



The Joy of Christmas
Luke 2:8-20
December 19, 2021

Main Idea: The birth of Christ leads to joyful responses to those who hear his word and believe, no matter their station in life.

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXT: LUKE 2:8-20

⁸And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be a sign for

you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”^[a]

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Highlight – What stands out?

1. Write down the main characters and what you learn about them in this text? (Notice key words or phrases that describe them.)
2. Is there anything surprising to you in this text? Or what ideas do you see here that you have never heard before?
3. What questions do you have about the text?
4. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in this text? What is the role of Jesus the Son in this text? What is the role of God the Father in this text?

Explain – What does this mean?

This particular sermon is focusing in on Luke 2:19, but to understand why she “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart,” we need to first see what she heard and saw.

There are three character groups in this text: the shepherds, the angels, and Mary. Let’s look at the shepherds first.

Angels:

1. Look at verses 9-13. What do the angels say? What is their response to the birth of Christ?

Shepherds:

1. The shepherds hear the words of the angel and respond. Look at verses 15-17 and 20. What do the shepherds hear, understand, and do as a result?

Mary:

1. Mary figures prominently in Luke’s Gospel, and this is one of the many times she hears from others about her son. Think back to last week’s sermon from Luke 2:22-38 (particularly Simeon’s prophesy in verses 29-35). What did Mary hear about her son from Simeon?
2. Look up Luke 1:26-45. What is Mary told about her son here? How does she respond? (Hint: look further into Luke 1:46-55 for more from of her response.)

3. Why do you think she would ponder and treasure all these things in her heart? (Hint: Isaiah 7:14 may come to mind for her and others in this scene.) What do you think that means that she pondered and treasured up all these things in her heart?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. What do you know about shepherds and their work in the ancient near east? What does this tell you about the type of people to whom Christ comes?
2. Mary received a lot of messages in these early chapters of Luke. Fast forward to John 19:25-27. Many think this is the fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy to her, and likely the end result of all her pondering and treasuring in her heart. What does this teach you about the cost of following Jesus? How have you seen the cost of following Jesus lead to "soul piercing" in your own life?

Respond – What's my next step?

1. Every character in this narrative responds in the same way. What do you think that is? (Look back at the text and make a note of what they all did or said in response to what they saw and experienced.) When you're shown the glory of Christ and the wonder of his birth, do you respond in the same way? Is there an area of obedience or worship needed in your life that you need to step forward in?

2. Often following Jesus in obedience leads to suffering in our life. This was true for Mary. If you're in a time of suffering, or know someone who is, spend some time praying that joy would break through in your life (or their life) in the midst of the suffering.

Commentary¹

*This commentary section in particular has content on Mary and what it means that she pondered and treasured up all these things in her heart. It also spends some time talking about our response when we are met with the presence of God—God dwelling among us.

Author: Luke, a Gentile Christian

Luke 2:8-20 Commentary (see footnote at the end of the commentary)

8–14 The infancy narrative reaches a second christological highpoint, in addition to the Annunciation (1:26–38), in the angelic announcement to the shepherds in vv. 8–14, each verse of which (with the exception of v. 12) was utilized as text in Handel's *Messiah*. The announcement begins with the introduction of **shepherds**, who represented one of the meaner demographic elements in Palestinian society. Luke mentions two characteristics of shepherds: living outside in open country (the literal meaning of *agraulountes*) and taking turns in night watches. Nomadic shepherds who were separated from human communities and culture for long periods of time were inevitably subjected to suspicion and scorn. Popular lore accused them of failing to observe the difference between “mine” and “thine.” Because they could prey on lonely travelers, they were often suspected of practicing “the craft of robbers” (*m. Qidd.* 4:14). Their prolonged absences—and ill-repute—disqualified them from being legal witnesses. A third-century rabbi, commenting on Ps 23, said, “There is no more despised occupation in the world than that of shepherds.” Along with gamblers and tax collectors, herdsmen were regularly listed among despised trades by Mishnah and Talmud.³⁵ In contrast to this negative assessment, the NT holds shepherds in generally high

¹ Edwards, J. R. (2015). [The Gospel according to Luke](#). (D. A. Carson, Ed.) (pp. 74–80). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos.

esteem. Indeed, the shepherd becomes a symbol of God himself in Luke 15:4–6 (as earlier in Ezek 34:11–16). The radical re-presentation of shepherds in the NT may, as Jeremias suggests, be due to the life of Jesus himself, the Good Shepherd, who knows the sheep by name (John 10:3) and lays down his life for the flock (John 10:11–13).

