

Main Idea: In Luke 2:8-14 we discover what heaven thought of the birth of Jesus, and what we *should* think. Luke puts the spotlight on two angelic scenes.

- I. An angel delivered the birth announcement (8-12).
    - A. The angel appeared to the shepherds (8-9).
      1. They were ordinary men.
      2. They witnessed an extraordinary sight.
    - B. The angel spoke to the shepherds (10-11).
      1. The child is the Savior.
      2. The child is the Messiah.
      3. The child is the Lord.
    - C. The angel gave a sign to the shepherds (12).
      1. He will be wrapped in cloths.
      2. He will be lying in an animal trough.
  - II. A host of angels delivered praise (13-14).
    - A. The purpose of Christmas is the glory of God.
      1. The angels did what the world failed to do.
      2. The angels brought honor to God.
    - B. The by-product of Christmas is the good of mankind.
      1. God gives peace to men.
      2. Only God can give peace to men.
- Take Inventory: Three questions to consider...
1. How do you view Jesus?
  2. How have you been treating Jesus?
  3. How can you give glory to God today?

This morning we are continuing our series, “The Birth of the Savior,” from Luke 2. Let’s read this morning’s text.

*Scripture Reading: Luke 2:8-14*

The angels did what the world should have done. When the Son of God entered in to human history as the newborn Messiah, He was ignored by the world, but not the angels. He came to His own, but His own did not receive Him, let alone honor Him. But the angels did.

I entitled last week’s message, “A Birth Ignored,” for as we saw in Luke 2:1-7, when the Almighty became a man, He was in essence ignored by the world.

But there was a group that did not ignore this spectacular event, and that’s this week’s message from verses 8-14. “A Birth Applauded.”

You see them throughout the Bible. You’ll find them in Genesis. They’re in Revelation, too. They’re all over the place but they don’t draw attention to themselves. They gave Lot a hand at Sodom. One of them opened the cell doors and escorted Peter from prison in Jerusalem. One told Manoah and his barren wife that they would have a son, which they did and named him Samson (Judges 13). On another occasion one brought a meal to Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kings 19:5). One told Paul that he would appear before Caesar and that the ship carrying him would run aground on some island (Acts 27:23). And when Jesus was enduring the agony of the garden of Gethsemane, one came and strengthened Him (Luke 22:43).

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<sup>\*\*</sup>Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For a previous look at this passage, see the message preached at WBC in 2002.

Who are these mysterious servants of God? The Bible calls them *aggelos*, “messengers,” *angels*.

Psalm 103:20 says, “Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.” Hebrews 1:13-14 says this, “To which of the angels did God ever say, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’?”<sup>14</sup> Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?”

That’s what angels are, “ministering spirits.” They are creatures as we are, but creatures made by God for a special purpose. They are His messengers. They do His bidding. They serve. They minister. But whom do they serve, according to God’s commission? “They are ministering spirits *for those who will inherit salvation.*” God gave His angels the assignment of caring for those people He has chosen to save.

Here’s an example. John Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands. One night hostile natives surrounded the mission station, intent on burning out the Patons and killing them. Paton and his wife prayed during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came they were amazed to see their attackers leave. A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Christ. Remembering what had happened, Paton asked the chief what had kept him from burning down the house and killing them. The chief replied in surprise, “Who were all those men with you there?” Paton knew no men were present--but the chief said he was afraid to attack because he had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords circling the mission station.<sup>2</sup>

The term “angel” (or “angels”) is mentioned over 300 times in the Bible. As you read the Scriptures you’ll discover some interesting things about these beings. But you’ll come away with more questions than answers probably. For good reason. The focus isn’t on the messenger but on the message and the One who sent it. Typically, angels serve behind the scenes or off to the side as they appear throughout the Bible. But there’s one place where they come center stage. To them God gave the privilege of making the birth announcement, *THE* birth announcement. And when they did they pulled out all the stops.

In our current study of God’s Word we are seeking to discover the truth about the birth of Jesus. So many people don’t know the truth, and you can’t have certainty and stability in life until you know the truth about Jesus. Last week, we discovered the truth that His was a birth that the world ignored. There was no fanfare. In fact, hardly anyone even knew the Son of God had come. The silence was deafening. And there were some creatures that did something about it.

In the text before us today we’ll see a sharp contrast. In Luke 2:8-14 we discover what heaven thought of the birth of Jesus, and what we *should* think. If you’ve not seen Christmas from the perspective of the angels, you don’t know the true meaning of Christmas. In the text before us Dr. Luke puts the spotlight on two angelic scenes. Let’s look and learn and join the applause.

