

**International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
December 25, 2016**

Lesson Text: Luke 2:8-20

Lesson Title: The Saviour's Birth (Christmas)

Introduction

Luke's Gospel is a Gospel of good news. The story of the birth of Jesus Christ the Saviour is by far the best news man has ever been given. The Saviour's birth is important because it became the high point in history. All history before Christ's birth is dated B.C., before Christ. All history since Christ's birth is dated A.D., *Anno Domini*, Latin for "the year of our Lord." Although the world seems determined to redefine the birth of Christ as just a holiday, look at the dates on our calendars, which testify life is centered on the Saviour's birth.

Jesus' birth is also important because it is the fulfilment of God's promise to send a Redeemer (Genesis 3:15-16). The long-awaited promise of God sending His only begotten Son is now come to pass. Most people in Israel knew some things about the promise of a coming Messiah, but only God knew how many things had to come together for this miraculous birth to take place. Luke tells us how it happened. Part of his story involves lowly shepherds in a field in Bethlehem.

The angelic announcement of Christ's birth to shepherds is probably the most familiar aspect of the Christmas story. Other than Joseph and Mary, hardly anyone knew the greatest event in human history had taken place. But soon after the Saviour's birth, an angel told the shepherds "...a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" has been born in "the city of David" (Luke 2:11). Today, you and I are the shepherds of Christmas. We are the recipients of the good news of Christmas and we must tell everyone of the Saviour's birth.

Shepherds Receive the News of the Saviour's Birth (Luke 2:8-14)

Verse 8

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

While there were Old Testament prophecies and promises which specifically detailed how Jesus would be conceived and where he would be born, nothing was written that would have caused "shepherds" to be *listening* or *looking* for the angels or Jesus birth. It was just business as usual for them on the "night" they received news of Christ's birth.

The “shepherds” were “in the same country” or nearby region at the time of Jesus’ birth. The word “manger” in verse 7 is “*phatne*” (fat-nay) which suggests the “manager” could have been a feeding trough carved out of a stone. If so, it is possible the place of Jesus’ birth was a cave familiar to the “shepherds.”

“Shepherds” were commonly viewed as the lowest people socially of that day. Shepherding was a needed profession but shepherds were not esteemed in the Middle East. In Jesus’ day, shepherds were held in such low esteem they were not allowed to give court testimony in judicial cases, because they were known to be untrustworthy. They were basically uneducated and unskilled in anything but shepherding. Since they had to watch their sheep on the Sabbath, they violated the Mosaic Law which caused them to be looked upon by the Pharisees as outcasts and spiritually inferior. Despite all of that, God sent His angel to make the greatest announcement in the world to the lowest of the low, the humblest of the humble, shepherds. This is truly a picture of the grace of God.

Application: No matter who you are, what you have or do not have, the message of Christmas is for you. God has sent His only begotten Son into the world that you might be saved.

Verse 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.”

An “angel of the Lord,” possibly the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:19, 26), “came upon them” or “stood among them” with the blazing “glory of the Lord.” God’s “glory” simply defined is His “manifest presence.” God does not have a body, a form, He is invisible. But when He reveals Himself, He does so with a type of brilliant, shining manifestation of light. When “the glory of the Lord shone round about” the shepherds, God was saying, “My presence is back.” His “glory” that appeared in the tabernacle in Exodus 40, in the temple in Solomon’s day, and was seen departing from God’s house in Ezekiel’s day (Ezekiel 8-10), is back! This time, it is not in a place or a building, but in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1-14).

In the middle of the night, suddenly the field was ablaze with light. The presence of “angels” and “glory of the Lord” resulted in the shepherds being “sore afraid.” This is a typical response in Scripture to either God, or God’s spokesman or messengers, with their encounter of God’s people. God’s people are normally terrified when God comes to meet them face to face, or when He sends His messengers to meet with them. When sinners encounter God, or when sinners encounter God’s message, their natural response is fear.

The word “afraid” is the Greek word *phobeo* {fob-eh-o} meaning “frightened, alarmed, and to be in awe.” The shepherds were “terrified.” Being in the

presence of God's messengers and God's glory always results in fear. There is nothing trivial or comical about being in God's presence. It is a serious place to be in any generation.

Verse 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."

