

“Glory to God!”

Isaiah 52:7; Luke 2:14

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“Today this message [of peace] goes out to the ends of the earth to reach all peoples, especially those scarred by war and harsh conflicts that seem stronger than the yearning for peace.” So preached Pope Francis on Christmas day this year. Citing our text about peace on earth, he went on to call for peace in Syria, Palestinian territories, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, South Sudan, Congo, Ukraine and Myanmar, places where war and terrorism seem to be endless. But what is this peace on earth the angels announced at Jesus' birth?

On the night that Jesus was born, the angelic heavenly host praised God before the shepherds, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”* (Luke 2:14). So the birth of Jesus gives glory to God, and at the same time, peace is announced to people with whom God is pleased. This is why the child who was born in Bethlehem is called the “Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6).

“In the Highest”

The first words of our text is “Glory to God in the highest.” There are two well-known beloved Christmas hymns that do not get this right. The first is Charles Wesley's song, “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” where he writes, “Glory to the new-born King!” The second is “Silent Night,” where Joseph Mohr, a Roman Catholic priest writes, “Heavenly hosts sing, 'Alleluia! Christ the Savior is born!’” Why are these words wrong? Because our text says that the angelic host praised God, not Christ. It was the announcing angel alone who revealed to the shepherds that Christ the Savior was born that night.

God is described as “in the highest” because of his position, power and sovereignty. He is Creator and everything else is his creation. He is Almighty, and no one is more powerful than him. And he rules supreme over all things. Because he is “in the highest,” he is the “Most High” or “Most High God.” Abraham calls God *“the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth”* (Gen 14:22). The psalmist writes, *“I will sing praise to your name, O Most High”* (Psa 9:2). At the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, King Solomon praised God, *“heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you,”* much less the temple he has built.

When the angel announced the birth of Jesus to Mary, he calls Jesus “the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32). When Jesus entered Jerusalem before he was crucified, the people acclaimed him as the Messiah, shouting, *“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”* (Mark 11:10). Even demons recognize Jesus as *“Son of the Most High God”* (Luke 8:28).

During the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, the people glorified God. Mary *“magnified the Lord”* (Luke 1:46). Zechariah *“blessed the Lord”* (Luke 1:68). The shepherds, after visiting the newborn infant, *“glorified and praised God”* (Luke 2:20). Therefore, all the

heavenly beings praise Christ, the Lamb of God, and give him all *“power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing”* (Rev 5:12).

“And on Earth Peace Among Those With Whom He is Pleased”

In the New Testament, the use of the Greek word *eirene*, translated “peace,” includes: (1) a state of well-being; (2) the eschatological salvation of the whole man; (3) peace with God; (4) peace between persons, including peace between governments and nations; and (5) peace of the soul.¹

The idea of international peace that defines Vatican's annual call for peace on Christmas day comes from the King James translation: *“and on earth peace, good will toward men.”* This reading seems to say that God gives peace and good will to men in order that the world will live at peace, and show good will with one another.

The word used for “good will” also means “good pleasure.” The same word is used in Ephesians 1:5 which says, *“[God] predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will”* (ESV). The NIV uses *“his pleasure and will,”* while the KJV says, *“the good pleasure of his will.”* But whose “good will” or “good pleasure”? In Ephesians 1:5, we know it is *God's* good will, not *man's* good will. It is not proclaiming that the birth of Jesus will usher in peace and good will among neighbors and nations.

But who are the objects of God's good will or good pleasure? The NIV translates it very close to the ESV and NASB as *“peace to men on whom his favor rests.”* The word “favor” is not used in any of the major Bible translations, but it also conveys the idea that God shows and bestows his good will or good pleasure or his favor to those *with whom he is pleased*.

And who are those who please God? Those who do good works? Those who go to church every Christmas and Easter? No, our text says he gives peace to those with whom he is pleased. Not because they do good works, but because they have faith in the Child who was born 2,000 years ago to save them from all their sins. Hebrews 11:6 is clear, *“without faith it is impossible to please God.”*

Faith is given to believers as an instrument of their salvation. By this faith in Jesus as Savior, they are justified before God the Judge, which means they have been declared “Not guilty!” and righteous. And we who believe are now reconciled with God when we were formerly God's enemies. We now have peace with God. This is why Paul says, *“Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Rom 5:1). He mediates peace and reconciliation between an angry God and this same rebellious people: *“More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation”* (Rom 5:11).

How did he reconcile us with God? With his sacrificial blood: *“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross”* (Col 1:19-20).

¹ Kittel, Gerhard, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 411-7.

This results in peace of heart that only Christ can give, not as the world gives, so we shall not be troubled or be afraid (John 14:27). God also gives his blessing of peace, when he says, *“The LORD lift up his face upon you and give you peace”* (Num 6:26).

All of these benefits and blessings are given only to those who repent and confess of their sins, and have faith in Jesus as Savior, not to those who don't repent and believe. God loves everyone, so he sends rain and sunshine to all mankind. But he loves only believers in a saving way. In fact, the psalmist says this about God's wrath against unrepentant sinners, *“The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man”* (Psa 5:5-6).

Therefore, the “peace” that the angels announced that first Christmas night inaugurated “peace on earth,” but this peace will not be perfected until Christ returns. All creation, including mankind, has begun to be renewed, but a perfect state of well-being is yet to be realized in the new heaven and new earth (Rom 8:22, 23).

Salvation has already been given to believers, but they are not yet in their future glorified state. Believers have already been forgiven of their sins, but sin has not yet been completely blotted out (1 John 1:8-10). They have the beginnings of *“peace that surpasses all understanding”* (Phil 4:7), but are not yet free of worry, temptation and sorrow. Christians now strive to maintain peace between themselves and even with unbelievers, but complete peace among men and nations will not be attained until Jesus returns as King to rule in perfect peace, justice and righteousness.

Therefore, in this age of tears, mourning, crying and pain, he invites all people, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matt 11:28). After he ascended into heaven, he did not leave his people as orphans, but sent to them another Comforter and Helper, the Holy Spirit (John 14:18, 16).

Dear people of God: This Christmas season, let us remember two things: First, may we always give glory to God for the salvation that he has given us through Christ. God revealed to us his glory in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. We praise God that the glory of Christ does not terrify us, unlike the glory that frightened the shepherds. Instead, Christ's glory gives us confidence to enter into His presence with both reverence and joy. And we glorify God for the hope that we too will be glorified like Christ; a glory, blessedness and happiness which we cannot even imagine. A glory in which to praise God forever.

Second, may we always “bring [the] good news” of Christ's birth and “proclaim peace” to others (Isa 52:7) as we become blessed “peacemakers” (Matt 5:9). Not between warring nations. Not between individuals separated by hate, although this is a worthy goal. But between a holy God and sinful man. Amen.