#### I. Scene #1: An angel delivered the birth announcement (8-12).

Luke tells us that this birth announcement involved three actions.

**A. The angel appeared to the shepherds (8-9).** “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”

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<sup>2</sup> *Today in the Word*, MBI, October, 1991, p. 18.

It's been well said that God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform. That was certainly the case in the incarnation. Luke's entire account is filled with surprises. For starters, the Son of God was born to obscure peasants rather than to the wealthy elite.

And then there is this surprise. God sent the birth announcement, not to the palace, and not even to the temple, but to a hillside, to *shepherds*.

That doesn't make sense to us. A great birth deserves great publicity, doesn't it?

If we're honest a lot of things about God may not make sense to us. But the problem isn't God. It's that our perspective is so limited, and twisted by sin. We expect God to do things in ways that make sense to us, and we even try to help Him along. But God knows what He is doing. He invites us to trust Him, to let Him be what He is. God.

In the marvelous plan of God, He chose shepherds. But why shepherds? Why did the angel appear to these particular men with this announcement? Why not to the royal magistrates of Caesar Augustus, or at least to King Herod or the temple priests in Jerusalem? Why the shepherds?

For starters, they were awake in the middle of the night. There weren't too many graveyard shifts in that day. The text is clear that these men were "keeping watch over their flocks at night."

More importantly, the shepherd image is very important in the Bible. The shepherd symbolizes those who care for God's people, including the Lord Himself. "The Lord is my shepherd," Psalm 23 begins. God gave this Messianic promise in Ezekiel 34:23-24, "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken." Jesus, in fulfillment, would later say, "I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11)."

Let's talk about these particular shepherds. Two things stand out.

1. *They were ordinary men.* These men on the hillside were very common men. Shepherds were sort of the "normal Joes" in ancient culture.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as an occupation shepherding was sort of looked down upon in Jesus' day. Some considered shepherds to be untrustworthy. Their work made them ceremonially unclean, according to the religious leaders.

Let that sink in. The first people to receive the gospel were common folk, yes, but more than that, they were on the fringe socially. Marginalized. Outcasts. That's a great theme Luke will develop in the rest of his biography of Jesus. Why did Jesus come?

Later in Luke 15:1-2 Luke tells us this about Him, "Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.""

Perhaps the climax of the book is this statement by Jesus Himself in Luke 19:10, "For the Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost." Why did He come? To save people just like the men who first received the message that He had come.

My friend, who gets it? Who most appreciates what Christmas is all about? It's the people who admit their need, right? It's the people who recognize how desperately they needed the Savior to come to earth and rescue them. Is that true of you?

So the shepherds were very ordinary men. But the text tells us something else.

2. *They witnessed an extraordinary sight.* Notice verse 9 again, "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were

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<sup>3</sup> Bock, p. 84.

terrified.” According to Luke, the shepherds saw a couple of things. First, there was an [not “the” as in the KJV] *angel of the Lord*. Then there was the *glory of the Lord*. Just what that is Luke doesn’t tell us. In the Old Testament, when God birthed the nation of Israel into existence, He demonstrated His shekinah glory en route to the Promised Land. The glory of the Lord is the visible demonstration of His supernatural presence. Where God is, there’s glory. The apostle John later commented (1:14), “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

What effect did the angel’s appearance have on the shepherds? Luke says they were *terrified*. ESV, “filled with great fear.” Keep in mind that these guys were not wimps. They were rugged outdoorsmen and were used to hearing startling noises at night while protecting their flocks. The snap of twigs. The howling of fierce animals. These guys knew how to control their emotions and manage their fears.

But not this time. What they saw this night caused them to be “sore afraid,” as the KJV puts it. Many today view angels as quaint little, make-you-feel-good kind of beings. Look at the average Christmas card angel, and what do you see? Sort of an, “Ah, isn’t he cute?” kind of creature. If we had a more biblical view of angels, we wouldn’t have called the television show “Touched by an Angel,” but “Terrified by an Angel.”

Throughout the Scriptures when people realized they were in the presence of angels they were overwhelmed with fear. Why is that? In part, it’s because even though these are merely *creatures* of God, they are creatures who have direct access to God Himself. And when they do His bidding, when they manifest their radiant presence, those who see them begin to see themselves in a very different light, as fallen and frail.

At that point came the second action. First, the angel appeared. Then...

**B. The angel spoke to the shepherds (10-11).** “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid.’” They were afraid, but he calmed their fears. He hadn’t come to harm them, but to bring them a message.