“In the same countryside” (v. 8; NIV “field nearby”) suggests a location of the shepherds near Bethlehem. According to the Mishnah, livestock within a certain circumference of Jerusalem were reserved for sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple.³⁷ Bethlehem lay within that circumference, and the shepherds may have tended flocks appointed for that purpose. In general, shepherds spent warmer, drier months (March–November) further afield, and colder, wetter months (November–March) nearer towns and cities. Proximity to Bethlehem could speak for a winter birth of Jesus; a census, however, would more likely be scheduled for July–August, when harvests were complete. The dearth of information on the date of Jesus’ birth may indicate that NT writers themselves did not know when he was born.

The appearance of the angel to the shepherds exemplifies the proclamation of “good news to the poor” (Isa 61:1). Luke will quote the same verse twice again (4:18; 7:22) as a defining characteristic of Jesus’ ministry. According to Mic 5:1–4, a “ruler over Israel” will arise in Bethlehem and “shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord.” The shepherds are ordained to be the first to hear of the savior’s birth and recognize the Good Shepherd in Bethlehem. The Greek word for “appeared” (v. 9; *epestē*) is commonly used of heavenly appearances and visions in classical Greek. The “angel of the Lord” is not identified in v. 9, but the same expression is used of Gabriel in 1:11, and presumably indicates Gabriel here. With the angel of the Lord appears “the glory of the Lord” (v. 9). The Hebrew word for “glory,” *kabod*, means “weight,” that which is heavy and substantial, whereas the Greek word for “glory,” *doxa*, is nonmaterial, meaning “splendor” or “brightness.” Despite the different connotations of *kabod* and *doxa*, both are associated with radiant light. Luke describes the flash of light at Paul’s conversion (Acts 26:13) with the same word for the radiance of the Lord here. The antiphony between light and darkness may reflect Isa 9:2, for Luke artfully contrasts human darkness in v. 8 and divine light in v. 9. He further contrasts “great fear” at the appearance of the angel in v. 9 (also 1:13) with “great joy” in v. 10. “Joy,” a major motif in the Third Gospel, is not an emotion caused by auspicious circumstances but by the presence and work of God—in salvation (1:14; 2:10; 15:7, 10), spiritual works (10:17), and the resurrection of Jesus (24:41, 52). An angelic appearance that simply impressed the shepherds with brilliance would have left them in fear. The purpose of the angelic appearance is not to stun or dazzle, but “to bring you good news” (v. 10). The use of “good news” (Gk. *euangelizesthai*) subtly counteracts Caesar’s self-promotion by use of the same word (see the discussion of vv. 1–3 above). The proclamation of joy is not a general announcement of euphoria, but good news specifically and

personally “to you”—the shepherds—and for “all the people” (on “all people,” see note at 1:10).

The angelic proclamation reaches a climax, “Today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (v. 11). It is natural to take “City of David” with reference to Bethlehem, since David was a native of Bethlehem (1 Sam 17:12–15) and Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem for Jesus’ birth (v. 4). “City of David” almost certainly refers to Jerusalem, however, and associates Jesus’ birth with it. The epithet occurs forty-five times in the OT, always with reference to “Zion,” i.e., to Jerusalem as either the cultic heart of Israel (ark and temple) or as the seat of royal power of the kings of Judah. In the NT “City of David” occurs only in 2:4, 11. The former reference specifically refers to Bethlehem, but v. 11 is better taken with reference to Jerusalem, thus associating the birth of Jesus with the two most tangible expressions of God’s presence in Israel—the *place* of God’s presence in the temple, and the *line* of God’s presence through the kings. The former theme will reappear in 23:45, when the temple curtain is rent asunder at Jesus’ death on the cross. With regard to the royal dynasty of Judah, beginning with David (1 Kgs 2:10), “city of David” occurs twenty-eight times in the OT with reference to Jerusalem as the final resting place of the kings of Judah.⁴⁰ As a burial epithet “city of David” connects Jesus directly with the royal and filial theology of the monarchy (2 Sam 7:12–14; Ps 2:7); the burial place of Israel’s monarchs is now declared the birthplace of Israel’s Messiah.

