by the work of the Holy Spirit, but it also says something to us about what our attitude ought to be towards those who are sinners.

If God's heart of mercy towards us has been great, then our heart of mercy towards our fellow sinners as yet unredeemed, as yet unrepentant, as yet unresponsive to the gracious overtures of God's mercy, then our hearts should be filled with mercy towards sinners. Those who know God's grace show God's grace to those who need God's grace. So, even in the recipients of this message, God shows us His grace in reaching out to sinners. 'God saves sinners' is a wonderful summarization of the truth of God's gracious gospel, and it's illustrated even in God's announcement to these shepherds in the hillsides.

II. The reaction of the recipients to the message.

But there's a second thing. Look at verse 9: look at the reaction of the recipients of this message. They are terrified! "The angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terribly frightened." In fact, this is a typical response in Scripture to either God or God's spokesman, or God's messengers, in their encounter with God's people. God's people are typically terrified when God comes to meet them face to face, or when He sends His messengers to meet with them. You see, when sinners encounter

God, or when sinners encounter God's messengers, their natural response is fear. I asked Jennings and Sarah Kennedy this afternoon why the shepherds were afraid. And Sarah Kennedy said, "Well, they were startled!" Well, that's true. We're told that they were there and the angel of the Lord suddenly appeared before them. That's true. That would be a fairly startling thing, to be minding your own business on the hillside at night, watching sheep—not a terribly active pastime—and suddenly, there's an angel! That would be a startling thing.

But you see, more than that, in the Bible the reason for the fear of sinners in the presence of the messengers of God is because of the greatness of God, and because of their own sinfulness. Think of this: when God, by the voice of the angel of the Lord, speaks to Hagar in the wilderness, what's the first thing that the angel of the Lord has to say, in Genesis 21:17 to Hagar? "Do not fear."

When Zacharias is in the temple serving the Lord, and the angel comes to him to announce to him that his prayers have been answered, that he is going to have a son: John, who is going to be the forerunner of the Messiah; what is the first thing that the angel has to tell Zacharias? "Do not be afraid."

When the angel comes to Mary, it's recorded for us in Luke 1:30, what is the first thing that he has to say to her before he announces to her the way that she is going to be used as an instrument in the providence and in the mercy of God to bring the Savior into the world? "Do not be afraid, Mary." When God goes to speak to Joseph, who has already decided to quietly divorce his wife, because she's clearly been unfaithful to him; she has broken the betrothal vows even before their marriage has been consummated; she has proven herself to be unworthy of a lifetime covenant commitment. And God in His mercy sends His angel to Joseph, and what does he say? "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid." When the Lord speaks to the shepherds, here in Luke 2:10, his first words: "Do not be afraid." And in Matthew 28:5, when the angel speaks to the women at the tomb, his first words are "Do not be afraid."

And it's not just that these people are startled. Now it's true: speaking with an angel is not an everyday occurrence. You need to understand that. I think there are some people who would give you the impression that this sort of thing just happened all the time in Bible days. It didn't. Angels didn't just "pop in" on the people of God on a weekly routine! This was an extraordinary thing. But ultimately, you see, the encounter of the people of God with God in the Bible produces fear because of the greatness of God, and because of the sinfulness of His people.

When sinners encounter God, their natural response is to tremble. That's one way that you can tell the voice of a false prophet telling you that coming into the presence of God is a comfortable thing, a joyous thing, a thing that makes the heart light. In the Bible, coming into the presence of God is an awesome thing. And so, there's this response of fear.

But then, if you look at verses 10 and 11, there is a comforting reply from the messengers. When these sinners encounter God, they have to be told not to fear, and why. Listen to the words of the angel:

“The angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall 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.’”

So the angel not only says, “don’t be afraid,” the angel tells the shepherds why they don’t need to be afraid. And the ‘why’ they don’t need to be afraid is in three parts. And if you look at the hymn, the carol that we’re going to sing later tonight, that we’ve already sung the first two stanzas of, the opening line which is repeated each time gives you the announcement of the angel of good news to these shepherds; and then, each of the three remaining parts of the three stanzas explains to you one aspect of the reason that the angel gives to the shepherds not to fear. So let’s walk through this together.

