Good News of Great Joy
(Luke 2:1–20)

A (Christless) Christmas Carol

As we do every year, a few days before Christmas my family gathered in our living room to watch *A Christmas Carol*. We usually choose the 1992 Muppets' version; occasionally, we opt for the 2009 Disney version; both are excellent. For those of you who have been living under a rock for the past two centuries and are unfamiliar with the plot, *A Christmas Carol* is a story of redemption, narrating the conversion of Ebenezer Scrooge from a greedy old miser to a generous and merry man. The majority of the story takes place on the night of Christmas Eve, during which Scrooge is visited by three successive spirits—the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future—who together show him the error of his ways. The climactic scene finds Scrooge and the terrifying, black-shrouded Ghost of Christmas Future standing in a darkened church yard with Scrooge looking in horror upon his own gravestone and coming face-to-face with the visceral reality of his imminent death and the punishment that he now knows awaits him, the same miserable, chain-laden fate endured by his old partner, Jacob Marley. Scrooge pleads with the silent, shrouded spirit:

> "Spirit!" he cried, tight clutching at its robe, "hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope?"
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> For the first time the hand appeared to shake.
>
> "Good Spirit," he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: "Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!"
>
> The kind hand trembled.
>
> "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh tell me, I may sponge away the writing on this stone!"

In his agony, he caught the spectral hand. It sought to free itself, but he was strong in his entreaty, and detained it. The Spirit, stronger yet, repulsed him.

Holding up his hands in one last prayer to have his fate reversed, he saw an alteration in the phantom's hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost.

Yes! and the bedpost was his own. The bed was his own, the room was his own. Best and happiest of all, the Time before him was his own, to make amends in!

"I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future!" Scrooge repeated, as he scrambled out of bed. "The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. Oh Jacob Marley! Heaven, and the Christmas Time be praised for this! I say it on my knees, old Jacob; on my knees!"

He was so fluttered and so glowing with his good intentions, that his broken voice would scarcely answer to his call. He had been sobbing violently in his conflict with the Spirit, and his face was wet with tears.

"They are not torn down," cried Scrooge, folding one of his bed-curtains in his arms, "they are not torn down, rings and all. They are here: I am here: the shadows of the things that would have been, may be dispelled. They will be. I know they will!"

His hands were busy with his garments all this time: turning them inside out, putting them on upside down, tearing them, mislaying them, making them parties to every kind of extravagance.

"I don't know what to do!" cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath; and making a perfect Laocoön of himself with his stockings. "I am as light as a feather, I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world. Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!"

He had frisked into the sitting-room, and was now standing there: perfectly winded.

. . . . "It's all right, it's all true, it all happened. Ha ha ha!"

Really, for a man who had been out of practice for so many years, it was a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh. The father of a long, long, line of brilliant laughs![1]

[1] Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843), 150–54.

Now, I hasten to add that Charles Dickens was no evangelical. Raised in a nominal Anglican home, he eventually found a home in Unitarianism—a rationalistic form of pseudo-Christianity that rejected much of classical Christian orthodoxy while retaining much of Christian vocabulary. Dickens did not embrace Christian theology but was very much attracted to parts of the Christian ethic, particularly its concern for the poor. Thus, the redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge is not a conversion to *Christ*, but rather a conversion to *Christmas*. Permeating *A Christmas Carol* is a strange kind of pseudo-gospel that is sometimes referred to as "the spirit of Christmas" or the "Christmas spirit"—a vague sense that at Christmas people ought to be kind to one another because… Christmas. In the opening scene, Ebenezer Scrooge is visited at his counting-house by his nephew, whose indefatigable cheer annoys his uncle to no end. Scrooge chides his nephew for wishing him a "Merry Christmas," and in response his nephew explains,

> "But I am sure I have always thought of Christmastime, when it has come around—apart from the veneration due its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that—as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe it *has* done me good, and *will* do me good; and I say, God bless it!"[2]

