

“THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS” Part II

HOLINESS

Presentation of The Legacy Book to Dr. Bruce Bickel

Followed by the teaching by Dr. Bickel

December 19, 2014

Dick: Gentlemen, today is a special day. Every Friday morning we celebrate the Lord and give glory and honor to Him. We have been blessed for nineteen plus years with our beloved brother here opening the Scriptures for us, and there have been more than seven hundred men that have passed through these doors. Their lives have been transformed, and we give God all the glory for that.

But this morning we’re going to take a few minutes, and we also give thanks to the Lord for giving Bruce to us. Bruce has been our teacher, our leader, our encourager, and he has been praying for us for these nineteen plus years.

And so one thing that we did, we thought, in celebrating, in moving into the year 2015, is that we would put together a tribute to the ministry of this men’s Bible study. And so we have put together a legacy album for our 20th anniversary in a couple of weeks. In this album we have about a hundred twenty of you men with your photos and tributes, and we have a history of the ministry over this period of time.

So this morning, for a few minutes, sorry about that, Bruce, (*laughter*) we’re going to project a couple of the pages from this album. There are 75 pages of photos and history within this album. This is the first time all of these men have seen this album. It will be the first time for you.

And so, why don’t we begin with that? And if we can get the projector set up, we will do that. Bruce, is that a comfortable seat for you?

Bruce: Not particularly. (*Laughter*)

Dick: Do you want to stand, or do you want to do some physical therapy while we wait?

Bruce: I want to sit by my brother Don.

Dick: You want to sit by your brother Don. That would be great.

Okay. So this is the cover of The Legacy Album, and it’s a photo of the Barn, the meeting place where we’ve been for the last number of years. And this is our welcome to the Barn, and this book represents the legacy of the Brave Men, in the twentieth year of our fellowship and ministry.

So what we decided to do, since for some of you folks this is the first time, or if this is your first year, that we would give you a little history of the ministry. It started twenty years ago, and we have within this history the Bickelisms that you’ve come to know, (*laughter*) about three or four hundred plus.

But on this photo, it shows the starting at World Vision in 1995. We then moved to the Farmhouse. Many of you can remember the roaring fires we had at the Farmhouse.

Well, we outgrew the Farmhouse, and we’re now in the Barn. On the left hand side, that was our first Bible study. It was on September 22 of 1995, and Bruce taught on 1 John.

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Beside the teaching and the fellowship that we enjoy every Friday morning, the Brave Men have also come together in hands-on ministry. We came alongside Bruce in support of his friend Tin, who was a victim of the Vietnam war. Tin needed a new prosthesis. Bruce traveled with him, I think, to Kenya. Is that right, Bruce?

Bruce: That’s right.

Dick: And he had the prosthesis. And we got to know Tin more. We developed a strong relationship with him, and the Brave Men helped to support and supply his church with Bibles and with hymnals.

It’s tough to see this, but you can see in the book that’s a young, young, young Bruce. (*Laughter*) He was twenty-eight then. This was back in 1968, and Bruce was in the service, and stationed in Vietnam, and he helped to build an orphanage in Hue, in Vietnam.

It’s hard to see this, but you just heard from our master of ceremonies, the illustrious Sig. (*Laughter*) He welcomes us every Friday morning to the Embassy of Grace, and, if we have enough time, he allows Bruce to teach. (*Laughter*)

You know, we have been just so unbelievably blessed for these nineteen plus years. Bruce has been our primary teacher, week in and week out. But God has raised up other men of faith—Bishop Rodgers, Don Maurer, Ted Wood, Carl Jones, Tom Hansz—that we have been blessed with when Bruce is absent from us. We’ve had consistent Biblical teaching week by week. A couple of these men would just like to share a couple words with us. Bishop Rodgers?

Bishop Rodgers: Can I do that from here?

Dick: Yes.

Bishop Rodgers: Okay. Bruce, beat Army! Go, Navy! (*Laughter*) We won’t mention who won this year.

Bruce: Yeah , right!

Bishop Rodgers: Reverend Doctor, it’s my privilege to express something of our desire to honor you, and to thank you as our teacher now for some twenty years. That’s some kind of a record of faithful service and godly persistence, and all done despite the physical pain that costs you to be standing there before us each week. Obviously, in two minutes, we can’t even get close to what we want to say “thank you” for, but I’ll mention a few.

We want to thank you for making clear to us, Bruce, repeatedly, the fullness of God’s grace given us in Christ, and Him crucified. Week by week, we go home, made freshly aware of our eternal security, in the sufficiency of His cross and saving work for us, and in the sovereign finality, finality of the Father’s election of us in Christ. What the Father ordains, the Son accomplishes, and the Spirit applies in our hearts, all of grace, utterly undeserved, and yet totally sufficient. What a thing to hear, to hear Jesus week by week.

