

The Angels' Song
Luke 2:8-15
ABC 12/13/20

Song lyrics have a way of embedding themselves in our memory. Often, as soon as we hear the 1st line, we know the song.

*Hello darkness, my old friend...*¹
*There is a house in New Orleans...*²
*All the leaves are brown & the sky is grey...*³
*Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away...*⁴
*Hello? Is there anybody in there?...*⁵
*She's a good girl, loves her mama...*⁶
Glory to God in the highest... (Lk 2:14).

How did you do with those? Probably says more about my taste in music than you want to know. Today we come to the 3rd song in Luke's Christmas Playlist, the angels' song. This is the best known of these songs & the shortest, but there's a lot packed into what the angel said & the angels *sang*. Not only that, but it comes in one of the most well-known passages in Scripture. After all, Linus quotes them every Christmas in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, which has been airing for 55 years. Before we get to the angel's song, it's good to be reminded of the scene & time in history. Lk 2 begins with the words, **Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus** who was ruler over **the inhabited earth** (1). Who was Caesar Augustus? His actual was Gaius Octavian, the great-nephew of Julius Caesar. He climbed his way to power by defeating Antony & Cleopatra, & then, through smarts & force of personality, gave the Roman empire a solidness that lasted for years. He was the 1st of the Caesars to be called *Augustus* which means *holy, revered, or exalted one*, & up until that time was only used for their gods.⁷ It was under his rule that steps were taken toward making the Caesars gods themselves. People began referring to him as *savior*. An inscription found even called him *savior of the whole world*.⁸ Listen to what was written of him:

The most divine Caesar...we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things.... Whereas the Providence which has regulated our whole existence...has brought our life to the climax of

¹ Paul Simon, "The Sound of Silence," *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.*, 1964

² Alan Price, "House of the Rising Sun," *The Animals*, 1964

³ The Mamas & the Papas, "California Dreaming," 1965

⁴ Paul McCartney, "Yesterday," *Yesterday*, 1966

⁵ Pink Floyd, *Comfortably Numb*, 1979

⁶ Tom Petty, "Free Fallin'," *Full Moon Fever*, 1989

⁷ T. Walter Wallbank, *Civilization Past & Present*, p 75

⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, p 415

perfection in giving to us Augustus, whom Providence filled with virtue for the welfare of men, & who, being sent to us & our descendants as a Savior, has put an end to war & has set all things in order...(he brought peace). Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times... The birthday of the god Augustus has been for the whole world the beginning of good news, the gospel, concerning him.⁹

One historian says that when Caesar Augustus died, men *comforted themselves, reflecting that Augustus was a god, & that gods do not die.*¹⁰ The Roman calendar of dating was changed so that it began with Caesar Augustus' birth.¹¹ What is Luke telling us by including the historical context of Jesus' birth? He wants us to understand the world had as a ruler one who was a self-proclaimed, & widely acknowledged as, god & savior. Luke wants us to see the contrast between this pseudo-savior & the true Savior being born in Bethlehem. Mary's Baby wasn't a Caesar, a man who'd become a god, but a far greater wonder, the only true God becoming a man. So while Caesar was ruling, God was overruling as He always does. Don't ever forget that no matter who's president, governor, or whatever, God is the rulers' Ruler. Nothing escapes His gaze or knowledge. He's in absolute control no matter what it may look like to us.

We are all familiar with the simplicity of Luke's description of Jesus' birth: **6-7**

There was sweat & pain & blood & cries; the smell of birth mixed with the stench of manure & sour straw; trembling carpenter's hands, clumsy with 1st-time father fear, held God's Son slippery with blood. The Baby's limbs waved helplessly, His face grimaced as He gasped His 1st breaths, & His cry pierced the night. Like every mother, I'm sure Mary counted His fingers & toes, cleaned Him as best as possible, wrapped Him carefully, & then, unlike most mothers, laid Him beside her in a feeding trough. God had taken on human flesh. That paradox is mind-boggling. Augustine said of Jesus, He...

*is the Revealer of His Father,
the Creator of His mother;
... the Son of God through His Father without a mother,
the Son of man through His mother without a father....*

*Maker of the sun, He is made under the sun....
In (the Father) He remains,
From (His mother) He goes forth.*

⁹ Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae: Supplementum Sylloges Inscriptionum Graecarum, V 2, no 458, <https://archive.org/details/OrientisGraeciInscriptionesSelectaeV2/page/n458/mode/2up>

¹⁰ John Buchan, *Augustus*, p 346

¹¹ *New International Dictionary of NT Theology & Exegesis*, Vol 2, p 211

*Creator of heaven & earth,
He was born on earth under heaven.
Unspeakably wise, He is wisely speechless;
filling the world, He lies in a manger;
Ruler of the stars, He nurses at His mother's bosom.
He is both great in the nature of God,
& small in the form of a servant,
but so that His greatness is not diminished by His smallness,
nor His smallness overwhelmed by His greatness.¹²*

Lancelot Andrewes, who worked on the original KJV translation of the OT, preaching before King James on Christmas in 1608, described Christ in the manger as *the Word without a word; the eternal Word not able to speak a word.*¹³ The one who asked Job, **Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?** (38:4) now lay wrapped helplessly in swaddling clothes. This is the wonder of the Incarnation! The all-powerful, everywhere present, all-knowing God became a Baby! Emmanuel, God with us. With that as the setting, Luke now tells us, **8-11**.

1. The Angel Jesus was born as the One who would be Lord of Lords & King of Kings. He is the One, the only One, who can truly have the title *Savior, Exalted One, holy, divine Ruler, & God*. This is the only One whose birth should be called **good news**, because it truly is the gospel. **I bring you good news** (10), literally, *I am gospelling you*. This One born in the city of David is the only One who can bring true joy, peace, & salvation. It would be this Baby, not Caesar Augustus, but Jesus Christ, who would have calendars & our system of tracking time revolve around His birth. The words of the angel, spoken to the shepherds, are for all of us. What did the angel say?

A. Do not be afraid This angel didn't come for judgment but to bring a message from God Himself. This is good news, not bad news.

B. Good news/gospel It's *the gospel* that would bring **great joy**. The **good news** of Scripture is the *gospel* of Jesus Christ. Something wonderful was happening. This news was so great it would cause the shepherds to celebrate & give thanks. But the good news, the glad tidings, the gospel, isn't just about the birth of a Baby. The angel said this is about the Savior who is the Lord & who is the long-awaited Messiah. This is the One God promised would come. The angel is telling these

¹² *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers*, https://archive.org/stream/ancientchristian027822mbp/ancientchristian027822mbp_djvu.txt

¹³ <http://anglicanhistory.org/lact/andrewes/v1/sermon12.html>

shepherds, *Today, this Savior, this Messiah has been born!* Of all the faithful believers in the past who longed for this day, the shepherds got to see it & to see Him with their own eyes! There were Magi on their way who'd see Him later but it's the shepherds who were 1st told the good news. I know this is all very familiar to us, but I hope we don't miss how astounding this must have been for these shepherds. The Shepherd who David knew as Lord in Ps 23, they would get to see in a way David never did. They, who were raising lambs probably for Passover, would get to meet the One who would be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29). These simple shepherds were about to meet the Great Shepherd. But this news wasn't just for them. This news was...

C. For all people (10-11) Have you ever wondered why the angel doesn't say, *Now there were in the same region scribes & Pharisees, keeping watch over their scrolls & religious rituals? Or, There were kings & princes keeping watch over their treasures at the palace?* God chose to reveal the birth of the Savior to shepherds. Why? To show that the good news is **for all people**. No matter who you are & no matter where your life has been or what your circumstances are, the birth of Jesus is **good news** because it's evidence of God's great love for you. **All people** includes, surprise, **all people**. We see this throughout Luke's gospel: Jesus came for lawyers (10:25), lepers (5:12), tax collectors (3:12, 5:27, 18:11-14, 19:1-9), Zealots (6:15), criminals (23:39-43), slaves (Lk 7, 12:37-43), & those disabled & diseased (5:12-26). The gospel is for all ages & stages of life, all places & stations in society. The gospel is for you.

D. Today It happened on a day in history. Not a day in some imaginary story, but a day when Caesar Augustus was the emperor of Rome. It was a day planned in eternity before the creation of the world. The whole universe, with untold light-years of space & billions of galaxies, was created for this day & what it means for mankind. This was the day of His appearing. **When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son** (Gal 4:4). It happened on a day in time. The perfect time appointed by God. **For unto you is born *this day*** (KJV Lk 2:11).

E. City It happened in a real place, the city of David. Not in Narnia, Middle Earth, nor in a galaxy far, far away. It happened in a city roughly 7,000 miles from here. The city still exists today. It's

Bethlehem (Lk 2:4), the city where Jesse lived, the father of David, the great king of Israel. Bethlehem, the city that Micah prophesied about: **But as for you, Bethlehem ... from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel, His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity** (5:2). It happened in a city. As real as Ashland, Yreka, or Medford. Now we come to the heart of the angel's message.

F. Savior There has been born for you a Savior. If you've ever sinned against God, & you have, you need a Savior. This good news highlights the bad news. The bad news is we need a Savior. The good news is we have One. **Savior** implies that those He came to save are lost, alienated from God, under His condemnation because of our sins. The angel said to Joseph, **you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins** (Mt 1:21). Only God can forgive sins against God. That's why God sent the eternal Son of God into the world. That's why Jesus said, **The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins** (Mark 2:10). Therefore, a Savior was born. What does this mean? It means He's *fully man*. He was born in the city of David, to descendants of David who were there to register for tax purposes. That sounds pretty human, doesn't it? Jesus the Savior assumed full humanity so He might bear the sins of the human race. It was because of God's incarnation & His perfect identification with humanity, taking on our nature though without sin, that He could save us. As a man He became the perfect Substitute for us so He could take our sins upon Himself, become **sin for us** (2 Cor 5:21), & die an atoning death for us. As Peter explained, **Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin & live to righteousness** (1 Pt 2:24). Whatever our situation, He can deliver us. Whoever you are, He can deliver you, help you, save you. **Jesus,... because He continues forever... is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them** (Heb 7:24–25). But that's not all!

G. Christ A Savior who is Christ... *Christ* is English for the Greek *Christos*, which means *anointed one*, which is the Messiah (Jn 1:41; 4:25). This is the long-predicted, long-anticipated, promised of God, Messiah. The final anointed Prophet, Priest, & King. In Him all the promises of God are yes (2 Cor 1:20). He would fulfill all the hopes & dreams of sinners all over the world. There's more!

H. Lord A Savior, who is Christ the Lord. **Lord** refers to the holy, unspeakable, personal name of God Himself.¹⁴ To say this Child is **Lord** is to say He is God. When used in reference to Jesus, **Lord** carries all that's implied by the tetragrammaton YHWH, the name of God (Ex 3:14–15). The most basic confession of Christianity is **Jesus is Lord** (1 Cor 12:3). No one who doesn't affirm Christ's full deity & equality with God the Father can be saved because, as He Himself warned, **Unless you believe that I am God, you will die in your sins** (Jn 8:24). The Ruler, the Sovereign, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Lord of the universe, this Baby is fully God. The Savior had to be man to bear the sins of humans; but He also had to be God so His sacrifice had merit before the holy throne of Almighty God. Only Jesus is that unique Savior, Messiah, & **Lord**. Over & over in the gospels Jesus is called **Lord**. Thomas said what? **My Lord & my God** (Jn 20:28). That's the meaning here. God has come. He is with us. As Lord, those who are His, submit themselves to Him & *crowns Him Lord of all*. He is God incarnate. He's the One before whom all people will one day confess that He is Lord (Phil 2:10-11). For those who know their greatest problem is the sin in our hearts, this is good news. Jesus came to save sinners not to overthrow Rome. Jesus is Lord, not a genie in a bottle who exists for our wishes. No, we exist for His glory & to enjoy Him forever, doing what He wants.

In vs 12 the angel tells the shepherds how to find this Baby who is the **Savior, Christ, & Lord**.

2. The Angels After that something else wonderful occurs: **13-14**

One angel announces the Savior, Messiah, Lord is born & then a company of angels respond with this triumphant declaration of **glory & peace**. A heavenly flash-mob appeared & suddenly the bewildered shepherds were surrounded by angels. **A multitude** means beyond count. Maybe every angel of God was there because this was the most amazing event that had ever happened. I think they stretched from horizon to horizon, obscuring the night sky. I like to imagine they radiated the full spectrum of colors, like the northern lights on steroids. When they lifted their voices to God, it was in cosmic stereo. They were announcing the long-awaited **Sunrise from on high** (1:78). Job tells us that at the creation of the world, **the morning stars (angels) sang together & all the angels**

¹⁴ TC Butler, *Luke Vol 3*, pp 29-30

shouted for joy (38:7). Now the angels again join voices at the greatest creation of all, the birth of the God-man, the perfect Savior. Some people talk about all hell breaking loose; this is where all heaven breaks loose in joy. These angels were doing what angels constantly do, praising God (cf Rev. 5:11–12; 7:11–12). The angels knew Him as the 2nd person of the Trinity before His incarnation, where they saw His inexpressible glory. They understood the fall had transformed the human race into sinful rebels against God, but they also knew God had provided a way of salvation. The angelic chorus of praise reflects the highest of all thought & action; the supreme reason for all that exists, God's glory. The ultimate purpose of the good news of salvation is to save sinners so they can join the angels in glorifying God. But these words also define our need. & by defining our need, they describe the mission of this promised Redeemer, now come as a Baby. & if they define our need & define His mission, then these words not only announce a birth, they also predict His death. **Glory & peace** are the 2 major words: **Glory to God in the Highest, & on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased** (14). The joyful news that on a day in history, in the fullness of time, in the prophesied city, a Savior was born, who was Christ, the Lord. That news has 2 great outcomes or purposes: **Glory & peace**.