If I am reading Dickens rightly, what he has Scrooge's nephew to say is that apart from any religious origin or significance of the holiday—with such Dickens was very little concerned—Christmas of its own produces in the hearts of those who celebrate it the virtues of kindness, forgiveness, charity, and cheer. It seems to me, then, that rather than merely *removing* Christ *from* Christmas, Dickens *replaced* Christ *with* Christmas. Christmas itself became a god to be honored, and this was done by participating in Christmas festivities and conforming one's life to the Christmas virtues. Thus, when Scrooge is converted to Christmas, he commits himself to "honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year." In so doing, he hopes to "sponge away the writing" from his gravestone.

[2] Dickens, *A Christmas Carol,* 8–9.

For Dickens, Christmas was not the commemoration and celebration of the historical birth of Christ the incarnate Son of God, but rather was transformed into a kind of personification of human generosity and goodwill. One sees this especially in the Ghost of Christmas Present, for whose character Dickens drew far more inspiration from the "Father Christmas" mythology of English folklore than anything in the Christian Scriptures. In fact, *A Christmas Carol* would still work even if there were no stable, no manger, no swaddling cloths, no shepherds in the fields abiding, no angelic choir singing, "Glory to God in the highest," no Mary, or Joseph, or baby lying in a manger. If the eternal Son of God had not become incarnate by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin, if He was not crucified, buried, and raised to life again, no significant portion of *A Christmas Carol* would need to be rewritten, for Dickens' gospel was not rooted in historical realities, but in the general sense that people can and should be good to one another.

And yet, what a picture of joy when Ebenezer Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning to find that he still has the opportunity to escape the dreadful punishment of his sins. If such joy may be imagined by an unbeliever (Dickens) who had nothing more on which to base it than some vague notion that if one "honoured Christmas in his heart, and tried to keep it all the year" than his past crimes would be forgotten and he would be saved, how much greater must be the solid joys of those whose hope is grounded in the historical events of the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ? I want us to know this same joy—the joy of sin forgiven, the joy of punishment averted, the joy of new life bestowed. That is what we are after today as we return to Luke 2 and the narrative of the birth of Jesus Christ, for that is precisely what we are promised in this passage. When the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were filled with terror.

> *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 Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (2:10–11)*

If you want to know this "great joy" (χαρὰν μεγάλην), then you must hear and believe the "good news" (εὐαγγελίζομαι — "I proclaim good news"). Let's give our attention, then, to five aspects of the good news that we might know this great joy.

I. The Good News Is Historical (2:1–7)

First, the gospel is good news of great joy because it is *historical*. The events of Jesus Christ—His incarnation and birth, His ministry and miracles, His crucifixion and burial, His resurrection and ascension—actually happened at a certain time and at a certain place in history, such that if you had been there at that time and at that place, you would have witnessed them with your five senses. The historicity of the gospel was of the utmost concern to Luke, as we already observed in his prologue, in which he labored to assure Theophilus that what he has written was the fruit of his careful and copious research into the accounts of numerous eyewitnesses:

> *Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (1:1–4)*

Luke was not an eyewitness of Christ's life, death, or resurrection, but he was acquainted with many who were. In the sermon on that text, I mentioned that reliable early church tradition asserts that Luke was originally from Antioch in Syria, which after the persecution that broke out in Jerusalem following the death of Stephen became the epicenter of the early church (Acts 11:19).[3] It was in Antioch that Luke would have encountered numerous eyewitnesses of the life and ministry of Jesus, including a number of the apostles. This likely would have included Mary, whose care Jesus had entrusted to the apostle John (Jn 19:26–27). And it is likely from Mary, as well as others, that Luke received this account of Jesus' birth.

Let's read vv. 1–2:

> *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. (2:1–2)*

[3] James R. Edwards, *The Gospel of Luke,* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 5–7. Those asserting Luke's Antiochene roots are the *Anti-Marcionite Prologue,* Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.4.6), and Jerome (*Vir. ill.* 7.1).

