

RESPONSES TO THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Luke 2:8-20

(NASB) "In the same region there were *some* shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. ¹⁰ 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; ¹¹ for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² This *will be* a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' ¹³ And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.' ¹⁵ 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.' ¹⁶ So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them."

INTRODUCTION

On Christmas Eve, 2010, Mike Hermanstorfer was in the delivery room of a Colorado hospital clutching his pregnant wife's hand. His wife Tracy suddenly stopped breathing. She'd gone into cardiac arrest during labor. Doctors soon told him, "We're going to take your son out now. We've been unable to revive Tracy so we have to do this now to save the baby." After an emergency C-section, a medical team rushed his wife to an operating room. Other staff handed his son to him. Mike cradled his newborn, seemingly totally lifeless, son. With his world collapsing around him, Mike fervently cried out to the Lord for His aid. He continued to pray while doctors feverishly worked to revive his boy. His son soon began breathing on his own. Not long after, Mike learned his wife had inexplicably started breathing again. He later confessed, "My legs went out from underneath me. I had everything in the world taken from me, and in an hour and a half I had everything given to me." Mike credits "the hand of God" for this double blessing of receiving both his wife and son back seemingly from the dead. Tracy calls their son her "miracle birth."

The most astounding "miracle birth" of all time took place over 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem. Angels heralded the arrival of God's Messiah, the Christ-child, whose coming was promised for at least 4,000 years. Before choosing to create our world, God knew His Son could alone become the perfect sacrifice necessary to save us from the everlasting ruin into which our pride-filled, selfish rejection of God's loving authority had cast us. The Message paraphrases **I Peter 2:18-21**: "Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God. It cost God plenty to get you out of that dead-end, empty-headed life you grew up in. He paid with Christ's sacred blood, . . . He died like an unblemished, sacrificial lamb. And this was no afterthought. Even though it has only lately—at the end of the ages—become public knowledge, God always knew He was going to do this for you. It's because of this sacrificed Messiah, whom God then raised from the dead and glorified, that you trust God, that you know you have a future in God."

Today's sermon, Responses to the Birth of Jesus, highlights three ways people respond to the Adoration with which Heaven's angels announced "'good news of great joy": Acceptance, Amazement, and Analysis.

I. ADORATION (Luke 2:8-14)

"In the same region there were *some* shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened." In **Exodus 25-28**, God instructed Moses how to build the "tabernacle" where He would meet in person with Moses and the High Priest. After completed according

to God's exacting specifications, as worthy of His holy, glorious Presence, **Exodus 40:22** records, "The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." This awesome manifestation of God's Presence with His people is called the "Shekinah Glory," from the Hebrew word meaning "to dwell" or "reside." At the dedication of the Temple Solomon built, "The glory of the LORD filled the house of God" like a "cloud," (**II Chronicles 5:13-14**), but departed the Temple and land of Israel before the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in 586 B.C. God's visible glory never filled the second Temple completed in 515 B.C. after the Jews returned to Israel. The visible glory of God's Presence was not seen again until the night of Christ's birth. Why? Because once again God had a worthy tabernacle where He could meet with us! **John 1:14** (NIV) declares: "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." The Greek verb translated "made His dwelling" is from the noun for "tabernacle" or "tent" and literally means, "to reside in a tabernacle." It's used as a metaphor for the human body (**II Corinthians 5:1-4**).

¹⁰ 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; ¹¹ for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² This *will be* a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' ¹³ And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.' The angels sounded a note of Praise, a note of Peace, and a note of Purpose in their words to these shepherds. Praise is always a proper reaction to God's kindness toward us, great or small. But notice the Praise of the angels is superlative and succinct: "Glory to God in the highest" is a declaration the fulfillment of God's promises through the arrival of the Messiah resounds God's glory to "the highest Heaven." But there's no indication the angels broke out in an extended Praise chorus. These shepherds had things to do—to find and embrace the Christ child, and to begin spreading the "good news" of His birth—so the angels' song was short and to the point. An old farmer went to the city one weekend and attended a big church. When he came home, his wife asked him how it was. "Well," said the farmer, "It was good, but they did something different. They sang praise choruses instead of hymns." "Praise choruses," she said, "What are those?" "They're sort of like hymns, only different," said the farmer. "What's different?" she asked. The farmer said, "It's like this. If I were to say to you, 'Martha, the cows are in the corn,' well that would be a hymn. If on the other hand I were to say to you, 'Martha, Martha, Martha, Oh Martha, Martha, Martha, the cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows, the white cows, the black and white cows, the cows, cows, cows, are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn,' well, that would be a praise chorus."

