



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas

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Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." (*NASB, Luke 2:1-14)

The wondrous, yet all so familiar Christmas story. I wonder sometimes if we're not so familiar with the story that it ceases to be wondrous. Perhaps for some of you, you actually "checked out" while I was reading it because you know the story so well. So, how do we recapture the wonder of this story? I suppose we could view the story through the eyes of Mary and Joseph... through the eyes of the shepherds...through the eyes of the Magi, or even through the eyes of Herod, the wicked king. But I'd like to try to recapture the wonder of this story by viewing it through the eyes of the angels.

The angels have a very unique perspective to the Christmas story. Luke tells us that every time a sinner repents and comes to Jesus, the angels throw a party in the heavenlies. Do you know that the day you decided to trust Jesus as Savior, the angels threw a party? Ephesians tells us that the angels participate with us when we, as a body, gather to worship. Paul tells us in Ephesians that part of the plan has always been that God would take sinful men and women (children destined for wrath) and, on the basis of His grace, and His grace alone, He would make them into a masterpiece, in order that they might be displayed in the heavenlies, that the angels might gasp at the wonder of what you have become in Christ.

I'd like to offer a little context to help us understand why I think the angels gasp at the wonder of a sinner created into a masterpiece. In order to do that, we have to go back to the beginning of the story.

As close as I can tell, the reference to the creation of the angels is in Genesis, Chapter 2, Verse 1. There is mention that God created the heavens and their hosts. I would have to think that "hosts" is a reference to God's creation of the angelic beings. Somewhere in this story, Lucifer, the greatest of all the angels, determined that he, himself, would like to be God and receive God's glory. One-third of the angels sided with Lucifer, and they were cast out of the presence of God. Two-thirds of the angels remained faithful to God. It is through the eyes of those faithful angels that we view the story.

These angels would have been very aware of God's perfect creation. They would have seen the paradise that God created called Eden—this magnificent place that was both pleasurable to look at and a fruit to taste. They would have witnessed the amazing creation of Adam and Eve crowned with glory and majesty, as Psalm 8 says, that they would image God to the world. They would have been aware that God, in His goodness and grace, placed Adam and Eve in the work which He had finished—this beautiful garden paradise—as His gift to them in order that they might experience everything that God intended for them. They would have known that every evening, in the cool of the day, God would leave the heavenlies and go to the garden in order to stroll through the garden with Adam and Eve, just to enjoy the time together. They would have noticed a familiar face in the garden, as Lucifer (taking on the form of a serpent) shows up in the garden, in order to deceive Adam and Eve with the same lie that cost him his position in the heavenlies. I would think, initially, the temptation must have seemed laughable, because Lucifer had virtually nothing to offer Adam and Eve. God had provided them virtually with everything, so they must have been stunned and confused as the conversation began to unfold, and Adam and Eve seemed to actually be listening and considering what Lucifer the serpent had to say. They must have wondered, as Adam and Eve considered the possibility that life could actually be better if they, themselves, were gods, and ran their own lives for themselves.

One can only imagine what it was like in the heavenlies, when Adam and Eve actually listened to the voice of the serpent and sinned against God. What did that look like from the heavenlies as, for the first time in all of history, there was this separation between sinful men and women and a holy God, and what they had known before was suddenly over. They would have known when God left the heavenlies to go stroll with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, but Adam and Eve were nowhere to be found. They were hiding in the trees, covered with their shame and guilt. They would have known that God made some sort of a promise that God, somehow, would bring life back out of death. But there was no way the angels could have understood, in that moment, what it would cost God.

As closely as I can tell, the very first angel assignment that we are made aware of is that the angels had the assignment to go to the Garden of Eden and escort Adam and Eve out, and to guard the entrance, that they may not return. Think about that! They had seen the fullness of what God wanted for people made in His image, and they were actually involved in walking

Adam and Eve out of that, into the world now cursed with their sin. Nobody would have understood that better.

The angels show up in various ways in the Old Testament. For example, at one point they actually sit down and have supper with Abraham. Shortly after that, they go to the city of Sodom and rescue Lot and his family before Sodom is destroyed by God. And then Jude tells us this very strange story where Michael, the archangel, actually contested with Satan himself for the dead body of Moses on the mountain, a contest that God won. And then imagine those four hundred silent years between the end of Malachi and the announcement of the birth of the Messiah, years for the Hebrew people that were filled with despair and disappointment and hopelessness. The angels must have wondered: What is God up to? When will he fulfill his promise?

Can you imagine what it must have been like that day in the heavenlies, when God called Gabriel over and said, “It is time to go to Earth and meet with Zacharias and tell him that his wife Elizabeth is going to have a child in her old age, and he will be the one who will announce that it is time for the Messiah to come. The conversation between Gabriel and Zacharias is classic! Gabriel meets with Zacharias and explains to him that his wife Elizabeth will have a child in her old age, and that he will announce the Messiah! And Zacharias says, “You know, I’m really struggling to understand this, because we’re kind of old...like past childbearing years! I don’t know that this is going to work!” Gabriel’s response is classic. He looks at Zacharias and says, “Do you know who I am? I am Gabriel! I stand in the presence of God! Do you think I’m just making this up? I bring to you a message from God, but because you didn’t believe me, you will remain silent until the day that child is born.”

