

Angels' Song

SCOTT HOEZEE

According to the Guinness Book of World Records, the shortest song ever recorded lasts exactly 1.316 seconds. There is actually a video of it on YouTube; go ahead and watch it; you have time. Now, the British rock band that produced that one-chord song did it as a joke, of course; but we do know from history that songs do not have to be long to be meaningful. In fact, the song of the angels as Luke records it on the night of Jesus' birth is by far the shortest of the four songs you find in Luke 1 and 2; in fact, in terms of words, it is even shorter than Psalm 117, which is the shortest psalm; but, what the angels conveyed in that brief chorus to those shepherds that night contains a whole lot of Gospel Good News. Today on *Groundwork*, we are going to dig into that little song and ponder its meaning.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we welcome our listeners back to this third program of looking at the songs that we find in Luke. There are four songs. We have looked at Mary's song, we have looked at Zechariah's song, and now we move into Chapter 2, after that very long first chapter of Luke – 80 verses – and now we move into Chapter 2 and we get to the time – the night, the day – of Jesus' birth.

DAVE BAST

This is, by far I am sure, the best known of the four songs in Luke. It is also by far the shortest. It is the *Gloria*, or sometimes called the *Gloria In Excelsis* to give it its Latin name; and it is the song that the angels sang to the shepherds on the hills outside of Bethlehem. It is just really a dozen or so words in its extent. It is: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men. That is how many of us learned it originally in Sunday school or in the familiar carol versions; but actually, a little better translation changes that last phrase.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; peace to those on whom God's favor rests. So, we had Mary's song, ten verses; Zechariah's song, twelve verses; they look like they are getting longer, and if you get to a song by angels, you would think it would be something worthy of Handel or Bach or some great composer, but no, this is the shortest song – very short – very to the point – but delivered to the shepherds, and I think maybe we should spend a few minutes before we think too much more about the song itself, about what an unusual setting this is; that the angels came to shepherds first. The greatest birth ever and it was announced first of all to these people out in the middle of nowhere on the hills with their sheep.

DAVE BAST

I think we have seen a theme now, in even these just very early stages of Luke's Gospel, just the opening verses, that God is the God of the little people; God is the God of ordinary, humble, everyday folks. God is not the God, necessarily, of the great Caesars and emperors and potentates. He is not just the God of the high and mighty; he is not the God of the one percent, to put it in our terms today, but he is the God who comes to

humble Mary, a simple village girl, and exalts her highly; and he is the God who comes to an elderly priest and his wife – by the way, there were tons of priests in ancient Israel, that is why they had to take their turn. We did not mention this in our earlier program about Zechariah, but how special it was for him to be serving in the Temple. It is very possible that that was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it could be.

DAVE BAST

So, he is an ordinary person. He is not a great, famous high priest or anything; and here in Luke 2 when we come to the most familiar and beloved parts of the Christmas story, the news is first announced to shepherds out in the fields watching over their flocks, who were not only simple, working stiff – blue-collar types, farmers and laborers – but they were kind of looked down on by the more elite of Jewish culture because they were considered to be following an unclean occupation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; that changed over time. Of course, David was a shepherd, so there was a time in Israel when shepherds were not looked down on; but by Jesus' day, by the First Century or so, that had changed. Ironically, Dave, you were mentioning about potentates – good word – and the big shots of the world; the biggest big shot of them all at this time was Caesar Augustus, and he is the one whose tax decree brought us to Bethlehem, of all things; so, the big shot is the one who brought us to these little guys outside of the little town of Bethlehem – not in Jerusalem even; not in the big city – we are out in the countryside a little way, and we remember the story, the tax decree – the census was declared by Caesar Augustus, and so Joseph was from the Bethlehem area, so they had to go there, and that is where they found themselves when it came time for Mary to give birth, and they ended up lodging with the animals; they could not find any room because a lot of people had traveled and made that same trip. So, no room at the inn; and yet, through all of those movers and shakers, we end up here and then we end up with the shepherds. Again, Luke is turning the world... I mean, I love the setup of Luke 2: All those names that kids in Sunday school pageants have a hard time pronouncing: Caesar Augustus and Quirinius and all these people, and Luke is listing them, but then through a little step of irony he makes them of no account; we move away from those people, and now to the really important people: shepherds.