That leads me to a second gift that you’ve given us, which has already been mentioned, your memorable sayings that you teach us, things that in a few words sum up the themes of Scripture. I’ll just mention one, a Trinitarian one. I mean, who can sum up the Trinity so concisely in this work of salvation? Our faith is dark. It’s “think, act, feel,” not “feel, act, think.” After a time, these sayings become part of the way we think, act

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and feel, part of God’s renewing of our minds, so that we will no longer be conformed to this fallen world, and to our culture. For this we give you profound thanks, as your brothers.

Lastly, we want to thank you for making it clear that God’s word is true. It’s not just for the mind, but for our lives, for living. You tell us to ask, after each session, “What will I do with what I have just learned?” God’s truth is for an active, living relationship with Him and with our neighbors. In order to help make that clear, you have been willing to share your very self with us, your life, as impacted by the word of God, and with other people, giving us examples out of your own heart and life.

St. Paul told the Thessalonians that he loved them so much that he shared not only the gospel, but his very self with them. So, dear brother, you have done with us, and we give you profound thanks for doing so.

So, dear brother, we hope that this morning will indicate the extent of the love and gratitude we have for you in the Lord. We thank God for you, and we thank you for you.

Dick: Thank you, Bishop. Don, you wanted to share a couple words with Bruce.

Don: In 1 Corinthians 15:10, the apostle Paul said, “By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain.” Well, Bruce, even though you are not an apostle, please understand what I’m not saying, (*Laughter*) even though you’re not an apostle, there is no doubt that by the grace of God you are what you are, and His grace toward you is definitely not in vain.

When I met you at Reformed Seminary around eight years ago, and I heard you, I almost felt like the queen of Sheba did with Solomon. I had heard about you, but the half of it was not told to me.

And so I thank God, through Christ, for enabling you to teach us Brave Men the Word faithfully for almost twenty years, without compromise, in season and out of season, when you were feeling up to it, and most of the time when you weren’t feeling up to it.

I thank God, Bruce, that you have encouraged us to delve more deeply into the word of God, and that when we asked questions, you didn’t discourage us, but you encouraged us, and you never thought that any one of our questions was irrelevant or unimportant, and you answered them with grace and humility.

I stand up here humbled to be privileged to be able to teach once in a while. And I almost feel like John the Baptist did whenever he encountered Jesus. I need to be taught by you, and you ask me to teach?

And so I thank you, and I thank God, Bruce, that you are so diligent in your preparation week in and week out. And you make practical application of the word of God to all of our lives, and to all of us with our different backgrounds and experiences. You are a very good example, by the grace of God, of what it means when you tell us all the time that learning leads to living, and living leads to loving.

And last, but not least, last week, Bruce, you said to us that the true meaning of Christmas is the glory of the Lord revealed. I know that I can say this for myself, and I trust that I can say this for everyone here, that, by the grace of God, Bruce, you reveal that glory, and give us a glimpse of it all year round. And, by the grace of God, I pray that you will be able to do that for years to come. *Sola Deo Gloria!*

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Participant: Amen.

Don: Thank you, Bruce. (*Applause*)

Dick: Lastly, of the teachers, we have Ted. You have ten seconds, Ted. (*Laughter*)

Ted: I’m always very uncomfortable with these kinds of gatherings simply because all of the focus becomes on that person, as if through his own faithfulness, diligence, and hard work he was able to bring the grace of God to us.

I was at a gathering a number of years ago, a banquet, in which they were honoring a corporate leader in Pittsburgh. You may not know his name, but you would certainly know his company. A lot of great and glorious things were said about this man. And then they invited him to come up and speak, and he was not known as a man of faith.

And, as he stood up, the first thing he said was, “Everything I am, and everything I hope to be I owe to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Men: Amen!

Ted: And while the crowd was stunned,—there was silence when he said it; no one expected him to say that—none of us would be stunned to have Bruce say that.

Participant: Amen.

Ted: And I believe that reflects Bruce’s attitude. Everything he is, and everything he hopes to be, he owes to His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Men: Amen! (*Applause*)

Dick: Well, nothing begins the morning better than a jolt of coffee. This is Frank’s café, but unfortunately Frank is under the weather. So Dean, do you want to share a couple words with us?

Dean: Yes. My name is Dean Panizzi. I’m humbled and honored and privileged to address such a great man as Bruce Bickel.

Who is Bruce Bickel? Bruce, you’re a servant of God, and a servant to us. You are faithful, loyal, constant and steadfast, unwavering, unshakeable. You’re a man with a heart of firm determination to teach the word of God to the point of understanding.

But there are pros and cons to everything, Bruce, even a Bickel study. The pros are very obvious. We’re being taught Scripture to the point of understanding. It’s a life changing study, and Bruce, you spoil us with the truth. You give us pure extract of the word of God week after week, and year after year.

