SEE THE WONDER OF CHRISTMAS THROUGH NEW EYES

Gain a fresh perspective on the familiar story of Christmas from the unique perspective of the shepherds and angels. Learn how intentional the Savior’s birth was and why it was important they were present. *Our Daily Bread* author Bill Crowder highlights the history that points us back to God’s heart for humanity. Draw closer to the loving Father as you peek through the windows on Christmas.

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Bill Crowder
In the middle of the holiday season, it’s possible to see the lights in other people’s windows while sensing that you have lost the spirit of Christmas. While trying to live up to the expectations of others, you may find that your own ability to give has been drained out of you. Even the sounds
of church bells and carols can leave you feeling that God is asking more of you than you have to give.

If that describes you, maybe it’s time to revisit the wonder of the Christmas story. In the following excerpt of *Windows on Christmas*, Bill Crowder captures the spirit of the season and shows us a God who has moved heaven and earth to give us the greatest Gift of all.

*Our Daily Bread Ministries*
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My dad loved huge Christmas trees, and he made quite a production of trimming those trees. First we would wrap all the lights on the trees, then cover it with ornaments and tinsel. I would watch as Dad placed the angel on the top branch—the final act of the tree trimming ritual. It seemed a grand gesture. Only moments before, the tree had somehow appeared incomplete, as if something important was missing. But with the placing of the angel, the house
was finally ready for Christmas. As I remember it, the angel was blonde, feminine, winged, and robed in a white gown that sparkled. For years afterward, whenever I thought of angels, my mind envisioned that figure on the top of our Christmas trees. What a shock it was, years later, when I learned that whenever angels are named in the Bible they have masculine names, and that it is highly unlikely they were blonds in sparkling gowns!

It’s hard to shake our childhood impressions, but I was right about one thing: angelic beings played a significant role in the events of the Nativity. Without their involvement, there would be a hole in the story—as incomplete as an unfinished Christmas tree. To help us understand the role of angels in Christ’s birth, let’s take a closer look at the heavenly beings themselves.

Who Are Angels?

From paintings to poems to movies to television shows, it seems that angels need a new press agent. They aren’t being well represented. It helps to remember that their best and most accurate representation comes to us in the pages of the Bible.

Angels are seen throughout the Scriptures and are called by a variety of names, including cherubim, seraphim, and living creatures. Sometimes they are described as men, often in shining garments. They are seen guarding Eden, waging war, rescuing Peter from prison, worshiping in the presence of God, and,
tragically, in the case of some angels, rebelling against God. They carry names like Michael ("who is like God"), Gabriel ("warrior of God"), and Lucifer ("light bearer," before he became Satan—the Adversary). They are the often mysterious, sometimes mercurial servants of God that are at the center of many of His dealings with men and women in the Bible.

Some versions of Scripture refer to “Lucifer” in Isaiah 14:12 (KJV, NKJV). Other versions render the name as “Day Star, son of Dawn” (ESV) or “morning star” (NIV) or “star of the morning” (NASB).

The word angel itself comes from the Greek term angelos. The primary definition is messenger, and that is often what they are seen doing in the pages of the Bible:

- Sometimes they carry a message of warning, as with Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19).
- Sometimes they carry a message of rescue, as with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace (Daniel 3).
- Sometimes they carry a message of instruction, as with Hagar, Sarah’s handmaiden (Genesis 16).

Angelos is defined as “a messenger, envoy, one who is sent, an angel, a messenger from God.”

While angels unquestionably do more than simply carry messages, it is impossible to underestimate their critical role as messengers making announcements from heaven to earth. The gospel
(good news) was first delivered to the world by angelic messengers during the events surrounding the birth of the Savior.

**How Are Angels Part of the Christmas Story?**

So, we come back to my childhood Christmas tree. Why an angel on top of a tree? Because the Christmas story is filled with angels, busy carrying messages to people who are integral to the story.

The first angel we encounter in the story is Gabriel, an archangel—apparently the highest ranking in the command structure of the angelic realm. Gabriel visits planet Earth to inform the principal players, and ultimately the world, that the “fullness of time” has come—that long-awaited moment in history when the promised Messiah will arrive (*Galatians* 4:4). This comes in a series of announcements.

