

Heaven's Not So Far Away!

CHRISTMAS TRUTHS

Luke 2:8-15

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Bethany Church

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Grownups can act like babies, can't they? Take the 14 grownups who die each year on average when a pop machine falls on them. (Yup, you guessed it. They lose their money in the machine, get angry, bang, kick and shake it until it tips over on them.) Or consider the two drivers who sped down a Washington, D.C., freeway shouting and angrily gesturing at each other. Both failed to see the approaching turn, lost control of their cars, crashed and were killed.¹

As tragic as these incidents are, they illustrate well how grownups, just like babies and toddlers, can lose all perspective due to our emotions. I suspect that is why many of us fear emotion. We are afraid of being foolish and we're rightly afraid of the pain that follows. Despite that fear, we still can find ourselves in situations where we are vulnerable because of overwhelming emotion. I think that is why many are afraid of getting too emotional in worship. Consequently, our worship can become formal, detached, drained of emotion, purely intellectual, even boring... because of fear. We'll let loose in a ball game but not worship. Incidentally, any relationship, where no emotion

is expressed, is superficial. Try emotionless conversation when courting. Read in monotone all your words to your girlfriend? What do you think will result?

I also think fear of emotion is why so many are afraid of the supernatural. We are afraid of being caught up in emotion. We are afraid of being trapped in superstition. We are afraid of losing perspective and suffering as a result. We probably fear the reaction of others too. Do you know what? Fear is an emotion. Fear can cripple our perspective just as much as anger or any other feeling. When there is a mountain of fear present, it is tough to see beyond it. What aren't we doing because of fear? What aren't we seeing because of fear?

The night that Jesus was born in the village of Bethlehem, shepherds were nearby tending their business. They had no idea how heaven was influencing their world. About 1700 years earlier their ancestor Jacob had slept in the open fields less than 20 miles away. As he slept, he saw the gate of heaven where angels, doing their business, came and left earth. He found heaven was not so far away; and he named the place Beth-el meaning house or place of God. Now a new Beth-el, a new home of God, was less than two miles away in a stable at Bethlehem. The Lord of heaven and earth had come to live among us. Heaven was not so far away. Still they were clueless. How about you? Does heaven seem far away?

About ten years ago, I started my doctoral program in California. I chose California, not because it was warm, but because some teachers there were both observing and involved in what God was doing in his church all over the world. I was so frustrated with my leadership of the church. We were called to make disciples of all nations, yet the congregations I led struggled just to grow, much less impact their

communities. What did I need to do in order to bring an awakening to Christ in the community? What did I need to do in order to not just support a few missionaries but raise them up right here and send them throughout the world? What did I need to do to see people experience freedom from addictions, restoration of marriages, healing from mental and physical illnesses, and reconciliation with one another and God? As I met with leaders from Malaysia, Singapore, Korea, New Zealand, Australia and the United States, I learned that heaven was not so far away. The supernatural activity, which I enjoyed in the Christmas story, but regarded as superstition otherwise, that activity was happening all over the planet and bringing many to faith and freedom in Jesus. You know how we greet these stories with skepticism? I'm no different. However, when these stories keep multiplying and you see the evidence and then witness the supernatural yourself, the skepticism erodes. You soon discover yourself that heaven is not so far away.

I don't think the shepherds knew that. Their vision was filled with home, family, work and money. They certainly didn't expect anything unusual or suspect that anything was about to happen. When an angel appeared with bright light all about them, they were terrified. Fear seized them. They could not see beyond it. The first words that the angel declared were "Do not be afraid." When an angel visited John the Baptist's father Zechariah, guess what he said first? "Do not be afraid." When an angel visited Mary the mother of Jesus, he said, "Do not be afraid." It's got to be monotonous saying the same thing over and over again. The angel that visited Joseph was lucky. Joseph was sleeping. He got to visit him in a dream.

Fear may be such a common response because the supernatural is not natural. It is beyond natural. It does not naturally or usually happen. Therefore, we don't expect it or prepare for it. When I was a senior in high school attending Red Rock Camp at Lake Koronis Assembly Grounds, a large number of junior high and senior high youth registered and flooded the facilities. My dormitory was so packed I ended up sleeping on a table top out in the lobby. That week a spiritual hunger gripped the camp, and the youth initiated and organized a 24-hour prayer vigil. Every moment of the day and night 4 youth were praying. Many of the teens went and came to the vigil through my sleeping quarters. About 2 a.m. I was awakened by 4 teens, all of them crying. They had returned from the prayer vigil. I watched the adult counselors talk with them. Their voices still shaking, they told them they had been praying in the chapel. During their time one looked up and saw a man in a brilliant white robe. Suddenly, the other three looked up and saw him too. They believed they had seen an angel, and they were overwhelmed. I don't know if they were scared, stunned or what was fueling the tears, but there was a lot of emotion. The counselors took them aside, and so I heard no more. One counselor reminded us teens that God values each of us, that he loves each of us and works differently with each of us. Later I overheard some pastors and leaders discounting the experience as if it all was the product of overtired kids being emotional. However, whatever happened in that chapel, those four teenagers learned that heaven's not so far away; and those of us, who saw their genuineness, heard their words and believed, gained that same perspective.

Why did just those four teens see the angel and not the rest of the youth who prayed at different times? Why didn't the angel visit the skeptical camp leaders? I don't

know. Why on Christmas were the shepherds visited by angels and not the many rabbis, priests and scholars? The Bible doesn't say. However, there are clues. When Jesus sent out 72 followers of his to heal and proclaim the gospel, they returned with reports of many miracles. In the 21st verse of chapter 10 in Luke, Jesus reacts.

Then Jesus was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit and said, "O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for hiding the truth from those who think themselves so wise and clever, and for revealing it to the childlike. Yes, Father, it pleased you to do it this way." (Luke 10:21, NLT)

God's love is for all the people. God's power is for all the people. It's for young children and teens who kneel before the Lord. It's for a peasant woman betrothed to a carpenter. It's for fishermen and tax collectors hungry for God. It's for shepherds tending their flock on a hillside near Bethlehem. For ordinary people, people who often feel less than wise, less than knowledgeable, less than gifted, less than valuable, less than important, heaven's not so far away. Ordinary people are the focus of God's love, compassion and plans. You are the focus of God's love, compassion and plans. Heaven's not so far away from you.

The Apostle Paul wrote:

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important, so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God. God alone made it possible for you to be in Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made Christ to be wisdom itself. He is the one who made us acceptable to God. He made us pure and holy, and he gave himself to purchase our freedom. As the Scriptures say, "The person who wishes to boast should boast only of what the Lord has done." (1 Corinthians 1:26-31, NLT)

Christmas reveals that God has spread out a banquet for all people. We can eat it, or we can turn away. We may think that knowledge is power, but the Christmas story reminds us that knowledge belongs to God, power belongs to God, wisdom belongs to God and salvation comes from God. No matter how much we strive for all of that, it – knowledge, power, wisdom and salvation – is gift, not achievement. We have libraries of self-help books on every imaginable topic, yet pain and addiction continue to hold humanity in bondage. We've never been more educated, yet disease still dogs us, peace still eludes us and despair knocks at our doors. However, we have terrific news. Whether you herd sheep, carve wood, raise children or sit in school, there's a Father in heaven working on your behalf, doing things right on this earth. You won't miss it if you believe. Do you see this truth of Christmas? Heaven's not so far away. Believe it.

21] John Trent, *The Making of a Godly Man Workbook* (Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family Pub., 1997), 1
