

**Glory to God and Peace to His People:  
The Angel's Song  
Christmas Eve 2016**

*“Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those  
with whom he is pleased!” - Luke 2:14, ESV*

**Christmas and the Olympics**

What would you think if I told you that the First Christmas was a lot like the Olympics? Your first reaction might be that that seems like an absurd comparison. No, the shepherds did not jump hurdles or throw the shot-put. The wise men came from far away, but they were not running a marathon. Joseph and Mary were not a two-person bob-sled team either. The similarities between the Olympics and the First Christmas have to do with singing and glory in response to good news of great joy.

For centuries, Christmas has been associated with singing. Advent and Christmas carols are among the earliest hymns of the Christian church. This is not surprising, since the coming of Jesus was the most joyful and wonderful event in the history of the world. Likewise, the Olympics feature the singing of various national anthems as celebrations of victory, which sometimes make the news when an athlete's friends put a Baltimore spin on the national anthem and make the athlete crack up during the medal ceremony.

When an athlete's national anthem is heard at the Olympics, it is because he or she is earning Olympic glory. The First Christmas was also full of glory. For many people, Christmas and the Olympics are the almost only times when we hear the word “glory.” In the Christmas story, the word “glory” is specifically associated with the angels. The first mention of angelic glory leads to a response of great fear by the shepherds: *“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.”*

Then, after the angel messenger gave the good news of great joy for the all the people, *“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!’”* This song of the angels is anthem-like in its glorious proclamation. So, at the first Christmas, we have glory, good news, great joy and the singing of an anthem. This is very Olympic-like, isn't it – good news of victory bringing great joy, glory and the singing of an anthem?

Anthems reflect the values and priorities of the kingdom or nation they represent. Our national anthem celebrates America as the land of the free and the home of the brave. The heavenly anthem that filled the skies that first Christmas night was sung in response to much better news of greater joy than Olympic glory, which fades quickly. But in both cases, we might ask, “What exactly is glory?” And in the case of Christmas, we might ask, how exactly does the birth of Jesus bring glory to God, and what's the connection in the angelic anthem between glory to God and peace on earth among those with whom He is pleased?

**Glory in the Bible**

Olympic glory is the winning of a great reputation and high honor for being a gold-medal-winning athlete. The Greek word for glory used in the New Testament, *doxa*, carries much of this same meaning. That makes sense, since the Greeks literally invented Olympic glory. But *doxa* also carries with it the idea of brightness,

splendor and magnificence, and that's the meaning in view when "the glory of the Lord shone around them." The splendor and magnificence of God shone around the shepherds and filled them with great fear.

In the Old Testament, the word "glory" is a translation of the Hebrew word *kabod*, which means to be heavy or weighty. It carries with it the idea of having a great reputation or being highly honored. So a Biblical understanding of glory includes weightiness and radiance, gravity and splendor.

Thus, biblically-speaking, the most glorious object in our solar system is the sun, as it is the heaviest and the source of all gravity and the source of all splendor and radiance. The glory of the sun is a fitting image for the glory of God, for God holds all things together and gives light to everyone. He is the source of all true light for the minds and spirits of people.

We're told in Scripture that God does everything He does for His own glory, and He calls people to order their lives for His glory. The Westminster Larger Catechism, which is part of the summary of the beliefs of our church, opens with this question and answer: "*What is the chief and highest end of man?*" It then answers, "*Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.*"

Some people have a hard time understanding or accepting these realities. They question why God should want us to glorify Him or why He should do all things for His glory. They say it makes God seem very self-centered and vain, egotistical even. But consider this for a moment: Whose glory should God seek to make centrally important?

What if something other than the sun were at the center of our solar system? The very thought of it is impossible. The sun orders all things around itself by its very nature. It is central in our solar system because it is the most glorious object in our solar system. Our solar system, by very definition, would have no existence or order at all without the central glory of the sun.

