

CHRISTMAS INTERLUDE: GOD'S FEAR NOTS OF CHRISTMAS

Part IV: God's "Fear Not" For Unjust Group Rejection

(Luke 2:8-20)

Introduction: (To show the need . . .)

This Christmas, we Christians along with many other people face unjust group rejection:

(1) We face it for holding to the traditional definition of marriage: David Harsanyi's piece, "First Amendment hinges on SCOTUS Case" (Republican-American, December 12, 2022, p. 8A) wrote of the Supreme Court's hearing of "the case of Lorie Smith . . . who refused to create websites with messages that conflict with her faith – among them gay wedding announcements and celebrations." Mr. Harsanyi then concluded, "Progressives like to act like . . . opposition to same-sex marriage is some newfangled ruse cooked up by activists . . . I assure you that the notion that true marriage is exclusively between one genetic man and one genetic woman is a generational notion."

(2) We face it simply for not being progressive in ideology: Rich Lowry's piece, "Elon Musk fights the culture war" (Ibid., December 14, 2022, p. 6A) noted, "Elon Musk, who has never called himself a conservative, is now the nation's foremost culture warrior. That he's achieved this status without espousing anything remotely like social conservatism" shows "how important a set of hothouse progressive pieties have become to the . . . political debate."

(3) Group rejection has led to the peril of deserting truth: David Harsanyi ("Why the redefinition of 'woman' matters," Ibid., December 19, 2022, p. 8A) wrote that "the Cambridge Dictionary . . . now says the definition of a woman is 'an adult who lives and identifies as female though they may have been said to have a different sex at birth.'" He summed, ". . . Americans . . . in their well-intentioned effort to embrace inclusivity – and avoid being called bigots" have "allowed extremists to . . . circumvent debate by corroding fundamental truths about the world."

(4) We face such group rejection that corrodes fundamental truths in religious realms: Recently, a public school teacher in Connecticut reported how a child in school told some classmates that his family had switched from Christianity to Islam out of fear that not doing so would send them to hell! The classmates were alarmed at his words, so they went home and told their parents, with one asking his parents if they should switch to Islam to stay out of hell!

Need: So, we ask, "How does God direct us to handle unjust group rejection?!"

- I. When God's angel came to Bethlehem's shepherds, they had been unjustly excommunicated, Luke 2:9a:**
 - A. The flocks that were pastured in the winter near Bethlehem during Christ's era were destined to be used in the Jerusalem temple sacrifices (Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 1972, vol. i, p. 186).
 - B. Thus, "the shepherds, who watched over them . . . were under the ban of Rabbinism" by their "necessary isolation from religious ordinances, and their manner of life, which rendered strict legal observance unlikely," Ibid., p. 186-187. These shepherds were thus unfairly anathematized that others might worship in the temple!
- II. As a result, the angel's arrival with the surrounding display of God's glory left the shepherds thinking that God was about to punish them due to their excommunication, so they were terrified, Luke 2:9a:**
 - A. In the quiet wintry night, the angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to these shepherds and the glory of the Lord "shone around them" (*perilampo*, Abbott-Smith, A Man. Grk. Lex. of the N. T., 1968, p. 356).
 - B. They thus "feared a great fear" (*ephobethesan phobon megan*, U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 207), meaning they were terrified! The sudden appearance of the angel with God's glory encircling them in the night as excommunicated men because of their employment left them presuming that God was about to destroy them!
- III. The angel told the shepherds to "Fear not," and the setting and his message in view of Rabbinic tradition on how Messiah's birth would be announced greatly cheered these men about God's grace toward them:**
 - A. Rabbinic tradition taught that Messiah's birth would be announced from "Migdal Eder," the "tower of the flock" that lay close to the road just north of Bethlehem on the way to Jerusalem. (Ibid., Edersheim, p. 186) This was the very area where the Bethlehem shepherds were keeping their sheep for temple sacrifices!
 - B. Yet, the setting and message of God's angel greatly cheered these men regarding God's grace toward them:
 1. Instead of a man heralding from the top of the "tower of the flock" as in Rabbinic tradition, God's angel graciously came down to where the excommunicated shepherds were working and the glory of the Lord shone all around them, enclosing them in a clear signal of God's gracious attitude toward them, Lk. 2:8-9a.
 2. Instead of punishing these unfairly excommunicated shepherds, the angel of the Lord told them to "Fear not," that he brought them good tidings of great joy, not of divine punishment, Luke 2:9b-10a.
 3. Instead of heeding rabbinic excommunication that had banned these shepherds from religious meetings, the angels gave the shepherds tidings of Messiah's birth to share with all of Israel's people, Luke 2:10b.

