



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for December 21, 2008
Released on Wednesday, December 17, 2008**

"The Shepherds' Commitment" (Christmas)

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 107:1-15

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:1-20

SCRIPTURE LESSON: Luke 2:8-20

Luke 2:8-20

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

16 And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

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

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to examine the interchange between the humble shepherds of Bethlehem and the heavenly angels who appeared and the action this caused the shepherds to take.

Principle: to be aware that God used ordinary people to receive His announcements and act on them.

Application: to encourage common people to hear divine news and respond positively to it.

INTRODUCTION:

A new baby is born! How do you let people know of this joyous event? There are many different ways, both old and new. Years ago, it was traditional for men to hand out cigars to

let their friends know there was a new child in the household. (For non-smokers this might be a bubble gum or candy cigar, in either blue or pink.) Within a few days, the record of the birth would be published in the town newspaper, efficiently informing those who kept track of such things.

When mother and baby were home from the hospital, she might hand-address birth announcements and mail them to all the appropriate friends and relatives. It was not uncommon for a business owner to post a message on the reader board, letting all those who drove past know "It's a girl!" or "It's a boy!" Informally, the community grapevine could quickly convey the news: "Did you hear that Linda and Ryan just had another boy?" A tradition in many churches was to have a rose in a vase on the pulpit, accompanied by an announcement from the preacher and a note in the bulletin.

Times have changed, but the desire to let people know about a birth has not. Now the news of a birth may be instantly communicated to grandparents via cell phone cameras. Digital pictures of the newborn may be e-mailed on the day of the birth. Details may be posted on a family web site within hours. Birth announcements may be done through some type of e-card system that is paperless, cheap, and quick.

None of that existed in the first century AD. But we may safely assume that all of the normal channels of communication of the ancient world were working to announce the birth of Mary's son. Grandparents in Nazareth would have learned, although it would have taken several days for the news to travel there.

In addition, God chose two extraordinary methods to announce the birth of Jesus. First, He revealed a new star, which was noticed by ancient stargazers. This figures into the story of the wise men and is told in the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Second, God sent angels to give the news to some local shepherds that very night. This is the story that is told in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, and that is the focus of today's lesson.

LESSON BACKGROUND:

Understanding today's lesson hinges on appreciating the role of shepherds in the ancient world. In this period, flocks of sheep or goats were common sights throughout Palestine. Much of the land was unsuitable for cultivation because of rocky conditions or the steepness of the slopes. As a result, many families, even those who lived in the cities and villages, owned flocks. The animals were both a source of income and a tangible asset of wealth.

The flocks were tended by shepherds, who came to the task from several different sources. Some shepherds of the time were simply the children of the owner, doing menial work for the greater benefit of the family. Others could be relatives in need of employment. In these cases, there was a strong family motivation to guard and care for the flock.

Shepherd duty was generally unpleasant. Hours were long. There was little protection from the rain, sun, and cold. The meals were sparse. Daily routine could include leading the flock for several miles to be watered and to find adequate forage. The opportunity for social niceties such as meeting with friends was rare. Small flocks were tended by a single shepherd, who may have had only a dog for companionship.

If appropriate family resources were inadequate for shepherd duty, the owner could be forced to hire men for the task. This was considered to be one of the lowest levels of employment possible. The men who took such jobs were seen as untrustworthy (see John 10:12, 13). We do not know if the shepherds of today's lesson were from the category of young family members or from the loathed journeyman shepherd class.

Bethlehem had a reputation for shepherds and flocks that extended back to the time of David (1 Samuel 16:11). During the time of Jesus, the flocks of Bethlehem were a main source for lambs that were sold to Passover pilgrims in nearby Jerusalem. A Jewish historian of this period by the name of Josephus estimated that 100,000 lambs were sacrificed in Jerusalem on Passover (compare 1 Kings 8:63; 2 Chronicles 35:7). This made sheep a big business! Therefore, we may assume that such large flocks were tended by a mix of family children and hirelings.

