

CHRISTMAS INTERLUDE

God's Encouragements Amid Life's Oppressions, Luke 2:1-20

III. God's Edification Amid Religious Oppression

(Luke 2:8-20)

Introduction: (To show the need . . .)

Many people struggle with depression at Christmas, for if they try to focus on what makes them happy, they only note their lack of joy due to oppression. One realm of affliction they face is religious oppression. We illustrate:

(1) Clifford May's column, "Religious-freedom panel imperiled" (Republican-American, December 3, 2019, p. 8A) reported that the "U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom" that was "created 21 years ago" to monitor "the state of religious freedom around the world" and make "policy recommendations" to governing officials is being opposed by "(s)ome members of Congress." They "object to its prioritization of 'freedom of religion or belief' . . . over what they consider . . . expanding rights for select grievance communities" like the gay community.

For example, if a "Christian baker declines to design wedding cakes for same-sex couples," such congressmen assert that he is to be considered guilty of the "abuse of religion to justify human-rights violations," Ibid.

However, Mr. May, president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, objects to the view of these congressmen, claiming that "'(F)reedom of religion or belief' . . . I regard as the most foundational right, the right upon which all others are built." (Ibid.) Accordingly, these congressmen advocate the government's reducing the rights of religious people to the undermining of the foundation of all the personal rights of every American.

(2) We face religious oppression from within even evangelical circles: Brannon Howse in his book, The Coming Religious Reich, 2015, p. 17, reported on a July 27, 2012 ecumenical political rally in Dallas, Texas at High Point Church that involved "Roman Catholics, Word of Faith false teachers, pro-family activists, neo-evangelicals, and so-called evangelicals," one of whom was a former seminary classmate of mine! I thus agree with Justin Peters' promo in Howse's book (Ibid., p. iii) when he wrote, "Ironically, many . . . in the Religious Right . . . who claim to be fighting . . . troubling trends are . . . contributing to them by their dilution of biblical doctrine and standards."

Need: *So we ask, "What edification does God offer for the religious oppression we face this Christmas Season?!"*

- I. **The Luke 2:8 shepherds who worked near Bethlehem at Christ's birth faced great religious oppression:**
 - A. Hebrew tradition held that Messiah's birth would be announced from *Migdal Eder*, "the tower of the flock," **close** to Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem, A. Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jes. the Mes., 1972, p. 186.
 - B. This tower was not used for "ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheep-ground beyond Bethlehem," but was situated near the road leading to Jerusalem as such sheep "were destined for Temple-sacrifices," Ibid.
 - C. The shepherds that then kept these sheep were "under the ban of Rabbinism," excommunicated from the temple services due to their "necessary isolation from religious ordinances, and their manner of life, which rendered strict legal observance unlikely, if not absolutely impossible," Ibid., p. 186-187.
 - D. In other words, though the temple priests **needed** these shepherds to keep their sheep year-round at this spot to provide the priests qualified sacrificial animals for the year-round temple functions in Jerusalem, the job of the Bethlehem shepherds kept them religiously unqualified according to Rabbinical standards from participating in the Jerusalem temple services, a dreadfully unjust, legalistic and oppressive situation!
- II. **Yet, God in grace edified these shepherds, sending them His holy angels with good news of great joy:**
 - A. In the very place mentioned in Hebrew tradition where also the excommunicated shepherds kept the temple's sacrificial sheep, at *Migdal Eder*, the angel of the Lord appeared and the glory of God shone all around these excommunicated shepherds, terrifying them with a dazzling display of God's glory in the night, Luke 2:8-9.
 - B. The Angel addressed their fear, telling them, "**Stop** [*present* tense of the imperative] being afraid [middle voice = **for your own benefit**]" (*me phobeisthe*, 2nd pers. pl.; U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 207; The Analyt. Grk. Lex., 1972, p. 427), implying he was appearing to encourage these men for their own good, providing wonderful news for men who had been unfairly excommunicated and likely dreaded God! (Luke 2:10)
 - C. Rather, the Angel claimed he was bringing them good tidings of great joy that would be for all the people, for that day had the long-expected Messiah and Lord been born unto them in Bethlehem, the city of David, v. 11.
 - D. After the Angel told them of the distinguishing mark of the baby Messiah's having been laid in the unusual bed of a manger, he was suddenly joined by a host of the heavenly angels, praising God. The message the angels gave to the shepherds implied these men were favored by God in His grace, a great encouragement to such excommunicated people. We verify this truth from the New Testament Greek text (as follows):