The angelic proclamation is emphatically existential (“today”) and personal (“for you,” v. 11). “Today” belongs to the lexicon of Luke’s load-bearing theological vocabulary. Its occurrence here announces Jesus’ advent; in 4:21 it is the first word of Jesus’ inaugural sermon in Nazareth; at 23:43 it is the final promise of Jesus from the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” The angel identifies the newborn Jesus as Messiah, Lord, and Savior. The first two titles appear in tandem, “Messiah-Lord” in Greek, a construction found nowhere else in the NT. “Messiah” (Gk. *Christos*, “Christ”) means God’s anointed Davidic-king. “Lord” (Gk. *kyrios*) is the standard LXX translation of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, YHWH. One would expect the construction to read “Messiah of the Lord,” as is prevalent throughout the LXX.⁴¹ Significantly, in this first occurrence of “Messiah” in Luke, it appears with “Lord.” The apposition of “Messiah-Lord” is similar to the apposition of “Christ-King” in 23:2; both convey that Jesus is not simply the Messiah of the Lord, but the Messiah who *is* the Lord. The attribution to the newborn Jesus of a title reserved exclusively for God in the OT corroborates the high Christology of the annunciation, where Jesus is called Son of God (1:35). Although “Savior” is less exalted than either “Son of God” or “Lord,” it is more remarkable in this context. It would have been sufficient for Luke to say, “The Messiah, the Lord, was born today in the city of David.” The identification of the Messiah-Lord as “savior” counteracts the claims and cult of Caesar Augustus in v. 1, who repeatedly promoted himself as “savior of the common folk” and “savior of the world.” In an official litany of

accomplishments known as *Res Gestae*, Caesar Augustus postured as a “savior” who inaugurated a new and propitious age of peace, order, and prosperity, fulfilling the longings of humanity.⁴⁶ The NT, and particularly the Gospels, are sparing in attributing *sōtēr*, “savior,” to Jesus, perhaps to avoid its rampant association with the emperor cult. We noted in the discussion of the Halicarnassus and Priene inscriptions (see discussion at v. 1) that the titles ascribed to Caesar Augustus—Son of God, savior, bringer of peace, hope, and good news—are all attributed by Luke to the newborn Jesus, as a divine alternative to the Roman imperial political-theology. The attribution of *sōtēr* to Jesus in v. 11 is a direct challenge to that political-theology. Contrary to imperial propaganda, the true Son of God and Savior of the world—and thus the ultimate good news for the world—are not contained in a decree of Caesar but in the divine proclamation from heaven. The Savior is not mighty Augustus in Rome, but an infant lying in a feed trough in the city of David.

The angelic promise does not remain an abstraction but is instantiated in a sign, “a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (v. 12). Luke’s combination of word and sign in the infancy narratives, a combination repeated with greater precision in the revelation of the resurrected Jesus through Scripture and breaking of bread in 24:25–32, anticipates the categories of “word and sacrament” in later theology. Divine word in human flesh clearly presupposes incarnation. In contrast to the Fourth Gospel, Luke and the Synoptics are skeptical about the value of signs for faith. The only sign promised by Jesus in the Third Gospel is the dubious sign of Jonah in 11:29–30. The sign announced by the angel is itself dubious: a newborn is commonplace, and a newborn in a manger is primitive, if not brutish. Apart from the angelic announcement, this sign could easily be overlooked or mistaken for something other than it is. Without the divine word, who would imagine that in this humble person and place, *Immanuel*, “God is with us”?

The angelic herald is like an announcer standing on stage before a curtain. The curtain rises, and “suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel” (v. 13). “Suddenly” (Gk. *exaiphnēs*) indicates that what follows is not humanly induced but divinely given. The Greek word for “company,” *stratia*, denoted a military unit, an army. This army is huge (Gk. *plēthos*; NIV “great”), regimented, and marshaled for the praise and purposes of God. The Greek word for “praise,” *ainein*, occurs only eight times in the NT, six of them in Luke-Acts. *Ainein* augments Luke’s central theme of joy, reminding believers that the eschatological community of God, both the church triumphant and the church militant, is by nature doxological, ultimately determined by its celebration of God. Bengel notes the paradox of an army deployed for peace rather than war.

The heavenly army chants:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
And on earth peace among those of good will.”

The angelic song does not proclaim a mystical union of heaven and earth. Rather, it celebrates two sovereign works of God: one in heaven, and one on earth. Rather than being mystically amalgamated, God's activity is praised in both: glory in heaven, and peace on earth; glory to God, and peace to humanity. A minority of Greek manuscripts, and older English translations, rendered the final phrase as "good will among men," i.e., the peace of God rests on people of good will. This translation, although deeply engrained in public memory, is probably incorrect. Textual support is decidedly superior for the NIV translation ("peace to those on whom his favor rests"). Moreover, the translation adopted by NIV is the more difficult reading (and hence to be preferred). Finally, the word for "favor" (Gk. *eudokia*, *eudokein*) means *God's saving pleasure* rather than humanity's good will whenever used in Luke (2:14; 3:22; 10:21; 12:32). The meaning is "not that divine peace can be bestowed only where human good will is already present, but that at the birth of the Saviour God's peace rests on those whom he has chosen in accord with his good pleasure."