A most unexpected thing happened to the shepherds of today's story: they were visited by an angel! While we sometimes think that the Bible is full of angels, such visitations are relatively rare. Luke has a special interest in this area. He records three angelic appearances during the events leading up to the birth of Jesus (to Zechariah, to Mary, and to the shepherds). An angel ministered to Jesus in the garden (Luke 22:43). Angels witnessed to the women at the empty tomb (Luke 24:23). Likewise, in Acts (Luke's second book) angels were encountered as a means of direction and protection for the people of the first-century church (examples: Acts 5:19; 8:26).

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT (Luke 2:8-14)

1. How did people in that day generally feel about shepherds, and why might this group have been watching sheep near Bethlehem (Luke 2:8)?

It was not easy being a shepherd. We know David was the son of a shepherd and was called in from being with the sheep when Samuel was looking for God's choice of a king. He was part of a family business. By New Testament days, the occupation of shepherd was not so well accepted. Shepherds were often viewed as dirty and smelly thieves and were not welcomed as respected members of society. The group of shepherds here was probably no more highly thought of than any other group.

Bethlehem was just a few miles from Jerusalem, where Jewish men were required to assemble three times a year for sacrifices. The Mosaic Law allowed those who lived great distances away to purchase their sacrifices in Jerusalem rather than bring them from home. This flock of sheep being watched near Bethlehem might have been raised for such purchases.

2. What happened to change the darkness and quiet of the night for the shepherds (v. 9)?

We can imagine the peace and quiet on the country hillsides surrounding Bethlehem. Common night sounds frequently interrupted the quiet, but that was expected and normal. At least some of the shepherds would have been awake to make sure the sheep slept peacefully and were safe from predators.

Others probably dozed lightly, always on the verge of waking up if needed. Luke 2:8 is a beautiful portrait of tranquility, but that gives way in verse 9 to a portrait of sudden, unexpected activity that caused great fear.

The sudden appearance of an angel standing near them shattered the peace and quiet of the night and understandably caused the great fear that overcame them. While we usually assume that the angel simply "appears out of nothing," the language *came upon them* implies that the angel walks up to the shepherds. At the proper instant, though, the angel is revealed to them with supernatural glory. This includes bright light, for Luke says *the glory of the Lord* shines.

Both the quiet and the dark were instantly gone. The shepherds are described as terribly afraid. These men who braved wild animals in order to protect the flocks found themselves terrified.

3. What did the angel say first, and what message followed (v. 10)?

The angel first told the shepherds not to be afraid – "Fear not." This echoed Gabriel's words to both Zacharias and Mary when he suddenly appeared to them (1:13, 30). Was this angel also Gabriel? We are not told, but whether it was or not, the same message would be necessary upon his appearance because of our natural propensity to become afraid at unexpected events. The reason they did not need to be afraid was that he had come with good news for them.

What the angel says next is difficult to render into English. We should note that in the original text the phrase *bring you good tidings* is a verb and *great joy* is the object of that verb. The idea is something like this: "I have a good announcement for you: a great joy for

all the people has come." It was at this moment that the official birth announcement of the Messiah was given.

4. What is encouraging about the fact that Jesus' birth was first announced to humble shepherds?

To hear that the announcement of Jesus' birth was given first to lowly shepherds is a reassurance to us that Jesus is for everyone and not just the privileged few. Status in life, amount of money possessed, position attained, and worldwide fame have nothing to do with the reason Jesus came. He came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10), and that includes everyone, regardless of status in life. No one should ever feel too small or too insignificant to win the attention of Christ.

Fortune and fame were not what Jesus' coming was all about, nor should they be the driving goal of believers. Everything related to Jesus' coming was humble and simple, including the selection of the shepherds to receive the first announcement.

5. Why was the message of Jesus' birth one of "great joy" (v. 11)?

The angel's message was the kind of news that would bring joy to people everywhere. What is this "great joy"? It is the announcement of a birth. The angel includes four reasons why this birth is joyous.

First, it has taken place in David's *city*, Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16:4–13). The shepherds understand this as a fulfillment of the many promises to King David regarding an eternal throne (example: Psalm 89:3, 4). Thus, this is the announcement of a royal birth. Second, this baby is to be a *Saviour*, one to deliver oppressed Israel. That day a Deliverer (the meaning of "Saviour") had been born. This may lead the shepherds to think the baby will be a warrior-king, not realizing that the Savior's mission is spiritual rather than political (compare Matthew 1:21).

