

THE GLORY OF THE LORD IN EPHRATAH'S FIELDS

*“ . . .and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were filled with fear.”*

(Luke 2: 9B)

On Christmas Day, as our text says, “the glory of the Lord” shone round about the shepherds in the field of Ephratah. I cannot see this “glory” as being anything else than a brilliant light. God is light, says the Bible. He dwells in an impregnable light, and therefore His “glory” is also manifested in terms of “light,” an incomparable, majestic brilliance that makes everything in it glow and shine.

The darkness of the night was suddenly removed by the brightness of the glory of God. There was no gradual transition from dark to light, as in the early morning or evening, no dawn or dusk, but it was as if someone had suddenly switched on mighty floodlights. Dark one moment, light the next!

I suggest that the appearing of this light was an altogether unique and special event. It never happened in this way before Christmas, and it never happened in this way afterward.

THE BURNING BUSH AND OTHER MANIFESTATIONS

Certainly, the glory of the LORD was seen before on this earth. We can think, for example, of the time when the Angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3: 2). That was also a manifestation of light, a fire burning by itself, without consuming any fuel. Fire too is light.

Think of other appearances of God, for example the one at Mount Sinai, when Israel had been led out of the house of bondage. In Exodus 19: 18 you can read how the LORD descended on Mount Sinai “in fire.” That fire was wrapped in smoke, contained as it were “in a kiln,” an oven. The glory of the LORD in the bush and on the mountain was limited and obscured, because people could not bear to see the full light of God.

At that time, after Moses had ascended the mountain to receive the Law, he came down and “the skin of his face shone,” because he had been so close to God, and the people were afraid to come near him (Exodus 34). The light was so bright that Moses required a veil over his face whenever he spoke with the people!

And when God’s glory descended into the tabernacle, upon the ark, we read in Exodus 40: 35 that even Moses was not able to enter, because “the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.” Even Moses could not stand *in* the light of this glory!

Are you beginning to get the picture? Never before have any persons, not even Moses, been so taken up in the glory of God as these shepherds were! It says in our text: the glory of the Lord shone *around* them, and that means: God’s glory, God’s brilliant light completely enveloped and surrounded them. All around them was this light, like a wall of fire, and they were standing right in the middle of it.

Compare again the situation of these shepherds with that of Moses at the burning bush. Here is Moses, and there is the bush. Here is Moses, and a little farther off is the light. Moses is not standing in the light at all, but outside it. Indeed, the Lord even warns Moses not to come closer. Moses may not come near the fire, let alone be taken up in it. And he is reminded that he is a sinful man who cannot stand in the presence of a holy God: “Take off your shoes from your feet.”

We see in Exodus 3 a remarkable distance between Moses and the light of God's presence. God is still far, even though He is close.

But in the fields of Ephratah it is different. Here are the shepherds, and here is also the light! There is no longer any distance between the presence of men and the manifestation of God's glory. God's glory illuminates the shepherds. God has come so close that *men* are for the first time fully taken up in His glory. They are not even told to take off their shoes or sandals. They are taken up in the glory of God just as they are, where they stand.

As you see, the history of redemption never repeats itself. There is always progression in the work of God. The LORD God has made another mighty leap in the history of salvation. God has come closer to His people; He is closer than was ever seen before.

And let us not say now: but God Himself was not present there in the fields of Ephratah as He was in the burning bush; it was only an angel, not God Himself. For this is not true. The expression, "the glory of the Lord" denotes the majesty with which God Himself appears on this earth. God is indeed seated on the throne of heaven, but He is also present in the fields of Ephratah with His glory, majesty, grace, and power! Where the glory of God appears, there God Himself is manifest.

MEGAPHOBIA

The shepherds are taken up, suddenly, in nothing less than the glory of God. In one instant they stand in the presence of almighty God and share in the heavenly glory that normally is seen only by angels. There is no cloud of smoke to obscure the brilliance of that glory, there is no veil given to block out its penetrating power; they see it as it is, and it surrounds them. Can you understand that it is said of these men, "They were filled with fear"? Literally it says: they feared with a great fear! Two Greek words are used which we also know in English: *mega-phobia!*

All the young people know the word "mega." There's even a rock group called "Megadeath." When someone makes a lot of money, we say that he makes megabucks. Megaphobia: a fear that is so great that it grips you to the core of your existence, so that you cannot so much as move. Phobia, also in our language, is a fear that controls you, so that you are virtually paralysed and cannot function as you should.