Verse 10—“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” The message itself will come in verse 11, but notice a couple of things about this message. First, it’s good news. The KJV says, “I bring you good tidings.” Elsewhere in the New Testament this phrase is translated “preach good news.” In its noun form it is the word “gospel.” The gospel is the good news, the best news ever told. And this angel was the first evangelist to proclaim the good news concerning Jesus.

Notice something else. The angel said this is a message which produces great joy. Not just joy, but *great* joy. In fact, you will never know real joy until you take to heart the message you are about to hear.

And who is this great joy for? The angel said it will be for *all* the people. Remember, he’s talking to shepherds. These men knew what it felt like to be outcasts. They lived in a world of oppression and abuse and injustice, much like ours. There had been very little good news to cheer about for generations. But the angel said that this good news is for *all* people, regardless of class, race, and gender. Regardless of your background, regardless of what you have done or failed to do, this good news is for you.

But this good news is not just for you. It’s for *all* people. So having received it, we’re to share it.

Do you need some good news today, my friend? Here it is. Listen to the angel in verse 11, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the

Lord.” What an amazing revelation! Just think of what those words meant to the shepherds who first heard them. “Today”—it just happened—“in the town of David”—that’s Bethlehem—a Savior has been born—yes, just born!—“to you [ESV ‘unto you’]”—He entered the world for your benefit, He’s here *for you!*—“he is Christ the Lord.”

Take another look at that announcement and you’ll notice the angel used three important words, three titles to identify this newborn child. Again, think of what these terms meant to the shepherds—and then to us.

1. *The child is the Savior.* The shepherds knew Israel was in trouble—so was the whole world—for turning from God and violating His holy Law. That’s why life was so hard under the Romans. But it wasn’t just the nation of Israel that was in trouble. *They* were in trouble. They, as individual men, had missed God’s mark. They needed a deliverer, someone who could rescue them from their sin and its consequences. The Old Testament prophets had predicted such a deliverer was coming, and for centuries the people waited. And waited. And waited. And then one day an angel told some shepherds, “He has come! The child is the Savior!”

2. *The child is the Messiah.* “He is *Christ*,” the angel said. Christ is the Greek term for “anointed one.” The Hebrew term is *Meshiach*, that is, Messiah. Who is this One born in Bethlehem. He is the One who will inaugurate the kingdom age. He is God’s Anointed One. He is the One God authorized and empowered to carry out the work of salvation. He is the Messiah.

3. *The child is the Lord.* That’s a staggering title. Already in a little more than one chapter Luke has used the word “Lord” more than twenty times—as a title for the God of Israel Himself. Now the angel makes an astounding connection. The child in Bethlehem *is* none other than the God of Israel Himself come in the flesh. This baby [don’t be misled by how meek and lowly He appears] is the Sovereign One, the One in control of all things, the One to whom all honor belongs in heaven and on earth. He is the Lord!

Friends, let this sink in. Who was born that day in Bethlehem? The angel is very specific. The child is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

But there’s a problem. Many don’t know that. It’s sad, yet true. So many people today don’t know the truth about the child that was born in Bethlehem. In fact, what is supposed to be a celebration of the birthday of Jesus has very little to do with Jesus.

Several years ago the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* published an article by Dave Barry entitled, “Notes on Western Civilization.” In it Barry comments on how the schools today have reinterpreted Christmas:

“To avoid offending anybody, the school dropped religion altogether and started singing about the weather. At my son’s school, they now hold the winter program in February and sing increasingly non-memorable songs such as “Winter Wonderland,” “Frosty the Snowman” and--this is a real song--“Suzy Snowflake,” all of which is pretty funny because we live in Miami. A visitor from another planet would assume that the children belonged to the Church of Meteorology.”<sup>4</sup>

The angel set the record straight. The child born in Bethlehem is the Savior. He is the Messiah. He is the Lord. No wonder the shepherds rushed to see Him, and having seen Him told the world about Him.

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<sup>4</sup> Dave Barry in his “Notes on Western Civilization”, *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, July 28, 1991.

But to find Him they would need help, which brings us to action #3.

**C. The angel gave a sign to the shepherds (12).** The angel continued to speak in verse 12, “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Bethlehem wasn’t a large place, but there was more than one baby in the village. “Which one is the Savior, Messiah, and Lord?” the shepherds would have wondered. “How will we identify Him?” The angel told the men to look for two marks.