**Announcement #1 (Luke 1:5–22)**

Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, an aged, childless priest who was performing his priestly functions in the temple. At first, the old priest was troubled by this phenomenon, but the terror of the moment turned to comedy when he heard the angel’s message. Gabriel declared to Zacharias that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son who would be the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy. When Zacharias, understanding the physical realities faced by himself and his aged wife, questioned the possibility of a
The Window of Exaltation

Malachi promised that God would send an Elijah-like figure who would prepare the way for the messianic Redeemer (MALACHI 4:5–6).

Zacharias would have known well the story of Abraham and Sarah, in which the aged couple were miraculously enabled to have a son (GENESIS 17:15–18:15; 21:1–8).

Gabriel’s announcement came true, and John the Baptist arrived to “prepare the way of the Lord”—step one in the process of bringing Christ into the world.

Announcement #2 (Luke 1:26–38)
Six months later, Gabriel came to the village of Nazareth to give a message from God to a young woman named Mary. She had been selected for the role that had long been the desire of Jewish women—the privilege of giving birth to the promised Messiah. Her response was one of submissive confusion: she was ready to do the Lord’s bidding but mystified as to how such a thing could occur. She was a virgin, and, betrothed to her fiancé Joseph, had no intention of violating her vows of purity. The angel assured her that she would in no way violate her vows, and that the child would be the result of the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, when
the child was born, He was to be named “Jesus” (“the Lord is salvation”)—defining both His character as the Son of God and His mission as Redeemer. At that point, Mary’s response was one of simple availability: “Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Following his visit to Mary, Gabriel also visited her husband-to-be, Joseph, and gave him the same message—Mary’s child was of God, not man (Matthew 1:20–25). Joseph could take her to be his wife with full confidence in her purity.

Nine months later, Gabriel returned with yet another message—this time not a message of anticipation, but one of arrival.

**Announcement #3 (Luke 2:9–14)**

The shepherds of Bethlehem were enduring yet another cold night tending the sheep when they suddenly beheld a brilliant, heavenly light show! This time, the glory of the Lord accompanied the angel’s message, and the shepherds were terrified by the sight. The message itself could not have been more dramatic.

*The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:10–12).*
These simple herdsmen clearly were not equipped to handle this! Angels were supposed to appear to priests, not shepherds. They should be calling on the current managers of the temple in Jerusalem, not men and boys at the lowest level of the Jewish social strata.

We have heard this story so many times that we have become immune to its power and majesty. We talk about angelic appearances as if they were an everyday occurrence—but they weren’t then, and they aren’t today.

No one could have anticipated that such an audience would be the first to hear the angels give the evangelios—the good news of the Savior’s arrival!

**Why Do the Angels Respond with Exaltation?**

Carrying messages is not the only function of angels. In fact, it may actually be secondary to their primary activities in heaven—praise and worship. Notice how this plays out in both the Old and New Testaments.

- The prophet Isaiah was transported into the throne room of God where he witnessed the angelic worship of God in heaven as the six-winged seraphim declared the glory and greatness of God:

  “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isaiah 6:3).
The role of the seraphim is the perpetual worship of God, exalting the beauty of His holiness.

• The apostle John was given a glimpse of the heavenly landscape (Revelation 4–5). He saw the “living creatures” (another term for angels) declaring the holiness of God and calling on the redeemed to worship God for the wonder of His creation and to worship Christ for the grace of His salvation (Revelation 4:11; 5:12). All the residents of heaven then joined the anthem as they praised the Father and the Son for their powerful intervention into a fallen world.

Whereas in Revelation 4 and 5 the angelic realm celebrates God’s creation and Christ’s salvation, in the Christmas story they assemble in a glorious mass choir to celebrate His invasion of the broken planet that is the object of His eternal love (Luke 2). When the angel announces the arrival of the Son of God in human form, the heavenly host can remain silent no longer. They raise their voices in exaltation of God for His glory, for His Son, and for His plan to rescue the lost, tired, and confused race of men and women who, like the sheep guarded by the angels’ Bedouin audience, had long since gone astray. This response of exaltation becomes the great thread of worship that began that first Christmas and continues in our worship today. Their message was powerful:
And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest,
   And on earth peace among [those] with whom He is pleased” (Luke 2:13–14).

