Savior

Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, was born in Bethlehem just as the prophets foretold.

C.S. Lewis described his conversion experience as being "surprised by joy."[1] God had something in store for Lewis far greater than he had ever imagined. No doubt the shepherds on that first Christmas evening were "surprised by joy." None of them would have expected the events of that night to have turned out that way. They received a heavenly visitation from the angel of the Lord; they heard God's praises sung by the heavenly choir. They were blessed to be witnesses of the newborn Savior, but they were also compelled to be witnesses about the newborn Savior to others. The long-awaited salvation promised so long ago by the prophets had begun to come to pass. What a message!

It is quite possible that to many who have grown up in and around the church, the story of the newborn Savior is no longer "news," much less "good news." It is a story that is so familiar that it has long since lost its pizzazz, much less the urgency to relay the story to others. If that is the case, could there be something that we are missing? Have we overlooked elements of "the gospel" or "the good news"? Could the true meaning of the event be lost in its familiarity? Might we need to be reminded of what took place that first Christmas evening and its significance for all of us? Being reminded of why the story is so significant is never a bad thing. It really is "good news"!

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Luke 2:1-20

Luke's Gospel account begins with two birth stories, that of John the Baptist (chap. 1) and Jesus (chap. 2). John was born to be the forerunner of the coming Messiah and prepare the hearts of the people for His coming. But John's story always points to Jesus's story. Jesus is the promised

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Messiah, the Savior of the world foretold in the Old Testament through "Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms" (24:44). The angel Gabriel told Mary that her son would be called "the Son of the Most High," and He would be the prophesied Davidic king who would establish a kingdom that would never end (1:31-33). She would conceive by the Holy Spirit instead of by a human father, thus Jesus would be called "the Son of God" (v. 35).

The Old Testament had foretold that the future Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10), specifically a descendant of David (Isa. 11:1). Even more specifically, the prophet Micah foresaw that the future Messiah would be born in the town of Bethlehem in Judah (Mic. 5:2).

Unbeknownst to Roman emperor Augustus, his decree that all the world should be taxed, making everyone be registered in their hometown, meant that Joseph would bring his wife, Mary, to Bethlehem where her child would be born. Born in humble circumstances with a feeding trough for their baby's crib, Mary and Joseph did not know that their baby's arrival would be announced by an angel and heralded by an angelic choir—to a group of shepherds out in the fields that evening.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

A Savior Is Born (Luke 2:8-12)

Joseph and Mary had traveled to Bethlehem to register for the census in Joseph's ancestral home. While there, the time came for her to give birth (2:1-7). In the same region, an angel appeared to a group of shepherds, proclaiming the birth of the Savior, who is the Messiah.

VERSE 8

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

In Jewish society in the first century, those who were "lowly" included **shepherds.** One of Luke's major themes in his Gospel is that the weak and despised have a place in God's kingdom. Most of the time, shepherds were peasants who hired themselves out to work for wages and/or watch the flocks owned by someone else. In Luke's descriptive style, the

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story of the birth of Jesus includes distinct contrasts, such as those with earthly power and authority, emperor Caesar Augustus (vv. 1-2), and the humble shepherds. God used those with worldly power to contribute to His plan because it was by Augustus's decree that Joseph had traveled to Bethlehem (v. 4), the place where the Messiah was to be born (Mic. 5:2). However, Augustus was not privileged to witness the arrival of the newborn King, shepherds were. By including the shepherds in the story, God was declaring that all people, no matter their social class or standing, no matter their income level or level of influence, were the purpose for God becoming flesh. All people are special in the heart of God, and though none are deserving of His grace, God does not reserve His grace to a select few. All are welcome to respond.

The shepherds were guarding their flock **at night.** They resided in darkness before the light of God's glory appeared. As Isaiah prophesied of the coming Messiah, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness" (Isa. 9:2). A new light was about to shine.

VERSE 9

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

It was to the shepherds that the divine messenger, **an angel of the Lord,** appeared. **And the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.** In the dark of night, the light of God's glory shone.

