

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS. ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE II. 8–20.

<p>8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.</p> <p>9 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.</p> <p>10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.</p> <p>11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.</p> <p>12 And this <i>shall be a sign</i> unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.</p> <p>13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,</p> <p>14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.</p>	<p>15 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.</p> <p>16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.</p> <p>17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.</p> <p>18 And all they that heard <i>it</i> wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.</p> <p>19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered <i>them</i> in her heart.</p> <p>20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.</p>
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WE read, in these verses, how the birth of the Lord Jesus was first announced to the children of men. The birth of a king's son is generally made an occasion of public revelling and rejoicing. The announcement of the birth of the Prince of Peace was made privately, at midnight, and without anything of worldly pomp and ostentation.

Let us mark *who they were to whom the tidings first came that Christ was born*. They were "shepherds abiding in the field near Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks by night." To shepherds—not to priests and rulers,—to shepherds—not to Scribes and Pharisees, an angel appeared, proclaiming, "unto you is born this day a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

The saying of St. James should come into our mind, as we read these words: "Hath not God chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he hath promised to them that love him." (James ii. 5.) The want of money debars no one from spiritual privileges. The things of God's kingdom are often hid from the great and noble, and revealed to the poor. The busy labour of the hands need not prevent a man being favoured with special communion with God. Moses was keeping sheep,—Gideon was threshing wheat,—Elisha was ploughing, when they were severally honoured by direct calls and revelations from God. Let us resist the suggestion of Satan, that religion is not for the working man. The weak of the world are often called before the mighty. The last are often first, and the first last.

Let us mark, secondly, *the language used by the angel in announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds*. He said, "I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

We need not wonder at these words. The spiritual darkness which had

covered the earth for four thousand years, was about to be rolled away. The way to pardon and peace with God was about to be thrown open to all mankind. The head of Satan was about to be bruised. Liberty was about to be proclaimed to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind. The mighty truth was about to be proclaimed that God could be just, and yet, for Christ's sake, justify the ungodly. Salvation was no longer to be seen through types and figures, but openly, and face to face. The knowledge of God was no longer to be confined to the Jews, but to be offered to the whole Gentile world. The days of heathenism were numbered. The first stone of God's kingdom was about to be set up. If this was not "good tidings," there never were tidings that deserved the name.

Let us mark, thirdly, *who they were that first praised God, when Christ was born*. They were angels, and not men,—angels who had never sinned, and needed no Saviour,—angels who had not fallen, and required no redeemer, and no atoning blood. The first hymn to the honour of "God manifest in the flesh," was sung by "a multitude of the heavenly host."

Let us note this fact. It is full of deep spiritual lessons. It shows us what good servants the angels are. All that their heavenly Master does pleases and interests them.—It shows us what clear knowledge they have. They know what misery sin has brought into creation. They know the blessedness of heaven, and the privilege of an open door into it.—Above all, it shows us the deep love and compassion which the angels feel towards poor lost man. They rejoice in the glorious prospect of many souls being saved, and many brands plucked from the burning.

Let us strive to be more like-minded with the angels. Our spiritual ignorance and deadness appear most painfully in our inability to enter into the joy which we see them here expressing. Surely if we hope to dwell with them for ever in heaven, we ought to share something of their feelings while we are here upon earth. Let us seek a more deep sense of the sinfulness and misery of sin, and then we shall have a more deep sense of thankfulness for redemption.

Let us mark, fourthly, *the hymn of praise which the heavenly host sung in the hearing of the shepherds*. They said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men."

These famous words are variously interpreted. Man is by nature so dull in spiritual things, that it seems as if he cannot understand a sentence of heavenly language, when he hears it. Yet a meaning may be drawn from the words which is free from any objection, and is not only good sense, but excellent theology.

"Glory to God in the highest!" the song begins. Now is come the highest degree of glory to God, by the appearing of His Son Jesus Christ in the world. He by His life and death on the cross will glorify God's attributes,—

justice, holiness, mercy, and wisdom,—as they never were glorified before. Creation glorified God, but not so much as redemption.

