

Faith Pulpit

Faith Baptist Theological Seminary

Ankeny, Iowa

December 1997

The Shepherds in Search of the Savior

Manfred Kober, Th.D.

The birth of our Savior is surrounded by striking events. The story of the wise men journeying from afar with precious gifts to worship the Savior has captured the imagination of devout Bible students as well as poets and artists. There is another thrilling account which has excited both young and old. It is the angelic announcement to the shepherds and their adoration of the newborn child. Luke, the evangelist, records the intriguing incident in Luke 2:8–20.

I. The Revelation by the Heavenly Messengers: Luke 2:8–14

A. The context of the revelation: vv. 8–9

It is of greatest spiritual significance that the first announcement of the birth of the Savior was not made to Herod in his palace nor to the priests in the temple but to the shepherds in the fields.

1. The disposition of the shepherds

The heavenly message concerning the birth of the Savior came to shepherds, who at the time of Christ were outcasts. “Shepherds were despised people. They were suspected of not being careful to distinguish between ‘mine’ and ‘thine’; for this reason, too, they were debarred from giving evidence in court” (Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, I, 113). Shepherds were grouped with thieves, murderers and tax collectors. The message of the gospel first came to shepherds, the pariahs of Judaism, to signify that the Savior had come for them. Christ was born to be the Savior of sinners.

The shepherds were in the fields near Bethlehem where David centuries before had also kept his flocks (1 Samuel 17:34,35). The presence of sheep in the fields does not argue against the birth of Jesus in December. Even in December the weather can be very balmy in Israel. However, the date of December 25 as Christ’s birthday was not fixed until the fourth century during the reign of Constantine (A.D. 306–337).

2. The descent of the angel: v. 9a

While the shepherds were watching their sheep by turns, suddenly the angel of the Lord stood by them. It might possibly have been Gabriel who appeared to both Zacharias (1:19) and Mary (1:26) in the events leading up to Christ’s birth.

3. The display of God’s glory: v. 9b

Accompanying the angel was the blinding brightness of God’s glory, a manifestation of the presence and power of God. It is the same bright light which guided the wise men from the east (Matthew 2:2).

The effulgence of the eternal suddenly enveloped the execrated of the earth. So awesome and magnificent was the Shechinah glory that the shepherds were terrified, literally “feared a great fear.”

B. The content of the revelation: vv. 10–12

1. The allaying of fear:

The angel announced the good news with the exhortation, “Stop being frightened.”

2. The announcement of the good news: vv 10b–11

Once the shepherds had been calmed, the angel disclosed good news of great joy. “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

The announcement related the gospel which would bring joy to all the people. The angel then stressed the relevance of the Savior’s birth to the despised shepherds as outcasts of society by saying, “Born to you this day” is the One Who was promised so long ago. The angelic announcement further highlighted the nature of the One Who was just born: “a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”

As the Savior, a title used only here of Christ in the synoptic gospels, He would deliver His people from destruction, disaster, and death. Most importantly, as Savior He would rescue the people by remitting their sins (Luke 1:77). As Christ, He is the Anointed One, the Messiah, Who was promised by God to Israel as their Great Prophet, Sympathetic High Priest, and Davidic King. The infant in Bethlehem is moreover the Lord, He is very God, the Immanuel □”God With Us.”

Long the world has waited such a Saviour,
Sunk in sin and torn by fear and doubt;
Long in darkness groped for truth and wisdom;
Glory, glory now the light shines out!
‘Unto you is born this day a Saviour,’
Earth’s one hope, the Life, the Truth, the Way;
Mighty God and glorious Redeemer.
Jesus Christ the Lord is born today

(Annie Johnson Flint)

3. The attestation of the good news: v. 12

The shepherds were given a two-fold sign how to find the child. They would discover a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Walter Liefeld shows the significance of the swaddling clothes. “Babies were snugly wrapped in long strips of cloth, giving them warmth, protection of extremities, and a sense of security in their newborn existence. The combination of a newborn baby’s wrappings and the use of the manger for a crib would be a distinctive ‘sign.’ Perhaps they also imply that in spite of seeming rejection, symbolized by the manger, the baby was the special object of his mother’s care” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, 846).

C. The confirmation of the revelation: vv. 13–14

1. The appearance of the heavenly host: v. 13a

Just as the appearance of the angel of the Lord was sudden, so was the descent of a multitude of the heavenly host as thousands of angels appeared, and all this for a small band of shepherds. Bengel says fittingly, “The army announces peace” (*Bengel’s New Testament Commentary*, I, loc. cit.).

2. The acclaim by the heavenly host: v. 13b–14

Luke does not say whether the angels sang, chanted or shouted. Their doxology of joy is consistent with the nature of angels. Three major times in the Scriptures they are seen rejoicing: they are rejoicing at creation (Job 38:7,8), here at the incarnation, and at the salvation of sinners (Luke 15:10). Their doxology is the climax of the entire story: “Glory to God in highest places, and on earth peace, on men of good pleasure!”