Why does Luke include these details? What purpose do they serve in his narrative? Clearly, they are intended to locate the event of Jesus' birth in a particular time and a particular place. James Edwards writes, "The story of Jesus, like that of Israel as a whole, does not begin, 'Once upon a time,' but 'In those days.' The biblical story is not a myth, but a record of divine activity in historical time."[4] So when did the birth of Christ take place? Luke provides three time-stamps, if you will.

The first is actually given back in chapter one, where Luke dates the annunciation of John the Baptist's birth to "the days of Herod, king of Judea" (1:5). Herod the Great reigned over Judea—though under Roman supremacy—from 34 to 4 BC. And as John's conception in Elizabeth's womb and Jesus' conception in Mary's womb are separated by just six months (1:36, 56), Jesus' birth could not have occurred much later than 4 BC. If we add in the information we have from Matthew's Gospel, where Matthew records Herod's command to slaughter the infants of Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the Messiah (Mt 2:1–18), Jesus' birth must have occurred a year or two prior to that, perhaps 6 or 5 BC.

Second, Jesus' birth occurred when "a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered" (v. 1). Caesar Augustus, whose given name was Octavian, was Julius Caesar's nephew. Born in 63 BC, he joined Mark Antony after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC and together they defeated Brutus and Cassius at Philippi in 42 BC. Octavian then defeated Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in 31 BC, thus becoming the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. He was awarded the title "Augustus" (meaning "majestic" or "holy") by the Roman Senate in 27 BC and reigned until his death in AD 14.[5] Although there is no extrabiblical record of a specific census during the period in question, Luke likely refers to the kind of administrative decree that was a regular part of the taxation policy implemented by Caesar Augustus.[6]

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[4] Edwards, 67.

[5] Edwards, 67.

[6] "Thus there is no record of any law of Augustus that a universal census be held. But he did reorganize Roman administration, and there are records of censuses held in a number of places. In Egypt, where the custom is unlikely to have differed significantly from neighbouring Syria (of which province Judea was a part), a census was held every fourteen years. Actual documents survive for every census from AD 20 to 270 (Barclay). When Augustus died he left in his own handwriting a summary of information, such as statistics on direct and indirect taxation, which would most naturally have been derived from censuses [Morris cites Tacitus, *Annals* i.11; Suetonius, *Octavian* 101]. The evidence seems best satisfied if we understand the *decree* of which Luke writes, not as a formal law, but as an administrative direction which set the whole process in motion and had its effect in distant Judea"; Leon Morris, *Luke,* TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1974, 1988), 98–99.

Third, this "was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (v. 2). Here is where we encounter some difficulty reconciling the biblical text with external data, for Josephus, our primary extrabiblical source for what transpired in Palestine during the first century states that Quirinius became the governor of Syria in AD 6, and that he was sent to impose a census upon Judea that provoked the famous revolt led by Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37).[7] But if Quirinius did not become the governor of Syrian until AD 6, how could this census have occurred during the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 BC? There are a couple of plausible solutions to the problem. The more likely is that the word translated "first" (πρώτη) should rather be translated "before," such that v. 2 would read, "This registration was before [the one that took place when] Quirinius was governor of Syria." Another possible solution is that Quirinius served an earlier term as governor of Syria during the reign of Herod the Great, before the one that provoked the rebellion in AD 6.[8] But as there is no evidence of an earlier Syrian rule for Quirinius, I prefer the first solution. In this case, Luke would be distinguishing the census that took Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem from the more famous and volatile census that occurred in AD 6 during the governorship of Quirinius that resulted in the revolt of Judas the Galilean, an event with which Luke was also familiar (Acts 5:37).

It is within this specific historical context that the famous events recorded in vv. 3–7 actually took place.

