

GOING THE DISTANCE



Greetings to those of you that will read this before Christmas as well as those of you who will read this after the hustle and bustle of the New Year. We'll do something a little different this year into 2007 in that we will combine the two seasons into one. If you will remember the Lord had given us a word just before the beginning of the Jewish New Year that He would release a season of revelation to the church as well as the world. I believe that season of revelation will continue into the next year. While our secular calendar may go from January to January, the Jewish calendar does not count the days in the same way.

Our text for this season comes from Luke 2:1-20: "And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was that while they were there the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass as the angels were gone away from them into heaven the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem

and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them."

I've reprinted the whole text here in the Old English of the King James Version for those of you that don't get a chance to read this passage too often. I've also copied the whole text for another reason. During the Christmas season we kind of forget that the lives of the players in the story did not end that night. Since many only get a chance to see the plays or the festivities of this story once a year we sometimes forget the ponderings in Mary's heart for a lifetime and the life-changing impact this experience made on the shepherds. One minute they are going about their daily lives; lives which were pretty low on the economic and social food chain of their generation, and they now become messengers of an experience that they will never forget; an experience that will impact history forever. There are some theologians that believe these particular shepherds were guarding the sheep that were used in the Temple rituals. While our text does not support this theory one way or the other, the reality is that they were still a

group of people that the world did not consider talented or special. There aren't many that would have invited them for Christmas dinner. Trust me when I tell you that they would have killed anything in an instant that threatened the safety of the commodity they were guarding. While they wouldn't have been migrants per se, think migrant worker when you think social status and pay scale.

Another feature of this passage that many might not realize when they hear it once a year is the controversy surrounding exactly what the meaning of the message was that the angel told these shepherds. Normally I would chalk this long standing argument up to a bunch of suits fighting over nothing. But in this case it boils down to an added 'S' from the Greek language that happens to exist in some of the historical manuscripts and does not exist in others. In this case, especially concerning the New Testaments scribes it would be very easy for them to add the 's' to the word used, because from our human understanding it would make sense to do so. Let me explain. Most Bibles translate the angelic proclamation in a three-part harmony, if you will: 1. "Glory to God in the Highest; 2. On Earth Peace; 3. Goodwill Toward Men." Some Bibles translate the passage this way: 1. Glory to God in the highest; 2. On Earth peace Toward men of good will." I've capitalized certain words in both versions because of the emphasis on certain words that changes with the different translation. This happens to be one of those places where there are ancient texts that would support both

translations. The reason is because of the scribes or those who recopied the New Testament manuscripts. Unlike Jewish scribes (which some earlier ones may have been), there was no fastidious practices with rules and regulations that might have prohibited more errors like the Old Testament scribal tradition did. Not that there aren't any controversies within the Old Testament due to possible scribal error, there are. But for the volume we see between the two, it's a miracle that our Bibles are as free from human copying mistakes as they are. While I believe this to be due to the hand of the Lord, He makes use of the---as some would say almost neurotic---practices of the Old Testament scribes. In this case here in the New Testament it boils down to the Greek word used for goodwill, eudokia. Typed without the Greek letter sigma (or let's just say our 's') it means simply that God's goodwill is for all people. The word spelled with an 's' would put the emphasis on the type or kind of people that God would speak peace to; namely, only those of good will. Since there are roughly equal numbers of ancient texts that have it both ways, what's a translator to do? I always say, when in doubt go back to the beginning. And frankly this is what many scholars have done.

They've gone back to the character and nature of God seen in the Old Testament and they have made an effort to look at other passages in the Old Testament that may carry a similar blessing, either in three-part or two-part form. They also happened to have looked at history and the attitude of

different groups within that history. It is repeated several times throughout the Scriptures that it is by the testimony of two or three witnesses that a thing would be confirmed. There are many passages that carry a three-part blessing. One of the most notable is in Isaiah 6:3 where the angels surrounding the throne of God cry "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is filled with His glory." In fact ancient Jewish scholars expound on this passage in a three-part description: "1. Holy in the highest heaven, the house of His Presence. 2. Holy upon the earth, the work of His might. 3. Holy for endless ages is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of the brightness of His glory." (See Brad H. Young, "Jesus the Jewish Theologian." Hendrickson Publishers, p 8) I look at this like an 'angel thing.' Whenever they show up they always shout---or more like thunder---the praises of God in a three-part proclamation.

