

**International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
December 21, 2014**

Lesson Text: Luke 2:8-20

Lesson Title: Glory to God in the Highest (Christmas)

Introduction

Luke's Gospel is a Gospel of good news. The story of the birth of Jesus Christ is by far the best news man has ever been given. The birth of Jesus Christ 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 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 even the dates on our calendars testify that life is centered on the birth of Christ.

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. Everybody 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. And part of his story involves lowly shepherds in a field in Bethlehem.

Shepherds Receive the Good News of Christ'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 that specifically detailed how Jesus would be conceived and where he would be born, nothing is specifically written that would have caused "shepherds" to have been *listening* or *looking* for the angels or Jesus. It was just business as usual for them on that special night when they received the good news of Christ's birth.

The "shepherds" were "in the same country" or nearby 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 that the place of Jesus' birth may have been a cave familiar to these very "shepherds."

"Shepherds" were commonly viewed as the lowest people socially of that day. Shepherding was a needed profession but shepherds were not the movers and

the shakers of their day. 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. In spite of 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.

Application: No matter who you are, what you have or don't 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 doesn’t have a body, a form, He’s 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 had 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! And it is back 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.” 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.

Application: We often talk about the manifest presence of God in our church services but most of us have never experienced anything even remotely similar to what the shepherds did on the night of Jesus’ birth. What is happening here is a monumental moment in redemptive history. The shepherds are not having a good service. They are experiencing God in their midst out in a “field” during the normal activities of life. The message here is that Christmas can be experienced!

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 these 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). Salvation is not for a select group of people you and I might pick out. 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!

Application: The “good news” of Christmas is that salvation is for “all people.” If the “good news” is “for all people,” then “all people” are responsible to do something with that “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.

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.

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 message of the angel to the shepherds is so precise and each word carries both temporal and eternal implications. “For unto you” is plural and means not only for those shepherds that first Christmas night, but for all of humanity a Savior is “born this day.” “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 angel was talking about 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 didn’t have a clue. Cyrenius wasn’t 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 angels from heaven, and now some lowly shepherds. But soon the world would know!

“A Saviour.” Christmas can be summed up in those two words, “A Saviour.” As Christian witnesses that is what we still tell people. That’s 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 that of “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.” Hallelujah!

The “sign” given to the shepherds by the angel was that 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.

Application: Christ is so different from the other professing deities in the world that he is not hard to identify. In fact, no other man-made god is a Savior! No other man-made god has ever been able to say, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

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 angels 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 in a field to shepherds. Collectively, spontaneously, and unexpectedly this army of heavenly beings celebrates Christ’s birth. They represent the awesome power of heaven gathered for peaceful purposes. Their message on this night is about “peace” and “good will,” not war. “Peace” reflects the calm that man can have in knowing Christ and accepting His great salvation. “Good will” refers to loving and lasting relationships on earth that can now exist because Jesus’ has come to save.

Application: The good news of Christ's birth means that things on earth can change. Lasting and eternal change does not come by politics or religion. It comes through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Shepherds Respond to the Good News of Christ'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.”

Luke details for us the response of the shepherds to Jesus' birth. This sudden invasion of angels upon these lowly shepherds and the information they had been given might seem more than the average shepherd could handle. But it seems to all come together for them and the question now is how they will respond. They respond with the appropriate *conversation* and the appropriate *action*.

We don't 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. These shepherds received a message from God and believed it. Have you?

Application: Christmas if properly understood always results in conversation and action. How could these shepherds receive the message they had received and not talk about it? How could these shepherds receive the message they had received and not go see what had taken place? If you have heard the gospel you must respond.

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 still be eager and thrilled to be in the presence of Christ and the work of God.

What the shepherds “found” at Bethlehem were exactly what the angels had said they would find. And what the Bible says about Jesus Christ the Savior of the world is exactly what sinners will find when they come to Him for salvation.

Just as Mary and Joseph 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.”

The shepherds did not need to see the new born baby to believe the message of the angels had spoken to them. However, “when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.” The words “made known” means “to tell abroad.” The shepherds are the first New Testament witnesses. Their message was centered and focused on the things they were told “concerning this child” (Luke 2:17). Our message is to be about Jesus. It’s amazing in Christianity and witnessing how quickly our message moves away from Jesus to something else. If we aren’t careful, we find ourselves talking to sinners about our church, our programs, our activities and what we have to offer them and their family. While there is a need for all those things, let’s learn from these shepherds that Christmas and Christianity is about JESUS! God is glorified when we tell the world about His Son!

Verse 18

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

Everyone 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's used often in Luke's gospel (Luke 4:22; 8:25; 9:43; 11:14; 24:41). The things that Jesus did caused people to be amazed, caused them to wonder, caused them to 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.”

Now certainly being amazed over the story of the shepherds didn’t save anyone. It takes more than a good feeling or goose bumps to save your soul. But what these shepherds were proclaiming was definitely getting the attention of those who heard. And still today, the only thing that will get the attention of sinners and hold their attention is the message of the gospel.

Note: Wouldn't it be a blessing if the Lord would give us back the "wonder" this Christmas! How can we expect sinners to be amazed if Christians are no longer amazed?

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's 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 about 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 can't stay at the manger forever. We must take what we have been given in Christ and "return" to our lives. The shepherds went back to their sheep and the everyday routine of life. But life was never the same because now they know about Christ. 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. 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 that 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 didn't 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 every year. But the real meaning of Christmas will always be “as it was told unto them.”

Conclusion

The angel brought the message of Christ’s birth to the shepherds that night outside of Bethlehem. It was a message that resonated 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.”

Merry Christmas!

Amen.