Now the cons. 6-30 every Friday morning. (*Laughter*) So many years, it’s been tough. But Bruce has always taught us that we’re not allowed to wine, or complain, or gripe. (*Laughter*)

And the second is—take no offense, men!—but studying under Bruce is so comprehensive and engaging that it’s hard to sit through other preachers, ministers or teachers.

Participants: Amen.

Dean: But we’re spoiled in a good way. Fortunately, we have been given a strong foundation, so we can understand our Sunday morning sermons better.

Participant: Amen.

Dean: Lastly, Bruce has branded us with the name “Brave Men.” Bruce has made the Brave Men famous with the acronym, “mission-minded men, members of a movement

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motivated for ministry.” And that’s who we are. But I have an acronym just for you, Bruce. It’s called the seven I’s. Love, loyalty, learning, you’re a light, long lasting, a legacy, of eternal life.

Bruce, on behalf of all the men here, and myself, we are grateful. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. And may God bless you. Can I get an Amen from the Brave Men?

Men: Amen! (*Applause*)

Dick: Jay Batch, and his son, Jay Jr., represent the generations of the Brave Men. Jay also leads a Saturday morning Bible study, and Jay is going to share a few words with us.

Jay: First and foremost, we must thank God through Jesus Christ for the blessing of our leader, teacher, and brother in Christ, Dr. Bruce Bickel.

Dear Bruce, we acknowledge you with gratitude, respect and love. Thank you for teaching us the word of God for twenty years. Personally, for me, it’s been ten years. Words cannot express what your preaching and teaching have meant to us all on Friday mornings. Your courage, boldness, faithfulness, love for the word of God, and your obedience, to use the spiritual gifts God has given you has edified the body of Christ. You are truly a man after God’s own heart.

There are many verses that come to mind in regard to your faithfulness, and I will share three.

2 Timothy 4:2 says, “Preach the word. Be prepared in season and out of season. Correct, rebuke and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction.”

1 Peter 4:10-11 says, “Each of you shall use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.”

Men: Amen.

Jay: Thank you, Bruce, for your careful instruction. Thank you for serving us. Thank you for speaking the very words of God to us. Your desire to be obedient to God is something we should all be diligent to imitate.

Finally, Bruce, “may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you always.”

Men: Amen! (*Applause*)

Dick: It seems that we have a number of families of multi-generations of Brave Men here. Next, we have a young member, Gideon Manges. Would you please share a couple words with us? In the blue suit, Bruce.

Gideon: I’m Gideon Manges. I’ve been asked to talk about how this Bible study appeals to all generations. But first, I just wanted to say how blessed I am to come here, and see a role model such as Dr. Bickel, and to see how a man of God should look, how he should act, and how he should talk. And that’s one reason that Dad is coming each week to hear a great message deeply rooted in the word of God, and I feel like my dad brought me and my brothers here so that we could also see how a man of God acts, and that we could apply that to our own lives, in turn how we should act. Dr. Bickel knows

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where he stands. He strongly believes, but at the same time, he’s not arrogant about it, and he’s really humble. And so that’s how he appeals to me, in looking up to a role model, but then also, for people who are older, and not necessarily needing a role model. They can still come here and hear a great message rooted in the Bible, and in the words of God. And that’s all I have to say. I want to thank you, Dr. Bickel, for doing this.

(Applause)

Dick: Hey, Doug, we plan to get Gideon in on our next photo. *(Laughter)* Thank you, brother.

Well, most of us know Dick Clouser. He works the room as well as anyone. *(Laughter)* So Dick’s corner is on the far side over there, and he has brought many a new man to the Brave Men. Dick, a couple words.

Dick Clouser: As you know, ministry is who you are, where you are. God places situations around us for us to act on. We have learned to be aggressive responders in each situation. What amazes me is how many opportunities God presents.

When I speak with folks, often the subject of the Brave Men enters into the discussion, and, when I close, I always mention that “I will be at the table at the right rear of the Barn” upon their first visit. You never know when that’s going to be, but I need to be here in case they show.

And finally, I’d like to give a special thanks to Bob Malnati. Bobby is over there with his camera. He was a good friend before we started this project, I had to check the temperature lately. He’s done a yeoman’s job in putting this together, which hopefully has been passed to you here, and everything he did well, for our very special occasion. Thank you.

Dick Johnson: Can we have a standing ovation for bob Malnati? *(Applause)*

So we have had a number of Brave Men that have been called to other locations over the years. They have gotten some good foundation teaching before they left. Samuel Mariel, who is in the South Sudan. Tom Smith, who is in Zegreb, Croatia, and Dan Wood, Ted’s son, who lives in Virginia. A couple weeks ago I was in a meeting, and I came across another Brave Man that I did not recognize, and he has also been called into ministry outside the Pittsburgh area. So, Fernando, will you share for a minute or two with us?

