

Why Do the Christmas Angels
Appear to Shepherds? - Luke 2:1-20

Question: Who was the first shepherd in the Bible? **(Wait for responses)**

Answer: Abel (In Gen 4:2 we read “Later she (Eve) gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.”

Approximately 700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Micah foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Micah 5:2 says:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel, whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf.

Matthew 2:1 and Luke 2:4, 11, and 15 confirm that this is precisely what happened.

The birth of Jesus was a most miraculous event, having been foretold centuries before. And such a momentous event deserved a grand announcement.

Have you ever wondered why angels appeared at night and proclaimed a message of universal significance to unnamed shepherds outside a small village called Bethlehem?

If you had good news to share, who would you tell first? Would you tell your best friend? Share it with your spouse? Maybe your mother or father?

When God had the best news of the ages, who did He tell first? Members of the clergy? Wealthy people? Political leaders? People in academia? Actually, no, **God told shepherds.**

So, why **did** God choose to make His announcement of “cosmic significance” to a group of unnamed shepherds, inviting them to join in the celebration?

The Gospel of Luke is the only account which mentions the shepherds. The narrative is written in Luke 2:1-20. Rhys Pearson read that passage in its entirety last Sunday, so today I will just focus on the section that features the shepherds. Reading from the New Living Translation – Luke 2:8-20

⁸ *That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” ¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.” ¹⁵ When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ¹⁶ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger.*

¹⁷ *After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, ¹⁹ but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. ²⁰ The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.*

Did they sing, was this a choir of angels? That is often the way the angels are represented, and the words of praise that they expressed have inspired many songs.

In the time of the patriarchs, a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, being a shepherd was an honourable occupation because at that time, many people were living nomadic lives.

In Biblical Israel, nomadic shepherds lived a lowly life with their flocks, providing all the care that the sheep needed. They would guide their sheep by day to find food and watch over them at night. Shepherds had to place their flock into sheepfolds and protect them from predators and robbers.

Night was never a time for uninterrupted sleep. Each sheep was counted every morning and should one have gone missing, the shepherd searched diligently for it. Being a shepherd wasn't just a job but a lifestyle, often lonely and isolated from other people.

Though many of the patriarchs were respected shepherds, by the time of the NT, shepherds had a low status within their culture. The Jewish leaders often criticised shepherds as the nature of their work meant they could not always keep to religious rules, e.g. strict Sabbath observances. Shepherds were poor, often illiterate, and frequently viewed as dishonourable. Many considered them thieves for grazing their sheep on others' property.

Shepherds were the marginalized, the ones society looked down upon. Yet, it's to these very people that God chooses to reveal the most significant event in human history.

Randy Alcorn tells us, "Smug religious leaders maintained a strict caste system at the expense of shepherds and other common folk. Shepherds were officially labelled 'sinners' — a technical term for a class of despised people."

The angels declared the beginning of a new era – this is now the time of God's favour, a time of peace. The armies of heaven appeared to the lowly, the ordinary, the disregarded, the outsiders, drawing them in and making them part of this event – to welcome the Saviour of all mankind.

Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889) provides an intriguing answer to our question of why the angel announced Jesus' birth to this particular group of shepherds. He asks us to consider the possibility that these were not shepherds of ordinary sheep.

Edersheim was Jewish by birth and training. Later, he became a follower of Jesus, studied and taught biblical theology in Scotland, and wrote *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Writing about these shepherds, Edersheim referenced the Jewish *Mishnah*.

The *Mishnah* is a collection of documents recording oral traditions governing the lives of Jewish people during the period of the Pharisees. As such, an understanding of the *Mishnah* gives us insight into how Jewish people lived during the time of Jesus.

One regulation in the *Mishnah* "expressly forbids the keeping of flocks throughout the land of Israel, except in the wildernesses – and **the only flocks otherwise kept, would be those for the Temple-services**" (*Bab K. 7:7; 80a*) - sacrifices.

Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and their surrounding fields were **not** in the wilderness where ordinary flocks of sheep were kept. Therefore, according to the Jewish regulations, the flocks under the care of the shepherds near Bethlehem must have been "for the Temple-services." These shepherds watched over sheep destined as sacrifices in the Temple at Jerusalem.

Everything points to these shepherds watching over sheep used for sacrifice. What would they have thought when they heard:

"Today in the town of David **a Saviour has been born to you**; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

The message of the angels signified, among other things, that the time of animal sacrifices would soon end. The offering of Jesus Christ, the Saviour, the Lamb of God, would soon take place.

These shepherds who were minding the flocks used for the temple sacrifices were granted the privilege of being the first to see the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" as John the Baptist declared in the Gospel of John 1:29-30

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, '**Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**' ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, "A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me."

It's no wonder **these shepherds “let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen”** *As the Message version phrases Luke 2:20* .

We may think that news this important should be told to the highest authorities in the region, if not the world. So, why didn't the angels make the announcement to Caesar Augustus in Rome?

Bethlehem is less than 9.0 km from the Jewish capital, Jerusalem. Why didn't the angels appear to the Roman Governor Quirinius or King Herod?

Why didn't they appear to the Jewish high priest at the Temple?

The fact that the angels announced the arrival of Jesus to this group of shepherds shows that **the message of Jesus is for all people**, even those considered to be insignificant or marginalised.

The angel spoke of a **“Saviour”** and said he is **“Christ the Lord”**. This is an important detail about the identity of Jesus.

‘Christ’ is a Greek word and is the equivalent of the Hebrew **‘Messiah’**. Both words mean ‘the anointed one.’ The Christ-child will be a saviour, but not in a political or military sense – He will save people from sin and death.

The angel proclaims good news of cosmic proportions: A Saviour has been born! One who will deliver humanity from the consequences of sin. This isn't just any birth announcement; it's the declaration that God Himself has entered human history in the person of Jesus Christ.

The impact of this news on the shepherds was profound. They went to Bethlehem. They found the babe, lying in a manger. They became worshipers of Jesus, praising and magnifying God. But they didn't stop there—after they left they became witnesses, sharing the good news that the long-hoped-for Messiah had been born.

This story of the shepherds isn't just a quaint nativity scene element. It's preserved in Scripture for a deeper reason. God wants us to see something vital: **If there's hope for shepherds, those derided and considered as lowlives, there's hope for all of us.**

1 Corinthians 1:25-29 says:

²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.

The imagery of the Messiah as the ‘Good Shepherd’ and Israel as the sheep appears throughout Old Testament Scripture.

The Bible is not explicit about why the shepherds were the first to receive the announcement of Jesus’ birth, but here are some possible reasons.

1. God was intentional in sending the announcement of Jesus’ birth to those Israelites who, by their occupation as shepherds, represented the role of His Son, who has become known as the Good Shepherd.

2. The major biblical patriarchs were Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. Each of these men were shepherds for a time of their lives, albeit this occupation was regarded noble when they served

as such. In Psalm 23:1, King David called the Lord his shepherd, and in John 10:11&14 Jesus called Himself the good Shepherd.

The shepherd motif is a broad one throughout Scripture. Isaiah 53:6 reminds us,

“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Isaiah is speaking of Jesus Christ as the One on whom God has laid the iniquity of us all.”

3. A third reason is that shepherds are **Watchful**

The shepherds in the field outside Bethlehem were awake and watchful. When the angel appeared in the night sky, they reacted with great fear, and then belief. They did not doubt what the Lord had shown to them. Their demeanour serves as a contrast to other Jews who were looking for a mighty king to save them from the yoke of the Romans.

4. A fourth reason is that shepherds are **Lowly**

At the time Jesus was born, if anyone in that culture understood a lowly state, the shepherds did. Their estate was one of subservience and humility. Similarly, Jesus arrived on this earth in the form of a helpless baby, and, while raised in the household of a craftsman, His position was not regal and mighty as expected by the Jewish elite.

5. Even the location — Bethlehem — speaks of the humble nature of Jesus’ entry into the world. Micah 5:2 predicts that our Saviour will be born there.

‘But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.’

The significance of inviting the shepherds first, those who were overlooked and disregarded by many, hinted at God’s kingdom ways. The shepherds represented the people of Israel, invited to come and worship their Messiah. Those who seek out and acknowledge Jesus are those who are humble and who recognize their need for a Saviour.

Jesus is the ‘Good Shepherd’ and He came for the salvation of Israel, to reconcile people to God. But when He was rejected by many of His own, the fulfilment of God’s plan was fully revealed to draw **ALL** people to Himself.

So What Does This Mean for Us?

We need our good Shepherd to guide us and protect us from the evil one. Our Shepherd is our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and like a good shepherd, He cares for us and only wants the best for us.

We do not know the precise date of Jesus’ birth, but Christmas is the traditional time for celebrating that birth. And His birth is something worth celebrating! Let’s remember why he came – not only to live but also to die – the perfect sacrifice for sin, once and for all.

And, praise God, that’s not the end. For He rose from the dead, ascended to the right hand of His Father, and is preparing a place for us, as he declared in John 14:2-3

My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

When the shepherds arrived in Bethlehem, they were empty-handed. They had no expensive gifts to bring. All they had to bring was their praise and worship as an offering. They are a witness to us, because we too come humbly to Jesus empty-handed.

The shepherds had a great story to tell – and they passed it on. When we encounter Jesus, we also have a story to tell!

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.” (Luke 2:20)

As you read the account of the shepherds in the field on the night our Saviour was born, may you reflect on Jesus’ humility, mercy, grace, goodness, holiness, and truth.

God used lowly shepherds to share the good news. They were the very first evangelists! Like the shepherds, encountering Jesus should transform us into both **worshippers** and **witnesses**, sharing the good news with others. How kind of Him to use even you and me as His ambassadors.

In Matt 28:18-20 we read:

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’