A. Glory Why were the angels praising & glorifying God? Because Jesus the Savior was born. The coming of this Child was the greatest revelation of the **glory** of God & the coming of this Child would bring **peace** to God's people. The angels understood humanity's fall into sin & that the majestic 2nd member of the Trinity would lay aside His riches & come to earth in humility for undeserving sinners. He would live a perfectly righteous life & die on the cross to bear the punishment of our sins. They understood the significance of Christ's birth & were praising God because they were seeing the beginning of the final phase of His redemptive plan. The angels tell us that with the birth of this Baby something happens in heaven & on earth. They proclaim that with His birth, this Baby, who is the eternal Son of God, has made the invisible God visible. God's glory shines through all eternity with unparalleled splendor because of the incarnation of Jesus. **Glory to God in the highest** is the culmination or climax of the message of **good news of great joy which will be for all the people** who receive it. The angels aren't just saying they praise the glorious

God whose throne is in the highest heaven, but they're saying that this event, the incarnation, brings glory to the One who is already glorious. In other words, God has once again shown His glory through His works, He has shown His true character through His willingness to humble Himself for our sake.

What is it about Christmas that reveals the glory of God & brings Him honor? The birth of Jesus Christ is the greatest gift ever given by anyone. Jesus is the most priceless, most valuable, most needed, & most truly desirable gift one could ever receive. For God to give His Son to the world is an expression of such love, such generosity, such matchless grace as to bring God great glory. It also confirms God as One who keeps His promises, whose word is trustworthy, as He sent the long-awaited, promised Messiah to His people. The substance of the angels' song was 1st upward as they glorified God. Then it was outward as it pronounced **on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased**. Peace, wholeness, well-being for those who have been favored by God's grace.

B. Peace Augustus had established the Pax Romana, an empire at peace & in safety. But the peace of Rome was about to be dwarfed by the **peace** of God. A 1st-century philosopher observed: *While the emperor may give peace from war on land & sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief, & envy; he cannot give peace of heart, for which man yearns for more than even outward peace.*¹⁵ Caesar Augustus couldn't transform any of his subjects' hearts or change any of their eternal futures. But the angels say this Baby will. The angels attributed **glory to God in the highest**; that is, heaven. **On earth**, the lowest place in comparison, they proclaimed **peace among men with whom He is pleased**. This is the **peace** with God that results from salvation (Rom 5:1; cf Acts 10:36). Through faith in the Messiah, the **Prince of Peace**, God & sinners are reconciled (Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:18–19; Eph 2:16; Col 1:20–22). This is an announcement of **peace** that goes deep within & lasts beyond the grave. **Peace** is one of the great gifts God has given us in Jesus. Through Jesus we find peace with God in the forgiveness of our sins. The peace promised by the Bible isn't the peace of a tranquil situation, though at times God allows that. His peace is an inner rest that sustains us despite outward circumstances. This peace is for those who've received His grace by believing &

¹⁵ Epictetus, quoted at www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/archives/guzik_david/StudyGuide_Luk/Luk_2.cfm

trusting in His Son. As Elisabeth said to Mary, **Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord said will be accomplished** (Lk 1:45). We receive His blessing & peace when we humbly believe what He's promised through Jesus, forgiveness of our sins, newness of life, & hope for all eternity.

