

Should We Celebrate Christmas?

Luke 2:8-20

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Intro.

The answer to the question asked in the title is “Yes.” Of course we’re supposed to celebrate Christmas. What do you think the angels were doing in today’s text if they weren’t celebrating the first Christmas. But now, at the risk of sounding arrogant or something, let me say this. You have no idea how much God wants us to celebrate Christmas! How do I know? Because almost everywhere you look, Old Testament or New, you find the Bible celebrating Christmas.

I’ve heard people say, “Well, we shouldn’t make too big a deal out of Christmas. After all, Jesus’ birth is only mentioned in two of the gospels.” True, but when you really look at the Bible, you find our Lord’s birth is celebrated over and over, often right where you least expect it.

Example: Romans 15:7ff

7 Therefore accept one another, just as the Messiah also accepted you, to the glory of God. 8 For I say that the Messiah became a servant of the circumcised on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises to the fathers, 9 and so that Gentiles may glorify God for His mercy. As it is written: Therefore I will praise You among the Gentiles, and I will sing psalms to Your name. 10 Again it says: Rejoice, you Gentiles, with His people! 11 And again: Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; all the peoples should praise Him! 12 And again, Isaiah says: ***The root of Jesse will appear***, the One who rises to rule the Gentiles; the Gentiles will hope in Him. 13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Text

Luke 2:8 In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock.

Obviously we’re skipping right past the first part of the chapter, in which Caesar Augustus sends out a decree to register all the citizens of his empire. By verse 8 Joseph and Mary have already arrived in Bethlehem, Jesus has been born, and Mary has already laid the baby Jesus in a “feeding trough” because there was no room in the Inn. I think that just about catches us up. In Bethlehem the stage is set for the original nativity scene. All we need now is for the Great Director (God) to send the angels to let the shepherds know that it’s time for their big entrance.

Where are those shepherds anyway? Oh yes, they are staying out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock. Some people have tried to argue that this proves Jesus could not have been born in late December because even in Israel it’s too cold in December for shepherds to stay out all night. Others have gone to great lengths to research weather records and try to prove that yes, indeed, the shepherds could so have stayed in the fields in December. Personally I’d like to call a truce on all attempts to prove or disprove December 25 as Jesus’ birthday. I think if the date

had been spiritually important the Bible would have told us. But it doesn't, so why don't we agree that these events happened without getting bogged down over the date.

9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Let's pause to note that in the Bible every undisguised angelic appearance begins with the human observers terrified. Inevitably the first words out of the angels' mouths has to be, "Don't be afraid." Dear friends, we have no idea what it is like to be confronted with the unfiltered outshining of heaven's glory. Isaiah cried out "Woe is me. I am undone." Ezekiel was stunned and left speechless for seven days. Daniel just passed out. Without God's help, none of us could stand before the glory of God.

I want to point out one more detail that may seem like a quibble, but I don't think it is. The Greek text literally says an angel of the Lord stood "by" them, not "before" them. The preposition "before" is a translator's attempt to make sense of an unexpected word. The angel stood "by" them. I think this is a clue that when the angel appeared the shepherds were looking into another dimension. The angel was there, but not right there. It was probably hard to say exactly where he was; it's even possible that everywhere they looked, there he was. And yet he wasn't moving. No wonder they were afraid.

10 But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people:

The phrase "all the people" is worth noting. The article "the" is important. This message isn't for all people, but for "all the people." It's a phrase that speaks, not of everyone in the whole world, but rather the people of God, true sons of Abraham, both Jews and Gentiles. Of course this doesn't leave anyone out. If you, or anyone else, want to be included in "all the people" of God, then all you have to do is call on the name of the Lord. "For whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13).

11 Today a Saviour, who is Messiah the Lord, was born for you in the city of David. 12 This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in cloth and lying in a feeding trough."

The HCSB got it right in emphasizing that Jesus had been born "today." This second greatest of all days (second only to Easter) had been promised for 4,000 years. Finally it had arrived and the angel puts the emphasis on that very thought. "Today a Saviour was born." Do you remember the third verse of "Oh Come, All Ye Faithful?" "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing." Obviously the hymn writer had in mind that Jesus is the Living Word of God. But I think we can read it another way in light of this text. Jesus' birth is actually God keeping His word. Four thousand years earlier He had promised Adam and Eve that someday the seed of the woman would come to crush the head of the serpent. That promise had been renewed again and again, but now, at long last, the Messiah had come.