“Peace on earth!” the song goes on. Now is come to earth the peace of God which passeth all understanding,—the perfect peace between a holy God and sinful man, which Christ was to purchase with His own blood,—the peace which is offered freely to all mankind,—the peace which, once admitted into the heart, makes men live at peace one with another, and will one day overspread the whole world.

“Good will towards men!” the song concludes. Now is come the time when God’s kindness and good will towards guilty man is to be fully made known. His power was seen in creation. His justice was seen in the flood. But His mercy remained to be fully revealed by the appearing and atonement of Jesus Christ.

Such was the purport of the angels’ song. Happy are they that can enter into its meaning, and with their hearts subscribe to its contents. The man who hopes to dwell in heaven, should have some experimental acquaintance with the language of its inhabitants.

Let us mark, ere we leave the passage, *the prompt obedience to the heavenly vision* displayed by the shepherds. We see in them no doubts, or questionings, or hesitation. Strange and improbable as the tidings might seem, they at once act upon them. They went to Bethlehem in haste. They found everything exactly as it had been told them. Their simple faith received a rich reward. They had the mighty privilege of being the first of all mankind, after Mary and Joseph, who saw with believing eyes the new-born Messiah. They soon returned, “glorifying and praising God” for what they had seen.

May our spirit be like their’s! May we ever believe implicitly, act promptly, and wait for nothing, when the path of duty is clear! So doing, we shall have a reward like that of the shepherds. The journey that is begun in faith, will generally end in praise.

NOTES. LUKE II. 8-20.

- 8.—[*Shepherds abiding in the field, &c.*] It has been argued from these words, that our Lord could not have been born on Christmas day, because it was not the custom of the Jews to keep flocks in the field in winter. It may be doubted whether the argument is quite conclusive. At any rate, Jacob complains of “frost by night,” when he kept the flock of Laban, in the neighbouring country of Paden Aram. (Gen. xxxi. 40.) However, it is an undeniable fact that the precise month or day of our Lord’s nativity is not known. Every month in the year has found its advocates, in the conjectures made on the subject. Certainty about it there is none. Had it been good for us to know the day, God would have told us. For keeping Christmas we have no authority, but that of the church.
- 10.—[*All people.*] It may be questioned whether this expression was not meant to apply specially and primarily to the Jews. It would be translated more literally, “to all the people.”
- 12.—[*The babe.*] There can be no doubt that this expression would have been better translated, “a babe.” The whole context, no less than the absence of the Greek article, shows the pro-

priety of this.

- 14.—[*Good will.*] The word and thing here are the same that we find in Ephes. i. 5, 9. The meaning is that “good will and good pleasure of God” towards man, which is revealed in His Son Jesus Christ.—It is the same as the “kindness and love of God” in Titus iii. 4, and the “love of God” in John iii. 16.
- 15.—[*See this thing which is come to pass.*] The word translated “this thing,” might also be rendered “this saying.” The commentary of Ambrose on this passage is a curious proof that the Fathers were anything but infallible. He actually regards “this thing” as the personal Word, the Son of God! A very slight acquaintance with Greek will show that this sense of the word is impossible. Even the Romish commentator Barradius is obliged to confess, that in this comment Ambrose erred.
- 16.—[*They came with haste.*] There is a touching comment on this conduct of the shepherds, in a letter of Bishop Hooper’s to certain “godly and faithful prisoners, which were taken together at prayer in a house in Bow Churchyard.” He says, “Read the second chapter of St. Luke, and there ye shall see how the shepherds that watched their sheep all night, as soon as they heard that Christ was born at Bethlehem, by and by must go to see him. They did not reason nor debate with themselves who should keep the wolf from the sheep in the mean time, but did as they were commanded, and committed their sheep to him whose pleasure they obeyed. So let us do, now we be called; let us commit all other things unto him that called us. He will take heed that all things shall be well. He will help the husband; he will comfort the wife. He will guide the servants; he will keep the house; he will preserve the goods; yea, rather than it should be undone, he will wash the dishes, and rock the cradle. Cast, therefore, all your care upon God.”—*Hooper’s Works. Parker Edit. vol. ii. 617.*