

Introduction:

1. Everyone knows the story of Jesus' birth, though we might be confused about how many wise men came to Jesus, and where Jesus was when they came, and even when Jesus was born.
 - a. But the birth story itself is straightforward and easily understood. An angel came to a virgin named Mary and declared that she would have a child without a human father. He would be called "the Son of God." Mary was betrothed to Joseph. They lived in Nazareth, but because of a census had to travel to Bethlehem. It was at Bethlehem that the Christ child was born—in a manger. His birth was announced by the angels in Luke 2:8-18.
 - b. But something bothers me here. It's not the Christ story, but the way the story is sometimes presented. Through various media the birth story is often presented as though it was the end of something, rather than the beginning. The camera slowly pulls away from the manger scene; *Silent Night* softly plays; then we cut to commercial. Next up: *A Charlie Brown Christmas!* It's true that Jesus was born in a stable—but that's not the end of the story!
2. The message often gleaned from the birth story is taken from Luke 2:14. Preachers stand in the pulpit and say, "We ought to be at peace with one another and have goodwill toward others during this holiday season—and year round." That may be good, but it misses the point of this verse.
 - a. The real message is one of peace from God and goodwill from God to men on earth. This is a verse about the gospel. The prophets foretold that Jesus would bring peace, Isaiah 9:6.
 - b. The gospel we preach today is the gospel of peace, Romans 10:15. Peace and glad tidings!
 - c. Jesus is the bringer of grace and peace. He makes it possible for us to have peace with God. But how do we find that peace? To understand that, we need to learn more about Jesus.

The Lesson:

I. The Birth of Jesus: the Beginning of the Christ Story.

- A. The baby born in a manger is only the opening event in a series of wondrous events.
 1. This child would ultimately pierce hearts and souls, Luke 2:34-35. Some in Israel would fall because of Him; others would rise; some would speak against Him. This child will turn out to be an adult of great controversy and consequence.
 2. As an adult He would preach a message of repentance, calling on men to turn from sin, Mark 1:14-15. Some would believe His message; some would not!
 3. Men who rejected His message would ultimately kill Him! See Mark 14:64; 15:12-15.
 4. Jesus would die and be buried, but the story would continue, Mark 16:9. "He is alive!"
 5. The story continues further as He would ascend into heaven, Mark 16:19.
 6. But even with Jesus returning to heaven, the story still continues, Mark 16:15-16, 20.
- B. So, the birth story isn't the end of anything, but only the beginning. And because Jesus completed His earthly mission, men can now have the promised peace from God of Luke 2:14!

II. Jesus: Bringer of Grace and Peace.

- A. How can we have the peace promised by the angels? The story is not just ancient history! It applies to us! We begin by seeing that *peace* and *grace* are linked in the gospel, 2 Peter 1:2.
1. Eighteen times in the New Testament, *grace* and *peace* are coupled together. You can't have peace without grace. We need to know how to get the grace that gets us to peace.
 2. But there is a problem—not a problem with grace or with the gospel—but a problem with what folks think and say about God's grace. Grace is misunderstood. Some think it means God just overlooks sin, or that it means there is nothing for us to do to be saved.
- B. The key text to understanding grace is Ephesians 2:8-9. A key passage, but misunderstood.
1. What does grace mean? The word means *unmerited favor*. It is undeserved, a gift.
 2. Through Jesus, grace is made available to all men, Titus 2:11, 14. He gave Himself!
 3. Remember the birth of Jesus! Jesus left heaven to become a man, 2 Corinthians 8:9.
 4. He became a man to deal with our sin problem, 2 Corinthians 5:21. He died for all.
 5. Does the fact that God's grace is made available to all men mean that all men will be saved? It does not, Matthew 7:13-14. Christ Himself makes salvation *conditional*.
 6. Salvation is by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). *Grace* covers all that God has done for us. *Faith* covers all that we must do in response to God. This even includes repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38). The faith that saves is the faith that obeys, Hebrews 5:8-9.
- C. "But," it is argued, "Ephesians 2:8-9 says it is not of works—and baptism is a work."
1. This view tries to exclude baptism from God's grace. It fails to understand that there are four different kinds of works in the Bible. What works does Ephesians 2:8-9 address?
 - a. The "works" of the flesh, Galatians 5:19-21. These keep men out of heaven.
 - b. The "works" of the law, Galatians 2:16. These can't save. This is Ephesians 2:8-9.
 - c. The "works" of man's own righteousness, Titus 3:5. This again is Ephesians 2:8-9.
 - d. The "works" of God's righteousness, Romans 10:1-3. This is not Ephesians 2:8-9. These are works which God has appointed that men *submit* to in order to be saved. This includes belief in Jesus, John 6:28-29. It also includes baptism, Colossians 2:12.
 2. Since Jesus is the bringer of grace and peace, He has the right to determine the conditions by which you will receive it. "But don't I have any rights?" Oh, yes! You have the right to determine whether or not you want to receive it.
 3. Someone says, "Since salvation is a gift, I am still not comfortable with having to do something. A gift means I should do nothing." Though salvation is a gift, it is conditional. The fact that we have to meet conditions does not mean we earn God's grace and peace.

Conclusion:

1. The real question is about whether you and I have done what Jesus says to receive His gift.
2. God really does want you to have peace. That is why He sent Jesus into the world. His birth is only the beginning of the story. Will your part in the story end with you in heaven?