

Introduction

It is remarkable that the first announcement of the birth of the Promised Messiah was given by an angel to anonymous shepherds. Why Shepherds? The reason provides an insight into God's love and grace to mankind. Shepherds were outsiders and outcasts in Israel. The work they did with the animals made them ceremonially unclean – which kept them away from going to the temple to worship God. So, God made the first move and went to the shepherds.

Jesus is called the Good Shepherd (John 10:11) the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the world (John 1:29). The shepherds outside Bethlehem may have been caring for the sheep that would provide the sacrifices for the temple services. If so, it seems right that the good news about God's Shepherd and about God's Lamb was given to humble shepherds.

But these hard, practical men could be frightened. So, the angel reassured them (Luke 2:10).

1. The DARKNESS

(Luke 2:8)

“That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep.”

(Luke 2:8 NLT).

Many pictures on Christmas cards shepherds on the hills are not correct. The sheep were not safely in a pen, and the shepherds were not warming themselves around a fire.

- The phrase translated “staying in the fields” (v.8) means living in the wild pasture, out under the open sky even at night. There would have been no sheep pens nor tents. The shepherds may have been in the same valley, but they would have stayed close to their own sheep. Their job was to protect their herd from thieves and wild animals.
- Sheep are generally afraid of fire. The flickering light of the flames and the crackling noises make sheep nervous. A shepherd would not light a fire unless he wanted to drive his flock away.

The hillside outside Bethlehem was an inky-black darkness. There were no streetlights, no ambient light from the city, and the Star of Bethlehem was not in the sky. (That came many months later, with the Wise men.)

What the shepherds experienced was an intense physical darkness – which is also a metaphor of an intense spiritual darkness. The shepherds are a picture of a world living in spiritual darkness and fear.

In the Bible, darkness is a symbol of sin, ignorance, judgement, and death. Darkness refers to everything that separates us from God. This explains why Satan is called the ‘Ruler of Darkness’ and Jesus is the ‘Light of the World’.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” (John 1:5 NLT).

John was referring to Jesus, explaining that the Word of God has become flesh. Jesus has come into a dark world, and He is the light of the world. Jesus is the One who shines out in the spiritual darkness of this world.

Earlier that evening, when the shepherds settled down for night, they would not have known that the answer to all their darkness and fears was just around the corner.

2. The DAZZLING

(Luke 2:9)

“And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord flashed and shone

around them, and they were terribly frightened.” (Luke 2:9 AMP).

It is difficult to imagine the sudden change from the inky black darkness of a hillside to the bright, visible light of the glorious, holy presence of the angel of the Lord. English Bibles politely say that the shepherds were “*terribly frightened*”. (A great understatement!). The shepherds would have been speechless, freaked out, and rooted to the spot in fear.

There were several reasons:

a) The angel Broke Earthly Reality.

The Shepherds were practical men of the world who focused on the work that needed to be done with little time for dreams and visions. When they saw the angel, it would have shattered their ideas of everyday life.

b) The angel Highlighted Human Sinfulness.

The angel of the Lord would have come from God’s holy presence in heaven. So, when God’s holy glory appeared in the hills outside of Bethlehem, it would have highlighted the sinfulness and the unworthiness of the Shepherds.

c) The angel Announced Upcoming Judgement.

In Bible times, many Jews believed that, when a human saw an angel, it was to announce that they would die. (Note: The Bible does not support this view.) Instead, the appearance of an angel is linked to a judgement from God. So, the Shepherds were facing God’s judgement; they knew that they were sinners who had fallen short of what God wanted.

Clearly, the Shepherds were afraid and shaken to the core.

Critics suggest that what the shepherds saw was not real. It was just some sort of weird vision or pretty lights. In response, if a group of brave shepherds were afraid at what they saw and heard, then we can be sure that it was real.

Into the spiritual darkness of the world, God’s holy presence was seen and heard. The dazzling glory of God announced peace and good news to the shepherds, because the Prince of Peace was born.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

(Isaiah 9:6 ESV).

3. The DISCOVERY

(Luke 2:16-18)

“So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” (Luke 2:16-18 NIV).

Note what the shepherds did.

a) They Jumped into Action.

The word translated “hurried” (v.16) means to urge and to encourage. In other words, when the shepherds heard the news from the angels that Jesus was born, they joyfully jumped into action. As they made their way down to Bethlehem in the dark, they urged and the encouraged one another to keep going and to keep up the pace.

b) They Met with Jesus.

In English, to “see” something means to look with our eyes. The word translated “seen” (v.17) also means to understand. We might say, ‘the penny has dropped’. What the shepherds saw with their eyes caused them to understand who Jesus was. This baby was the promised Messiah, the Prince of Peace, and the Saviour of the world.

c) They Spoke to Others.

After they had seen Jesus, *“they spread the word”* (v.17). These untrained, uneducated, and unprepared shepherds were the ones that God chose to share the Good News of Jesus with others. The shepherds shared what had happened and how their lives had changed because of having met Jesus.

As Christians, we are called to share the Good News of Jesus with others.

“Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous works among all the peoples!” (Psalm 96:3 ESV).

“But you will receive power and ability when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be My witnesses [to tell people about Me] both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 AMP).

As Christians, let us not delay in speaking out about who Jesus is. Let us tell our families, friends, and our community how Jesus has changed our lives.

CONCLUSION

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator;
If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist;
If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist;
If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer;
But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Saviour.

Jesus is the Light of the World, and we live in His light.

Because of Jesus:

- ❖ The **Darkness** is gone
- ❖ We are forgiven and shine in His **Dazzling** holiness.
- ❖ There is an ongoing **Discovery** of a new and an eternal life with Him.

“But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.””

(Luke 2:10-11,14 NIV)

AMEN