What Isaiah and John witnessed in the sanctuary of heaven, the shepherds experienced on that Bethlehem hillside. They heard the angels affirm the glory of God and announce that Christ had come to offer peace with God to a race in rebellion against Him. The reconciliation between God and mankind—the solution for the human condition of sin—is summed up in the simple word peace. It is important, however, to understand that this peace is not simply the absence of conflict—it is the presence of the Christ who is described by the prophet Isaiah as the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). It is, through Christ, the reality of relationship with the God of peace (Philippians 4:9). The Hebrew word for peace, shalom, encapsulates this idea, for it carries the weight of such realities as completeness, soundness, and contentment. Peace. The angels could offer this
promise of peace to the shepherds (and us) because the Christ who makes such peace available to us had just arrived on planet Earth!

The voices of the angels, raised in exaltation of the living God, continue to ring out in our celebrations today. The hope of peace, the longing for glory, the gift of Jesus. All these things that reverberated in the hearts of those shepherds continue to resonate with the deepest longings of our own hearts two millennia later.

How Did the Angels Serve the Christ?

How disappointed the shepherds must have been when the glorious bright angels left and the sky returned to its cold darkness. But the angels were not finished. They would continue to be involved in the ministry of Christ for the next thirty-plus years, particularly during critical moments of danger or declaration:

- **An angel warned Joseph to take the Christ child out of Herod’s reach:** “Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him’” (Matthew 2:13).

- **Angels served Jesus following His testings in the wilderness:** “Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him” (Matthew 4:11).
• **An angel ministered to Jesus during His suffering in the garden of Gethsemane:** “Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him” *(Luke 22:43).*

• **An angel opened the tomb on resurrection day:** “And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it” *(Matthew 28:2).*

• **Angels announced the resurrection of Christ:** “The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified’ . . . and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying” *(Matthew 28:5; John 20:12).*

• **Angels attended the return of Jesus to heaven:** “And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” *(Acts 1:10–11).*

Paul may have been considering a similar cataloging of the activities of angels in and around the earthly mission of Christ when, in writing to one of his young
ministry protégés, he gave a summary statement of the incarnation of Christ in 1 Timothy 3:16:

*By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh,*
*Was vindicated in the Spirit,*
*Beheld by angels,*
*Proclaimed among the nations,*
*Believed on in the world,*
*Taken up in glory.*

There was great interest among the angelic host concerning the earthly mission of the Lord of glory. The events of the incarnation were not merely “seen by angels”; these divine activities were “beheld”—that is, gazed upon—with great interest. In other words, Christ’s redeeming work was, and is, an ongoing source of fascination for the angelic company. Notice how the apostle Peter describes this:

*It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven— things into which angels long to look* (1 Peter 1:12, emphasis added).

What does it mean, these “things into which angels long to look”? Bible teacher and commentator Adam Clarke described it this way in his commentary on 1 Peter:
[They] stoop down to—the posture of those who are earnestly intent on finding out a thing, especially a writing difficult to be read; they bring it to the light, place it so that the rays may fall on it as collectively as possible, and then stoop down in order to examine all the parts, that they may be able to make out the whole. There is evidently an allusion here to the attitude of the cherubim who stood at the ends of the ark of the covenant, in the inner tabernacle, with their eyes turned towards the mercy-seat or propitiatory in a bending posture, as if looking attentively, or, as we term it, poring (over) it. Even the holy angels are struck with astonishment at the plan of human redemption, and justly wonder at the incarnation of that infinite object of their adoration. If then these things be objects of deep consideration to the angels of God, how much more so should they be to us; in them angels can have no such interest as human beings have.

Why is this so? Because it involves “the incarnation of that infinite object of their adoration”—the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The angels exalt Christ for who He is and for what He has done. They exalted Him in His birth, ministered to Him in His life, supported Him in His anguish, announced Him in His resurrection—all because He is the Christ. All because He chose to do all of that for an underserving, sin-stained race. All because He chose to express His inexpressible love in
such a mysterious and wonderful way—and pour it out on His wayward creation.

The angels know what we too easily forget: that the Lord Jesus Christ is ever and always deserving of the highest exaltation. And, as Clarke said, if the angels, who can only observe redeeming love but never experience it, exalt the Christ for His grace, how much more should adoration of the Savior drive the hearts and passions of the men and women who have been granted this great grace!

The marriage of awe and exaltation from observing angels and redeemed humanity finds wonderful expression in one of the most familiar of Christmas hymns:

_Hark! The herald angels sing,_
="Glory to the newborn King:"
_Peace on earth, and mercy mild,"
_God and sinners reconciled!"

Joyful, all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With th’angelic host proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”

_Hark! The herald angels sing,_
="Glory to the newborn King!”