Fernando: Sure. My name is Fernando DeCarvalho. I will never forget being in this room. Bob McCullough, who many of you probably know, handed me my first Bible when I gave my life to Jesus.

Participant: Hallelujah!

Fernando: When I walked into this room, Craig Waller, Jay Batch, and many other men that you probably know about, were sitting on that couch. And I walked into the room, and Chuck Schweinberg was praying, and in my heart, I felt like I wanted to run, before I walked into the room. What am I getting myself into, asking a lot of different questions. I walked in, and fell in love with the men that were in the room. That was the CLC group.

Since I graduated from CLC, I joined the Brave Men, and every Friday morning, for a while, I was here listening to Bruce, and many of the other teachers. And those were the

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formative years of my Christian life in many ways—the beginning, where a root needed to be planted deep, so that I would not depart.

And that’s exactly what took place. I was called into full time missions years ago. Today, I’m a full time missionary to the church in the United States, as well as to different countries around the world. This year alone, we have facilitated thirty-four church plants around the world, and I am very grateful for the deposit that was made in my heart here, that will be eternal, and it’s bearing a lot of fruit to the ends of the earth. So thank you, Bruce, for all that you’ve invested in us. And thank you, men, for being an example of godly husbands, and godly men. Thank you.

Dick: thank you. (*Applause*)

So, lastly, we have Thaddeus with us. Thaddeus had dinner with Jesus at the Last Supper. (*Laughter*) If you didn’t recognize Thaddeus, he’s the second one from the left of the top row, and Rich Clark is impersonating him today. (*Laughter*)

Rich: Thank you, Bruce. Thank you, Bruce. Friday morning is the highlight of my week, and I think I can speak for a lot of brothers in regard to that. I look forward so much to being with you guys, being with the brothers, being with Bruce and hearing the incredible messages he has for us week after week consistently. So I must concur with the Psalmist, who says, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity.”

Participant: Amen!

Rich: “It is like precious oil upon the head, running down upon Aaron’s beard, coming down upon the edge of his robes.”

Seventeen years ago, I was going to Allegheny Center Alliance Church, where there was a nationwide movement for men to get involved in men’s Bible studies. Well, Allegheny Center didn’t have a group, so a few of us went out looking, and we heard about this men’s group that was meeting up in Sewickley, at this Christ Church of Grove Farm. So it was late fall/winter. I came up to check it out. I went into the farmhouse, and there was a big crackling fire in the room filled with men, and Bruce teaching. And so it was from that point on that I’ve been so blessed to be a part of this group, with the exception of about three years. That’s all I was involved with the CLC group.

But Bruce, thank you so much for your consistency. And we all aspire to be more godly, more Christlike. That’s what we hope to reflect in our lives. And, when I think of you, Bruce, I think of the hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” because that’s what you’ve been to us throughout all these years, so faithful in delivering God’s word of truth to us. So thank you.

Participants: Amen! (*Applause*)

Dick: Bruce, will you stand up. I’ll help you get off those knees, there. Come up front for a moment.

So, putting this album together has been a labor of love. We’ve been working on this baby for about four or five months now, Brave Men, and we have collected over 120 tributes and photos of these Brave Men here. We have their signatures in this album that I’m going to bestow to you, mostly, I think, from our hearts. And it was just that our

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hearts were on fire. I was telling somebody this morning that I was like a little kid before Christmas last night. I couldn't sleep.

Participants: Same here.

Dick: And I wanted to give this present that we wanted to present to you as an encouragement to you for just an unbelievable commitment to each one of us, and the transformation that you've made in each of our lives through the Holy Spirit. And we hope that we're back here ten years from now, when we'll have the 30th year Legacy Book, and we'll have grown out of the Barn, and we'll be in another facility to accommodate us. But Bruce, it has just been an absolute privilege to be a part of putting this together on behalf of the Brave Men.

And so here is your official Legacy Album, and we hope that you will review that over the days and weeks to come, and get a sense of how blessed we have been over the years. Thanks. (*Long standing ovation*)

So, as you know, each year about this time, we have a gift for you, and we have heard through the grapevine that many of the gifts we've given you in the past years have been re-gifted. (*Laughter*) So therefore, this year we thought we would (*more laughter*) We would change you in that event, and we made it a little bit easier on you. So we decided, as the Brave Men, to contribute to the Servant's Fund.

Bruce: Amen.

Dick: And in this envelope we have checks, and we're still receiving checks of more than \$5500.

Men: Praise God! Wow!