> *And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to*

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[7] Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews,* 18.2 [confirmed by Tacitus, *Ann.* 30.30; Suetonius, *Tib.* 49]; 17.355; 18.1–2; 18.4–10; 20.102; Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Wars,* 2.117; cited in Edwards, 69.

[8] David Garland surveys both possibilities, and opts for the first: "The translation offered here avoids this historical problem by rendering the superlative adjective 'first' with a comparative sense 'before.' Fitzmyer dismisses this view as a 'last ditch solution to save the historicity involved,' but valid arguments commend it. The translation 'first' is odd because no sequence of other known censuses follows. Why does it need to be identified as the first? The structure of the phrase is also similar to the usage in John 1:15, 30 with the adjective 'first'/'before' (πρῶτος) followed by the genitive—in this case, the genitive absolute"; David E. Garland, *Luke,* ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 118; see Garland's full discussion on pp. 117–19. Garland cites repeatedly from Brook W. R. Pearson, "The Lucan Censuses, Revisited," *CBQ* 61 (1999): 268–81. Edwards surveys and rejects both suggestions, leaving the question and open and unresolved problem: "A full resolution of the historical problems related to the dating of the census of Quirinius seems impossible on the basis of current historical knowledge"; Edwards, 68–71.

give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn[9] *son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (2:3–7)*

Evidently, the decree of Caesar Augustus required the Jews to register in their home town, which for the Jews meant the city of their ancestral inheritance.[10] As Joseph "was of the house and lineage of David" (ἐξ οἴκου καὶ πατριᾶς Δαυὶδ), this meant a return to Bethlehem, the city of David, some seventy miles due south of Nazareth and four a half miles from Jerusalem.[11] It is unlikely that the decree required Mary to go with Joseph to register, and we might think that no one in their right mind would willingly take a very pregnant woman on a seventy-mile trek. Why, then, did Joseph bring her? I like Leon Morris' explanation, that Joseph did not want Mary to endure the undoubtedly severe social ostracism alone in his absence.[12] Nor, I suspect, did he want to risk being absent for the birth of the one he knew was the Messiah (Mt 1:21). It is also possible that Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem quite some time before she was due, for even though in our popular imagination Mary went into labor as soon as they arrived in Bethlehem, Luke simply says, "*And while they were there* [ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ], the time came for her to give birth."[13] We probably think that Mary went into labor as they were arriving in Bethlehem because the King James translation of v. 7 is indelibly etched in our minds and has bled over into our modern translations: "because there was no room for him in the inn," as though they arrived in Bethlehem with Mary already in active labor, went to the inn and found it filled, and thus went around back to the stable and there gave birth to Jesus. But the Greek word καταλύμα does not mean "inn." There is a Greek word for "inn" (πανδοχεῖον), and Luke uses it in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:34. Rather, what Luke probably has

[9] "Firstborn" (πρωτότοκον) refers to birth order, and suggests that Jesus had younger brothers. As Edwards notes, "Had Luke intended to imply either Mary's perpetual virginity or that Jesus was her only son, he could have used μονογενὴς, 'only (begotten) son'"; Edwards, 73.

[10] Morris suggests that this return to their ancestral homeland was Herod putting a patriotic spin on a decree he knew would be unpopular: "But it is fairly contended that at the time of which Luke writes Herod would have arranged the details and 'it would be quite like Herod's skill in governing Jews to disguise the foreign nature of the command by an appeal to tribal patriotism' (Easton, cited in Manson)"; Morris, 99–100.

[11] Edwards, 71; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 105.

[12] Morris, 100. Edwards writes, "Luke reports only that Mary attended Joseph 'because she was pregnant [οὔσῃ ἐγκυῳ],'" and cites Alfred Plummer who noted, "*ousē* introduces, not a mere fact, but the reason for what has just been stated; he took her with him, '*because* she was with child'"; Edwards, 72, citing Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke,* 5th ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1900), 53.