God's *glory* is His manifest presence, which without mediation would destroy people. But in some way, He admits people into intimate fellowship with Him. The glory of the vibrant and real presence of God was lost by Adam and Eve as they left Eden. The glory of God which appeared on Mount Sinai and then filled the tabernacle demonstrate God's desire to make His presence manifest among His people. He did this several times throughout the wilderness wanderings (Lev. 9:23; Num. 14:10; 16:19,42; 20:6). The only other time in the Old Testament that God's glory came down in this mighty way was when Solomon dedicated the temple (1 Kings 8:11; 2 Chron. 5:14; 7:1-3). The glory could depart as the people became sinful (1 Sam. 4:21-22). Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord depart the temple in Jerusalem (Ezek. 10–11), but he prophesied of the future ideal temple to be built (chaps. 40–48), and he saw the glory of the Lord return to the temple once more (43:1-5; 44:4).

The Israelites longed for the glory of the Lord to reappear to them. The prophets prophesied that it would (Isa. 40:5; Ezek. 43:2; 44:4;

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Hag. 2:3,7,9), but when Zerubbabel's temple was rebuilt after the Babylonian exile, no glory of the Lord descended upon it (Ezra 6:14-18). One day the glory would return, but they would have to wait for it.

Isaiah prophesied of a voice calling in the wilderness, "Clear the way for the LORD" (Isa. 40:3, NASB), and "the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together" (v. 5, NASB). God's glory would show up when the future son of David arrived, and then Israel would be restored (Isa. 58:8; 60:1-2,19; 62:2-3) but at the same time be transformed because the nations would be included (59:19; 66:18-19).

John said, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us; and we saw His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, NASB). This is a direct reference to Exodus 33:18–34:6, where Moses asked to see God's "glory," and God revealed His character which is full of mercy and faithfulness. Thus, Jesus is the manifest presence of the Lord.

The shepherds were privileged to be the first ones to see God's glory, *and the glory of the Lord shone about them* and it *terrified* them. For one brief moment some of His disciples saw the Lord's glory at Jesus's transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36; see Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2). But only those with the eyes of faith would recognize who Jesus really is. Simeon (Luke 2:25-32) and Anna (vv. 36-38) recognized God's glory when they saw it.

VERSE 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 common reaction to the appearance of an **angel** from God was fear (1:11-13,28-30), to which the angel responded, **"Don't be afraid."** The shepherds were to exchange their great fear with **great joy** because of the **good news** the angel would **proclaim** to them. People have nothing to fear when God brings the grace of His salvation on their behalf. It is a source of *great joy* that is available to all.

This *good news* ("gospel") is different from anything this world can offer. The Roman emperor Caesar Augustus gained his throne over Rome through a bloody civil war and then turned the Roman "republic" into an "empire" of which he was the supreme head. He proclaimed that he was the one who brought justice and peace to the whole world. He declared his dead adoptive father, Julius Caesar, to be divine, thus, Augustus described himself as "son of god." His people called him the "savior" of the world, and he was its king, thus its "lord." But the Roman emperor was not the "savior" that the world needed.

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The *good news* the angel brought was **for all the people,** a phrase meaning the people of Israel (3:21; 7:29; 24:19). It was a message that would begin with God's chosen people, but it certainly would not end there. The wise men from the east were personally invited (Matt. 2:1-2). The good news is a message to be proclaimed "to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47).

VERSE 11

"Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

The good news that the angel proclaimed was that God's plan of salvation for humanity was now set in motion. Drawn heavily from the message of Isaiah the prophet, specifically Isaiah 40–66, this message of "good news" takes on new and more significant meaning. The prophet described "good news" as the coming of God to His people (Isa. 40:9). The good news of good things is a message of salvation, proclaiming peace and the eternal reign of God (52:7). It was a message of good news to those who are afflicted, brokenhearted, held captive and imprisoned, and those who mourn (61:1-2).

The good news was that **in the city of David,** that is, David's hometown of Bethlehem, the long-awaited son of David had been born (Luke 1:32). Not just born, but He **"was born for you,"** born for people like the lowly shepherds. In the Old Testament, "savior" is a term used especially of God, who rescues His people (1 Sam. 10:19; Isa. 45:15,21). The child who had just been born now carried that title. He is **a Savior** (Acts 5:31; 13:23). God is the "Savior" who brings deliverance to His people (Deut. 20:4; Pss. 24:5; 25:5; Isa. 25:9). This child would be the one who delivers people from all evil, delivers from sin and sorrow, replacing it with the goodness of God's salvation. Now, the divine Savior of His people had been born in human flesh.

