

THE ANGEL OF THE LORD AND THE SHEPHERDS

Luke 2:8-20

Intro: Of all of the passages of Scripture that have to do with the birth of our Lord, this is probably the best known. This is a passage which children have memorized, probably since it was first written, especially down through verse 14, and parents and teachers in teaching it to children, have learned it for themselves. The incident which took place on that night stirs our imaginations as we try to visualize the scene—shepherds taking care of their flock when all of a sudden “the angel of the Lord” appears to them with a message from God. And you can see that the shepherds took it as a message from God because of what they said according to verse 15, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this things which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.” And verse 20 gives us further evidence that the shepherds believed that the message had come from God:

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them (Luke 2:20).

In our text for today we have two divisions to these thirteen verses:

- 1) The appearance of the angels to the shepherds (vv.8-14).
- 2) The response of the shepherds to what the angels told them (vv. 15-20).

I. THE APPEARANCE OF THE ANGELS TO THE SHEPHERDS (Luke 2:8-14).

One truth that all of us need to learn in our lives as Christians, was stated by the prophet Isaiah many years before Christ was born. Most of you have heard these verses many times, and you will hear them many times in the future if our Lord tarries. I am thinking of Isa. 55:8-9:

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The fact that God’s ways and our ways, or man’s ways, are not the same, is very apparent from the passages we have considered last Sunday, and then this passage which we are considering today. God just does things in a manner that is totally different from the way we would do them, and, at the same time, we have to say that His ways are higher and better, infinitely so, than our ways. But, you might ask, “*What is it that you have in mind?*” Let me explain myself.

I can imagine what some modern day publicity agents would do concerning the birth of Christ if they were given the task of making the birth of Jesus Christ known. They probably would have taken the largest feast day of the year, when Jews would have been present from all over the Roman Empire, and would have had the angel of the Lord appear to thousands of people at one time. They would have wanted to make it as spectacular as possible.

Or they might have wanted the angel of the Lord to appear at a meeting of the Sanhedrin when that group of men would have been together and could have seen and heard the angel of the Lord for themselves.

Or think how someone might have suggested that the angel of the Lord would come to Herod, or Pilate, in some of their great courts. Any of these choices would have been very impressive, and the news would certainly have been out!

But God didn't do that! Instead, He sent His angel to an insignificant and unknown group of shepherds. We don't know their names. We don't know how many of them there were. There are a lot of things that we don't know about what happened. The Scriptures tell us that "the angel of the Lord came upon them" (v. 9), and so it may be that first the angel of the Lord appeared in the sky, to be followed later by "a multitude of the heavenly host, but we can't say for sure. *But can you imagine such a great event, the most important birth in all of human history, and the announcement was made to some lowly shepherds about whom we hear nothing more than what is right here in these verses?*

Even think about Joseph and Mary. We know that they had royal blood running in their veins, but that was not important in Israel, nor in the Roman Empire of that day. Joseph and Mary were very common people from man's perspective. The Lord was not born in the best inn that there was in Jerusalem. The inns were full. Jesus Christ, the Son of God Who became a Man, was born in place where animals were kept. (Read verses 6 and 7.) What is a manger? It is a crib out of which cattle and horses and pigs ate their food. I am sure that everyone here today had a much better birthplace than that, a place that was warm and clean and comfortable!

Now we know that God is a sovereign God. It was not at accident that Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem at the time Jesus was born. That in itself was a fulfillment of an OT prophecy which you will find in Micah 5:2, which says:

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

Likewise we know that what the Holy Spirit led Solomon to write in Prov. 21:1 is also true. Listen to what Solomon wrote:

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.

So, when we read in verses 1 and 3 of our chapter that “there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed,” and that “all went to be taxed, every one to his own city,” you and I must believe that it was God Who moved upon the heart of Caesar to issue that decree at that particular time. That mighty Emperor was nothing more than a tool in the hand of God to do the will of God.

So the fact that Joseph and Mary were not at home when our Lord was born, and that they were in Bethlehem at a time when the inn was full, was not a mistake. It was all according to the will of God! This was the divine plan. Was God just trying to make it as miserable for Joseph and Mary as He could? Certainly not! And, by the way, if you read your Bible carefully, you will not find a single word of complaint coming from either Joseph or Mary! They were godly people who were acquainted with the ways of the Lord.

