

THE SHEPHERDS' CHRISTMAS

Luke 2:8-20

INTRODUCTION: Some shepherds were together in an open field near Bethlehem. They were keeping watch over their flocks as they settled in for a quiet night. Each shepherd would take his turn watching the sheep while the others rested. Like most people in Israel, these men would have known of the prophecy of the coming Messiah. These poor, humble, and downtrodden shepherds were the first to hear the best news that mortal man has ever received.

I. THE WATCH OF THE SHEPHERDS

A. LIFE OF THE SHEPHERD. (v. 8)

Shepherding is one of the oldest professions in the Bible. In Genesis 4:2, we learn that Abel was the first shepherd. Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Lot, Laban, Moses, Rachel, David, and Amos are a few examples of shepherds in the Bible. Shepherds were at the lower end of society. Interestingly, God chose to send angels to the shepherds for the announcement of the Savior's birth. In the days of Jesus, shepherds were despised. They were considered as second-class citizens especially by the religious leaders. They were considered vile and filthy.

The religious crowd considered them as defiled and unfit to worship God. They were often uneducated and unskilled. Shepherds were looked upon by many people as being dishonest and unreliable. Shepherds were not even allowed to testify in court.

B. LABOR OF THE SHEPHERD.

The words "keeping watch" is in present tense meaning continually, to function as a military guard, to keep safe. A day in the life of a shepherd was very demanding. Shepherding was a lonely occupation. A shepherd's day began early in the morning. He would lead forth his flock from the fold. The sheep recognized the voice of the shepherd, and they followed him. The shepherd protected his flock. He would give his life for them if needed. David described his work as a shepherd. He had to protect the sheep from lions, bears, wolves, and any other predators.

The shepherd found a good pasturing place for them to feed. He led his sheep to clean water for them to drink. The shepherd watched his flock to keep them from going astray. At night, he brought the flock home to the sheepfold, counting them as they passed under the rod at the door to assure none of his sheep was missing. During the night hours, he had to guard the flock from wild beasts. Sometimes the shepherd would mix in with other shepherds and split the night watches.

It is an interesting fact that even at times when the sheep would be with other sheep and shepherds that the flock always recognized the voice of their own shepherd and they would only follow their shepherd. At other times, they would spend all night with their sheep in the fields.

II. THE WORD TO THE SHEPHERDS.

A. APPEARANCE OF THE ANGEL. (v. 9)

The Lord sent His Word to the shepherds through His messenger, the angel. This was an unexpected visit to say the least. It was night when all of a sudden, the glory of God shone around them, and they were very afraid. They were frightened like anyone would have been. The angel of the Lord comforted the shepherds by saying, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." (Luke 2:10)

B. ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE ANGEL. (v. 10)

The angel of the Lord declared unto them his message as recorded in Luke 2:11-12: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

The Creator of the universe would be born as a baby and placed in a manger. His mother was a young virgin girl, and His adoptive father worked as a carpenter. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 3:16, "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory." The miraculous birth is the greatest mystery of the ages. The name "Christ" speaks of the "anointed one." In Hebrew, it means "Messiah."

Jesus is the Messiah who was promised many years ago in Scripture. Messiah refers to someone who is set apart and given a specific office. Jesus is the anointed Prophet sent into the world to declare God's message. He is the anointed Priest who will make atonement for our sin. The word Lord is used over 6,000 times in the Old Testament to refer to God. It is the most used name in the New Testament for Jesus. This confirms that Jesus is indeed God.

The word "Savior" means someone who saves or rescues another from danger. Jesus was born to "save His people from their sins." Jesus has delivered all of us who are saved "from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" according to Colossians 1:13.

The shepherds were surprised to hear they would find Christ lying in a smelly animal stall in Bethlehem. The stable reminds us of His lowly birth. 2 Corinthians 8:9 states: "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich."

The shepherds would never have believed they would be granted the privilege of receiving the first message of the Messiah's birth. They thought this honor would have been given to the religious leaders and kings. Yet, God chose to give the shepherds this heavenly message. God was showing His interest in the lowest of men according to the opinion of the world.

