

The Gloria in Excelsis - The Angels' Song

Luke 2:14

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Shepherds were an interesting choice in the grand scheme of redemptive history. Personally, if I were God, I wouldn't have chosen them. And here is where I readily confess, it is a very good thing that I am not God! See, at this point in history, shepherds were almost always hired men who had no other choice for a profession. They came from families of the lowest social rank, in a time when you did not move up in social rank, you could really only move down. They were ceremonially unclean because of their work, even though they often took care of animals that were going to be used for religious worship in Jerusalem. And, to top it all off, they had developed a well-earned reputation for being thieves and liars. So much so that in Jewish legal tradition, a shepherd could not testify in a court of law. That's right, a shepherd could be the only eyewitness to a crime, and their testimony would not be accepted or even heard in a court of law. So, instead of the gentle sheep herding group that we might immediately think of, they were a ragtag group of untrustworthy social outcasts. And what does God do? He invites them to be the first to proclaim the birth of the Messiah. Scandalous, right? Yep.

How does God communicate with these shepherds? He sends an angel to them. What do the angels tell the shepherds? The glorious God of the universe has brought good news of great joy: the Messiah has been born. Where? In Bethlehem, only a short (first-century short that is) walk away. Then there is an angelic multitude all singing, "Glory to God in the highest!" It is the God of the universe who deserves all of the glory because he has done what he long promised to do. What do these shepherds do with this information? They go and find the Messiah, tell Mary and Joseph all about what happened in the field, and as they go back to the sheep, they tell everyone what they had seen. God used a group of men who couldn't testify in a court of law to declare the greatest news of all time. How glorious is that? This is why it is good that I'm not God, and it is why **only God deserves all of the glory.**

1. God is glorious.

1. What is glory?

1. A reality of God's character.

1. i.e., Who God is.
2. God is glorious whether we praise him or not. God is glorious whether we love him or not. God is glorious, because God is glorious.
3. **A biblical term used in reference to the unapproachable and mighty manifestation of the immediate presence of God.** The biblical concept of glory carries with it connotations of inexpressible beauty and majesty. At the same time, it implies an absolutely pure and terrifying "holiness" confronting the sinfulness of humans. In the NT, Christ is said to be the glory of God, although a glory that is at least partially veiled from sight, except for those who exercise faith in Christ. Christ's glory is especially a consequence of his resurrection from the dead and his ascension to the right hand of the Father.¹
4. **Consider v. 14** - The refrain for the worship scene is provided by the heavenly choir (2:13–14). In the Old Testament the "heavenly host" also refers to the armies of heaven who surround God for worship and to help his people (1 Kgs 22:19; Jer 19:13). **The contrast with Rome is found at every point of this passage. Rome's armies controlled the world, but with the sword, not the "good news," and they prided themselves on having established the *Pax Romana*, their version of peace, which meant doing exactly what the Romans tell you to do. Here the angelic hymn began with "Glory to God in the highest heaven," the reminder that true splendor and glory is not an earthly thing centered on the so-called glory of Caesar but a heavenly reality centered on the Most High God (*hypsistos*, 1:32, 35, 76). Here the same term is "the highest heaven," the habitation of the Most High God.²**

2. A proper perspective on God.

1. Our right understanding and admission. – This means when we have a proper perspective on God, we understand that he is glorious and we admit or acknowledge that fact.
2. It is important to state that just because we acknowledge that God is glorious, it doesn't mean that we are saved or adopted into his family. You might recall what James 2:19 says, **"You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!"**
3. In one sense of the word *glory* it simply means "honor" or "excellent reputation." This is the meaning of the term in Isaiah 43:7, where God speaks of his children, "whom I created for my *glory*," or Romans 3:23, which says that all "have sinned and fall short of the *glory* of God." It also has that meaning in John 17:5, where Jesus speaks to the Father of "the *glory* which I had with you before the world was made," and in Hebrews 1:3, which says that the Son "is the

¹ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 55.

² Grant R. Osborne, *Luke: Verse by Verse*, ed. Jeffrey Reimer, Elliot Ritzema, and Danielle Thevenaz, Awa Sarah, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 69.

radiance of God's *glory*" (author's translation). In this sense, the glory of God is not exactly an attribute of his being but rather describes the superlative honor that should be given to God by everything in the universe (including, in Heb. 1:3 and John 17:5, the honor that is shared among the members of the Trinity). But that is not the sense of the word *glory* that we are concerned with in this section.³

2. Glory should result in...

1. **Praise and Worship**

1. "Proclaiming worth." – This is what worship is, or more specifically, this is what worship does.
2. Because God is glorious, he deserves our praise and worship. When we think of the life to come (the eternal life) that is exactly what we will be focused on for all of eternity, praising God. And, because God is infinite, his glory is never ending, and we will never tire of praising him.
3. The question that we need to ask as believers is, what things do I proclaim worth to in my life, and do any of them hold greater worth than God to me?