First, look at the opening line of the hymn: “Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice.” This is a call for us to respond to the good news of great joy. The angel said, ‘You don’t need to be afraid. I’m not here to destroy you. I’m not here to bring down God’s righteous, condemning judgment upon you; I am here to announce to you good news of a great joy.’ And this is repeated at the beginning of each of the three stanzas of Good Christian Men, Rejoice. So the angels tell the shepherds to rejoice because the angel has good news for all God’s people: “I bring you good news of great joy, which will be for all God’s people,” the angel says in verse 10. And this idea is repeated in each stanza.

Notice that it is the good news which enables God’s people to stand before His presence, rather than fearing condemnation, with great joy. Notice that you can’t just stand before God without trembling unless He has good news for you. There is a world of theology in that! And you’re singing that back to God every time you sing, “Good Christian men, rejoice with heart and soul and voice...” You see, that’s encouraging one another as we sing.

Sometimes when you sing, you’re singing directly to God, and you’re singing praises to God. Sometimes when you sing, you’re singing directly to God, and you’re lifting up prayers or petitions to God. Sometimes when you sing, you’re singing directly to God and you’re lifting up confessions to God. Sometimes when you sing, you’re singing directly to God, and you’re lifting up thanksgivings to God. Sometimes when you sing, you’re singing directly to God and you’re lifting up intercessions on behalf of others to God. Sometimes when we sing, we sing to one another, exhorting one another either to praise God or to confess some great biblical blessing or promise or truth that God has told us about in His word.

And so when we start off this song singing, “Good Christian men, rejoice with heart and soul and voice”, the exhortation is “with all that you are, respond to the good news that God has brought you.” It's based on a realization of just how great this news is that the angels have brought to the shepherds. The angel tells the shepherds to rejoice because the angel has good news for all of God's people.

And then secondly, look at verse 11. The angel tells the shepherds to rejoice because of the birth of the Messiah: “Today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Here's why you ought to rejoice, shepherds! Here's why you shouldn't fear, shepherds! Because the Messiah has been born! Now that would have made instantaneous sense to every committed Jew, who, for two thousand years at least, had been waiting for the coming of the Messiah into the world. And the angel tells the shepherds, ‘Rejoice because of the birth of the Messiah.’ And that's what we sing about in the first stanza of Good Christian Men, Rejoice.

Look at the rest of that stanza: “Give ye heed to what we say; Jesus Christ is born today;...Christ is born today! Christ is born today!”

And so, the hymn is asking us to rejoice because of that first truth which the angels revealed to the shepherds: that the Messiah has been born; that the One who had been long expected, long awaited, for the people of Israel, for deliverance, for the restoration of the fallen throne of David the king, He has come into the world; and, therefore, these shepherds ought to rejoice.

Now by the way, if you'll look at the bottom of your worship guide, you'll notice that there is a slight difference in the first stanza, between our hymnal and the worship guide. Our hymnal has in that first stanza: “...earth and heaven before Him bow.” Perfectly theologically correct. John Mason Neale's translation, however, has “ox and ass before Him bow.” Now, perhaps the authors of our hymnal felt that that was not exalted enough, that it didn't say enough about the dignity and the deity of the person of Jesus Christ; but I think in the original stanza it's designed to be an irony, isn't it? The Messiah is born, and yes, heaven and earth ought to be surrounding Him, bowing down to Him even as we sang in one of the earlier hymns tonight “...He made the starry heavens....” If the stars bowed down to Joseph in a dream, surely they ought to bow down to Jesus, who spoke them into being by the word of His power. But the point is, of course, that wasn't happening.

Now, there may have been some oxen and there may have been some donkeys there bowing down, but there was no great company of kings and leaders, great people of the earth. No, there were none like that in the manger. It's another one of those ironies of the Messiah's condition. You would expect God's Son to be born in a palace. You would expect pomp and circumstance, and kings and

nations coming to Him; but in fact, He is born in a manger. And so, Neale is catching something of that irony of the incarnation in the first stanza.