This new child is **the Messiah** (*Christos* in Greek). The term *messiah* literally means "Anointed One," God's specially chosen One, who carries God's approval and the stamp of His blessing upon Him. Prophets were anointed by God (1 Kings 19:16; 2 Kings 2:9). Priests were anointed (Ex. 28:41). Kings were anointed, specially chosen by God, such as Saul (1 Sam. 9–10), David (16:12-13), and Solomon (1 Kings 1:39). With the promise of an eternal dynasty to David (2 Sam. 7:11-16), the descendants of David were recognized as God's chosen. However, the Davidic kings, for the most part, proved to be far from godly and did not lead God's people in the way of holiness. Therefore, the prophets pointed to a future

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Son of David, God's Anointed One, the One that God had chosen to deliver His people and reign with truth, justice, and righteousness (Isa. 9:6-7). Whenever Jesus is called "Christ," it is a recognition that He was specially chosen by God to bring salvation and rule over the universe with righteousness and justice (Jer. 23:5).

The child born that night is also **the Lord,** the term that designated God as Yahweh of the Old Testament (Luke 1:11,17; see Ex. 3:14-15), but now is freely applied to Jesus (1:43,76). Yahweh, "the Lord" and "Savior" of the Old Testament had now arrived in the person of Jesus. This child born was "a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" (KJV).

VERSE 12

"This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger."

By offering a confirmatory **sign** to the shepherds, the angel invited the shepherds to check the story out to see if it was true. They would find a newborn **baby,** that was born "today" (v. 11), **wrapped tightly** in "swaddling clothes" (KJV) and **lying in a manger.** In the small town of Bethlehem there could not have been many babies born that day. A quick search through Bethlehem to find newborn baby boys, and specifically one that was kept in an animal pen, would be all the *sign* that the shepherds would need to confirm everything the angel had told them.

Explore Further

Read "Shepherd" on page 1453 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How do shepherds appear in Scripture, and how are they used as a metaphor? How is God like a shepherd? How is a pastor today like a shepherd?

Peace Is Available (Luke 2:13-15)

Next, a multitude of angels appeared, praising God and singing of His glory. Their song professed the peace God had brought to His people through faith in Jesus. When the angels left, the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem to see the newborn Savior.

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VERSES 13-14

Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!"

The announcement of the birth of the Savior was so important, **a multitude of the heavenly host** accompanied **the angel** to sing praises to God. *Heavenly host* is many times translated "heavenly army" (1 Kings 22:19), but it basically means "God's entourage" or "heavenly attendants," sometimes serving in a military capacity (2 Kings 6:15-17), but in this case as a heavenly chorus.

The angelic song provides a commentary on what God had done. The birth of the child would bring **glory to God in the highest heaven.** God had reached down in love to sinful humanity with the gift of Himself. God deserves *glory* in the highest heaven, but at the same time, the angelic chorus was inviting the shepherds (and all the earth) to join in with the praise that God so rightfully deserves.

With the birth of the Messiah, God had now brought **peace on earth.** The biblical concept of *peace* is far more than the absence of war. It means that everything is complete, and nothing has been taken away. This kind of peace is the goal of God's salvation, everything is exactly as it should be, with nothing left out. Specifically, it means peace between God and humanity. Christ's work of redemption was to bring peace to people in all their relationships broken by sin, with God (Rom. 5:1), with others (Mark 9:50), with the created world, within oneself (Rom. 8:6). It is not a wish for peace, but describes an accomplished event. The "Prince of Peace" had been born (Isa. 9:6).

However, peace is not a universal promise given to all, but instead it is **to people he favors.** The picture of being a person "on whom [God's] favor rests" (NIV) is a Jewish way of saying that this person is in right standing with God.

Salvation and peace with God are not automatic for everyone, not even for all Jews. It is for those who respond to God's grace offered to them and choose to follow in His ways (1:76-79). It is God's grace extended to humanity, grace that makes salvation for all possible. The Savior came for everyone, but only those who humbly receive Him and follow Him will know His salvation (John 1:11-12).