The "angels" words "Fear not," simply means the shepherds do not have to worry about dying in the presence of God. This is going to be a great occasion for them because the angel is bringing a message of "good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." "Good tidings" means "good news."

The "good news" the angel is speaking about to the shepherds is that salvation "shall be to all people" (Isaiah 45:22). It is the "good tidings of great joy" or the "good news" that allows the shepherds to remain in God's presence without fear. It is the good news of the gospel that allows us to stand in God's presence without fear of condemnation.

The "good tidings of great joy" is for "all people." According to God's Word, salvation is for "*whosoever will*" (Revelation 22:17). Salvation is for both Jew and Gentile, male or female, slave or free. Salvation is for those born in town, up town, down town or for those who have never been to town!

The "tidings" or "good news" carries with it "great joy." "Great" is the Greek word *megas* and "joy" is the Greek word *chara*. The angel is saying, "I bring you great, large, spacious news of gladness!" The word "bring" describes the actions of a messenger bearing official proclamation of the king, or announcing news of a military victory. The Saviour's birth is a day of victory!

Application: The "good news" of Christmas is salvation is for "all people." If the "good news" is "for all people," then "all people" are responsible to do something with the "good news." If you are lost, you are responsible to repent of unbelief and believe. If you are saved you are responsible to share the good news with everyone you meet.

Verse 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 angel's message is precise and each word carries temporal and eternal implications. "For unto you" is plural which means the message is not only for

the shepherds, but for all of humanity. “Born this day” means “the waiting is over.” The long-expected Messiah has arrived.

“In the city of David” is a reference to Bethlehem. Bethlehem was not formally called “the city of David” but most Jewish people identified Jerusalem as the city of David. The shepherds would have known the city the angel was talking about was Bethlehem.

“A Saviour” is the heart of the angels’ announcement to the shepherds. Only a few people in the world, at this moment in time knew a “Saviour” had arrived. Caesar Augustus did not know. Cyrenius, the governor of Syria was not aware of what was happening. Herod would only find out when the wise men would come seeking Jesus. The only people who knew were Joseph, Mary, the angel, and now some lowly shepherds. But soon the world would know!

Christmas can be summed up in two words, “A Saviour.” That is the message of the gospel. These shepherds would recognize the word “Saviour.” It was an Old Testament word. Israel knew God as Savior. Jews would know what the word meant because Savior was a Jewish concept as well. When the word “Saviour” was mentioned the people thought of a Rescuer, a Deliverer (Deuteronomy 20:4; Psalm 24:5; 25:5; Isaiah 63:8-9; Micah 7:18; Luke 1:47, 69; 2:25-30; 1 Timothy 4:10).

The “Saviour” born on this day “is Christ the Lord.” Luke placed the title “Christ” between “Saviour” and “the Lord.” The Greek term for “Saviour” is closely associated with God, who is called both *theos* (God) and *kyrios* (Lord). “Christ the Lord” essentially means the same as “Messiah God.”

The “sign” given to the shepherds by the angel was they “would find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” There were no doubt other babies born in Bethlehem that night, but it is doubtful if many or any were “born in a manger.” Where the Christ child was laid would distinguish him from all other babies. Laid in a feeding trough was certainly unique and different. The shepherds would have no problem identifying the Christ child.

Verse 13-14

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

When the angel’s announcement to the shepherds was complete, “a multitude” of other angels, called “the heavenly host,” appeared “praising God, and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” God’s army of angels gathered over and around this heavenly announcement to the shepherds. Collectively, spontaneously, and unexpectedly this army of

heavenly beings celebrated the Saviour's birth. They represent the awesome power of heaven gathered for peaceful purposes. On this night, their message is about "peace" and "good will," not war. "Peace" reflects the calm man can have in knowing Christ and accepting His great salvation. "Good will" refers to loving and lasting relationships on earth which can now exist because Jesus has come to save.

Shepherds Respond to the News of the Saviour's Birth (Luke 2:15-20)

Verse 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."

The sudden invasion of angels upon these lowly shepherds and the information they had been given might seem more than the average person could handle. But it seems to all come together for the shepherds and the question now is how will they respond. They respond with the appropriate *conversation* and the appropriate *action*.