1. The KJV translates the last phrase by the angels as "good will toward men," reflecting the manuscript reading *eudokia* for "good will," the noun being in the **nominative case**. (Bruce M. Metzger, A Text. Com. on the Grk. N. T., 1971, p. 133) This reading teaches that God expressed goodwill to all mankind.
 2. However, the oldest manuscripts of the Alexandrian and Western text types give the reading *eudokias*, "of [God's] favor," which is in the **genitive case**, and the difference between the **genitive** (*eudokias*) and **nominative** (*eudokia*) readings is the final letter "sigma" in the genitive that was often written as a tiny, elevated, "lunar sigma," or "little more than a point" that could be overlooked and errantly omitted by copyists, *Ibid*. Also, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls gave witness to the Hebraistic phrase "men of [God's] good pleasure," and Luke 1 and 2 is "characterized by Semitizing constructions" like it, *Ibid*.
 3. Thus, the *better* manuscript reading is the **genitive** *eudokias*, "men of [God's] favor," meaning God was granting peace on earth to those who were objects of His favor [because of their faith in His Son, Jesus].
- E. The shepherds then hurried to Bethlehem and found the Infant Messiah and God Incarnate, and in faith in Him proclaimed abroad the angels' message about Him. They returned to their sheep, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen just as it had been told to them, Luke 2:15-20. The excommunicated shepherds rejoiced in God's grace that had been shown unto them by faith in God's Son, the Infant Lord Jesus Christ!

Lesson: *God used Hebrew tradition about the "tower of the flocks" right north of Bethlehem to announce there to unjustly excommunicated shepherds His great salvation grace unto them and to all who put their faith in His Son!*

Application: *(1) May we trust in Christ for salvation, John 3:16. (2) If facing religious oppression from the world without or from parties within religious circles themselves, may we rest in God's grace to us by faith in His Son.*

Conclusion: (To illustrate the message . . .)

Each of the kinds of religious oppression mentioned in our sermon introduction are met by the Lord under specific conditions given in Scripture, so God may allow one to face trials in each of these realms simply to point him to the edifying solutions that are found in His Word. We explain these Scriptures as applied to these needs as follows:

(1) In regard to religious oppression or persecution from the secular world without, (a) Jesus in John 16:33 predicted that in the world, we believers in Him would face tribulation, but that we were to be of good cheer, for He had overcome the world. (b) Paul explained **how** we would find edification amid such oppression in 2 Timothy 3:12-17: (i) We should note that if we live godly lives, we **will** suffer persecution, 2 Timothy 2:12. (ii) We also should note that evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived, 2 Timothy 2:13 ESV. (iii) Yet, to offset persecution and evil men and impostors, we are to (a) continue in what God has let us learn and firmly believe is the truth, knowing the credible people from whom we have learned them, 2 Timothy 2:14; (b) we are to rely on written Scripture as our ultimate source of truth as God's completely, permanently inspired Word (2 Timothy 2:15-16a); (c) we are to rely on that Word for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness as Scripture is sufficient for all discipling needs and for equipping us for every good work, 2 Timothy 2:16b-17) and (d) we must rely on the Holy Spirit to suffer persecution well by God's power for His glory, 2 Timothy 1:8.

(2) In regard to religious oppression from within religious circles themselves, (1) we need to apply all that has been presented in "(1)" immediately above and (2) recall that God's holy angels emphasized the **unmerited favor**, that is, the **GRACE** of God to unfairly excommunicated Bethlehem shepherds the night of Jesus' birth! Since so much of the oppression in religious circles is fomented by false legalism that is not found in Scripture, may we heed Scriptures that emphasize our walk with the Lord in **grace**. Important truths in this realm include: (a) Resting in God's Word to provide us assurance that we have truly been saved (1 John 5:13) as measured by the tests of our confession that Jesus is God come in the flesh according to 1 John 4:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 12:3; (b) Resting in God's grace to keep us saved in unconditional salvation security, John 5:24; (c) Relying on the spiritual gift God has given us for service power to counter oppositions of legalists to our ministries, 2 Timothy 1:6-7; (d) Relying on the Holy Spirit by faith to retain sound theology versus oppressive, doctrinally errant foes, 2 Timothy 1:13-14; (e) Relying on the Holy Spirit to discern and learn truth versus error, John 16:13-14; (f) Relying on Scripture as opposed to all other input, including experience, for knowing that all other input is laced with debilitating spiritual darkness, Isaiah 8:20; Psalm 119:105; Deuteronomy 13:1-3 and (g) recalling for our edification that throughout history, it has always been the errant legalistic oppressors who persecute the godly instead of the godly who persecute the errant legalists, thereby clarifying in our minds and hearts just **who** is right and who is wrong in such issues, Galatians 4:29.

May we trust in Christ for salvation. If facing religious hardships this Christmas, may we rely on the Lord, be careful to obey His Word, and see Him work to help us regardless of our religious hardships.