2. **A declared reality through Christ-like living.**

1. Quite amazingly, God made us to reflect his glory. Paul tells us that even now in our Christian lives we all are being "changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18; cf. Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:15). Though we do not now find ourselves surrounded by a visible light, there is a brightness, a splendor, or a beauty about the manner of life of a person who deeply loves God, and it is often evident to those around such a person. In the life to come, such brightness will be intensified, so that as we reign with Christ, it seems that we also will receive an outward appearance that is appropriate to that reign and to our status as image bearers of God and servants of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Prov. 4:18; Dan. 12:3; Matt. 13:43; 1 Cor. 15:43).⁴
2. **The most substantive expression of worship is obedience.** – Obedience is like your bank account, when you look at the way you spend your money, you reveal your true priorities. For example, you can tell someone that your greatest priority in your life is eating out at restaurants, but if your bank account shows that you never eat out, then it actually isn't a priority.
 1. Obedience is the same thing in your Christian walk. You can say that worshipping God is the most important thing in your life, but when the actions and attitudes of your life are really examined it will either confirm or deny that statement. This is why obedience is a powerful litmus test, it reveals what is true or untrue.
 2. We must also remember that while obedience reveals our true loves, it does not save us. We cannot forget that the kingdom is not opposed to effort, but it is opposed to earning.

³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 220.

⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 221.

2. Participating in God's glory.

1. How do we participate in God's glory? - Luke's Christology.
 1. v.11 - **Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.**
 2. Rich Villodas: **"What if at the end of history, the question God asks us is not whether we abstained from sin. What is the question is "Did you enter into the joy that was available to you?"**
 1. **Advent** – Hopeful and expectant remembering and anticipation.
 2. It is important to remember here that we are not talking about some sort of mild or half-hearted obedience where we only obey when we want to or conform to Christ in a lukewarm way. Avoiding sin is not optional for the believer. However, we must also be reminded that we were not saved for some mild religious morality where we think the substance of our relationship with God is only tied to avoiding all the "thou shall nots" of the Bible. We were saved for a life of righteousness and partnership with God. **We were saved for adventurous kingdom living. This question is getting at that, and forcing us to consider what kind of Christianity are we engaging.**
 3. In this passage we see both Mary and the shepherds participating in God's glory, and through that, entering into the joy that was available to them.
2. The shepherds. - **Why is their presence significant?**
 - i. Here in Luke 2, we are talking about hired help.
 1. This is a lowly socioeconomic position.
 2. Shepherds would have been left in a state of ritual uncleanness according to Jewish purity laws.
 - ii. Shepherds were known as dishonest and deceitful.⁵
 3. They were forbidden from testifying in a court of law according to Talmudic tradition.
 4. If they lost a sheep they were required to make payment for it.
 - a. They paid the sheep owner, market price for the animal!
 - iii. God's choice to include shepherds specifically in this messianic birth is significant at two levels: **Jesus is the lowly king coming especially to raise the lowly and exalt them**; and as David was the messianic shepherd, so also will Jesus be.⁶
 - b. **Thus the most obvious implication is that the gospel first came to the social outcasts of Jesus' day. This would accord with a recurring emphasis in Luke.**
 1. v. 18 – "And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them."
 - c. **They weren't allowed to testify in a court of law, but God used them to testify to the greatest moment in human history!**
 - iii. **How did the shepherds cooperate with God?**
 5. v. 15 – The decide to go over to Bethlehem and see what has happened.
 - a. Why? **Because the Lord has made this known to us.**

⁵ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 101.

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Luke: Verse by Verse*, ed. Jeffrey Reimer, Elliot Ritzema, and Danielle Thevenaz, Awa Sarah, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 67.