May we, with grateful hearts, join in the exaltation of the Christ, God’s glorious gift to us!
How surprised Mary must have been when a band of ragtag shepherds arrived at the stable telling of angelic hosts and “a star of wonder”—all announcing the birth of her son! Though still exhausted from childbirth, Mary must have been astonished as these simple men of the fields bowed in worship before her Son and then went to tell everyone they encountered about the child they had seen (Luke 2:16–18).

The shepherds were the first to kneel at the manger, which could seem surprising, given who and
what they were. Yet, there they were—worshiping the newborn Savior! So let’s look through the window of worship to learn about them. By doing this, we will better understand and appreciate their reactions to what they witnessed on that cold Judean night outside Bethlehem. Knowing them better will also enable us to move beyond historical records and ancient hymns to share their experience and join in their celebration.

**Simple Men With Simple Lives**

I can think of no better statement to describe the shepherds than that they were “simple men with simple lives.” The very brevity of Luke’s description emphasizes this simplicity: “In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8). Yet that one verse speaks volumes about who these men were and what they did.

*“The same region... shepherds...”*

The region surrounding Bethlehem has been associated with shepherding since the earliest days of recorded history. It was there that David guarded the flocks of his father, Jesse. Bethlehem was a place of pasture, and, therefore, appropriate for grazing flocks.

The sheep that grazed here were not ordinary sheep. Because of their proximity to the temple at Jerusalem, the fields of Bethlehem were primarily the domain of temple sheep—the animals used in the sacrifices offered in the temple. In the first century,
upwards of 250,000 sheep were offered annually as sacrifices at the festival of Passover alone! Thus, these shepherds of Bethlehem were responsible for the delivery of healthy, unblemished sheep to be offered on the altar of sacrifice for the atonement of sin.

“Staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.”

“The night was divided into four watches,” says Bible commentator John Gill. “The even, midnight, cock crowing, and morning. They kept them alternately, some kept the flock one watch, and some another, while the rest slept in the tent, or tower that was built in the fields for that purpose.” Adam Clarke adds, “The reason why they watched them in the field appears to have been either to preserve the sheep from beasts of prey, such as wolves, . . . or from bandits, which were common in the land of Judea at that time.”

These “watches” were based on the watches for military guard duty. Originally the Hebrew culture recognized only three watches: beginning (sunset to 10:00 p.m.), middle (10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m.), and morning (2 a.m. to sunrise). The Romans inserted a fourth watch into this time frame, each lasting about three hours.

The life of a shepherd was a life of loneliness and labor, danger and poverty. Yet, these hardships may not have been the greatest of their difficulties. Because of their profession, shepherds were considered
Their work, among other things, required their hands-on participation in the birthing of lambs (which would bring them into contact with blood) and disposing of dead lambs (which would bring them into contact with dead bodies)—both of which made them ceremonially unclean. This resulted in them being spiritual outcasts. It seems so sad that the very individuals responsible for raising sacrificial lambs for the temple in Jerusalem were themselves excluded from the temple because they were considered ceremonially unclean. But these shepherds faced a two-fold dilemma, for not only were they made unclean by the nature of their work, they were also required to stay constantly with their flocks. This meant that they were unable to leave their tasks for weeks at a time, preventing them from going to the temple so that they could be cleansed. It was the kind of religious “catch-22” that often bubbles up from highly legalistic systems of spiritual thought—and these detached, castoff workers serve as tragic examples of it.

The Israelites had strict laws, implemented by God, about what rendered a person ceremonially unclean (see Leviticus 5:2–3; 7:20–21; 17:15; 21:1–15; 22:2–8). Someone deemed “unclean” was to avoid anything holy and was also required to undergo a specified process of cleansing. Thus, these shepherds perpetually had to go through the cleansing process if they were to worship God in the prescribed manner.
Amazing Moments of Heavenly Splendor

Life is filled with “moments” that brand heart and memory. Some moments are dark and foreboding, like when I got the phone call that my father had just died of a heart attack. When I think of that moment nearly three decades ago, the emotions of loss and pain flood back over me, and I feel afresh the emptiness that attacked me then.