Third, the baby is the *Christ*, the Messiah. These two words, one Greek and one Hebrew, both mean "the anointed one." This signifies that He is chosen and sent by God with special authority and empowerment.

Finally, the baby is *the Lord*. This is surely puzzling to the shepherds, for this is a title the Jews reserve for God himself. How can a baby in Bethlehem be God? Such is the mystery of the incarnation of Christ, the foundational Christian belief that Jesus is both fully human and fully God. As an author, Luke does not lead his readers to this conclusion after many chapters, but states the divinity of Jesus with Him yet a tiny baby.

Just to be sure the shepherds could find the baby, the angel gave them a special sign they should look for (Luke 8:12).

The unusual detail for the shepherds is that a *manger*, an animal feed trough, has been appropriated for the baby to sleep in. There is no wooden cradle or even a large basket. This fact directs the shepherds to search for the new king in places where livestock feed.

Lofty things had just been said about Him, but they would find Him in extremely lowly conditions. Such would never be the case except under God's direction. It was a more-than-adequate sign.

6. What is the meaning of "heavenly host" (vs. 13)?

Just as suddenly as the one angel had appeared, now a multitude appeared. No specific number is given, but we know from other places in Scripture that the angels are innumerable. They could have filled the entire sky. It was a good thing the shepherds had already been told they did not need to fear, because this scene certainly would arouse strong emotions. Since they now knew the reason for this appearance, they were no doubt filled with joy and awe instead of fear.

This especially would have been their response when they heard the praise this multitude of angels (called a "heavenly host," or "heavenly army") proclaimed. Also, the very appearance of so many angels indicated an unprecedented event.

Rarely in the Bible do we read of the appearance of more than one angel. This particular event was so much greater than any other recorded that an entire army of angels appeared to render praise to God. The coming of Jesus to earth certainly is one of the greatest events ever recorded.

7. Describe the praise of the heavenly host (v. 14).

The first phrase uttered by the angels was "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:14). The coming of Jesus, of course, is one of the necessary events making salvation possible for us. It was God who devised the plan that allows us who are separated from Him because of sin to be reconciled with Him. There should be a constant flow of praise from our hearts to Him for what He has done to save us. Without this provision, our eternal destiny would be separation from Him.

This army of angels does not talk of war, but of peace. They refer to peace on earth and goodwill to people. This should not be viewed as an announcement of the end of war between nations (for we still see that today), nor was it a universal declaration of peace to every person. Mankind is not by nature at peace with God. We are separated from God by sin. Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The idea in the angels' praise is that peace can be a reality to those who are the objects of God's goodwill. They are the ones who receive Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour from sin. In this all glory goes to God, for this is a work solely of Him. It is an act of pure grace.

AN UNPARALLELED PRIVILEGE (Luke 2:15-20)

8. What was the shepherds' response to the angelic message (v. 15)?

"How would shepherds respond —these tough men whose theological education came from the heavens and meadows rather than the synagogue and its rabbis? No quibbling or quarreling! Rather, they made an immediate decision—to go to Bethlehem to see what God had reported to them. They wanted to be part of the work God was doing. . . . What audacity that God would use society's lowest occupations... to begin His awesome work of salvation" (Anders, ed., *Holman New Testament Commentary*, Broadman and Holman).

Just as suddenly as they had appeared, the angels were gone and the darkness and silence returned. Nothing, however, would ever be the same for this group of men. They had seen something never seen before on earth and something that would never be seen again. They were a privileged group allowed to hear the angelic announcement of the Messiah's birth. Can you imagine how they stood and gazed at each other silently before someone spoke up with a suggestion about what they should do? A revelation like this required a response.

They knew without doubt that what they had just witnessed was a message from the Lord. These were apparently God-fearing, believing men who received the revelation. There was no hesitation on their part to head for Bethlehem immediately to see with their own eyes what they had been told. In fact, the text says that they went in great haste. Can you see them rushing as fast as they could in their shepherd's robes, each one urging the others to step up the pace a bit?

