

Watchnight Communion Service

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[0 : 00] to 1027. I'm only going to look at one verse, and it's even been set out very beautifully for me in the Bible, so you can't miss it. It's verse 14.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. But before I get there, I just want to look at the context.

It's a very familiar picture. We have the hillside. We have the sheep. We have the shepherds. Perhaps they're huddling around a fire because it's night shift.

It's not a good deal being on night shift, especially at Christmas. But of course, they didn't know it was Christmastime at all. And then suddenly, there's a glorious light.

And first one angel, and then the whole heavenly host speak. And in early Luke, it's what is said that provides the interpretation for what is happening.

[1 : 05] We have, you know, Gabriel's words. We have Mary's song. We have Zechariah's prophecy. We have this, the angel's song.

And finally, we have the words of Simeon. And the angel's song is very short. Well, there's 18 words in English in the version we have here. There's only 11 in the Greek.

And if you think that it was originally spoken in either Hebrew or Aramaic, well, then there was probably seven. And they were all nouns. It's perhaps the other feature of this verse.

It's perhaps the only verse in the Bible that people know better in Latin than in English. I mean, gloria in excelsis Deo is a common phrase. And I think it probably comes from just here.

Even if you can't necessarily do the whole of the rest of it in Latin. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among humans of favor is what the actual Greek says, literally.

[2 : 13] Now, if you're my age, the text is different from the one you were used to. Someone said to me, well, what are you going to say at midnight that's different?

What's he going to say that's new? And in one sense, I don't want to say anything that's new. But I think this is new in a way. The text is slightly different and it's quite important.

There's one letter different in the Greek manuscript. And it has a small difference in what it means. The oldest manuscripts have the text you've had tonight.

So it's no longer goodwill towards men as a third thing. It's glory to God on earth peace. And then it's to those on whom his favor rests.

And the goodwill, when I say it's to humans of goodwill, it doesn't mean that the humans are of goodwill themselves.

[3 : 11] That's sort of good chaps. It means they're human beings on whom God has set his favor. And we know that in a complicated way from the, if you go back into Hebrew or Aramaic, we find this actual phrase used.

And it does mean God's favor. And that's important. So I want this evening to look at three words. Glory, peace, and favor.

Glory to God in the highest heaven. On earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. Now when you look at this verse, glory has a different flavor of meaning from the one it had just a few verses earlier.

When glory shone around. At that time, glory was visible. As God came to earth in the person of Jesus, the splendor of God, the splendor of his presence was revealed visibly.

But here where it talks about glory to God in heaven, I think it means something slightly different. When we use the word glory in this way in English. If we talk about Nelson's glorious victory, we don't mean that Nelson actually shone in a literal sense.

[4 : 34] We mean that his reputation was enhanced. So I think here it means that in heaven, the angels saw God come to earth. And they gave him praise and worship as they marveled.

Glory to God in the highest heaven. Because he has gone in the person of his son to Jesus to rescue human beings.

And then we move from glory to peace. Glory to God in the highest heaven. And Jesus' coming also means on earth peace. It moves from heaven to earth.

It moves from God to humanity. And Jesus not only brings praise to God, but peace to humanity. Peace is one of those words that in a couple of days' time, you may feel tempted to use with your children.

I went with mine, of course. But peace is not that sort of word that you suddenly use when you say, Oh, I want some peace. Because your child has been playing that trumpet that Aunt Agatha rather unwisely gave him.

[5 : 49] And he's been using it now for two days. And you just want him to stop. Peace, the Hebrew word is shalom.

You probably know that. It's a word that means not just absence of war, but well-being and prosperity. It means security and harmony. Peace was used in our first lesson from Isaiah 9, which spoke of the end of oppression.

It spoke of the end of war. But peace between human beings will only come ultimately through peace with God.

That's one of the truths of the New Testament that Paul makes much of. And Jesus brings peace because he is, as one of the angels said two verses earlier, Savior.

A Savior has been born to you. He is the one who will save us from our sins by dying on the cross in our place. And thereby he will deal with our sins, restore our relationship with God, and bring peace with him.

[7 : 03] And in the process, bring into being a multicultural, worldwide church of people. Who have peace with one another because we have peace with God.