[13] Edwards, 72.

in mind here is the guest room that was a part of a typical first-century Palestinian house. Luke uses the same word in Lk 22:11 to refer to the "guest room" where Jesus and His disciples ate the Last Supper. James Edwards helps us get a grasp on the actual scene:

> The footprint of a typical first-century Palestinian dwelling was a rectangle divided into three spaces: a large central room with a stable for animals on one end and a guest room (καταλύμα) on the other. All three rooms normally had separate entrances. The καταλύμα was an attached guest room separated from the central room by a solid wall. The stable was separated from the central room by a half-wall, thus allowing the family to feed animals without going outdoors. When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, the guest rooms in homes were already occupied, and hence the newborn Jesus was swaddled and placed in a manger. The manger was within sight, sound, and reach of the central room. Kenneth Bailey [in his 2008 book *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*] is correct in saying that, despite improvised arrangements, Middle Eastern hospitality, then as now, would have ensured that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were properly cared for.[14]

My intention is not to discredit your favorite Nativity movie or to wreck your cherished manger scene, but rather to direct our attention to what Luke actually intends for us to see. As David Garland notes, "The fiction of a heartless innkeeper who turns them away is not only a fantasy, it leads away from Luke's point."[15] And what is Luke's point?

Luke intends for us to read His gospel as history. The gospel is not a myth; it is fact. It is not a "once upon a time" kind of story; it is an "in the days of Herod, king of Judea, when Caesar Augustus ordered the registration, the one that took place before Quirinius was governor of Syria" kind of story. This is why the gospel is good news of great joy—because it actually happened. The eternal Son of God was really incarnated by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary at a certain time and at a certain place—in Nazareth, sometime around 6/5 BC. Nine months later, the Messiah was really born in a stable in Bethlehem. Some thirty years later—again, Luke meticulously dates the event "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,

[14] Edwards, 73; citing Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 25–36. See also Garland, 120–21.

[15] Garland, 121.

Pontius Pilate being the governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" (3:1–2)—Jesus was really baptized in the Jordan River. Some three years later, Jesus was really crucified for sinners, and three days after that, He really rose in triumph over death and walked out of his tomb. All of these events occurred in time and in history in such a way that if you had been there, you would have seen them, heard them, felt them. Luke stands in utter agreement with his mentor, the apostle Paul, that if these events did not happen—not in some spiritual, mythological, "in our hearts" kind of way, but in a way in which, had you been there, you could have observed them with your eyes, heard them with your ears, touched them with your hands—"then our preaching is vain, and so is our faith" (1 Cor 15:14), then "our faith is futile, we are still in our sins" (1 Cor 15:17), then there is no victory over death (1 Cor 15:18), there is no hope and "we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:19). Our very real alienation from the very real God required a very real redemption. The gospel is good news of great joy because it really happened. The gospel is historical.

II. The Good News Is Universal (2:8–12)

Second, the gospel is good news of great joy because it is *universal*—it is "for all the people" (ἥτις ἔσται τῷ λαῷ), a fact which is demonstrated by its revelation to a nameless group of shepherds tending their flocks outside of Bethlehem. We'll pick the text back up at v. 8:

> *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 Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you:*[16] *you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." (2:8–12)*

[16] "Luke's combination of word and sign in the infancy narratives, a combination repeated with greater precision in the revelation of the resurrected Jesus through Scripture and breaking of bread in 24:25–32, anticipates the categories of 'word and sacrament' in later theology"; Edwards, 77.