If we understand the meaning of the word glory and if we understand God accurately, we know that God is, in fact, most glorious. His glory is the source of all of the glory of all of the billions of billions of stars in the universe. He is the one who spoke light into being, who ignited every star, who set every solar system and every galaxy in the universe in motion. The glory of God so far surpasses all the accumulated glory of everything in the created universe as to be beyond our conception. How could He possibly put some small, created thing at the center of reality and order all things around this lesser thing? Such an idea is beyond nonsense, beyond impossible. It would, in fact, make God into an idolater and reality itself into an irresolvable contradiction.

### **The Glory of God and the Good of His People**

The remarkable thing we find in the Bible is not that God is to be glorified, but it is that God has chosen to manifest His glory in a way that blesses and saves His people. In other words, it's not surprising that the chief and highest end of man is to glorify God, but it is surprising that this has been joined inseparably to our enjoying Him fully forever.

Through the Scriptures, we see that the manifestation of God's glory brings good to His people:

- When God first manifested His glory in creation, it was to give light and then order and beauty and life to the universe.

- In Exodus, when God manifested His glory, it was to deliver His people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt and to lead them through the wilderness. He manifested His glory when He gave them the Law, which was given for their good, and when He established His worship in the Tabernacle, giving His people a way of approaching Him.
- In the rest of the Old Testament, God manifested His glory to reveal Himself to prophets, whom He then sent to bring the truth to His people.

In each of these cases of the manifestation of God's glory, people were overwhelmed with fear – the Egyptians driven back, the people of God trembling at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses unable to enter the tent of meeting for the brightness of God's glory, Isaiah overwhelmed with fear.

Yet even as God was manifesting glory that terrified, He was extending grace to comfort, truth to instruct and mercy to redeem. Even the very expression of the central covenant promise that God makes in Scripture reflects His dual commitment to His own glory and the good of His people. God promises repeatedly: *“You will be my people, and I will be your God.”*

We see the same pattern on that first Christmas night, in a still more wonderful way. The glory of God and the great fear of the shepherds is followed by the proclamation of good news of great joy. Then the song of the angels which filled the skies proclaimed the manifestation of the glory of God and the gift of peace to His people.

What is it about Christmas in particular that manifests the glory of God and brings Him honor? The birth of Jesus Christ is the greatest gift ever given by anyone. Jesus is the most priceless, most valuable, most needful and most truly desirable gift one could ever receive, and 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 very trustworthy, as He sent the long-awaited, promised King to His people.

Since God is being glorified in the matchless gift of His Son, that which brings Him glory also brings great joy and true peace to God's people, all of God's people, all of those with whom He is pleased, those of His good pleasure.

You're probably familiar with the traditional translation of the angels' song as “Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, goodwill to men.” But a better reading and translation of the Greek is reflected in our ESV: *“and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.”* An even more literal translation would be *“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among the people of His good pleasure.”* In other words, it is not so much that we please God by anything we are or anything we do, but rather that we are the objects of His good pleasure. Peace is given to those who are loved and favored by God.

We can see that the angels sing this song because in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God has brought together His highest glory and our greatest good. Only in Jesus Christ is God fully and perfectly glorified, and only in Jesus Christ are we richly and eternally blessed. God is glorified as the kind, generous, faithful, gracious God who keeps His promises and 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 and death, to replace condemnation with adoption, guilt with grace, judgment with salvation.

How He does this is the good news:

- He lived to fulfill perfect righteousness for us.
- He died to pay for our every sin,
- He rose to break the power of death and bring eternal life to His people.
- He ascended to the right hand of the Father to be enthroned over the universe as our King, our advocate, our Great High Priest, our mediator.
- One day, He will return as the manifestation of our hope, the fulfillment of our longings, the completion of our salvation and to bring us to Himself as our eternal home.

Have you heard the good news of Christmas? The glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus is the salvation of His people, power over sin and death. If you can sing from the heart, "Glory to God," this Christmas, it is because He has come to bring you peace, peace forever, from His heart to yours in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.