Suddenly there was with the angel of the Lord a multitude of angels praising God. The word "host" is a term used for a military army. The army of heaven joined in praising the birth of Jesus. The message of "peace, good will toward men" is directed to those in Christ. He is the Prince of Peace. Jesus said to His disciples in John 16:33, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

The shepherds were overwhelmed and amazed by the angel and the heavenly host. The angel of the Lord gave the message and the angelic host gave the praise. The shepherds were in the center of a heavenly worship service. Hallelujah!

This season some of us may have doubts and worries. Others may be losing hope. This Christmas is a good time to think once more of God's great love expressed in the familiar story of Joseph, Mary, the baby Jesus, and the angels who announced the Savior's birth.

III. WORSHIP OF THE SHEPHERDS

A. FAITH IN THE WORD.

Once the angels were gone away, the shepherds said to each other, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." (Luke 2:15) They believed the angel, and they had faith in the message of God. They believed a Savior had been born. It was none other than Christ the Lord. In obedience to the heavenly message, they made haste to go find Mary and Joseph and this baby boy.

In the city of Bethlehem, they looked upon the babe lying in the manger just as the angel had said. When they looked into the face of the baby, they were looking into the face of God. It would be impossible to capture the excitement of the shepherds. Their hearts must have been racing and their hands trembling as they told of their story.

They shared with Joseph and Mary how the angel appeared to them while they were tending to their sheep. The shepherds repeated all that the angel told them concerning the baby Jesus. The angel said the baby Jesus was "the Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The angel gave them a sign as recorded in Luke 2:12, "And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

The conversation between Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds confirmed to them all that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. The excitement in that stable would have been breathtaking as they shared their experiences. The words of Gabriel rang true, "For with God nothing shall be impossible." The shepherds had acted on faith. They were rewarded and encouraged because of their faith. Blessings follow those who live by faith.

Mary and Joseph shared with the shepherds the miraculous events preceding the birth of Jesus. Joseph described how the angel appeared to him in a dream, telling him Mary had conceived by the Holy Ghost and the baby was to be named Jesus. Joseph also explained how the angel told him that the baby would also be known as "Immanuel which means God with us." The eyes of the shepherds grew large as Joseph told of his experience.

Mary quickly began telling the shepherds about the angel Gabriel appearing to her. The angel told Mary she would be the mother of the Son of God, and she would call His name JESUS. The shepherds listened intently as Mary told them she was a virgin, but the angel said she would be with child of the Holy Ghost. The shepherds were obedient to God's message. They responded by faith. They were blessed by God and privileged to be the first ones other than Mary and Joseph to see the Savior. We need to remember that God rewards faith.

B. FAITH IN THEIR WITNESS.

The lives of these shepherds were changed. They were so excited and happy about the message they had received. Their faith was real and they could not help but witness. Everyone who heard the shepherds' story was amazed. The shepherds had no witnessing classes, but they could tell people all that the Lord had done in their lives.

These social outcasts were chosen by God to be the first preachers to tell about the newborn King. They made known abroad the truth that the Messiah, the Savior of the world was born. Their message was centered on the things told them concerning this child. They made known the truth to everyone they could.

Our celebration of Christmas must be about Jesus. Often we allow the world to silence the truth. Today, Christmas is about worldly songs, gifts, and parties. Christ is left out of most people's Christmas. We should be telling everyone we meet about Christ the Savior who came to save sinners.

C. FAITH IN THEIR WORSHIP.

Genuine faith will cause a person to worship. It will also lead a person to witness. As the shepherds returned to care for their sheep, they could not help but to glorify and praise God. While they continued to tend to the sheep, they were changed men. The shepherds were chosen to be witnesses to the birth of Christ. They shared the wonderful gift of God's Son to the world. We have also been chosen to share in the blessings of Christ and to be witnesses to the world of God's love. Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Paul reminds us in Romans 6:23 that the "gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord."

LESSONS FOR LIFE:

1. The world is without peace, but we can have peace with God through faith in Christ Jesus.
2. The world is without love, but we can know and experience the love of God in Christ.
3. The world has no message of hope, but we have Jesus who is our hope.
4. The world is troubled and anxious, but we can come to Jesus and find rest for our souls.
5. Jesus was born to be the Savior of all who believe in Him. Is He your Savior?