"For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." These three titles provide the full identity and mission of the Child born on Christmas night. "Savior": An angel had told Joseph, "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (**Matthew 1:21**). "Christ," the New Testament word for the Old Testament "Messiah" ("the Anointed One" God ordained to fulfill His promises to save us and deliver us from evil), was originally a title for **Jesus**. He was often called "the Christ" (**Matthew 16:16; Acts 17:3**). By applying the title "Lord" to **Jesus**, a term used exclusively of Israel's God in the Old Testament Scriptures, the angel is announcing to the world this human Child is also God in the flesh, as **John 1:14** so eloquently proclaims!

II. ACCEPTANCE (Luke 2:8-11, 15-18, 20)

"In the same region there were *some* shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. ¹⁰ 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; ¹¹ for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'" In a magnificent gesture, the first ones God alerts to the Messiah's arrival are not political, religious, or business leaders, but common, everyday people. God made it clear that the rich blessings of Christ's birth are "for all the people," not just the privileged few.

Shepherds were on society's lower rung but their profession was honorable. After all, were not Abraham, Moses, and David shepherds at one time? These shepherds may have lived in what was known as the "Shepherds' Field" located two miles from town. They kept watch in shifts to protect their flocks from robbers and wild animals. It is quite likely these shepherds were pasturing flocks destined for sacrifice in the Temple. God prescribed a daily offering of "year-old lambs," morning and evening, to symbolize Israel's sacrificial devotion to the LORD (**Exodus 29:38-46**). Rabbinic law required such lambs to be field fresh, not barn kept, which means flocks were tended near Bethlehem year round, even in winter.

If you've ever camped in the wilderness or been in a field far from any town at night, you have some idea of how pitch black it is. If a dazzlingly bright light suddenly flashed before your eyes out of the darkness and kept shining, do you think your heart might flutter a bit? "Terribly frightened" in Greek compounds several words for fear. We could say these shepherds "were terrorized by great fear!" Their hearts may have stopped until "the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid.'" The Son of God coming to earth to sacrifice Himself in our place is God's supreme gift of grace. Whenever God extends grace toward us, we have no cause to fear! This is the note of Peace the angels sounded to the shepherds.

"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.'¹⁶ So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.¹⁷ When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child.¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds." These simple shepherds, with minds free of legalistic or preconceived ideas of what God's Messiah must be like, responded with prompt obedience: "They came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger." "Found" translates a Greek word meaning, "to search with the result of finding what is sought." Once they investigated and found what the angels had told them was true, they quickly accepted **Jesus** as "Christ the Lord" and their "Savior." They then became the first evangelists by sharing with anyone at hand the "good news of great joy which will be for all the people." This is the note of Purpose sounded by the angels; embracing God's purpose, His plans, for creating and saving us.

III. AMAZEMENT (Luke 2:18, 20)

"And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds.²⁰ The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them." "Wondered" describes the response of those who heard the shepherd's testimony of the angels' visit and their message of "good news" (Gospel) of the birth of "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." They were "amazed," not knowing quite what to think about all this. What the shepherds reported both surprised and pleased them. But there's no report of them "glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen." They looked upon Christ's birth as a gift to "marvel over," as a nice story to celebrate. They may have overlooked God's call to them to become His people. Jews universally understood the "good news of great joy which will be for all the people" applied only to God's "people" by commitment and covenant. The angels themselves explained who qualified as "the people" able to receive God's gift of salvation in the Christ Child by stating, "peace among men with whom He is pleased." "Peace" is the Biblical "shalom," the well-being enjoyed by those who are reconciled to the Lord by repentance and obedience. We empty Christmas of its wondrous meaning unless we heartily embrace God's offer of salvation in Christ Jesus.