Dick: It goes toward the Servants Fund, and then, Bruce, you can allocate those funds out as gifts, however you'd like, and not think that they're being re-gifted. (*Laughter*)

Lastly, we have a Christmas card for Bruce, and we do have a gift card in here for you and your lovely wife Becky, and we pray that you'll take a quiet evening out, and have an enjoyable dinner, and just reflect on how much you are loved.

Bruce: Thank you.

Dick: Thank you, brother. (*Applause*) Now you've got twenty minutes to cram sixty minutes in.

Bruce: Sig, are you done? (*Laughter*) Well, men, you really know how to make me feel uncomfortable. (*Laughter*) I didn't even get dressed up for you. I'm on my way to P. T. right after this. I didn't even shave this morning. (*Laughter*) So you've humbled me. I'm just-- *Sola Deo Gloria!* May God be praised, and may God be glorified! That's all I can say. What a privilege it is to be a part of your life, and have you part of mine! I'm a much better man because of who you are, and I will always be grateful. Justin, do you want to set the tone for us? (*Music*)

“Comfort, comfort My people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.”

“A voice cries in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

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“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. An uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” May God be pleased to open our eyes once again, that we might behold Him for His glory. And all the Brave Men said, “Amen!”

I have four Christmas messages I was going to give you today. (*Laughter*) So you’re going to get a condensed version of something. (*Laughter*)

Last week we talked about the real meaning of Christmas. We tried to get away from the pageantry, and to focus on the Person, the Person and work of Christ. What I have read from Isaiah chapter 40, verses 1-5, is, in my description, the most definitive meaning of the Christmas season, and that is this. “And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed.” Now I want to say this with great respect and dignity. There is much more to the Christmas story than just the birth of Christ.

Participant: Amen.

Bruce: Much more to that. We need to see that God is the sovereign Lord of history, the sovereign Lord of the universe, the magnificent sovereign Ruler of the world. We tried to see that last week in Luke chapter two. We tried to look at this in the light, historically, of what was going on at the time of the birth of Christ.

There were some people who missed it. The great tragedy of the season of Christmas is this. So many people are so close, but they miss it. And some people who are so far away see it. Now that’s the dichotomy that we have in the Christmas season. Some people are so close! They just miss the Person because of the pageantry.

And yet there are others who are so far away, but God, in His sovereign grace, draws them into His presence, and they see the Person and not the pageantry.

Last week, as we looked at Luke chapter two, we saw that some people missed it because of their preoccupation. They were just too busy. Some people missed it because of their idolatry. They were trusting someone or something to give them only what God could give them. And lastly, some people missed it because of religious ritual. They were so wrapped up in their ritual worship that they missed the Person and the reality of the Person and work of Christ.

You see, brothers, there is much more to the birth of Christ than just the Babe in the swaddling clothes in the manger. And that’s what I’m hoping to try to do, to help you understand that God is preparing history for the entrance of Himself into the world situation. By the entrance of Christ, God was giving Himself to us. But that’s because He is the sovereign Lord of history, and has prepared history for us.

Last week, we looked at those who were close, and who missed it. Today I want to teach you from the same passage, Luke chapter 2, if you would turn with me there. I want you to see how His glory was revealed. We talked about His glory being prepared last week through the Romans, to the people of Jerusalem, to the inn keeper.

Now I want you to see the life of the shepherds. I want you to see how God’s glory is revealed. So go to Luke chapter 2, verses 1-20.

Now we’re going to see His glory revealed to the shepherds in verses 8-20 of Luke chapter 2. We see a very interesting process here in the lives of these shepherds. When

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you look at it closely, as we walk through these verses, you’ll see that this, the process of how God revealed His glory to the shepherds is the same way in which God reveals Himself to the glory of the gospel.

I want you to see this historically, because what we’re going to see is, in my judgment, the very first Biblical presentation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to mankind. It is how God revealed Himself to the shepherds. I want to walk you through this, detail by detail in the moments we have, because I want you to understand this. This is a picture, and it will help us in our evangelism. As we understand how God was pleased to reveal Himself, the glory of the Lord revealed to the shepherds, it is exactly the way you and I reveal the Lord’s glory in the presentation of the gospel.

Remember, we’ve been saying this: that the Christmas story is about the glory of the Lord revealed. Well, what then is the gospel going to be about? It’s going to be about the glory of God in the face of Christ. They’re very synonymous. They’re very systematic. There is a synergy between them. If God has introduced Himself in the history of the world through the birth of Christ, what do you think the message is going to be about? It’s going to be about the glory of the Lord revealed.

Now Paul says it this way for us in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 6. The gospel is “the glory of God in the face of Christ.” When you and I are teaching the Person and work of Christ, we’re teaching about the glory of God revealed. That’s the consistent theme that you see.