4. Instead of announcing only Messiah's birth, these shepherds would be announcing that the Messiah who had been born in Bethlehem was also "the Lord," that He was God Incarnate, Luke 2:11; Isaiah 9:6.
5. Instead of merely announcing Messiah's birth, the angel directed these excommunicated shepherds to find the Infant Messiah wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger in Bethlehem, what would be a sign that was of specific importance to these shepherds as they were associated with mangers, Luke 2:12.
6. Instead of just a one angel giving the announcement, that angel was joined by a multitude of heavenly angels who praised God in accord with the proclamation of the Infant Messiah's birth, Luke 2:13.
7. Instead of merely announcing Messiah's birth, the angels spoke of God's "peace" as "not given universally to men who possess good will toward God but individually to men who are the recipients of His favor and grace," Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, fn. to Luke 2:14. We explain this from the Greek text (as follows):
 - a. The manuscript reading of *en anthropois eudokia*, "good will toward men" (KJV), has "good will, pleasure" (*eudokia*) in the **nominative** case, but the oldest Alexandrian and Western text type manuscripts read *en anthropois eudokias* "among men with whom [he] is pleased" (NIV) where "good will, pleasure" (*eudokias*) is in the **genitive** case (Bruce M. Metzger, A Text. Com. on the Grk. N. T., 1971, p. 133).
 - b. The error likely rose when the final sigma ("s") that was eventually written stylistically as a "luna sigma" ("little more than a point") was omitted by accident by a copyist, so the genitive *eudokias* is the **initial** reading, teaching that God's peace rests on those who are the objects of his good pleasure. (Ibid.)
 - c. The objects of God's good pleasure are those who believe in Christ for salvation from sin, John 3:16.

IV. The Bethlehem shepherds thus believed and heeded the angels' words from God, visiting the newborn Incarnate God in the manger and then sharing abroad news of His birth with great joy, Luke 2:15-20.

Lesson: *Though Bethlehem's shepherds had been unjustly excommunicated due to their work to care for the sheep for the temple sacrifices, God reached out to them, having His holy angels meet them on the ground where they worked, encircling them with God's glory and announcing Messiah's birth with an emphasis on salvation by God's grace. The shepherds then believed and acted upon the angels' message from God, visiting Jesus in the Bethlehem manger and joyfully announcing His birth to all of the people in the area.*

Application: *(1) May we trust in Christ Who died as our Atoning Sacrifice for sin that we might receive God's gift of eternal life, John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. (2) May we heed God's Word to rejoice in the acceptance we have with God and godly people by grace through faith in Christ and serve the Lord like the Bethlehem shepherds.*

Conclusion: (To illustrate the message . . .)

We apply this sermon's lesson to the issues of concern mentioned in our sermon introduction (as follows):

(1) On being unjustly rejected by progressives for holding to traditional marriage, David Harsanyi (Ibid., "First Amendment hinges on SCOTUS Case") added the illuminating fact (a) that "(b)efore his 'evolution' on the question [of supporting gay marriage instead of traditional marriage], Democrat icon Barack Obama had tethered his opposition to gay marriage to theology." We shouldn't be pressured by any entity that departs from the initially long-held view that marriage is the union of one genetic man and one genetic woman, the Biblical model, Genesis 2:20-24.

(2) On being unjustly rejected for not being ideologically progressive, if Elon Musk who is not a conservative is the progressives' key foe for exposing the leftist bias of many former Twitter employees, progressives are exposing their hypocrisy! Jesus condemned hypocrites (Matthew 23:1-3), so we must not fear being rejected by them.

(3) On being vulnerable to extensive deception due to rejection by progressives for defining a woman as an adult genetic human female who was born as a genetic human female, we must recall that "many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1b) so we must "try the spirits" for discernment, 1 John 4:1.

(4) On being pressured to switch from Christianity to Islam due to group rejection by the claim that being a Christian will send one to hell, (a) Peter in Acts 4:12 and Jesus in John 14:6 claimed that salvation is only through Christ. (b) Furthermore, the Qur'an, Islam's Holy Book, claims that "Muslims are even to ask 'the People of the Book [Bible]' for enlightenment (21:7)!" (Dave Hunt, "Islam and the Gospel," The Berean Call, April, 1999, p. 2) Thus, claims in the Qur'an that Christians will go to hell are woefully inconsistent with the Qur'an's call that Muslims ask Christians for enlightenment, what would include enlightenment on believing Christ's Gospel of salvation from hell! Such inconsistency reveals a lack of God's inspiration of the Qur'an! So, if the Qur'an is not inspired of God, why switch from Christianity to Islam to avoid hell because the Qur'an at one point claims that Christians go to hell?

May we trust in Christ Who died as our Atoning Sacrifice for sin that we might receive God's gift of eternal life. May we rejoice in the acceptance we gain with God and His people through His grace in Christ.