No, a passage of Scripture which helps us answer our questions about the strange ways of God, is found in the last few verses of 1 Corinthians, chapter 1. Let me read them to you:

26 For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:

27 But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

28 And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:

29 That no flesh should glory in his presence.

30 But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

31 That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

God has, for the most part, chosen people who are nothing in themselves so that when people would glory in what was done, they would glory in

the Lord, not in themselves, nor in anyone else—just in the Lord! That’s how I got in.

So that which happened in Bethlehem on that night, although it was totally unnoticed by the world, was the most important, most influential birth ever to take place in the history of the world. And we gather today to glorify God that He sent His Son to save us from our sins.

Hasn’t God always worked this way? Think of Abraham, or Moses, of David, of Amos, of our Lord’s disciples, and even of the Apostle Paul, who could have become very famous as a Jewish rabbi, but what did he call himself? *The chief of sinners.*

So this was all according to the way God works.

But let us get to our text.

Verse 8 tells us that it was night when the angel of the Lord came to the shepherds. They were standing guard over their sheep, to keep them from being stolen or killed by some animal. They would sleep in shifts to make it through the night. Suddenly the angel of the Lord “came upon them.” And there was a bright light like the light which guided the children of Israel from Egypt to the promised land. It was a manifestation of the very presence of the Lord, brighter than a thousand halogen lights. And it all terrified them. There they were in the darkness of the night, suddenly it was brighter than daylight all around them. And they were terrified!

And then the angel spoke, and his first words were, “Fear not.” How becoming this was to herald the coming of the Savior through Whom it was going to be possible for sinful men to enjoy peace with God, as well as the peace of God in their hearts.

What the angel was doing was declaring the Gospel to these shepherds. This is the meaning of the words, “I bring you good tidings of great joy.” But the message was not just for them, but for all, lit., the people.

We have here a statement of the great doctrine of election. These were *lowly* shepherds, but they were chosen of God, and the Son of God was born in a special way for them, for their salvation. And *the people* were those given to the Lord by the Father, and for whom in particular the Lord had come to suffer and to die.

Verse 11 gives us both the humanity and the Deity of the Lord. His

becoming a Man in no way lessened His Deity. He is the Savior, and the only Savior. He is Christ, the Messiah, Who is the Lord. And “the Lord” is very likely meant to be the equivalent of Jehovah in the OT.

The contrast between verse 11 and verse 12 should constantly amaze us. This glorious Savior, who is Christ the Lord, is the babe (the Greek is better translated, *a babe*), not lying in a crib of immense value, but a manger, where animals usually feed. Whenever you see cattle feeding in a barn, with all of the offensive odor that goes with it, remember that that is the kind of a place where our Lord has His crib.

So in verse 11 we have the glory of our Lord; in verse 12, His humiliation. And His lowly place was the “sign.”

That was the end of the message given from God by the angel of the Lord. But what more needed to be said about the Person of our Lord and the Mission upon which our Lord had entered by His birth. And that which started in a stable never did rise much above that throughout His life, and certainly dipped even lower in His death.

But after the angel of the Lord had finished his message then just as suddenly as the light had shown at first, “a multitude of the heavenly host” appeared. And they did not sing in the city square of Bethlehem, nor to thousands packed into a great stadium somewhere, but to a few shepherds with their sheep out in the country. How unusual are the ways of the Lord, and how different from our ways.

The gist of their song was this:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men (Luke 2:14).

Please notice that the glory of God comes first, and then peace on earth. As long as we are mainly concerned about peace, but leave God out of our lives, we will be talking peace, but never experiencing it. And let it be said that our Lord’s primary purpose in coming to the earth in such humiliation, was not for the salvation of sinners, but for the glory of God. And, oh, how God was glorified in the life of His Son, and in His death.

The old ASV of which the NASB is a revision, renders this verse

Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men in whom he is well pleased (Luke 2:14).