For this peace is for those on whom God's favor rests. Now favor is pretty similar in meaning to grace.

Grace and favor go together. The point is that this peace comes not because we deserve it, but because God in his love loves the undeserving.

God's gift at Christmas, his gift of his son, comes because of his grace, because of his sheer kindness. Despite everything, God loves us.

But although grace is undeserved and often even unlooked for, it does need a response.

[8 : 12] I mean, in the story, when the shepherds heard the message, they went. In the words of the modern cowl, they hurried to Bethlehem to see the son of Mary.

They went with haste. And they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. Now when I meet a baby, I'm a bit nonplussed. When I met my first baby, well, Susan's our first baby, I thought there was something wrong with him.

He was so purple. I was very concerned. But when I meet other babies now, I don't go up and make sort of vaguely prophetic remarks. Ah, you have long legs.

I think you're going to be a runner. Or, ooh, you've got a large head. I think you're going to be a boffin. Or some other helpful thought. I try to say very little and avoid embarrassing myself or my children or my wife.

But when the shepherds meet the baby, they come out with very clear prophecy because they know who the baby is.

[9 : 19] They've been told that he's the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. And when they get to Bethlehem, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.

Unlike me going up to a baby, they know about this baby who he is. What an encouragement it must have been to Mary.

I mean, she can't have been pleased to have her baby, her precious child, in the manger. We sort of sanitize the manger.

We have our pictures. Some of us have probably had our babies in little sort of pretend mangers. And our babies have been very happy in them briefly. But she must have worried that somehow was she in the right place.

But the shepherds reassure her the child in the manger is the sign. God is in charge. And the angels say that the baby's been born in the town of David.

[10:26] That's how they describe the city of Bethlehem. That's the right title for Bethlehem. Because Jesus is great David's greater son.

Saviour. Anointed one. Lord. And again, the fact that Mary and Joseph are in the right place for great David's greater son to be born doesn't appear to be due to some careful planning on their part.

It's due to Caesar Augustus' idea. His census. It's due to HMRC equivalent.

It's taxation. But because of that we see God in charge even through the emperor. And Jesus is born in the right place.

And as I said what we hear tonight in this one verse that I've chosen is the angelic perspective.

[11:34] We want to understand who Jesus is and what he came to do we see it in this verse. And the shepherds brought it to Mary and Joseph.

They say that the baby brings glory to God in the highest heaven and indeed his coming has also brought glory on earth because they'd seen it shine.

And that his coming brings peace on earth to those on whom his favour rests. They say we've experienced God's favour.

We've experienced his grace. It's that exciting. And Mary must have been excited when she heard that. Because at the very beginning when the angel appeared to her she heard the words greetings you who are highly favoured.

More literally greetings oh one furnished with grace. Ave Maria plena gratia. Hail Mary full of grace.

[12:38] Not because she distributes it but because she's received it. And now the shepherds say well the angels spoke to us about favour as well.

They speak of human beings on whom God's favour rests. Not the same word but the same idea. God's overwhelming kindness for Mary for shepherds for us.

And Mary treasured up all these things pondering them in her heart. So if the Christian faith is something that you've just come in tonight to find out a little about the message of the shepherds is go check it out.

Think it through. Ponder about these words about glory and peace and favour. Think it out. And we're starting a Christianity Explored course on the 14th of January in the evening with food and a chance to talk and find out more.

Come along. There are cards at the back. Or maybe you've known this for years. Well there's always room for more pondering. There's always something new to discover in this wonderful story.

[14:02] I enjoyed exploring this actual text as I prepared. And I pray that you have enjoyed it too. There's always room for treasuring and pondering.

And then in the end when you go out tonight to go back from the manger glorifying and praising God just as the shepherds did.

Glory. Peace. Favor. Amen. Let's have a word of prayer. Heavenly Father thank you for sending Jesus.

Thank you that when the angels saw what was happening they gave you glory. Thank you for the glory that you could see that night that we can picture in our minds.

Thank you that it was only the start that that baby would grow up to teach and heal and live and die to bring us peace.

[15:19] Thank you for your grace and favor. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.