There are very few who would say that we live in a world that does not need fixing. The Bible tells us that our world is broken because we broke it, because of our sin. Sin has wreaked havoc on all of our relationships, and the result is strife and discord. What people need is God's "peace."

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Because the Prince of Peace has come to earth and paid the price for our sins, healing and restoration are available. Peace with God, peace with other people, and peace with ourselves are the result of a life surrendered to His lordship. He can take the brokenness of our lives and restore them to wholeness. At the very least, this message is good news, probably the best news that people can ever hear.

VERSE 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."

The shepherds knew that God's announcement to them was a special invitation. That invitation from God demanded a personal response. The angel did not command them to go to **Bethlehem,** but why else would God have told them who was born and where the baby could be found? Their response of going was not for proof so that they *might* believe the message. It was a response of faith because they *did* believe the message.[2]

Explore Further

Read "Peace" on pages 1233–1234 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are the various aspects of the biblical concept of "peace"?

Jesus's Birth Proclaimed (Luke 2:16-20)

Upon finding Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, the shepherds reported to them what the angels had proclaimed. Everyone who heard this was amazed. Mary treasured these things in her heart. The shepherds returned to their flocks outside Bethlehem, praising God for what they had just seen and heard.

VERSE 16

They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger.

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The shepherds represent the lowly and humble who respond positively to God's message, a major theme in Luke's Gospel. They chose to leave their flocks and head into Bethlehem to investigate the story personally. Sure enough, they **found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger,** just as the angel had announced to them.

VERSES 17-18

After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

The shepherds had the story for the ages and the story that all need to hear. It was the shepherds who had the divine interpretation of the identity of this child. Mary (1:30-35) and Joseph (Matt 1:20-21) were told earlier of Jesus's identity, and Elizabeth and Zechariah were told that their son would prepare the way for the people to meet the coming "Lord" (Luke 1:13-17). But the shepherds were the ones who had the privilege of announcing to the people the significance of **this child.**

In the small town of Bethlehem, the birth of a baby boy would not have been huge news. But with the explanation of *the shepherds* as to the significance of the event, the hearers no doubt went to check it out themselves. Their reaction was "amazement" or "wonderment."

VERSE 19

But Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them.

Sometimes a person experiences an event of such magnitude that it takes quite some time to unpack the meaning of what he or she has experienced. The Holy Spirit had overshadowed Mary so that she would conceive Jesus without the aid of a man (1:34-35). But the Holy Spirit had not given Mary divine insight to understand the implications of everything the birth of Jesus meant.

The shepherds and the information they brought from their angelic visitation gave Mary new insight that her newborn son was "the Savior," "Christ," "the Lord." Mary **was treasuring up** [pondering] **all these things in her heart and meditating on them.** The Greek grammar indicates this was an ongoing action. The *treasuring up* and *meditating on* were not onetime events. In her mind and heart, Mary continued to try to put all the pieces together, to understand all of the events, including the events the night Jesus was born, and to see the whole picture (2:51).[3]

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We are beneficiaries of Mary's thoughts and reflections through the years. When Luke wrote his Gospel account, he did thorough research to write about events he had not personally experienced. He consulted "the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed them down to us" (Luke 1:2). Who were those "original eyewitnesses"? No doubt one of them was Mary, who years after the events could recall them, even what God had said through His angels and what He had revealed through His servants. It is quite possible that the Christmas story in Luke's Gospel came straight from Mary, the one whom God had taught the profound meaning of the events as she meditated on them through the years

VERSE 20

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.

The shepherds were forever transformed by this experience. **God** had visited them, the angel had announced the birth of the Messiah, and they had witnessed the newborn Savior with their own eyes. God deserved the glory and praise for what He had done.

The importance of the message of the birth of the Savior demands that the message be retold over and over so that all may have an opportunity to respond. The child born that night is no longer bound in swaddling clothes and confined to a manger. He has accomplished the work for our salvation and is now seated at the right hand of God (22:69). The work is finished. The manger and the tomb are empty. Now there is a story that needs to be told!

Explore Further

Read "Mission(s)" on pages 1114–1116 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded.* It is God's purpose for His people to be a part of His mission to bring the message of salvation to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). In what ways are you and your local church a part of this mission?

1. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*.
2. David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 124.
3.. Ibid.

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