Peace is a personal matter, not national. If men do not experience peace in their hearts, there cannot be national peace. There is no true peace where God is not pleased. That is why we as a nation are in such a hopeless

situation. We are not concerned about being pleasing to God, and we can never please God except through the transformation of our lives by the Gospel of the grace of God.

“Glory to God in the highest” means in the highest heavens, glory from the angels, and glory from the redeemed people of God who are already there. On earth there needs to be “peace,” not peace by man’s definition, but *peace with God*. That is what Paul was talking about when he wrote Rom. 5:1,

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

What an experience those shepherds had! “Unto you” the angel of the Lord had said, not “unto us,” for there is no salvation for angels who sin. Nor did they say, “all people without exception,” but “unto the people, those chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world. If you want to know that you are elect, come to Christ today, seeking His mercy in salvation. He promised that “all that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37).

But now let us look at the last part of our text, verses 15-20.

II. THE RESPONSE OF THE SHEPHERDS TO WHAT THE ANGELS TOLD THEM (Luke 2:15-20).

To those lowly shepherds were given three great honors:

- 1) The first to see the Lord in human flesh.
- 2) The first to spread that message that the Christ had come.
- 3) The first among men to praise God for the coming of His Son.

Verses 15 and 16 tell us about the first; verses 17 through 19 tells us about the second, and verse 20 tells us about the third.

A. The first to see the Lord in His flesh (vv. 15-16).

We can be sure that they made some provision for their sheep. It is useless for us to speculate on what they did. But they lost no time in going to Bethlehem. How far it was, or how long it took, we don’t know. But they found Mary, and Joseph, and the baby Jesus in the manger.

I would remind you of another verse in the Gospel of John which teaches us, in the words of the Lord Jesus Himself that

No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:44).

So for the shepherds to go seeking the Lord even when He was a baby, means that the Father was drawing them. And when people are drawn by God, they come to Christ. God is sovereign not only over kings, but over all of us. We would never have come to Christ on our own, but we came and found Him because He found us first and drew us to His Son.

But let me say a word about the shepherds second response.

B. The first to spread the message that Christ had come (vv. 17-19).

One evidence that a person, or persons, have been saved, is that they want to tell others about the Lord. And just as the shepherds wasted no time in coming to see the Lord, neither did they waste any time in telling others about the Lord. Notice in particular the words, “the saying which was told them concerning this child.” Now “the saying” had come to them through the angel of the Lord and the heavenly host of angels, but remember that it was *the word of the Lord* that had come to them. And that is what we need to spread, the actual words of God which we have in the Bible. It is the Word which is living and powerful... It is the Word which brings people to Christ.

But notice another very precious result. *The shepherds ministered to the mother of our Lord.* Luke said in verse 19 that “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” She was learning, too. And the shepherds had a part in what God was doing even in Mary’s heart. The people to whom the shepherds spoke “wondered,” *i.e., marveled.* Mary “pondered.” This means that things were *coming together* in her mind and in her heart.

And now for the last verse. As far as the Scriptures were concerned, the shepherds were

C. The first among men to praise God for the coming of His Son (v. 20).

The shepherds went back to their sheep praise God for the message of God which had been given to them by the angels. “To God be the glory; great things He hath done.” And all of the glory for salvation belongs to God. The shepherds did not deserve to hear. It was the grace of God that they did, and they knew it. And so they gave their praise to Him.

Concl: I don’t know if this was the time when these shepherds were

saved, but I am inclined to think that it was. We have in all of this a perfect picture of the way people are brought to Christ. They Word is given to them. The Father draws them, and gives them the faith to believe. They come to the Lord and by faith see Him as the Savior Who is Christ the Lord. They believe, and then go to tell others. And then they spend the rest of their lives praising God for His Word which was used to bring them to Christ.

People do not always respond as the shepherds did. Some marvel at the message, but never come. Others marvel, and come right away. Others marvel, and come later. But the important thing for us is to get the message to them. God is the One Who determines how the message will be used. So let us at this Christmas time and throughout the rest of our lives be telling people about our Savior, trusting the Lord to use His Word according to His will. Let me close with two other verses from Isaiah in support of what I have just said:

10 For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:

11 So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it (Isa. 55:10-11).