A few months pass and God the Father calls Gabriel over and says, “It is time to go to Earth again. This time you shall meet with a young Jewish virgin and you shall explain to her, that even though she has never had relations with a man, she will have a child. It will be God in the flesh—the Savior of the world!” Can you imagine being Gabriel and having the opportunity to meet with this young Jewish virgin, and to explain to her that: “Even though you’ve never known a man, you will have a child! And by the way, he will be God in the flesh! He is the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world!” Gabriel has that conversation with Mary, and Mary responds beautifully. She erupts with praise for God! But the conversation gets more difficult as she tries to explain this to her betrothed husband-to-be, Joseph. “Joseph, I don’t know exactly how to tell you this. I’ve never been with a man, but I am pregnant.” Joseph, applying some common sense, assumed she had to have been unfaithful. Therefore, he began a process to divorce her. Can you imagine being the angel that God calls over and says, “I need you to go to Earth and have a little conversation with Joseph; he’s not quite understanding this.” The angel appears to Joseph and explains to Joseph. “It is true. Your wife-to-be has never known a man. She remains a virgin, but she is pregnant with a child. But this child is a gift from God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. He is actually God in the flesh. He is the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world!” Can you imagine trying to process all this from the viewpoint of the angels who have seen Jesus in all his glory—as King of Kings, as Lord of Lords, the Creator of

the universe? And now, somehow, in some way, He is absent from the heavenlies and He dwells, somehow now, taking on human flesh, in the womb of a young Jewish girl.

And then came that glorious night when the Christ-child was born. But what a strange circumstance—born not in a temple...born not in a palace...not even born in a house! How could this be that there was no room in the inn? How could it be that God made flesh would actually be born in a stable and would be laid in an ordinary feeding trough? One can only imagine the angels thinking to themselves: This seems like such a strange way to save the world! You can also imagine the angels knowing that God had left the heavenlies and had now become a little baby born in that stable, and everybody around had virtually no idea what had just happened!

So, imagine being the angel that God calls over and says, “I need you to go down there and make an announcement that the long-awaited Messiah has been born.” But imagine the conversation when God says, “I need you to go to a small band of simple, poor shepherds on the side of the hill and announce it to them.” You can only imagine the angels saying: “I’m sorry...What?” “Yes, I want you to go down to a small band of poor, simple shepherds on the side of a hill and I want you to announce it to them.” So, imagine that angel appearing to the shepherd to announce the news: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior—it is the long-awaited Christ...God in the flesh!”

And then suddenly the sky was filled with angels, as all of the angels gathered together to celebrate this magnificent moment, saying, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace among men.” What an absolutely wondrous moment that must have been for the angels!

Arnie: Merry Christmas, Bryan and Cara, and Merry Christmas to all of our listeners! I'm glad we could be together for this great teaching. Bryan, I've just never thought about viewing the Christmas story through the eyes of the angels.

Bryan: I think it's fascinating because it creates a completely different perspective about a pretty familiar story. I think it's a way to recapture the wonder of the Christmas story.

Cara: At Christmas time, we get that the angels are glorious and amazing creatures, but we don't always think about how much they're involved in the redemptive story.

Bryan: I think that's right. As a matter of fact, when you start looking at all the places where the angels are involved, it's rather eye opening. We tend to think the story is just about us, and it's a reminder that there's more to the story than just us.

Arnie: You know, sometimes we act like we're doing God some big favor by serving in some little way, but the angels remind us it's God doing us a favor, by inviting us into His part of the story.

Bryan: Yeah. That's one of the biggest impacts for me when I do that message from the perspective of the angels, is you just start to think about what an amazing moment it would've been for God to call the angels over for specific parts in the Christmas story and the Easter story. And it's a reminder that the privilege is ours that God has called us to be part of something that lasts forever. Cara, out of all of us here, you probably have the freshest perspective on the meaning of Christmas, because you're the newest believer. So how does Christmas look today, compared to how it looked in your past?

Cara: Well, I make it about other people and not me. You know, my parents are divorced, and that's like a death, you know, because you lose your past. It's just gone. All those memories, it just, Christmas is different, and then you know, people pass away in your life. I can be sad about that on Christmas morning if I make the day about me, but since I gave my life to Christ and it's not about me, it's about Him, and it's the day to celebrate Him as a gift. I focus on the Savior, and joy and peace fill the day, as opposed to the sadness if it becomes all about me.

Bryan: Yeah, I think that's a great perspective. You know, I think about as a kid, it was about Christmas mornings, about packages. It was about all the things you just talked about that most people think about. But as a pastor, I'm just so aware it's such a painful time for so many people. And the hope is not found in anything other than the Savior, which is the point of Christmas.