God is praised in heaven and peace is proclaimed on earth because He has shown His good will to men by sending the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:5). The “Roman peace” (Pax Romana) had been in effect, but there was no real peace on earth. True peace will only come when the Prince of Peace rules on His throne over the world.

There is a triple parallelism running through the doxology: glory in heaven, peace on earth, good will to men, or, to men of goodwill. It seems that the three-fold doxology corresponds to the three titles of Christ in verse 11. “Glory to God” because He is Lord; “peace on earth” because He is the Prince of Peace; “good pleasure on men,” because He is the Savior.

II. The Adoration by the Humble Shepherds: vv. 15–16

A. The departure of the angels: v.15a

The angels returned to their heavenly home, gradually disappearing, much like Christ ascended to heaven at the conclusion of His earthly ministry (Acts 1:9–11).

B. The deliberation of the shepherds: v.15b

The Lucan account indicates that the shepherds began to speak to one another with real urgency. They could not wait. They had to search for the Savior at once.

C. The devotion of the shepherds: v.16

They searched with haste and found without delay the announced Savior. The city of David could not have been large and they would easily have discovered the object of their search. The child was in a manger. If tradition is correct, the birth of the Savior took place in a large limestone cave beneath the inn. Today the oldest church of Christendom, the Church of the Nativity, sits atop the cave where the Emperor Hadrian once erected a temple in honor of Venus and Adonis in the second century, to desecrate a site sacred to Christians since the birth of Christ. To visualize the scene of the shepherds’ visit with the holy family, one should go to the round chapel on the Shepherd’s Fields where a magnificent painting above and altar captures the sacred moment.

Van Oosterzee remarks on the scene: The Evangelist leaves it to our imagination to conceive of the joy with which this sight would fill the hearts of the simple shepherds, and what strength the faith of Mary and Joseph must have drawn from their unexpected and wonderful visit (Lange, ed., *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, Luke, p. 39).

The shepherds in the cave were just as welcome as the wise men in the house. But unlike the magi, the shepherds brought only themselves and in the truest form of worship presented themselves to the Savior. What a miracle of miracles: the manger held the Lord of history, the Savior of mankind, the Sovereign of the universe. No wonder Eric Sauer calls the manger:

of all times—□ the turning point
of all love—□□ the highest point
of all salvation—□□ the starting point
of all worship—□□ the central point
(*The Triumph of the Crucified*, 1952, p. 14).

And we confess with the song writer Gellert:

When I this wonder contemplate
My spirit doth in reverence wait:
It worships, as it views this height—□
The love of God is infinite.

III. The Communication of the Glad Tidings: vv. 17–20

Just as the shepherds were sovereignly singled out to be the first recipients of the glad tidings of the birth of Christ, so they were divinely destined to be the first proclaimers of the event to others.

A. The rehearsing of their experience: v. 17

The shepherds were so moved by their discovery of the Savior and the developments leading up to it, that they joyfully rehearsed the good news, first to Joseph and Mary and then to their families and companions. If, as Edersheim suggests, “their flock was intended for offerings in the temple, they would have told the whole story to the godly remnant in Jerusalem who waited for the promised Redeemer” (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I, 189).

B. The response of the listeners: v. 18

All those who heard the message of the shepherds were amazed. Why should they not be amazed? The imperial decree, the angelic doxology, the divine directions, all centering on □ an infant lying in a manger.

C. The reflection of Mary: v. 19

Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. She was not filled with astonishment or apprehension but holy awe. Mary retained the marvel of the event in her heart and reflected on the

meaning of the event. Mary mused on the divine grace showered on her and the glory of her Son. How would Luke know about that which, literally, Mary “was keeping all the while within herself”? Robertson makes an interesting point by asking, “but did not Mary keep also a Baby Book? And may not have Luke seen it?” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, II, 26). It is almost certain that Luke received from Mary practically all the data related by him in the first two chapters of his Gospel.

D. The rejoicing of the shepherds: v. 20

The shepherds returned to their pastoral duties, reported their profound discovery and reveled in their provided deliverer, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, as earlier the angelic chorus had done (v. 13). Worship and witness are the proper responses to the mighty acts of God.

Conclusion:

1. The earnest individual cannot genuinely commemorate Christ’s birth nor celebrate Christmas unless he recognizes, like the shepherds, Jesus as Savior and Lord.
2. The devout believer who truly worships the Savior in the manger comes to Him, as did the shepherds, in humility and adoration.
3. The dedicated disciple cannot do any less than the shepherds who used every opportunity to testify that they met the Savior.
4. The events of that extraordinary evening so long ago made possible salvation from sins and hope of heaven for all who accept Him as Savior, Who is Christ the Lord.

Our restless spirits yearn for Thee,
Where'er our changeful lot is cast;
Glad when Thy gracious smile we see,
Blest when our faith can hold Thee fast.

Jesus, ever with us stay;
Make all our moments calm and bright;
Chase the dark night of sin away;
Shed o'er the world Thy holy Light.

(Bernard of Clairvaux)