1. *He will be wrapped in cloths.* “In swaddling clothes,” as the AV puts it. This action certainly portrays the humanity of the Savior. This was a typical action for parents in that day, to wrap the limbs of a newborn. When the Son of God entered the world, He truly entered as a human being.

But we see more than His humanity in this. We see a picture, don’t we? To begin His earthly ministry the Messiah allowed human hands to wrap Him. Thirty-three years later He ended His earthly ministry the same way. One commentator offers this thought, “When his parents wrap Jesus in cloths to keep his limbs straight and lay him in the manger, the humble emptying of the Christ has begun.”<sup>5</sup>

That’s why He came to earth, my friend. Even the manger scene points to the coming cross, the burial, and the empty tomb. He came to die as a substitute for sinners, to become the final sacrificial lamb. Because He let the hands of men wrap Him and ultimately nail Him to a cross, there is forgiveness for you today. Why? Because the hands of men didn’t prevail. He prevailed. He conquered the grave, returned to heaven, and lives today. He gives salvation to all who will repent of their wickedness and receive Him as Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

Oh, look at Him there, beloved! See Him wrapped in cloths. And don’t forget why He let those hands wrap Him.

The angel mentioned a second mark. “Lying in a manger,” he said. A “manger.” If anybody knew about mangers, these shepherds did. A manger is a place where animals feed. It’s dirty. Unsanitary. And it’s the second identifying mark.

2. *He will be lying in an animal trough.* Now these are shocking words. The angel’s two statements don’t seem to go together. He had just revealed the child’s identity, saying He is the Savior, the Messiah, and the Lord (in verse 11). And now in verse 12 it’s, “Oh, by the way, you’ll find the Lord of the universe lying in a feed trough.”

Surely we see here a glimpse into the heart of God, what He values. Not power and might, but humility and meekness. Here we see the most important person ever to be born on this planet, and He chooses as His first bed a box that holds animal food.

Later when He grows up He will say, “Follow Me. If any would come after me, let him deny himself, and walk in My steps.” If you want to belong to this dear Christ, my friend, He bids you come. But you must humble yourself, indeed, you must die to your yourself, and He will give you new life, eternal life, His kind of life.

I should hasten to say that He is no longer there. He who once allowed human hands to wrap Him and lay Him in a manger is no longer there. He who once allowed human hands to nail Him to a cross is no longer there. He who once allowed human hands to wrap His body and lay it in a tomb is no longer there.

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<sup>5</sup> Darrel Bock, p. 86.

Where is He? He is now seated on His heavenly throne at the right hand of God, and one day He's coming back to earth, not to a stable, but riding a white horse to conquer and establish His eternal kingdom.

So ends scene #1. An angel delivered the birth announcement. At that point something phenomenal happened. I get the sense that heaven couldn't contain itself any longer. If the world wouldn't applaud the arrival of God's Son, someone had to. And the host of heaven erupted in song.

## II. Scene #2: A host of angels delivered praise (13-14).

There's a time to be silent, but there's also a time to shout with as much enthusiasm as you can muster. And according to the angels, the time had come!

"<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'"

It happened *suddenly*. As soon as the first angel finished delivering his message, the host appeared. If the shepherds were terrified before, I wonder how they handled this sight! But Luke makes it clear this host wasn't there so much for the sake of the shepherds as for *God*. The first angel came with a message for the shepherds. The rest of the angels came to praise God.

"Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, *praising God*." You see, God deserves honor for this birth. He initiated it. What the angelic host said next makes that perfectly clear. In fact, the angels' words serve as a heavenly commentary on the birth event. When you ponder their words carefully you discover two things about the meaning of Christmas.

**A. The purpose of Christmas is the glory of God.** What did they say as they praised God in that Judean pasture? "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." Notice that. Christmas brings something to God and something to men. Don't miss who the angels mentioned first. "Glory to *God* in the highest."

I can't emphasize this too much. Far too often we basically turn Christmas into an opportunity to be either humanitarian (at best) or down-right self-centered (at worst). But Christmas is fundamentally about God's glory. In eternity past God determined to rescue a fallen people who would live now and forever for Him, for *His glory*. That's why His Son came into the world. "Glory to God in the highest!" the angels shouted.

To put it simply...

1. *The angels did what the world failed to do.* Namely...
2. *The angels brought honor to God.* That ought to be our motivation in everything we do. That's certainly why the angels sang.