6. v.16 – Not only did they decide to go, but they did so decisively... with haste.
 - a. There is a significant sense of urgency for them.
7. v. 18 – They tell everyone they run into about the birth of Jesus.
 - a. **They weren't allowed to testify in a court of law, but God used them to testify to the greatest moment in human history!**
3. Mary. – She takes it all in.
 1. Mary's response (2:19) has a deeper reaction, with serious reflection and meditation continuing in her life. This is the proper response, and she is the model of discipleship, as she "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." The imperfect tense *synetērei* (kept on treasuring) and the present-tense participle *symbolousa* (was pondering) stress the ongoing nature of her meditation on the separate events as a divinely sanctioned whole. She in a sense becomes the systematic theologian of the birth events as she is both thrilled over them and thinking long and hard about them.⁷
 1. Just put yourself in Mary's shoes.
 1. You just gave birth in your husband's hometown where there was no room for you in a relative's home. That doesn't seem offensive to us, but it would have been to them.
 2. The first people recorded to visit you after Jesus is born are shepherds. A group that is known to be dishonest, unclean, and even lower in social rank than you and Joseph.
 2. What does she do? – She ponders all that God is doing. Amazing!
4. **You and me.**
 1. **Enjoy God and get to know him.**
 1. Did God make my day? → How am I connecting with God?
 1. At the heart of the Christian life lies a question of purpose: *Why are we here?* Thomas Aquinas, one of the Church's great theological minds, answers with stunning clarity and depth. He teaches that we exist to glorify God—not because God needs our praise, but because in glorifying Him, **we are drawn into our highest joy and deepest fulfillment.** That is, an abiding relationship with God where we experience his presence and participate in his will.
 2. We are here to connect with God in real and meaningful ways. That is why we have a life question that is getting at this reality. How do we primarily do this? The Word and prayer.
 2. **Word & Prayer.**
 1. There is nothing mystical or scholarly about connecting with God through reading the Bible and talking to him in prayer.
 2. There are any number of Bible reading plans available online, a quick Google search will reveal apps and plans galore. And, if you are waiting till the new year to start fresh, give yourself an early Christmas present, just start now. And start in manageable and repeatable steps.
 3. Prayer doesn't need to be anymore complicated than setting reminders via your phone alarms or calendar app to pause and pray. **Consider these categories in prayer four times through your day.**

⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *Luke: Verse by Verse*, ed. Jeffrey Reimer, Elliot Ritzema, and Danielle Thevenaz, Awa Sarah, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 71.

1. **Morning – Adoration** – praise God for his good character.
 2. **Lunch – Confession** – ask God for forgiveness for sinful actions and attitudes in your day.
 3. **Dinner time – Thanksgiving** – praise God for how he has provided for you today.
 4. **Evening – Supplication** – Ask God for what you need for tomorrow.
2. **Root out sin. → I.e., Grow in righteousness.**
1. One of the realities that will become more and more present in our lives as we connect with God through his Word and prayer is that we will begin to think our sin and the actions of our lives differently.
 2. We will be less and less satisfied in the attitudes and actions of our flesh and desire more and more conformity to Christ. This again comes back to the idea of obedience not merely as avoidance of sin, but as adventurous participation with God in our world.
 1. Maybe we need to ask on a regular basis, **“Did I adventurously participate with God so that his glory would be known and experienced in the places he took me today?”**
3. **Declare the goodness of God in word and deed.**
1. i.e., Talk & walk. – Are you beginning to see how each of these categories builds on the last one? We don’t become desirous of the life of Christ without being connected to God. As God increases our desire for the ways of Jesus, the Spirit of God roots out sin in our lives and helps us follow God in adventurous obedience in the everyday places and paces that we go. Ultimately, this adventurous obedience should result in us declaring the goodness of God in both word and deed.
 1. Deed – Our actions and attitudes that are received and seen by others.
 2. Word – We actually talk about and verbalize the hope of heaven that resides in us. This is not the same thing as talking about neutral virtues or moral values. It is about connecting our actions to the very work of Jesus in our lives as our savior.
 2. Why do we need to consider how we are living and what we are declaring?
 1. Because God’s glory is for all people.

3. God's glory for all people.

1. “Great joy for all people.” (v.10)
 1. ***For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.* — Irenaeus (against Heresies, Book IV, Chapter XX)⁸**
 1. I love the way that the second century theologian, Irenaeus, expresses the core theological truth of the incarnation.
 2. He is saying that the glory of God is seen perfectly in Jesus, and that the true life of man, the life that we were created to live, consists of beholding (worshipping) him.

⁸ Jessica Parks, ed., *Irenaeus: A Guide to His Life and Writings*, Faithlife Author Guides (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2017).

2. This is the core truth of the Advent season, and it is why we take a whole month every year to remember this profound gift from God. That he loved us so much, that while we were still sinners he sent his son for us, and to save us from our sins. (cf. Rom. 5:8)
- 2. Do we live as if we have received “great joy for all people?”**
 1. Maybe this question is enough for this week. Perhaps we would do well to sit with it and ask the Spirit of God to speak to us each day in helping us to answer this question. I imagine that for many of us we will find ways that we can answer this affirmatively and ways that we need to grow in this arena.
 2. Let us then ask God’s Spirit a follow-up question - How would my life look different if I did?
 1. This is the question of adventurous obedience. It should cause us to reorder our priorities, commitments, and perspectives. It should drive us towards repentance and daily connection with God.
 3. God’s glory is for all people, we’ve been given a gift that we should be compelled by love to give away. When we do that we acknowledge that reality that only God deserves all the glory.