We sing "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright." It's bright all right, but not very calm. Who can be calm when he suffers from megaphobia? Christmas is not some kind of peaceful "interlude" when even perpetually warring factions have a brief ceasefire. The first Noel led to great fear, to hearts that pounded with an all-pervading sense of dread.

Why this megaphobia? How would *you* have felt if you had stood in the shoes or sandals of these shepherds? If you experienced the sudden switch from pitch dark to brilliant light? If you saw the luminous figure of an angel suddenly before you, and the whole area lit up, with everything around you appearing like a surreal

landscape? And it happened without any warning. It was not as if a far-away light had caught the shepherds' attention and they watched it come closer. The angel, it says, appeared, that is, he materialized out of nowhere. Suddenly he stands before you, and with him comes the splendour of heavenly light never seen before. How would you react?

Why such megaphobia? There is, of course, the element of surprise, the sudden happening of the unknown. But I think that we must go a step further to understand this fear. The shepherds were perhaps not gifted or learned men, but they knew all about light and dark, sunshine and moonshine. They knew when they saw something that was not "of this world." For them this brilliant light could mean only one thing: it was the manifestation of the living God. And that being so, they feared that they now stood face to face with their doom. Every Israelite knew: no one can see God and survive. Their megaphobia is a matter of knowing that they cannot live, for all flesh must wilt before the fire of God's presence. It is the fear of God that fills them with this unspeakable dread. For God is the Judge, who can sweep them into eternal darkness.

A SIGN OF CELEBRATION

They experience this light as a sign of condemnation, and therefore cannot understand that it is in fact a sign of celebration! They do not yet see that the "glory of God" which envelopes them is evidence that God has come to dwell with mankind in a way never seen before. They do not yet see that God here starts a new chapter in the relationship with His people, and that this chapter begins with the birth of Jesus Christ.

For there is only one explanation for this pouring out of the glory of God. God has come down to us, to dwell with us, rich in mercy and in love. The heavenly light does not consume the shepherds but illumines them. They are not destroyed by it; they are taken up in it. This manifestation of God's glory is a celebration of the work of salvation in the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord. When the Son of God comes into the flesh, the glory of God does not stay behind, but spills out of the heavens over the fields of Ephratah, and in its rising tide takes up the shepherds. One angel appears, but soon more follow: suddenly (verse 13) there is with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God! It's almost as if the distance between heaven and earth, between God and creature, between men and angels is wiped out altogether. The earth may share in the glory of heaven, and men may hear the song of angels.

MEGA-JOY

For God has come down to deliver His people through Him Who is greater than Moses, from an enemy mightier than Pharaoh, and now the light of heaven will decisively break through the darkness of this earth. For unto us a Son is born, unto us a child is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulders! God has come

down to man, in the flesh; and the glory of God shines around simple men. This has never happened before. God has decisively broken through the darkness with the light of heaven.

Therefore the angel can also say: fear not! Do not let this heavenly light fill you with dread! For I bring you good news of a great joy! Instead of megaphobia, let there be mega-joy! Instead of mega-death, let there be mega-life! This glory, this light, is not the ominous sign of eternal condemnation, but the glorious dawn of the era of salvation. To you is born this day in the city of David, a *Saviour*, Who is Christ, the Lord. Now is the time, not to flee from the light, but to stand in the Light. Savour the moment, bask in the warmth, draw near to the burning bush, for the day of salvation has come. The people who in darkness walked, have seen a glorious Light!

THERE IS DARKNESS. . . .

Yes, but what about sin and death? How can sinful men stand in this light and live? Notice that there *is* darkness on Christmas Day. There's no light at the manger. The Son of God has cast off His glory, which he had when He was at the bosom of the Father, and has entered into our darkness. The weight of our sins is already pressing upon Him, and the curse of God is taking its effect on Him.