And so I want to walk you through, very specifically, the issues here, dealing with the revelation of God’s glory of Himself to the shepherds, because, in my mind, this is the very first biblical presentation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me take you through verses 8-20 just very briefly. When you think about it, the gospel is about God revealing Himself to the world, and through the Person and work of Christ. The gospel is about the glory of God, not about the needs of man.

That’s exactly what you see here with the shepherds. So let me walk you through this very presentation of the gospel of Christ to these lowly shepherds.

Notice. In verse 8, you see their condition. What was their condition? The Scripture says this, “keeping watch over their flocks at night.” They were functioning in what? Darkness. Where does God appeal to us? In the darkness of our unbelief and our sin. That’s exactly where we start. It’s in the darkness of our unbelief of our sin, and God is pleased to reveal the glory of Himself through the gospel presentation.

Notice what Paul says in Ephesians 5:8. He describes our condition before our salvation by God’s grace. He says this. “For you once were in darkness.” See the similarity?

These shepherds were operating in darkness. Where do you and I operate before God’s grace draws us to Himself? In the darkness of our sin and unbelief.

Jesus described the unsaved darkness like this in John 3:19. “Light has come into the world, but men loved the darkness, ... because their deeds were evil.” Where does God appeal to us? It’s in the midst of our darkness.

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These shepherds were viewed as low class men, of low esteem and reputation, because they could not keep the ceremonial laws of the church, of hand washing and so forth. They were considered undesirable, despised and unreliable.

That is exactly how we are in our state before God’s grace—detestable, unreliable, and God’s enemies. He appeals to us in our darkness.

Notice next the preparation in verse 9. The condition is that God appeals to us in the darkness of our sin and our unbelief. In verse 9, an angel of the Lord appeared, “and the glory of the Lord shone around them.”

Here we see that the shepherds were prepared by God seeking them and enlightening them so that they could see. You see, He did something to them so that these men in darkness could see, and that was that He prepared them. We know that they saw because the Scripture says they were terrified. So they saw something.

Now why is it that they saw something? It’s because God prepared them to see it. God prepares your heart and my heart to see Him in advance of our salvation. That’s something that God does. That’s called grace, men! That’s called grace! In the midst of darkness, God does something so we can see Him, because we couldn’t see Him in our sin and our unbelief.

The Scripture says that they were terrified. Now it’s the same thing in evangelism. Unless He reveals His glory to you and me, we would remain in darkness.

So I want you to see the reaction in verse 9. We see the condition, that is, darkness. We see the preparation, as God shines His glory on us, opens our eyes, and draws us to Himself, so we can respond to Him. And now, notice the reaction in verse 9. They were terrified. Light from heaven always produces fear in the heart of the unconverted, because one’s sin is exposed.

Even in the disciples, in Luke chapter 8, verse 25, after Jesus calmed the storm, what did they say? “Who is this? He commands, and even the wind and the water obey Him.”

But notice this. Because of grace, initial terror becomes internal trust. Because of grace, initial terror, being exposed to the holiness of God, becomes internal trust. Brothers, that’s a function of grace! Our condition is darkness. Our preparation is that God seeks us. And then He takes that internal fear, and turns it into internal trust.

You and I must undergo a marvelous change of heart called regeneration before we would be able to see and be at home with the glory of God. That is something that God does for us, so that we can experience His grace and His glory.

Then I want you to see verses 10-14—the proclamation. We’ve seen the condition, the preparation, the reaction. Now what follows next? The proclamation. Here, we see the message of the gospel being preached by the angels. The message was not *for* the angels, but *by* the angels.

And notice what the message was. “A Savior has been born to you.” That’s the heart of the gospel. “A Savior has been born to you.”

Now the content of the gospel of grace removes initial fear, because the Savior deals with our exposed sin. That is the good news.

Notice that the message ends with what? Praise. When the message ends, praise begins—verse 12. Are you following along with this? When the message ends, “a

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Savior has been born to you,” what is their response? It is to praise. You’ll notice that in verse 12. An army announces peace, and first speaks of the glory of God, and that is a necessary preliminary to praise. You have to understand the Person of God in all of His glory before you can praise Him correctly.

Their praise is an emphasis on God, not an emphasis on themselves. Their praise is an emphasis on God and His character, not on themselves. It is those whom God chooses, rather than those who choose God, of whom the angels speak when they say they will praise Him. Yes, please?

Participant: I just wanted to say that when you mentioned praise, I think that praise is something that we hear very little about in the church.

Bruce: That’s right.

Participant: We don’t hear about praising God. Do you understand?

Bruce: I understand.

Participant: Personally.

Bruce: No, we don’t, and that’s because the focus is on who in the church?

Participant: Us.