M. R. DeHaan (1891-1965), founder of the Radio Bible Class (and co-editor of the devotional guide, *Our Daily Bread*), wrote the poem, *Can This Be Christmas*: What's all this hectic rush and worry? / Where go these crowds who run and hurry? / Why all the lights—the Christmas trees? / The jolly "fat man," tell me please! / Why, don't you know? This is the day / For parties and for fun and play; / Why this is Christmas! / So this is Christmas, do you say? / But where is Christ this Christmas day? / Has He been lost among the throng? / His voice drowned out by empty song? / No. He's not here—you'll find Him where / Some humble

soul now kneels in prayer, / Who knows the Christ of Christmas. / But see the many aimless thousands / Who gather on this Christmas Day, / Whose hearts have never yet been opened, / Or said to Him, "Come in to stay." / In countless homes the candles burning, / In countless hearts expectant yearning / For gifts and presents, food and fun, / And laughter till the day is done. / But not a tear of grief or sorrow / For Him so poor He had to borrow / A crib, a colt, a boat, a bed / Where He could lay His weary head. / I'm tired of all this empty celebration, / Of feasting, drinking, recreation; / I'll go instead to Calvary. / And there I'll kneel with those who know / The meaning of that manger low, / And find the Christ—this Christmas. / I leap by faith across the years / To that great day when He appears / The second time, to rule and reign, / To end all sorrow, death, and pain. / In endless bliss we then shall dwell / With Him who saved our souls from hell, / And worship Christ—not Christmas!

IV. ANALYSIS (Luke 2:19)

It's sometimes takes a lot of thought to know how to respond to the Christmas wishes of family or friends. A man recently bought his wife an apparently stunning ring for Christmas featuring a large green emerald surrounded by richly red rubies. His close friend commented, "I thought your wife wanted one of those sporty 4-Wheel drive vehicles." "She did," he replied. "But where am I going to find a fake Jeep?" "But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart." The Greek text means, "Mary" needed time for "ongoing reflection on these events" ("treasured") and for "connecting these events into an understandable whole" ("pondering"). Despite her deep faith in God's promises to her concerning **Jesus**, and despite her great trust in God directing the course of her life for her good and for His glory, Mary at times wasn't sure how to react to the surprises or to the demands God's will placed upon her.

CONCLUSION

Nineteenth century professor, novelist, and poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), author of *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* and *The Song of Hiawatha*, was the best-loved American poet of his lifetime. Christmas Day, 1863, Longfellow wrote a poem based on **Luke 2:13-14** that became the carol, *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*. After two joyous stanzas, the carol sounds a puzzling note of "despair." Longfellow was reflecting on recent tragedies. The U. S. Civil War had torn the nation in April of 1861. In July of 1861, the dress of his beloved wife caught fire in their home. Despite his efforts to smother the flames—first with a rug, then with his own body—she died the next morning. His facial burns led him to stop shaving; prompting him to wear the full beard that became his trademark. Then, while dining at home December 1, 1863, he received a telegram that his oldest child, Charlie, an officer in the Union Army, had been critically wounded in battle. A bullet skimming his spine had come within an inch of leaving him paralyzed. Charlie was returned to the Longfellow home on December 3 to begin his long recovery.

The first two stanzas are: I heard the bells on Christmas day / Their old familiar carols play / And wild and sweet their songs repeat / Of peace on earth good will to men. I thought how, as the day had come, / The belfries of all Christendom / Had rolled along the unbroken song / Of peace on earth, good will to men." Now we can understand why the next two verses of Longfellow's poem, left out of the carol, declare, Then from each black, accursed mouth / The cannon thundered in the South, / And with the sound The carols drowned / Of peace on earth, good will to men! / It was as if an earthquake rent / The hearthstones of a continent / And made forlorn the households born / Of peace on earth, good will to men!

We do not wonder, then, why Longfellow gave vent to these sentiments in his next stanza of the carol: And in despair I bowed my head: / "There is no peace on earth," I said; / "For hate is strong, and mocks the song / Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!" It's a credit to Longfellow's faith that he did not end his poem on such a sour note but was lifted by God's promise of peace and purpose in the angel's words on Christmas Day. Through the Savior whose birth the angels celebrated, God will accomplish what He has promised us. Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: / "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; / The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail, / With peace on earth, good will to men."