III. The good news brought

But there's another thing that the angels say, of course. They tell the shepherds to rejoice because the Messiah's birth has opened the way to communion with God and blessedness. Listen again to verse 10: "I bring you good news for all the people..." Then, in verse 11: "...there has been born for you a Savior." Listen to the emphasis: "I bring you good news." As the angel speaks to the shepherds, the shepherds are recipients of this good news. But this good news is not just for the shepherds, it's for all the people, it's for all of God's people. And then, again, he says in verse 11: "...there has been born for you a Savior." The angel is emphasizing that the Messiah's birth is going to benefit the people of God. It is a blessing for the people of God. He's been born for the people of God.

And look at the second stanza of Good Christian Men, Rejoice. It picks up on this idea beautifully:

"Now you hear of endless bliss: Jesus Christ was born for this!
He has opened heaven's door, and man is blessed forevermore.
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!"

You see, he's picking up on the "for you", the "for the people of God"; the "Savior for you" of verses 10 and 11. And Neale is elaborating, Jesus has been born for you. To do what? To give you endless bliss, to open the way into communion with God, to give you true blessedness. "I have come to give you life, and that abundantly. I have come to give you joy forevermore" Jesus has opened the way for the believer into an eternal communion with God, and that's what we sing about when we lift up the second stanza of this carol to God in praise.

And so, the shepherds need not fear, because the angel has good news for them. That good news is that the Messiah has come, and that the Messiah has come for them, to open the way of blessedness and communion with God.

Finally, look at verse 11 again. The angel tells the shepherds to rejoice because Jesus has been born to save all who trust in Him. Listen to the language: "For today ...has been born for you a Savior." This one who has been born is not only the Messiah; He's not only the long-expected Christ; He is not only the Lord, the One who will establish the rule of God's people; but He is a Savior. He is a Savior to us. He will deal with our sin. He will relieve us of the misery of sin, and ultimately, of death, which as we heard tonight, is the wages of sin.

And that's what the third stanza of Good Christian Men, Rejoice is about. Now, you need not fear the grave" because "Jesus Christ was born to save." He "calls you one, and calls you all, to gain His everlasting hall. Christ was born to save!"

This is a call for us to rejoice because Jesus has freed all who trust in Him of the fear of the grave, because we know that the grave is the wages of sin, and He is the Savior who has dealt with our sin. And as we trust on Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the gospel, we are forgiven that sin, and we are spared from that ultimate penalty of judgment and death. He is our Savior.

And so the angel, you see, says to these shepherds, 'Don't be afraid, because I bring you good news. The Messiah has been born; the Messiah has been born for you; and the Messiah is your Savior.' And the hymn, the carol, follows right along that pattern: singing, elaborating on that truth, and singing it back to God.

But did you notice how Mason Neale worked in the gospel call, the gospel offer, the gospel invitation in the final stanza? He "calls you one, and He calls you all to gain the everlasting hall." You see what's implicit in that. Jesus' birth has not thereby automatically saved the whole of mankind. He has come into the world to be the Savior of a multitude of sinners, a multitude that no man can number; but, He has come to be the Savior of all who trust in Him, every last one of them, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, but only those who trust in Him.

And so, there is this call. It is a call: "Gain the everlasting hall!" How do you do that? Through trusting in Jesus Christ. And so, even as we sing this hymn of thanksgiving to God for His salvation of us in Jesus Christ, we are calling one another, and we're calling everyone within earshot: "Trust in Jesus Christ. He came for sinners." But the only sinners who will be saved will be those sinners who trust in Him. They and they alone will gain the everlasting hall.

This season will be filled with much sentiment. We'll hear this carol sung dozens of times on our radios, in concert halls and churches; and there'll be hundreds and hundreds and thousands and thousands of people who will hear this hymn. They'll enjoy it, but they'll never trust in the Savior of whom this hymn speaks. And they will not gain the everlasting hall, for He has come for sinners. But only those sinners who trust in Him will gain that everlasting hall. May God grant that we would respond to Him in trust, and call all those around us to trust in Him.

Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we have every reason to rejoice. Though rightly we should tremble in the expectation of Your just judgment, in Your mercy You have enabled us to respond to You in rejoicing because of the good news. We pray that, in a season filled with memories and sentiment, that those memories and sentiment would not block out the seriousness of this gospel call: Repent or

perish; believe or die. Grant by Your Spirit that those who hear would believe unto everlasting life. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Would you stand for God's blessing.

Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord, until the day break and the shadows flee away. Amen.

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