The work of Jesus, the Messiah was for all people, to show God's good will to them. The ancient Jews had this same understanding. It was the central reason why God placed them in what He considered the central highway of the Earth. In the hustle and bustle of daily living, people would pass through the land of Israel on their way to wherever they were going. They would see God's goodness to these people and start to realize that there was One God that wanted to function and be involved in the lives of ordinary people. The good news is that a majority of folks came to this revelation. The bad news is that a small handful decided

they wanted what the Jews had and would get it, one way or the other. Freaky, huh? Definitely not men of good will; which leads me to the last detail of support for the three-part translation. When it comes to history and the attitude of people, none had attitude more than the first century community that surrounded the Dead Sea. For those of you that have done some Bible study some of these folks would be considered Essenes, which were part of a group of Jews that were around during Jesus' times. They considered the present Jewish system of religion to be hopelessly polluted and chose instead to live outside of it in a secluded community. While many of their intentions and Scriptural interpretations were good, the unfortunate reality is that this isolation enabled an attitude of exclusivity. Nowhere is this seen better than in their understanding of the Hebrew word 'ratzon.' And SURPRISE, SURPRISE---what's the word 'ratzon' equate to in the Greek? The same word that we translated as good will---eudokia. The understanding these folks had of this word meant that only persons of good will would see God's favor or peace or blessings. Whereas Jewish thought as a whole along, with the normal translation of the word 'ratzon,' saw that the desire of God's good will was for all mankind and we would see that good will manifested on earth in a substantive way if we would listen. It's a fact that some of the earliest Christian scribes would have adhered to a more exclusive tradition, like the Dead Sea communities, while others would have known of the ancient Jewish translation for the word 'ratzon.'

So what's my point here? Sometimes in global conflicts where it might appear that both parties to an argument have a point, it helps to go back to the beginning. It's obvious from our text that the angels did not show up to men that were considered of totally 'good will.' Society allowed them the unpleasant job of watching a bunch of animals out in the elements of whatever weather showed up. Isolation tends to turn a group of people, religious or atheists into folks who become quite exclusive to their own version of things. Whether you're a movie star or a goat herder, your own group will never challenge their own status quo. When God shows up on the scene He challenges everybody's ideas, from the priest and the prophet to the partygoer and the prostitute. I'm not trying to say whatever ideas work for your reality do; on the contrary, God has some plans and designs for your life that might just freak you out for awhile. Like those shepherds, you may not be on the top of society's wish list. You can have an experience with the Lord that will change and challenge you for life. The New Testament makes it clear that overcoming your doubts will lead you to ask of the Lord. I place no restrictions on what you ask, just ask. If you want to read more take a look at a New Testament, turn to the book of Romans and then look at chapter 10.

From the start of this article my intention was for some to read this in January, after the Christmas season. For those of you that do, conflict or argument might be dragging you down. A look at how God handles

controversy might help. He doesn't step in with His big ideas. After all, if you made the universe and the earth, why bother? What you did is already evident. Instead, He just speaks peace and then follows it up by action. He lays the choice for peace at humanity's feet. It's our choice. There are consequences for not following peace. This is not an article in support of pacifists. It is one that challenges our ideas of peace and action by taking a hard look at what it took God to bring peace to the earth. He did it by allowing His Son to be sacrificed. Bloody and ridiculous, you say? Our human tendency toward violence is bloody and ridiculous. Not only does God provide a way out for those involved in both practices by sending the Prince of Peace to a bloody and violent death, but He challenges Evil on this planet by offering a sacrifice that will expunge its hold on people when they accept that sacrifice. Does that make you a person of goodwill or turn you into one? As far as I'm concerned the argument is best left to the suits arguing. I prefer to talk about the experience that has turned millions of people from violence to good will and peace in Jesus Christ when they ask the Lord to show up in their reality, whatever that reality looks like. It's not scary, just ask. Hey, if atheists are right and there is no God, what's the worst that can happen? But if there is One God and He expresses Himself within the pages of the Old and New Testaments, I can tell you from personal experience, hang on, it's a great life---I didn't say it wasn't messy sometimes---but having God show up in the middle of your mess and surprising the snot out of you, is an awesome reality.

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