DAVE BAST

If you can think back to the summer of 2013, how caught up everybody was in the royal baby watch; you know, as William and Kate were about give – well, she – I think most of the work fell on Kate's shoulders – but this whole countdown, and on British TV apparently they put a little live shot in the screen corner; whatever program was on, here comes the palace spokesman to announce the great moment. Just imagine if instead of all that hoopla – and here in America a lot of people got caught up in it, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it was on CNN and they also had an inset on their website of the microphone where the announcement would be made eventually.

DAVE BAST

But just imagine if instead the royal spokesperson had slipped out quietly and gone down to Paddington Station in London and rounded up a couple of bums sleeping in cardboard boxes outside and said: Hey, psst, guess what. The royal child has been born. And that is something like what has happened here. The angels are royal messengers. In fact, the word *angelus* means the same, actually, as missionary: One who has been sent to make an announcement; and the announcement they make is to the unlikeliest group of people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that says so much about the Gospel; so much about the theme of Luke's Gospel in particular. We saw it in Mary's song: Lifting up the lowly, exalting the humble; God's eye on the sparrow; God's eye on the little

people; and that is just so much of the good news right there.

DAVE BAST

You know, here is another thing that is unique about Luke; his version of Jesus' Beatitudes has Jesus say simply, "Blessed are the poor." Matthew puts it, also accurately, I am sure, "Blessed are the poor in spirit – the spiritually poor," and you can be physically wealthy and be spiritually poor; it does not happen very often, but it is theoretically possible; but in Luke's Gospel it is simply, "Blessed are the poor," and that really summarizes – I think that could be written as the caption over the whole Christmas story and all of these songs that we are looking at, because that is the theme that comes through most clearly; God is on the side of the humble, the poor, the disadvantaged; the people who, in effect, know they need him; they know they need help and they have not got it made and they are not big shots, but there is good news for them. How that unfolds and how we unpack this brief, two-line song of the angels is what we will look at next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and today, Dave, we are in Luke Chapter 2, and we have already looked at it. So, this is the familiar story of the night of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and the birth announcement – the announcement of the greatest birth of all time comes, as we said, to a very surprising group of people, shepherds – nobodies in their day – little people, invisible people, despised people – and they are the ones that the announcement comes to. What I really love – and maybe we can spend just a few minutes talking about this – before the full angel chorus sings what we said earlier, in the earlier segment, is the shortest of all the songs in Luke; a very short song; but before that, the first angel who appears – and by the way, just the appearance of one angel scared them silly, as angels tend to do – but the angel says to the shepherds, "There has been born this day to you, a savior," and I have always been struck by that little phrase: to you. If you think about it, that is an unusual way to put it for the birth of a baby.

I remember when I was in my first church and our daughter was born just a little before six in the morning on a Sunday. That was my daughter's first gift to me; she got me the morning off from preaching.

DAVE BAST

Yes; nice. Good timing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and I was not there, but I heard the tape later, and the head of our elders got up that morning to explain why I was not there; they got a guest preacher at the last minute; and he got up and said, "Scott and Rosemary had a baby girl this morning." That is how you would expect somebody to announce it. But I always thought: Wouldn't it have been strange if that elder had stood up before the congregation and said, "This morning there has been born to you a girl." No, it was not born to them; it was born to us.

DAVE BAST

That is right; parents, Scott and Rosemary; yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But Jesus was born to them; to you – you shepherds.

DAVE BAST

That is a great point. I do not know that I have ever thought of that before, exactly. Those are words that just sort of trip off the tongue because most of us learn them in Sunday school, in some program or other we had to recite them; but, "today is born to you," he says to the shepherds; so, it really is to them; it is for them; not that they gave birth, obviously; but that the child is for their sake; and he adds, "Good news for you and all the people." This is universal good news. The very word *Gospel* referred to an announcement of public significance. It was good news from a royal messenger, and this is universal good news. It is for the whole world – a savior being born.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, if we had missed it up to this point, what we said in the earlier segment, Dave, that Luke is lifting up the lowly and exalting the humble, because that is what God does; then that little: This savior has been born to you; to you guys. He came for you; not just you, but you and everybody like you. And then, after that announcement they are told where they can find the child, and then the angel is joined by a host of angels...

DAVE BAST

Right; so, now we get to the song itself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to those on whom God's favor rests. And again, we do not know if they sang it twenty times; it is a short song; or if they sang it thunderously just once – it does not say. The content of the song word-wise, word count wise, is pretty short, but the theology of the song, what it packs in, is quite amazing.

DAVE BAST

What it really is is a commentary on the Gospel Good News, which the angel has just delivered, of a savior – a universal savior – born to them, for them, and for the whole world, potentially; for all who will have him, for all who will know him, for all who will respond to him in faith; and what that means, basically, is two things: For God, it means glory. So, the great end of the Gospel is like the great end of all things, it is glory for God.

There is a famous question and answer in the Presbyterian tradition in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: What is the chief end of man, or of humanity? And the answer is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. That is a summary, I think, a parallel of these two parts of the song. Everything exists ultimately for the glory of God. That is why all things were created. That is why things are in the process of being redeemed, not only people, but the creation itself. It is all going to tend more for the glory of God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because it is all God's work. This amazing birth of the Son of God – and we know that he is the Son of God as readers of Luke, because we have been all through Luke 1 already – this amazing thing did not come about because we earned it as a human race, or we deserved it, or we engineered it, or we thought it up, or we concocted this particular way to save the world; no, this is a work of grace, grace, grace from start to finish, even from the day of Genesis 12 when God calls an old couple and miraculously lets them have a child. Now more recently he has let Zechariah and Elizabeth miraculously have a child in old age, and the birth of this Jesus is also a miracle. Glory to God because it is all God's work; it is all his grace.

DAVE BAST

Yes; in a way this connects with Mary's song because the angels are magnifying God here. They are making God bigger. They are adding to his luster by declaring his praise; and it is not as though God is some cosmic egotist who needs to be flattered or told how great he is. It is the kind of thing that anything of surpassing greatness draws forth from us. We look at a mountain vista of scenery and we just say, "Glory, how glorious that is," because it is intrinsic to the thing, and God is infinitely greater and more wonderful, and what most clearly reveals his true glory is his mercy. He could just sit up there and be God and let the angels adore him, but he chooses to come down as one of us in order to save us, and all it does is redound to his greater glory.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then, the second part also redounds to his glory is the fact that we get peace, we get shalom to those on whom his favor rests. I actually looked up - when we were getting ready for this show – I looked up the Greek there wondering – I could not remember what that word favor was. It is a word, actually – I wondered if it was the word for grace or something, but it really was not. It is really more the word that has to do with delight. Who are the ones in whom God delights? Well, it goes back to Genesis 1. The people who were made in the image of God: Us. Really, potentially all of us are the ones who God wants to delight in; he

wants to delight in his creatures; he did so from the beginning; and so, in a sense that little phrase by the angels about the ones on whom God's favor, or God's delight, rests, brings us back to that God is going to restore creation and then some. He is going to bring us back to the flourishing that he desired in the beginning before sin and evil ruined the party.

DAVE BAST

Right; there is, however, here a little bit of a note, too, of necessity for us. How to put this without spoiling the Christmas party or the Advent party? In the New Testament, clearly God most delights in his Son; his well-beloved Son, with whom he is well pleased, as the Gospel says. He is pleased most with Jesus, and his favor, in Gospel terms, rests upon those who are united to Jesus by faith; who are, in this wonderful phrase that the Puritans love, based on Ephesians Chapter 1: They are accepted in the beloved. So, there is this sense, too, that while it is universally available to all – the favor of God – it is actually experienced by those who, through faith, have been united with his Son and are therefore pleasing to him, as they are in Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes; getting in on God's great project.

DAVE BAST

The Gospel is a wonderful announcement of Good News, but it is also a challenge to repent and believe, and it always comes to us as that, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; this is costing God a lot, and we want to get in on God's great project. So, this song and the announcement to the shepherds is loaded with meaning and it still has great meaning for us today, and we will consider what some of what that is for us in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi; welcome back. You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, looking along with you, Dave; digging into Luke Chapter 2, and particularly the part of this very familiar Christmas story, the classic – the only classic Christmas storytelling that we have in the New Testament, but centering on the shepherds, and particularly what the angels sang to them: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor – or as we just said, his delight – rests. So, this is a song that is full of glory, full of peace, full of hope for everybody who gets caught up in God's great story of salvation; and, as we have also already noted, by virtue of the fact that this incredible good news got announced, not to Caesar, not in sky writing over Rome, or even Jerusalem, but out in the middle of nowhere to people who, in the world's eyes, were of no account. They are the first ones to be told about it because apparently they are the ones who God comes to redeem. The people who are not well off; who are lowly; who are despised; who are cut off from hope, very often; which is, basically, everybody really, but some of us sense it more than others.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. That is the question: Do you realize it? And do you sense it, or are you so full of yourself and your projects that you do not really – oh, so what? Peace to me? His favor can rest on me? Ah, big deal!

SCOTT HOEZEE

The more you hunger for – and Jesus will eventually bless those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – those who so know that the things we need most in life are not the things we can achieve on our own; and it is always a struggle for us Christians, and in the Church, too. We live in a society that is really good at stratifying people; at focusing on the beautiful people – the rich and famous, the movie stars, the people who

have made it in life. They are self-made individuals. The Gospel comes to say: Yes, there is a lot you can achieve; but as Jesus will go on to say: Look, on your own efforts, you could gain the whole world, but if your soul is lost, where are you?

DAVE BAST

Yes, what good does it do you? Society is really full of status indicators, and we all know what they are. There are certain kinds of clothes; certain kinds of accessories; the car you drive; the neighborhood you live in; the schools you went to or graduated from; the degrees you have accumulated; the job title you have; the kind of office; the salary; all those things – we know all about that and we are good at sizing people up on that basis.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you feel it sometimes, and I guess we all do it. It is a sliding scale; so, what I am about to say, I do not mean to say that New Yorkers do something that I never do, but I do remember years ago my wife and I saved up some money to go to a really nice, snazzy restaurant in New York City, and we did our best to dress up; we wore our best stuff; but we could just tell that we had Midwest written all over us. They could tell we were not New Yorkers; this was not quite up to code for the fashion industry, and we just sort of felt like, well, we did our best, but in their eyes, we were Midwest little hicks playing dress-up. It made us feel bad; but we do that all the time; in all of society; no matter what level of society you are in, you tend to look down on others; but that kind of stratification, that kind of haves and have-nots and so forth, that is what the Gospel is here to fight against; and it is a great theme of Luke that God is most interested in the people who are lowly, despised; who need God's grace and they know it because they have nothing else.

DAVE BAST

And so, really, the angels' song, I think, comes to us a sort of invitation; his favor will rest on you if that is what you want. If you recognize your need of it, and you turn to him – as much of him as you know – and give as much of yourself as you know and understand to him, that is how you become accepted and find God's favor rest upon you in your own life.

As I think about this song, some of the great Christmas carols that have set this song to words; but I think one that may not come to mind because it does not quite have this text is Phillips Brooks' wonderful carol: O, Little Town of Bethlehem; and you probably know this story – you remember this story, Scott – he was a 19th Century Episcopal preacher – great preacher – and he was visiting Palestine and he saw – he was sitting in those same fields where the shepherds were, looking out over the city, so he said, “How still we see thee lie,” but the last verse is addressed to Jesus himself. “O, Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Oh, come to us, be born in us today.” He says, “We hear the Christmas angels, their great, glad tidings tell. O, come to us; abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.”

So, that is the spirit, I think: Be born in me; come to me; be born to me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That gets back to that line we said earlier from the angel; when the angel said to the shepherds, “There is born to *you* this day, a savior,” because it really does come to the little people; and so, as Jesus comes to the world, God has made his move here, and the first major announcement was to people who are harbingers – the forerunner – the preview of all the people to whom the Gospel is going to be Good News, and that is going to be everybody, but it is not going to be just the beautiful people and the rich people and the famous people; in fact, maybe not them at all if Mary's song that we looked at two programs ago in this series is right, the people who are proud in their own eyes are going to be scattered; the people who are filthy rich in this world, they are going to be sent away empty because maybe they do not have enough room for God in their lives if they are self sufficient. We love self sufficiency, but that is fatal to grace because grace requires you to say: I have nothing; only Jesus can take me home.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I like that thought because when you get right down to it, whether you are high and mighty and are going to be taken down a peg or two, or whether you are lowly and needy is really up to you. None of us is

held captive by our socioeconomic background; whether it is low or high; it is all a question of our heart readiness and willingness to welcome the Lord Jesus, born to us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, and born in our hearts, as you said a moment ago; and being humble and submitting to that, that is what brings the Gospel right into your own heart.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com to tell us about topics or passages you would like to see on the next *Groundwork*.

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Printed on June 22, 2026