And then there are those rare amazing moments. For me, one of those moments occurred on my wedding day. I was standing at the front of the church with the pastor and my dad, who was my best man. The music played and the bridal party entered. The doors at the back of the church closed for a brief moment that seemed to last forever and then the music changed and the doors opened—and out stepped Marlene on her father’s arm. As I think about it even now, a lump comes to my throat and I get choked up. To see the woman I loved, radiant and beautiful in her wedding dress, coming down the aisle to marry me—me! It was breathtaking and spectacular and magnificent and humbling and overwhelming. It was a moment of splendor.

Measured against what the shepherds saw in those moments on the hills of Judea, I know it sounds pretty small. Yet what I felt in that moment was not altogether different from what I imagine the shepherds were feeling—breathtaking, spectacular, magnificent, humbling, and overwhelming splendor.
Luke’s description challenges our imaginations and thrills our hearts.

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone round them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased (Luke 2:9–14).

How do you even begin to consider such a thing? It is far too much to process as a whole, so I prefer to break it down into moments.

**The Moment of the Messenger**

The angelic messenger is described as “the angel of the Lord” who was accompanied by the “Glory of the Lord” which “shone” in such a way as to terrify the shepherds (Luke 2:9). Like so many involved in the Christmas story, those poor shepherds were completely unequipped for such a sight.

The glory of the Lord was referred to as the “Shekinah,” the brightness of the perfection of the
all-sufficient God. It has been described theologially as the sum total of the attributes of God combined together to create brilliant, perfect light. Now, the shepherds were seeing this glory of the Lord on the hillsides around Bethlehem.

In the Old Testament, the glory of the Lord was evidence of God’s presence among His people. We see this phenomenon first in Exodus 24:16: “The glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; and on the seventh day He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud.” The people of God had gathered at Sinai to either accept or reject God’s rule over them as a nation. His glory displayed His power and might.

We see His glory again at the dedication of the tabernacle, the house of worship for the wandering children of Israel: “Thus Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the doorway of the tent of meeting. And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation” (Numbers 16:19). And we see it at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem where the children of Israel had established a center for their national life and worship in the marvel that was Solomon’s temple: “It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 8:10–11).

The people of Israel enjoyed the presence of God in their midst—until they began to stray into idolatry
and immorality. They corrupted God’s house with pagan idols and dishonored His name, so that God responded with chilling words through Ezekiel the prophet.

After a series of events in which God displayed the spiritual adultery of His people, Ezekiel watched as, step by step, the glory of the Lord departed from the temple, and then from Jerusalem, and ultimately from the people of Israel. The culminating blow is seen in Ezekiel 11:23, where we read these tragic words: “The glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city, and stood over the mountain which is east of the city” (Ezekiel 11:23).

Following Ezekiel’s grim words, the few remaining references to the glory of the Lord found in the Old Testament point to the future, with no expression of God’s presence among His people until that night in Bethlehem some 600 years later. There, with the angel of the Lord, the glory returned! Returned to announce the presence of God once again among His people in the person of the Christ, who John described tellingly: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

It is “the glory of the Lord” that evokes wonder and worship—and, in the case of the shepherds, fear. For hundreds of years, the glory of the Lord had not been seen in the land of Israel. But now, in the presence of shepherds, the glory had returned!
The Moment of the Message

Ostracized from the very religious system they helped to fuel, the shepherds were required to look elsewhere for hope. That night, they found it in the angel’s message, says commentator John Gill:

To the shepherds, the first notice of Christ’s birth was given; not to the princes and chief priests, and learned men at Jerusalem, but to weak, common, and illiterate men; whom God is pleased to choose and call, and reveal his secrets to as He hides them from the wise and prudent, to their confusion, and the glory of His grace. This was a precursor of what the kingdom of Christ would be, and by, and to whom, the Gospel would be preached.

Dr. Larry Richards, author and educator, reminds us that the shepherds were uniquely equipped to be the recipients of this great privilege:

The Saviour, who was now born and lying in the quiet manger, was to be the Lamb of God. And as the Lamb, He was destined to die for the sins of the world. To die for these very shepherds as their Saviour. Perhaps shepherds, who cared for young lambs, who sat through cold, dark nights in the fields to guard and protect their flocks, might understand the shepherd’s heart of God the Father, might glimpse what it meant for Him to give His one Lamb for all.
From a human standpoint, it is amazing that the Son of God would identify Himself with shepherds, some of the lowliest members of society and culture in that day (John 10). Yet, He described Himself as a shepherd, the protector and the pursuer of His flock. Imagine these shepherds—isolated from their people, their temple, and their national hope—discovering from the mouths of angels that they were not cast out or forgotten by God, a fact that He proved by having them be the first to hear the message of hope: “Today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

Their message of hope to the shepherds was a message of hope to all the world. For this child born in Bethlehem would become...