We do not know how long the "heavenly host" stayed and praised God but when they departed "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." The shepherds left their flocks in the care of God and began their journey to "Bethlehem."

Question: These shepherds received a message from God and believed it. Have you?

Verse 16

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

"They came in haste" indicates the shepherds wasted no time responding to the good news. The word "haste" means "speed or urgency." The shepherds were enthusiastic and eager to find their way to the Christ child. This truth serves as a reminder to us that we should be eager and thrilled to be in the presence of Christ and the work of the Lord.

What the shepherds "found" at Bethlehem was exactly what the angels had said they would find. What the Bible says about Jesus Christ the Savior of the world is exactly what sinners will find when they come to Christ for salvation. Just as the shepherds were correctly informed and clearly directed to the

Christ child, so sinners are clearly and correctly called upon to come to Jesus Christ alone for salvation (Acts 4:12).

Application: If you are a sinner there is no time to waste concerning coming to Christ. It is urgent that you come today and call upon the Lord for salvation (Isaiah 55:6; 2 Corinthians 6:2).

Verse 17

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

After going to Bethlehem and seeing the Christ child, the shepherds “made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.” The words “made known” means “to tell abroad.” They were not experts at communication. They had no formal training in public speaking or personal witnessing. What they did have was a sure word from God that a Savior had been born. They could tell that which they had seen and heard. They knew what God had done for them and they were able to go to others and say, “God can do this for you too.”

Note: If you know the Savior today, tell someone about Him. Tell your neighbor about Him. Tell your children about Him. Tell the person you work with about Him. Tell everyone you know what Christ has done for you in saving your soul.

Verse 18

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

“All” who heard the shepherd’s story about Christ’s birth “wondered.” The word “wondered” is the Greek word “*thaumazo*.” It means “to marvel, to be amazed.” It is a word Luke uses often in his gospel (Luke 4:22; 8:25; 9:43; 11:14; 24:41). The things Jesus did caused people to be amazed, wonder, and marvel. Jesus was and is an amazing person. The shepherds had never seen anyone like Him and when the shepherds talked about Him people “wondered.”

What the shepherds were proclaiming about Jesus was getting the attention of those who heard. Still today, the only thing that will get the attention of sinners and hold their attention is the message of the gospel.

Verse 19

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

This verse may seem out of place in the midst of Luke's account of the shepherd's Christmas experience. But as we know, everything in God's Word is exactly where it is supposed to be and accomplishes God's purpose. From a "field" in Bethlehem, Luke takes us to the "heart" of Mary. That is where Christmas must really be.

Mary "pondered" or "treasured, thought about, contemplated deeply" what was happening during these sacred moments. Her thoughts are much deeper than the amazement of the people the shepherds are speaking to in verse 18. Mary is thinking about a virgin having a baby without the aid of a man. Mary is thinking about God choosing her to be the mother of the Messiah. Mary is thinking about her own salvation through the Son she holds in her arms. Mary is thinking about Christmas the way Christmas should be thought about!

Question: What do you think about when you think of Christmas?

Verse 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."

The shepherds move from *witnesses* to *worshippers* rather quickly. The word "returned" reminds us that life goes on. We cannot stay at the manger forever. We must take what we know about Christ and "return" to our daily lives. The shepherds went back to their sheep and the everyday routine of life. God has intervened and they are committed to living and telling others the truth they have received.

"Glorifying and praising God" (Luke 2:20) are the attitudes Christians should have not just as Christmas time, but every day of our lives. Like the shepherds, Christians must be committed to an attitude of praise and worship.

"As it was told unto them" is a very significant part of this story. It literally means everything turned out exactly as the shepherds had been told by the angels. There were no flaws in the story. There were no facts left out of the story. The angels did not need to return and say, "O yea, we forgot to tell you about this."

Christmas and how the world sees it and celebrates it changes a little every year. But the real meaning of Christmas will always be "as it was told unto them."

Conclusion

The angel brought the message of the Saviour's birth to the shepherds that night outside of Bethlehem. It was a message resonating with glory and great

joy. A Savior was born and God wanted the shepherds to know. When they heard, they believed. When they believed, they went to see. When they saw, they were quick to tell others. When they returned to their everyday lives they were filled with worship and adoration.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” The Savior is born!

Merry Christmas!

Amen.