Bruce: It’s on us. There is nothing to praise when you focus on yourself. Now notice the angels and the shepherds. They praise God after the message of the gospel. Their first response was praise, because they called attention to what? To the grace of God, and not the needs of man. You see, that’s the paucity of our evangelism. We talk about man. But it’s the glory of God. It’s about the glory of God revealed—the glory of God in the face of Christ. When you are talking about the Person and work of Christ, you are talking about the glory of God. That’s what produces praise. There has to be an understanding of the character and nature of God Himself before you can have praise. And when the church emphasizes the needs of man, you’re not going to have much praise. You’re just going to have singly focused idolatry created, because we think we’re the end of all, when really, we’re not the end of all. God is the end of all things. To Him be the glory.

So praise comes after the message. The angels understood this, that the ultimate issue of the birth of Christ that they announced will be the rebirth of people who would fulfill the divine purpose of becoming people pleasing to God. That is what the angels announced. That is what they understood. They understood what was going on. They understood this. When we are talking about this Child who was born, and calling attention to these shepherds, they understood this—that something is going to happen as a result of the birth of this Savior, that people are going to be reborn, and follow God’s intention. There will be people who will be coming now who will be pleasing to God. That’s the desire, that we are pleasing to God. The angels announced that. That is what they were telling the shepherds. The result of this is that you will become pleasing to God, which was God’s divine plan for them. It’s rebirth and regeneration that brings peace between God and men. That’s what the angels were announcing.

A sign was given, and a proclamation. You’ll see that in verse 12. “You will find a Baby wrapped in strips of cloth, and lying in a manger.”

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Now I find it very interesting that these shepherds, who looked upon the temple lambs, were the first to see the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. Who were the first people to see the Lamb of God? The shepherds. What were they? They were the keepers of the lambs in the temple, weren't they?

Do you see the significance of all of this? Those very people who took care of the lambs in the temple worship were the ones who saw the Lamb of God in the form of the birth of Christ. It's very interesting when you see God's sovereignty in the whole issue of this historical presentation of Himself.

Another fact we need to understand is this. At the birth of a Jewish baby, local musicians would congregate at the house of the newborn babe, to greet the child with simple music. How interesting it is that the minstrels of heaven, the angels of heaven, took the place of the minstrels of earth at Christ's birth. They announced His birth. Do you see what was going on? This is very much an illustration of what happens in natural birth. The people of the Jews would get together, and they would sing wonderful songs about the arrival of a baby. What was happening? The angels from heaven came, and they were singing wonderful songs about the arrival of the birth of His Son, a Savior into the world.

And do you know what happens, friends? That still goes on. When one repents, and a person responds to the Person and work of Christ, and is reborn, through the gracious act of regeneration, angels rejoice in heaven at the conversion of a lost soul. They're still singing! They're still singing at the birth of a lost soul.

I told Sig that I just got a message last night from our brother Tin from the church in Viet Nam. I'll read it to you when we come back together after the new year. But he just told me that they've had a hundred converts in the church in Huey.

Men: Praise god!

Bruce: In the past year, through the bibles and through the hymnbooks that we gave them a year ago. A hundred new converts in a Communist country in the church of Huey! That's part of the investment we've made in eternity.

You see, that's what the angels were announcing. Every time a person is reborn, the angels continue to sing, because a new birth has occurred. A new baby has arrived, one who is now fit to be pleasing to God.

And then I want you to see the response. We've seen the condition, the preparation, the reaction, the proclamation. Now I want you to see the response in verse 15. Notice that the immediate response of the shepherds was what? One of obedience. "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened." The first response when their hearts changed was obedience. They determined to see for themselves. The gospel message is to be obeyed as well as to be believed. In fact, belief is the same as obedience. To believe the gospel is to obey the gospel. To obey the gospel is to believe the gospel. That is modeled for us here in the response of these shepherds.

They determined to see for themselves, and they went with a sense of urgency. Their simple faith received a rich reward. They were the first people to see the birth of Christ after Mary and Joseph, to see the newborn Messiah.

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I just pray in our churches today, men, that there will be more people like these shepherds, who believe immediately and promptly, and wait for God’s call to them to go and proclaim the message of the gospel of grace.

And what is the reiteration in verse 17? Their response was one of obedience, and what did they do next? “They spread the word concerning what they had been told.”

Do you see what’s going on? This is a mirror of evangelism! This is the very first presentation of an evangelistic message in the New Testament. It’s what God revealed Himself to the shepherds, and how He is doing this. And this is our motto for evangelism. After you and I have experienced the new birth, what do we do? We go into all the world and preach the gospel.

That is what the shepherds model for us. Such a story and sight burned into the hearts of these despised shepherds, and so sure were these men of the truth and the importance of the message that they heard that, even in spite of the disbelief and the ridicule, they were more than spectators at the cradle. They were ones who went out and told what they had seen.