It is impossible to overstate the degree to which shepherds were despised among first-century Jews. Leon Morris states,

> As a class shepherds had a bad reputation. The nature of their calling kept them from observing the ceremonial law which meant so much to religious people. More regrettable was their unfortunate habit of confusing "mine" with "thine" as they moved about the country. They were considered unreliable and were not allowed to give testimony in law-courts (Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 25b).[17]

Philip Ryken states, "With the exception of lepers, [shepherds] were the lowest class of men in Israel."[18] And yet it was to them that the angel appeared, it was around them that the glory of the Lord shone. Think of it… In the Old Testament, where did the "glory of the Lord" (δόξα κυρίου) reside? Within the temple, behind the veil, between the cherubim. And who could enter within the temple, behind the veil, to behold this glory? Only the high priest, and that only once a year. Yet now the most exclusive privilege in Israel, reserved for the most ceremonially clean in Israel, is granted to these common, unclean shepherds. What does this convey about the gospel? It conveys that the benefits of redemption are not reserved for the religious elite, for the politically powerful, for the socially connected, but for "all the people" (παντὶ τῷ λαῷ). The redemption accomplished in Christ is given to those "with whom he is pleased" (ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας—with men of [His] good pleasure).[19] And on whom is God well-pleased to bestow His grace? Time and again in Luke's Gospel we will find that the redeeming grace of God is given not to the scribes and the Pharisees, but to sinners and publicans, not to the ceremonially clean priest but to the unclean prostitute, not to the older brother but to the prodigal son. Why?

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[17] Morris, 101. Morris goes on, "There is no reason for thinking that Luke's shepherds were other than devout men, else why would God have given them such a privilege? But they did come from a despised class"; Ibid. Edwards quotes a third-century rabbi who, commenting on Psalm 23, wrote, "There is no more despised occupation in the world than that of shepherds"; Edwards, 74. Morris likewise mentions the possibility that these particular shepherds kept flocks intended for temple sacrifices; Morris, 101. But it is doubtful Luke intended his reader to make this connection.

[18] Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume 1: Luke 1–12,* REC (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 77.

[19] "The word for 'favor' [εὐδοκία] means *God's* saving pleasure rather than humanity's good will whenever used in Luke (2:14; 3:22; 10:21; 12:32). The meaning is 'not that divine peace can be bestowed only where human good will is already present, but that at the birth of the Saviour God's peace rests on those whom he has chosen in accord with his good pleasure'"; Edwards, 79, quoting Bruce Metzer, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament,* 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 111.

Because grace cannot be earned, but must be freely given; and because God's grace is most magnified where it is most needed.

> *And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Lk 5:30–32)*

Are you a sinner? Are you unclean? Are you an outcast, despised by the world and in your own eyes? Then you are just the kind of person Christ came to save. You need no other qualification than your sickness, for you contribute nothing toward your redemption than the disease from which you need to be healed. You need no other qualification than your sin, for you contribute nothing toward your salvation than the sin from which you need to be saved. There is nobody in this room, there is nobody within the sound of my voice, too sinful, too unclean, too far gone to be reached by the redeeming grace of God in Christ Jesus. I do not care who you are, where you've been, or what you've done, today I say to you, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people… including you."

III. The Good News Is Christological (2:11)

Third, the gospel is good news of great joy because it is Christological—that is, it is the good news that "unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11). The good news is that a Savior has been born, and this Savior is Christ the Lord. We have now arrived at the center of this text, and indeed, at the center of the Christian faith, for v. 11 tells us in the most concise language imaginable who Mary's baby is and what He came to do.

Who is this infant born in Bethlehem? He is "Christ the Lord" (Χριστὸς κύριος). "Christ" (Χριστὸς) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word משיח—Messiah, the "Anointed One" promised throughout the Old Testament, the one who would be the final Prophet, Priest, and King of Israel.[20] "Lord" (κύριος) is the standard Greek word used in the Greek Old Testament (LXX) to translate YHWH (יהוה). This is no merely human messianic figure; this is

[20] "'Messiah' (Χριστὸς) means God's anointed Davidic-king"; Edwards, 76.

God incarnate. This is the eternal Son of God become the messianic Son of Man (Dn 7:13–14). This is He who is two complete and distinct natures joined in hypostatic union—"without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of the natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ," as the Chalcedonian Definition (451) states.