Johann Sebastian Bach said, "All music should have no other end and aim than the glory of God and the soul's refreshment; where this is not remembered there is no real music but only a devilish hub-bub." He headed his compositions: "J.J." "Jesus Juva" which means "Jesus help me." He ended them "S.D.G." "Soli Dei gratia" which means "To God alone the praise."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [Kingdom Conflict](#), J. Stowell, Victor, 1985, p. 77ff.

Is that your aim as you work the job God has given you? Do you do what you do for the glory of God? Young people, is that what you desire most as you devote yourselves to your studies, the *glory of God*?

The primary purpose of Christmas is the glory of God. “What about us?” you ask. “Didn’t Jesus come for us?” Yes.

**B. The by-product of Christmas is the good of mankind.** “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” The goal of Christmas is the glory of God, but the by-product is for our good. Just what is this by-product. According to the angel...

1. *God gives peace to men.* Peace. What is peace? It involves the absence of conflict, yes, but so much more than that. Fundamentally, it’s wholeness. We’re living in a world that’s been fractured by Adam’s sin as well as his descendants, but Jesus came to mend broken lives and make them whole. He came to reconcile the alienated, to God and to each other. When God gave the gift of His Son, He was offering the gift of peace.

But who benefits from this gift? According to the angels, not everyone does. “On earth peace *to men on whom his favor rests*,” they said. The KJV translates this, “On earth peace, good will toward men,” but that makes it sound like the angels had two divine gifts in mind, peace *and* good will. That’s not the case. In the Greek text a literal rendering would be, “Upon earth peace to the men of good pleasure.” In the ESV, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

In other words, who receives this gift of peace? It’s not the whole world. The men “of good pleasure” do. That is, the men “with whom God is pleased” do. That is, the men “on whom God’s favor rests” do.

God gives peace to those to whom He chooses to give peace. In Luke 2, it was shepherds, lowly shepherds. Yet God set His affection on them and sent them the good news via the angels.

God is still giving peace to those to whom He chooses to give peace. He doesn’t give it to the wise, to the mighty, to the self-righteous. He gives it to the humble. Right now, through the preaching of His Word, He’s extending His offer to you.

My friend, if you desire the peace of God, you may have it right now. How? By humbling yourself, admitting the fact that you are hell-deserving sinner, and then receiving the One God sent to be your Savior and Lord.

Do you see the connection between grace and peace? The angels praised God for something we must never forget. God gives peace to men, and He does it on the basis of His grace. What’s more...

2. *Only God can give peace to men.* Jesus isn’t one option among many. If you want true peace, you must receive Him. You’ll never find true peace until you receive the gift God gave to the world. Only God can give peace to men.

Having said that, the angels left. One minute the shepherds heard the bleating of the sheep, the whistling of the wind, and the chirping of the crickets. Then they heard the thunderous applause of heaven shouting, “Glory to God! Peace to men!” Then it became quiet again, and all the shepherds heard was the bleating of sheep, the whistling of the wind, and the chirping of the crickets.

It was back to normal. But it wasn’t back to normal, for they would never be the same again. My friend, there’s no such thing as back to normal once you’ve learned the



truth about Jesus. We'll see how the shepherds responded next time, the Lord willing, but right now let's personalize what we've learned.

Take Inventory: Three questions to consider...

1. *How do you view Jesus?* The angel said Jesus is the Savior, Christ, and Lord. Do you agree? Do you believe that He is the *Savior*—the only one who can save you from your sins, the *Christ*—the One God sent to rescue you, and the *Lord*—the One who rules in heaven, will rule one day on the earth, and who deserves to rule in your life right now? Is that how you view Jesus?

2. *How have you been treating Jesus?* It's one thing to say, "Yes, that's how I view Jesus, like the angel said." But do you treat Him like the angels did? Is He the most important person in your life? Are you seeking to honor Him in everything you do?

William Dix wrote a song to help us treat Jesus as He deserves:

*What Child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping?*

*Why lies He in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding?  
Good Christian, fear; for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.*

*So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh, come, peasant, king, to own Him;  
The King of kings salvation brings, let loving hearts enthrone Him.*

*This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing,  
Haste, haste to bring Him laud, the Babe, the Son of Mary.*

In light of what the angels said, there's one final question to ask yourself.

3. *How can you give glory to God today?* The angels did it by singing. They did it by doing what God sent them to do. They delivered the birth announcement to the world. It's now our turn to give God glory. In a moment, by praying and renewing our allegiance to Him, then by singing to Him, then by our fellowship, and later in our homes, and out in this community in the coming week.

So ask yourself, what step do I need to take right now that would most demonstrate my desire to give glory to God in my life?