The most basic need we all have is peace with God. This is foundational to all our pursuits of peace. Rom 5:1 says, **Therefore, having been justified by faith** (that's the act of believing), **we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Justified** means God declares you to be just in His sight by crediting to you the righteousness of Jesus. & He does that by faith alone. It's not by works, traditions, being raised in a Christian family, baptism, church membership, or being a good person. It's by faith alone. When we believe in Jesus as our Savior by faith, we're united to Him & His righteousness is counted by God as ours. & the result is **peace** with God. God's anger at us because of our sin is put away. Our rebellion against Him is overcome. God adopts us into His family. & from now on all His dealings with us are for our good. He'll never be against us. He is our Father & Friend. We have peace with Him which is the most fundamental & important peace there is. You & I were created for peace with God. We were created so the most important thing in our lives would be a relationship with Him. We were created to have the honor of being the worshipful, obedient, children of God. But this **peace** the angels speak of is only for **men with whom God is pleased**. That doesn't mean He gives salvation to those who please Him by their good works, since salvation is **not as a result of works** (Eph 2:9). The Greek text literally reads, *men of His good pleasure*. This means *those upon whom God's will or favour rests*, & expresses the thought of *God's free choice of those whom He wills to favour & save*.¹⁶ Salvation peace belongs to those to whom God is pleased to give it. It's not a reward for those who have good will or who please God by something they do. It's a gracious gift to those who are the objects of God's grace. It was only to His disciples that Jesus said, **Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful** (Jn 14:27). No one earns God's peace. He gives it to them because He's pleased to do so. Even though God's offer of peace goes out to all, only those who receive Christ & trust Him as Savior & Redeemer & Lord, will experience

¹⁶ J Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p 112

the **peace** He brings. The angels weren't rejoicing for what people had done or would do to earn their salvation. No, the heavenly host was glorifying God because, though none can deserve salvation, God is delighted to give it to sinners by His own good pleasure.

The angel brought **good news of great joy. Great joy.** It's interesting that the next time the NT uses the phrase **great joy** is also a very important occasion. It's the message of an angel on the morning of Christ's 3rd day in the tomb:

After the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the 1st day of the week, Mary Magdalene & the other Mary came to look at the grave. & behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven & came & rolled away the stone & sat upon it. & his appearance was like lightning, & his clothing as white as snow. The guards shook for fear of him & became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. Go quickly & tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; & behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you." & they left the tomb quickly with fear & great joy & ran to report it to His disciples. & behold, Jesus met them & greeted them. & they came up & took hold of His feet & worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go & take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, & there they will see Me" (Mt 28:2-10)

The 1st time **great joy** is used in the NT is linked with the gospel of Jesus' birth. The next time it's used is at His resurrection. This time the angel doesn't say, *Come see where He's lying*. Instead it's, *Come see where He was laying, where He's not, because He has risen from the dead*. Jesus the Savior completed the work He was born for, completing the good news & their great joy. This is the heart of the gospel. Not just that Christ was born. Not just that He died for our sins. But He was buried, raised, & appeared to His disciples (1 Cor 15). If you don't have the resurrection, you don't have the full good news. Never leave Jesus in the manger, on the cross, or in the tomb. The good news is our Savior, Christ the Lord, conquered death by rising from it & is now in heaven as the Mediator for all who trust Him.

The real Savior of the world wasn't Caesar Augustus, nor will it be any other world leader. The Savior of the world is Jesus, the Son of God who came to earth hidden in Mary's flesh, was born in human flesh, lived in the flesh, died in the flesh, was resurrected in that flesh, & now lives in the same glorified flesh at the right hand of the Father. The angels sing this song because in Jesus God has brought together His highest glory & our greatest good. Only in Jesus is God fully & perfectly glorified & only in Jesus are we richly & eternally blessed. God is glorified as the kind, generous,

faithful, gracious God who keeps His promises & blesses His people in the gift of His Son. We, His people, are blessed because we receive the gift of Jesus Christ, who comes to save us from sin & death.

If you can sing from the heart, **Glory to God**, this Christmas, it's because He's come to bring you **peace** in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. But celebrating Christmas without knowing Christ means nothing. If you don't know Him, think on His words:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him (Jn 3:16-17).

I am the resurrection & the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, & everyone who lives & believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this? (Jn 11:25-26).

I am the way, & the truth, & the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me (Jn 14:6).

As you ponder Him, the Babe of Bethlehem, the Christ of the cross, place your faith in Him & truly know the wonder of Christmas.

Today, as we think about Jesus, as we reflect on the Messiah who has come, may we thank God that He's satisfied our greatest need by sending His Son, the sinless Savior, to lay down His life so we might be reconciled for God forever. Let us join the angels in praising & giving God glory, for sending us His Son who is the Lord of all lords, King of all kings, & Caesar of all caesars. The only true *august* One. On a real day in history, in a city in the real world, the Savior came to deliver us from sin. The Messiah was born to fulfill God's promises & the Lord arrived to defeat our enemies & make us safe & satisfied forever in Him. Let's rejoice together that we have this great Savior, Jesus, the Christ, the Lord, born on a day in a city to save us from our sins & for His glory!