- The Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11).
- The Great Shepherd who purchased the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant (Hebrews 13:20).
- The Shepherd and Guardian of our souls (1 Peter 2:25).
- The Chief Shepherd who comes again for His own with the reward of a crown of unfading glory (1 Peter 5:4).

_Hhumbling Worship in an Unexpected Place_

Where do you like to worship? Some prefer a majestic cathedral, others a simple chapel. But would anyone’s first choice be a stable? Yet, after hearing the message
of the angels, the shepherds’ first response was to find the stable where Mary had given birth to the Savior.

To me, this only confirms that our God is the God of the unexpected. And few things could be more unexpected than the King of Heaven being born in a stable.

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger (Luke 2:15–16).

I have often heard people use various forms of the expression, “You are not defined by what happens to you, but by how you respond to what happens to you.” This is true, I suspect, in areas of life both good and bad, both joyful and painful, both exciting and terrifying. How we respond measures us in ways that words fail to express.

The shepherds’ response was, first, to worship, and second, to tell what they had seen!

When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds (Luke 2:17–18).

Shepherds were not only the first to hear, they were also the first to tell the Christmas message.
With their hearts bursting with wonder at what they had experienced, they shared that wonder with others by telling the whole amazing story—the angels and the glory and the baby.

This is true worship—to kneel before the Christ so that you are then able to stand before others and proclaim His glory and salvation. To be humbled into silence in the presence of the King, so that you can then speak boldly to all who need to hear.

To think that all of this burst forth from a worship experience in a most unlikely place, on a most unlikely night, involving some most unlikely men.

**Celebration From the Heart**

_The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them (Luke 2:20)._  

“These simple men,” writes commentator Adam Clarke, “having satisfactory evidence of the truth of the good tidings, and feeling a Divine influence upon their own minds, returned to the care of their flocks, glorifying God for what he had shown them, and for the blessedness which they felt . . . . What subjects for contemplation! What matter for praise!”

Once outcasts, they were now embraced. Once unfit for the temple, they now stood with prophets and priests to celebrate the arrival of the hope of the ages.

Shepherds celebrating at the birth of a lamb—what could be more appropriate?
Several years ago, I led a study trip through Israel, and one of our stops, of course, was Bethlehem. We had a Bible study session at a place overlooking what is known as “The shepherds’ fields,” and then the group had the opportunity to spend some time shopping in Bethlehem’s world-famous olive wood stores. I was one of several who bought lovely nativity sets made of olive wood. The cost of the sets depended upon the fineness of the carving. Some were so rough-hewn as to be almost abstract art, while others were so realistically crafted that they looked like the figures were actually alive.

Later, as our tour bus carried us back to Jerusalem, we once again passed through the shepherds’ fields. With my wooden nativity set in hand, I thought about the events of the day and the events of the first Christmas. And as we drove through the area where angels visited shepherds and proclaimed the arrival of the King, I thought of the words of one of my favorite Christmas songs:

*In the little village of Bethlehem,*
*There lay a Child one day*
*And the sky was bright with a holy light*
*O’er the place where Jesus lay.*
*’Twas a humble birthplace, but O, how much God gave to us that day,*
*From the manger bed what a path has led,*
*What a perfect, holy way.*
Alleluia! O how the angels sang.  
Alleluia, how it rang!  
And the sky was bright with a holy light  
’Twas the birthday of a King.

Driving through those hilly fields speckled with rock, rough in terrain, and still populated by scattered sheep, these familiar words held an added richness and texture. And as I looked at the hills and tried to visualize that holy night so long ago, our guide asked the driver to stop the bus. Standing on the roadside were two young boys, no more than twelve or thirteen years of age, holding a small lamb. They were Bethlehem shepherds.

Two thousand years after the birth announcement of the Son of God was delivered to poor, forgotten, ostracized shepherds, these shepherds were still working the fields and “watching over their flocks.” As the boys walked down the aisle of our tour bus, almost every person placed a hand on the head of that little lamb. It was a wonderful moment. Shepherds from the shepherds’ fields presenting a lamb.

Two thousand years later, we continue to celebrate the Lamb, and we join the company of shepherds who were the first to do so. 🌟
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