What do we do? What is our witness for Christ? It’s telling what you have experienced. It’s telling what you have seen. It’s telling what you have heard. That’s what ministry is. Ministry is giving away to somebody else what God has given you.

That’s exactly what the shepherds did. God gave them a vision of Himself. He changed their hearts. They saw the Messiah, and what did they do? The first thing they did was that they were obedient, and they went out and tried to tell people.

What do we do? That’s the mission of the church. The mission of the church is not to start nonprofit organizations. The mission of the church is to go into all the world and proclaim the glory of the Lord revealed, the glory of God in the face of Christ. That’s what we see in the shepherds.

If the spectators of the cradle could not be silent,--these shepherds--how impossible it ought to be for us, who have seen the witness of the cross,. To keep our lips silent, and not say anything.

Compare yourself to the shepherds. They could not keep the message inside. They gave it away. And we have seen so much more. We have seen the glory of the Lord revealed in this passage, in the birth of Christ.

Now we’ve seen so much more. We’ve seen the glory of the cross. How can we be silent? The shepherds weren’t silent. How can we sit on our haunches and say nothing to a world that is lost, when we understand that we have seen the glory of the Lord revealed? We have seen the glory of God in the face of Christ. We’ve seen so much more, and yet we say so much less!

These shepherds are admirable in their evangelistic response, because of what they reiterate in the message of Christ. They spread the word.

And lastly, the rejoicing in verse 20. “Glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which was just as they had been told.” All who really find the grace of God in the glory of Christ have something to say, because they have heard something just as it was told in the gospel of Christ.

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When you hear the gospel of grace, and you experience that, you’ve got a message to tell because it happened to you just as it was told. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” That’s exactly what we were told, and you’ve experienced exactly that. And now the shepherds run off, and they rejoice in the belief of the gospel, because what they heard was exactly what they were told.

And brothers, when you come to saving faith, what you heard is exactly what you were told in the gospel of grace, for it is the glory of God revealed in the face of Christ.

So when a person experiences the gospel of grace, he realizes that what has been told to him is exactly true. Validation of the truth of the gospel follows conversion by the gospel of grace.

So you’ve seen in this passage in Luke chapter 2 two responses. There were those who were so close, and they missed it because of idolatry, because of busyness, and because of religious ritual. And yet there were those who were so far away—the shepherds, who came to the saving knowledge of grace, because they responded to the call of the gospel.

Men, review Luke chapter 2, and you will see in it the very clearest presentation of the first gospel presentation in the New Testament in the life of the shepherds. That is exactly the model that we have in our evangelism.

And may God help us to understand this—that there is much more to the birth of Christ than just His entrance into history. It is God’s sovereign rulership of all of history, of which we can learn. May God be pleased to help us understand the true meaning of Christmas, and not get lost in the pageantry, and see the reality of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. For that, dear friends, is the glory of the Lord revealed.

Let’s pray. Father, we’re overwhelmed with Your truth, as found in the sufficiency of Scripture. Father, help us in the time of year when people at least have some recognition of the Person and work of Christ, that we might be obedient and sensitive to those who need to hear the message of the Person and the work of Christ. And may we, with great clarity, conviction and great compassion, proclaim what we have seen and what we have heard, because we have experienced it. We are now the minstrels of heaven. We take the message of the gospel to a lost world. And may it be so, that people receive the reality of the Person, and not the pageantry of the system. And may it be so, for Jesus’ sake. And all the Brave Men said, “Amen!”

Dick: Before you leave, Don is going to pray over Bruce, and if we can have a couple men just lay hands on Bruce.

Don: Our Father and our God, truly You have revealed Your glory. And Father, we just thank You once again for Your grace, manifested and exhibited in Your servant Bruce. Our Father, we just pray for the upcoming days and weeks and months and years, Father, that You would be pleased, Lord, to restore Bruce to health,. That Father, that in this physical therapy, You would guide the doctors, that You would guide everybody working with Him, that You would be pleased, Lord, to take away the pain, to take away the discomfort, to just strengthen Him, heavenly Father, that He would be able to do everything, Lord, that he has been doing for so long, and even more, Lord, whether it’s

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here with the Brave Men, or or at PNC, or whatever other obligations He has, Father, that Lord Jesus, You would see to it that his health is restored, Father, and that he would feel much, much better. Father, we just pray this in Christ’s name. We pray, Father, that in any kind of discomfort that He would lean upon his Savior, who loves him infinitely more than any of us here. And Father, we also pray for Dave Wessel. Lord, during this time of surgery, during this time, Father, we pray that You would guide all of the doctors and surgeons, and everybody in this very delicate operation. Father, we also pray for Nancy, Sig’s wife in this time as well. O Father, help us this Christmas season, and every day, just to glorify You more and more, until that day when we are with You in eternity. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Men: Amen. (*Applause*)