Forgive me for hammering on small matters in the text, but they actually make a difference in

our understanding. Do you see how the angel says, “This will be the sign for you.” Some translations have “a” sign, but that isn’t correct. The angel is strongly encouraging the shepherds to go see the newborn Messiah, and the clue that they will have found the right baby, the sign, is that he will be lying in a feed trough. Who knows how many other babies were born in Bethlehem that night? But it’s a pretty sure bet none of the others were lying in a feed trough.

13 Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:
14 Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people He favours!

15 When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”

“Let’s go straight through to Bethlehem” is the full translation. Bethlehem was in the same region, but it wasn’t next door. These men had some ground to cover if they were to worship in the presence of the newborn Messiah.

16 They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the feeding trough. 17 After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

To whom did they report? Well, to Mary and Joseph, of course. Had the shepherds not told their story it’s likely they would never have known about it. But when the story was told, notice what happened. “All who heard it were amazed.” The shepherd’s witness to the glory of God was heard by all in the inn. People were there from all over Palestine. And when they went home the message would have gone back with them, that in Bethlehem, the city of David, just as it was foretold by the prophet Micah, the Messiah was born.

On the night of the Saviour’s birth the message was not confined to a handful of shepherds on a hillside as we might sometimes think. Thanks to Mary birthing the Messiah in a courtyard of an inn, and thanks to the shepherd’s testimony, it’s possible that within a week the whole Jewish world knew that God had visited His people and the Messiah had come.

If the entire nation did not make their way to Bethlehem to worship the baby Jesus it was not God’s fault. It was because of the hardness of people’s hearts. I’ll even go further. The same thing is happening today. The gospel message is plentiful and available. Yet people reject it. Why? Hardness of heart is the only explanation. May God graciously grant us new hearts, hearts of flesh that will cause us to receive the message of God’s love and run to Jesus.

19 But Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, just as they had been told.

How do you think all these things came to be written down in the gospel of Luke? And not just the story of the birth, but also the story of John the Baptist and Mary’s own angelic visit?

Because, of the four gospel writers, Luke alone spent time interviewing Mary. Remember, at the beginning of Luke's gospel he writes that he had "carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write [everything down] in an orderly sequence . . . so that [we could] know the certainty of the things [reported]" (Luke 1:3-4).

Finally, notice that when it was all over, Mary was doing two things. She was treasuring up all these things in her heart (mind), and she was meditating on them. Here Mary is an example for all of us. She found a way to lock into her memory all the works of God that she had observed, and how to put them all together in a way that made sense. That's what meditating means in Scripture—doing the mental work necessary to put together an understanding of what God is doing in the world, and in your life.

We've taken a close look at the text, but now let's seek to apply it to life, your life and mine.

Three things about the gospel

1. **The gospel is for shepherds.** This may not strike us as a big deal until we learn that by the time of Christ shepherds were despised by everybody else. They were considered the lowest of the low, looked down on by everybody else, classified with the tax collectors and dung sweepers. They could not testify in court because it was assumed they were liars. Nor would people buy from them because it was assumed that anything they had was stolen. Nevertheless, it was to such as they the angel announced the birth of the Messiah. To say the gospel is for shepherds is to say that no one is beyond the reach of God's love.

2. **The gospel is to be proclaimed by shepherds.** After the angels, the first gospel preachers on earth were the shepherds. "They reported the message they were told about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." Please don't buy the lie that no one would listen if you told people about Jesus. The gospel message isn't about you anyway. It's about what God has done for us in Christ. So talk away. Tell the world, not that you are a Christian, but that Christ is a great Saviour, and that He has come to save all who call on His name.

3. **The gospel and joy are inseparable.** You've already heard the note of joy that permeated the Christmas story. But here's the thing. If you know the gospel and believe it, your heart should be filled with joy. Think about it, sins forgiven. Peace with God. All of it not just promised, but accomplished by our Lord on our behalf. This good news should be a never ending experience of joy and increasing apprehension of all that God has for us in the gospel.

Our challenge, then, is to use the Christmas season as an opportunity to grow into a new appreciation of the gospel. We never outgrow our need for the gospel. We are not "saved" by the gospel, then enabled to grow into maturity by some other means. No. Our Christian growth, our spiritual life, is always dependent upon the gospel. We must be strengthened by God, through the gospel, every day till we die!

John Piper after being told he had prostate cancer. God spoke to him through I Thess. 5:9 For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who

died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing.