

## “The Return of God’s Glorious Presence”

*Luke 2:8-20*

One of the most astonishing events that happened at the birth of Jesus – which is rarely given much attention – is stated in the very familiar verse,

*<sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*

Angel appearances were quite uncommon in recorded Scripture but even more rare was the appearance of the glory of God. What exactly is the Glory of God? We often call it the ‘Shekinah’ glory, a term Jewish writers have used to describe the visible manifestation of the greatness and transcendence of God. The Hebrew term shekinah means ‘dwelling’ and it is how God communicated that He was with His people. The appearance of the Shekinah glory of God at Jesus’ birth communicated numerous things to God’s people about what He was going to do through Jesus. So we’ll see the connection of the glory of God to Jesus’ birth and what they should have understood what was going on. We’ll pick it up in v.8 during the night when the appearance of God’s glory would be most spectacular.

*<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*

The presence of God’s glory at the birth of Jesus ...

### **Communicates God Will Lead the Way** **(Luke 2:8-9)**

What did the glory of God do for God’s people in the Old Testament?

*Ex. 13:21* *By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. <sup>22</sup> Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

The glory of God went ahead, guided them, gave them light so they could travel and was always with the people until they reached the promised land. How was God leading the people?

#### ***Like a shepherd (v.8; Ps. 23:1-2)***

Jewish shepherds lead their sheep. Many other cultures push their sheep from behind. Jesus says in John 10 He is the Good shepherd who leads His sheep by His voice. God goes ahead of His people, leading the way. God is not a reactionary God. He is a proactive God, leading us towards the place where we will enjoy His presence in shalom/peace. Who sees the shekinah glory? Shepherds. Shepherds who know what it means to lead, to go before and survey the dangers ahead of the sheep and re-direct them where their needs can be met. Or, even go ahead of them leading them through the dangerous valleys. Valleys are always dangerous because you are no longer in the open. Threats lurk behind rocks and trees. It is a place of risk and danger. But God leads.

David wrote from personal experience in Psalm 23,

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*

<sup>2</sup> *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,*

<sup>3</sup> *he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

<sup>4</sup> *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

What was Israel looking for the last 400 years? God's next move. For God to lead. He ended the Old Testament saying He would send his messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah (Mal. 3-4). Luke already told us in Ch. 1 that God was leading again, telling Zechariah and Elizabeth they were going to have a son – John, the forerunner to the Messiah. He told Mary, you're going to be the mother of the Messiah, the Son of David. God was taking the lead again. He was going ahead for His people. The presence of God's glory to shepherds specifically gave that message. It's time to move. God is going to lead once again.

Of course the combination appearance of an angel with the brilliant light of the glory of God caused the shepherds to fear. But God says through the angel

*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy*

The last time the glory of God appeared was in Ezek. 8-11. There God showed Ezekiel that He had seen the sinful, idolatrous practices of the priests making sacrifices and worshipping false gods in the temple itself; the very presence of God! So God left. His glory departed. So the last time God's glory appeared meant bad news for Israel because this was one of the reasons why they went into exile. But now God says through His glory,

***He wants them to come near; not fear (vv.9b-10a)***

God has good news this time, not bad news! This good news means He has forgiven them and made them suffer long enough. He has returned! Come, listen I have good news. And who's this good news for?

***All the people (v.10b)***

That He appeared to ordinary shepherds and had Gabriel appeared to a woman (Mary) and a priest (Zechariah) and somewhere in there recorded in Matthew's gospel (to a poor carpenter named Joseph), means God's good news that His presence had returned to people living regular lives tells them that just like the Exodus God was once again leading all His people to the place where they will experience His presence.

The appearance of His glory to ordinary shepherds in Bethlehem, the night of Jesus' birth was not just for them – it was for all of us. What did God everyone to know when He showed up in the middle of that special night? That He was ...

**Providing for People What they Truly Need**  
**(2:8-11)**

What did the Israelites living under the rule of King Herod need? What did the Israelites living under the oppression of Rome need? What did Herod and Caesar Augustus themselves need? They needed what every person in the world needed. God revealed His glory because He wanted His covenant people especially, but also the whole world to know that we all need . . .

## **A Saviour**

Shepherds did not have a good reputation. They were not all bad but they were looked down on as thieves and dishonest. They were excluded from the temple, which meant they could not make a sacrifice for their own sin. They were outcasts, unclean – they were classified as ‘sinners’.

We’re all sinners. We all mentally, verbally and physically choose our way over God’s in a variety of ways. That’s what sin is; a deliberate choosing to act against God’s will as revealed in His Word. The shepherds represent all of us – sinners separated from God who can’t have our sins forgiven if we can’t get to the presence of God. That’s why the glory of God came to us!

The glory of God in the Old Testament also communicated this. When the glory of God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, Moses was commanded to remove his sandals for he was on holy ground. When the glory of God surrounded Mt. Sinai, the people were warned to stay away. When God met with Moses in the holy of Holies in the Tabernacle, He warned the people to not enter in. When Moses went to meet with God, His face glowed with the reflection of God’s glory and the people could not look at him, asking that he veil his face.

And God warned the priesthood not to enter the Holy of Holies at all except the High Priest, once a year on the Day of Atonement. So the glory of God reminded people that God is holy and we are to approach Him carefully and always with a blood sacrifice.

But now, God welcomes us all! He appears to those who were traditionally declared ‘unclean’ and God’s presence comes to the unclean of the world declaring

*<sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*

This is good news of great joy because the separation between God and man will now be healed. Jesus will become one of us and take on the sins of the world and be the blood sacrifice that God will accept in our place. We need a Saviour so we can have what we desperately need:

## **Peace with God (vv.13-14)**

*<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”*

The appearance of the glory of God to the people [not just a Moses or a High priest] communicates what God wanted for us along; peace. This is what God communicated through His glory the few times it appeared. When Moses and the Israelites finished building the Tabernacle and made their first sacrifices to God, this is what happened:

*Lev. 9:22 Then Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them. And having sacrificed the sin offering, the burnt offering and the fellowship offering, he stepped down. <sup>23</sup> Moses and Aaron then went into the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. <sup>24</sup>*

*Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown.*

The glory appeared to 'all the people' and God was pleased and showed His approval.

When Solomon finished building the Temple and made the first sacrifices on it this is what happened:

*<sup>2</sup> Chron. 7:1 When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it. <sup>3</sup> When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the LORD above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, "He is good; his love endures forever."*

The appearing of the shekinah glory of God to the people meant God was pleased and He was at peace with His people. This is the message that the angels gave to the shepherds

*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."*

God's glory left the temple at the time of the Babylonian exile to communicate God was not pleased. But the return of His glory at the birth of His Son says 'I am reaching out to you one more time. This time, everyone can see My glory. I'm going to walk among you.'

And this is what we read in John 1:14

*And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and Only, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)*

And there's one more appearance of the glory of God in the life of Jesus, just as an additional affirmation that God had returned and was reaching out to His people once more. At the transfiguration of Jesus, what happens?

*Matt. 17:1 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. <sup>2</sup> There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. <sup>3</sup> Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.*

*<sup>4</sup> Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."*

*<sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" <sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified.*

The glory of God appears again and this time God speaks and is 'pleased' with His Son and says 'Listen to Him'. You don't have to a Levite or a priest to enter the temple in order to see and hear from God anymore. The glory has come. He is full of grace and truth. Listen to Him.

And the appearance of the glory of God at the birth of Jesus is just that -

**Is an Invitation to Find Peace for Yourself**  
**(Luke 2:15-20)**

*<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*

*<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*

What did the shepherds do with the word from God? Let's **"Go and see"** . And they found Jesus exactly as God said they would. God doesn't force Himself on anyone but He goes out of His way to bring the truth to us so that we will find out for ourselves if what God says is true. And when we find Jesus and believe who He is, asking for forgiveness for our sins and accepting Him as Lord, we receive what God says:

*Rom. 5:1-2 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.*

True joy and happiness is inner contentment based on knowing that your most important needs are always met in God through Christ. God wants to be found. He wants us to be forgiven. He wants us to have peace and joy through his Son.

Once we have that He does expect us to **"spread the word"** like the shepherds.

*<sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,*

Think about the things we talk to people about; what are they? The people and things we enjoy. Might it be so simple to say we don't talk about Jesus enough because we're not enjoying Him as much as we should? That we're not spending enough time with Him in His Word and in prayer that He's not really a priority in our life? The things we talk the most about are the things that we naturally make a priority in our life.

Because if we're spreading the Word – even talking about spiritual things amongst ourselves – it will result in

### **"glorifying and praising God"**

If the glory (noun) of God is His transcendence and greatness than the verb means to declare how great and awesome and marvelous He is. Many times we read in the Bible about God declaring His glory or revealing His glory through creation and His Word and the way His children live.

When we understand who God is and His glorious nature we naturally bring Him more glory. And ironically we grow in His glory – His likeness. What do I mean? Look at 2 Cor. 3.18

*<sup>18</sup> And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

Paul had been explaining that when Moses went into God's presence, it was obvious because it was reflected in His face. But in time the glory faded. Likewise, when we work on our relationship with God we reflect His glory/greatness to the world around us. They see the difference God is

making in our life. They don't know what it is, but it's good and attractive. It's the presence of God now through his Spirit working in us and making us more glorious (like God) each day.

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