And what has Christ the Lord come to accomplish? He has come to be a "Savior" (σωτὴρ). Saved from what? When the angel of the Lord informed Joseph of the impending birth, he said,

> *"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Mt 1:21)*

The good news of great joy is that Jesus Christ the Lord will save you from your sins—from sin's penalty, from sin's power, and ultimately, from sin's presence. How will Jesus do this? Jesus will accomplish this salvation by offering Himself up to God as the sacrificial Lamb, to make atonement for the sins of His people. Our sin has placed us in debt to the law of God, and this debt demands satisfaction, for "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23a). Throughout the Old Testament period, God accepted the sacrifices of lambs as a temporary solution to the problem of sin, but it was always plain that the blood of bulls and goats could never atone for the sins of man (Heb 10:4). This was why God promised to send a Messiah to accomplish what the countless lambs could not—to bear the wrath of God and to satisfy the justice of God until justice was satisfied, the wrath of God was spent, and the glory of God was vindicated. This Jesus did in His death on the cross—He finished the work of atonement and satisfied the judgment of God in our place. Then, three days later, He arose in triumph over death and is alive to give pardon from sin's penalty and deliverance from sin's power to all those who will believe. The good news is that you can be forgiven of your sin, saved from its penalty, freed from its enslaving and dehumanizing bondage. You can be clean and new, no longer condemned, but justified, having a hope and a future. Why? Because "unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

IV. The Good News Is Doxological (2:13–20)

Fourth, the good news is doxological—that is, when the good news is revealed, it results in joyful worship. First, the heavens erupt with praise.

> *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!" (2:13–14)*

This angelic choir is in actuality an enormous military company (πλῆθος στρατιᾶς), "regimented, and marshaled for the praise and purposes of God."[21] And yet this heavenly army appears, not to kill and destroy, but to proclaim the praise of God and peace among those with whom God is pleased.[22] The apostle Peter said that angels long to look into the redemption that was progressively being revealed through the prophets and is now fully revealed through the apostles (1 Pt 1:10–12); evidently, then, at the dawning of the day of redemption, the angels cannot contain themselves but must burst forth in worship.

The same is true when redemption is revealed to man.

> *When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (2:15–20)*

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[21] Edwards, 78.

[22] "*Ainein* ['praising'] augments Luke's central theme of *joy,* reminding believers that the eschatological community of God, both the church triumphant and the church militant, is by nature doxological, ultimately determined by its celebration of God"; Edwards, 78.

When the shepherds arrive in Bethlehem, they find it just as the angel had said (v. 12). And what is their response? Great joy, exuberant worship, and organic evangelism that arises, not by force of discipline, but out of the overflow of a heart made glad. The description of the shepherds is not all that different from Dickens' description of Scrooge on Christmas morning. And why not? For they, too, now know the joy of sin forgiven, the joy of punishment averted, the joy of new life bestowed. Do you know this joy? And does your worship and evangelism bear out the truthfulness of your answer?

V. The Good News Is Personal (2:19)

There is one final element of the good news that must be mentioned, and that is that the gospel is personal. What I mean is, the good news must be personally received; it requires a response. And what response is that? I suggest that Luke inserts v. 19 for just that purpose. Once again, as she was in 1:38, Mary serves as our model of saving faith.[23]

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. (2:19)

To "treasure" (συνετήρει) means to protect, to preserve, to defend something of value. Mary treasured all these things by "pondering" (συμβάλλουσα) them—by thinking on them, meditating upon them, working them out in her mind. This was not something that passed in one ear and out the other; Mary grasped onto these things like treasure, and turned them over and over and over again until she understood them—not always perfectly, to be sure, but really and truly and savingly.

I encourage you to do the same today. If you would know and experience the great joy of sin forgiven, of punishment averted, of new life bestowed, then you must take and treasure the good news that there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

[23] "Already in the report of the shepherds, she becomes a model of faith for Luke; like the good seed in the parable of the Sower (8:15), Mary 'hears the word, holds it fast, and preserves a good crop'"; Edwards, 80.