All at once, there they were: the father (as it would have seemed to the shepherds), the mother, and the baby lying exactly where the angels had said, in a manger where the animals normally ate (v. 16). The rushed sense of eager discovery disappeared and was replaced with a quiet sense of awe and reverence. That baby, who looked just like any other one, was the long-awaited Messiah! And they were the first humans to see Him!

9. What happened after the shepherds left the manger, and what kind of response did they receive from other people (vs. 17, 18)?

What do you do when you hear such exciting good news that you cannot keep it to yourself? Obviously, you tell everybody you see. Since we are told the shepherds specifically told everybody "the saying which was told them concerning this child," we

assume they explained the appearance of the angels and the exact message they had communicated to them. That was certainly information nobody had ever been told before. What would people think of such an unusual report?

Luke 2:18 tells us that everybody "wondered" at what the shepherds were saying. "To wonder" means to not understand fully and yet to marvel. For the author Luke, this is a reaction from those who witness the miraculous (see Luke 8:25; Acts 2:7).

It is difficult for some of us who have heard this account all our lives to capture in our minds the amazement and wonder that spread as the shepherds told their news. It is good for us to try to imagine it, however, because what we are reading was the most significant event that has ever occurred in history. The growing excitement would have come from the fact that it was now being reported that the Messiah whom Israel had waited hundreds of years for had actually arrived! Such news thrilled the hearts of those who understood.

10. How was Mary's action at this time different from that of others, and why do you suppose this was so (v. 19)?

We cannot help wondering what was going on in Mary's mind through all this. There is no indication that she was exhibiting the excitement being felt by the people. After all, she had been in a state of amazement for the past nine months! During that time she had adjusted to the reality of what was taking place. There is also reason to believe that in spite of her youth, she was a godly woman who was well acquainted with the Scriptures.

Her attitude was based on her understanding of what God was accomplishing through this birth. Luke 2:19 simply says Mary "kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." The word "kept" indicates that she was storing up memories of everything that was happening so that she could reflect further upon them in the future. The word "pondered" indicates that as each event unfolded, she added it to what she had already observed and combined these individual events into the big picture.

Little by little, Mary was growing in her realization of how significant the events of her life were becoming. Salvation was being offered to the world through her son, God's Son.

PRACTICAL POINTS:

1. The birth of Jesus assures us that there is hope for all the people of the earth (Luke 2:8-11).
2. Jesus' lowly birth reminds us that His work was not for just a privileged few (v. 12).
3. We believers have as much to praise God for as the angels did (vss. 13-14).
4. It is not enough to know God's promises. We must also act on them and proclaim them (vs. 15-17).
5. God's works should not just cause wonder. The works of God should also make us consider who He is (vs. 18-19).
6. Though people may reject our testimony, God always accepts our praise (v. 20).

CONCLUSION:

This is the last lesson before Christmas, and it continues our look at aspects of the birth of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Luke is a master at narrative characterization. That is, Luke writes in such a way that the readers get to know the people of his story and gain insights into these characters very quickly. This lesson focuses on some unnamed men and boys who would have seemed unusual candidates for attention in the ancient world: field shepherds. For a brief moment, Luke brings us into their world to witness a marvelous work of God.

God's plan for human salvation required that His divine Son become a human being. Without being human, Jesus would not have been able to die for the sins of the world. God decided that this necessitated Jesus' birth by a woman, and His years as a baby, toddler, and child. Jesus was not to be like the mythical Greek gods, who emerged fully-grown from the sea or a cave.

While we bow the knee to the newborn king at Christmastime, we recall that we are worshiping God among humankind. He is the Word become flesh (John 1:14). "Oh come, let us adore Him!"

PRAYER:

Our Father in Heaven, things haven't changed that much since Jesus was born. We, like the shepherds, are awed by the magnitude of Your gift. We ponder and try to understand the depth of Your love, but it is beyond our ability to comprehend. So we continue to offer You our praise and give You all the glory. May You always reign over us. We pray these words through the name of Your Son, Jesus the Messiah. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER:

The good news of Jesus' birth is still precisely that!

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:

Next week's lesson is "Putting Commitment into Action." We will concentrate on the beginning ministry of John the Baptist, the herald of Christ. Study Luke 3:1-20.

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