The light and glory are not where they should have been, there where the Son of God is. For the Son has become a servant, and has emptied Himself, and will be obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Darkness will cover Him all His days, and ultimately, on the cross of Golgotha, the darkness will enshroud Him and swallow Him up. He will face mega-fear and mega-death so that we may experience mega-joy!

The glory of God which shone around the shepherds is something that we have not seen. It is only described to us. It did not last, either. When the angel choirs withdraw and retreat to heaven, the fields of Ephratah are dark again. Once more the glory of God is shrouded behind the clouds, contained as in a kiln in the confines of heaven.

GLIMPSES OF GLORY

The glory of God that appeared on Christmas Day was never again seen in the same manner. When the people saw Jesus walking, they saw no glory. I know, on the mount of transfiguration a few disciples, Peter, James, and John, saw a remarkable change in Jesus' outward appearance. It says in Matthew 17: 2, "And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became white as light." It was again a brief glimpse of things to come. And when Stephen later stood before the Jewish council, we read (Acts 6: 15) that "all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel." Another brief glimpse of things to come. And when Stephen had finished speaking, we read that, "gazing into heaven. . . he saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). Here we have a glimpse of a tremendous reality: Jesus appears in glory!

These glimpses are reminders to us that the glory is still there. But never did it shine so brightly on earth as in that night, when Christ was born.

God does not tell us of this light so that we may concentrate on what once was, but to encourage us to look forward. The glory of the Lord shone around them. Yes, it did. But something greater is about to happen. The glory of the Lord will shine around you. One day you will see this light. One day you will hear these angels. For we are children of light. We have been called out of the darkness, writes Peter, into His marvellous light. This light is our destination! And its powerful effect must now already be seen in our lives. The light that is from heaven must now be reflected in our hearts, in our deeds.

It is not without significance that the glory of God was again withdrawn. Even after Christ's resurrection, God's glory was not seen by men. The glory is still contained within the kiln of heaven. There is much darkness here below.

On Christmas Day we often are struck more by the existing darkness than by the light that once shone. There is the darkness of war, sickness, loneliness, sorrow, and death. For some, maybe even some of us, Christmas time is filled with unspeakable sadness because of the brokenness of life. During these times, more than at other times perhaps, we miss those taken from us. Where is the light and the glory that once illuminated the shepherds?

I'LL BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

But we must understand that this text is not nostalgic, but prophetic. People wax nostalgic, "I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams." But God's Word is prophetic! You *will* be home for Christmas, and it won't be in your dreams!

Where is home? There is a city, a paradise, of which it is written, "and night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their Light, and they shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 22: 5).

The glory of the Lord will shine around you, and you will be filled with mega-joy! *Mega*, a nice word for Christians! As long as you connect it properly. As I mentioned, *Megadeath* is the name of a worldly rock-group. It is a well-chosen name, really. They may not know it, but that's precisely where they are headed, unless they repent. Without Christ, it's mega-death. Eternal death. Mega-phobia. Eternal despair. Praise God that you are not a member of that cult of doom.

For we celebrate mega-joy! That's what makes Christmas so wonderful, every year again. That is why we can hang in, even in dark days, for the Light just won't disappear. It's there, and one day the glory of the Lord will shine around us, we'll be taken up in it, fully, eternally, because Jesus Christ lived and died here for our sake. And the shepherds will tell you: this is even better than Ephratah!

Ephratah, they will say, you should have seen that light, man, we were so scared! It came so unexpectedly. Jesus was then still in a manger. What did we know? Man, we had megaphobia! But this is greater, for Jesus is now on the throne in glory, for ever. This is better than Ephratah. We expect the light of Him Who sits

on the throne. We'll be so close to the Lord we can actually see Him, touch Him, walk with Him. In the brilliant light of the new earth.

That is our real joy on Christmas Day.

He sent His Son with power to save.
From guilt, and *darkness* – see that word? – and the grave.
He through this world will guide His own,
And lead us to His holy throne!
His mercies ever shall endure
When this dark world shall be no more!” (Hymn 61, *Book of Praise*).