15–20 Various church fathers interpreted the visit of the shepherds to Bethlehem as a metaphor of bishops tending the church, thus "shepherds of the church," similar to Ezek 34. Luke does not intend the shepherds allegorically, however, but in all their rustic reality. The construction of v. 15 in Greek places "angels" at the end of the first clause and "shepherds" at the beginning of the second. The syntax of angels-shepherds thus repeats the contrast between heaven and earth (v. 14), a contrast that in the incarnation is resolved and united in Jesus, the Son of God in human flesh. The use of the Greek imperfect tense, "the shepherds *were* saying among themselves," in an otherwise aorist narrative emphasizes repeated discourse, i.e., they could not stop talking about it. The word for "thing" (v. 15; Gk. *to rhēma*) is a Hebraism, a translation of Hebrew *dabar*, which means both "word" and "thing." The shepherds are thus impelled to visit the child because of the spectacle of the heavenly army in vv. 13–14 and because of what "the Lord made known to us." This last phrase indicates that the shepherds take the angel's report as the word of the Lord himself. The narrative is thus driven by the divine announcement of Jesus' birth rather than simply by the visit of the shepherds.

The "thing" the shepherds seek and find is "Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger" (v. 16). It is unusual for Mary to be mentioned before her husband Joseph. This suggests that Mary's preeminence as mother of the Messiah was already acknowledged when Luke wrote (so too Matt 2:11). Luke-Acts is attentive to the nature of communities, and particularly the joy they experience in the proclamation and mission of the gospel. The birth of Jesus creates such a community in his own family, and he is first encountered by a community of shepherd outsiders. Ironically, the shepherds, who were disqualified from serving as witnesses in legal cases in Judaism, are qualified to be the first witnesses of the gospel, not because of any innate abilities (see their *demerits* at v. 8), but because of "the word that had been told them" (v. 17). It is not witnesses who invoke the word, but the *Word* that calls, creates,

and empowers witnesses. The shepherds are also, although in a different way from Luke and his predecessors, “servants of the word” (1:2), indebted to make known “this child” (v. 17).

The testimony of the shepherds results in three responses: the amazement of hearers (v. 18), the pondering of Mary (v. 19), and praise of the community (v. 20). Amazement (see discussion of term at 1:63) is normally in Luke, as here, a group response. Amazement is not evoked by a spectacle, but by a report directed specifically “to them,” the hearers (v. 18). Amazement is not itself faith, but hearing a testimony of God’s word directed to oneself can be a first step in faith. Mary, by contrast, is not amazed but “ponders” in her heart (v. 19; NIV “treasured”). In 1:66 the crowd ponders in its heart the meaning of John’s birth, but only Mary ponders Jesus’ birth. The word for “ponder,” *syntērein*, means to “preserve,” “treasure,” “protect and defend.” The same word is used in the LXX of Jacob’s puzzling over the meaning of Joseph’s dreams (Gen 37:11). This word is in the imperfect tense, connoting something ongoing; thus, “to ruminate,” even “to wrestle with.” In addition to pondering, Mary “interpreted” events in her heart. Greek *symballein* means to scrutinize difficult events, often with divine aid, for right understanding. Mary is the only adult mentioned in Luke 1–2 who later appears in the Gospel. Already in the report of the shepherds, she becomes a model of faith for Luke; like the good seed in the parable of the Sower (8:15), Mary “hears the word, holds it fast, and preserves a good crop.” Finally, the shepherds return to their tasks, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen” (v. 20). Hearing precedes seeing as an avenue of faith. Their joy is not innate within themselves, but *gaudium extra eos*—the result of what “they had been told.” The description of the visit of the shepherds to the Holy Family already contains Lukan clues regarding the nature of the community formed by the gospel. The gospel does not result, as does Caesar’s ambition to enroll “the entire Roman world” (v. 1) and promote his pretense of deity, in despotism, subjection, or blind obedience. The new community of the manger results in the coming together of disparate groups who hear and speak, marvel and ponder, glorify and praise, and return to useful work in the world.²

² Edwards, J. R. (2015). [*The Gospel according to Luke*](#). (D. A. Carson, Ed.) (pp. 74–80). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos.

