

A CHRISTMAS BIBLE STUDY – The Bethlehem Shepherds

KEEPING CHRISTMAS IN FOCUS

It is difficult to keep Christmas in focus – we are all so busy!

However you only need *one minute a day* to use these Christmas meditations on the story of the Shepherds.

[Note: Although the prayers start in the singular, they end in the plural – a reminder that God is not only speaking to us individually, but as a Christian family.]

The Bethlehem Shepherds: Luke 2, verses 8 to 20

DAY 1. *In that region there were shepherds...*

There were many other folk in the region as well. God’s message was not to all there, but just to shepherds, to a *few individuals* chosen by God. This is very typical of God’s working. So often he is selective, personal and starts small. Christmas itself demonstrates this. God chose Elizabeth to bear John the Baptist; Mary to bear Jesus...

So in the Church, God does not throw his Almighty power and plans wholesale into a denomination or diocese or parish. He chooses *certain individuals*, discloses himself to them, and relies on them to bring change to the larger group.

PRAYER: Lord, I feel in some sense you may have chosen me. Keep us focused on your purposes, and use us in the lives of others.

DAY 2. *...living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

Why choose the shepherds? Compared with the townsfolk, did living in the fields and close to nature bring them nearer to the *Creator*? **Keeping watch...by night** – did they find it easier than most of us to be *quiet*? **over their flock** – did the simplicity and poverty of their lives mean that they were mentally *less cluttered*? **living** – the older translation has ‘*abiding*’, hence the old word for home ‘*abode*’. This was the shepherds’ *home*, their centre of responsibility, their place of caring.

PRAYER: Lord, I thank you that I don’t have to climb to Heaven, but that you visit us where we live, amongst our responsibilities and cares. Quieten us to hear your message.

DAY 3. *Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, ...*

An ‘*angel*’ is simply a messenger of God, human or supernatural - it matters little. His/her importance comes from the *message* he/she conveys. God speaks his word to the shepherds right where they were living. They probably believed in God, but had mentally located him at a safe distance – at Synagogue, Temple or Heaven. Everyone, not just clergy, has a ‘theology’, for it is simply *what you think about God*. It gets changed as we know and experience more of God.

Stood before them. I expect that was a healthy upset for their theology, especially if – like most of us – they had cut God down to size and pigeon-holed him!

PRAYER: Lord, I thank you for what I know about you. You make all things new. Don’t let our theology blind us to the new things you have for us to learn and enjoy.

DAY 4. *...and the glory of the Lord shone around them, ...*

God’s **glory** was the nearest thing to his Presence. It is a difficult thing to write about, but the Holy Spirit gives us some glimpses of this at times, especially in worship and prayer that is ‘open’ to him.

The Holy Spirit sometimes surrounds God’s messenger/message with his glory, and it is to God’s Presence that folk want to respond (rather than the actual ‘message’). In the ‘Christmas Gospel’ St. John writes **we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son** (John 1:14). The Holy Spirit transforms us **from one degree of glory to another** as we reflect Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18).

PRAYER: Lord, I thank you for all glimpses of your glory. Holy Spirit cleanse us anew that we may reflect more and more the glory of Jesus so it may ‘shine’ to those around us.

DAY 5. *...and they were terrified.*

Terrified – why? Because here was something new in their religious experience. Like so many, their security probably rested in their theological ‘map’. When God rendered it out-of-date, they felt insecure and panicked. In Rembrandt’s etching *The Angel appearing to the Shepherds* the Holy Spirit (a dove symbol) is the centre of the Heavenly light. One angel steps out of it to bring the glad tidings – result? – total panic! Some passing cattle stampede; the sheep scatter. One shepherd kneels, arms extended in worship; another flees, but is falling over one of the sheep. A third (Rembrandt himself) looks out at us with total bewilderment: ‘What’s happening?’

PRAYER: Lord, I feel secure in my mental ‘map’ of how I think you ought to behave. Help us to find our security in you yourself, so it may remain when things change.

DAY 6. *But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; ...’*

This is not advice, it is an order; not a suggestion, but a command. Some of the greatest were commanded not to fear (Mary, Luke 1:30, Joseph, Matthew 1:20). How much more do we need to hear and heed it! My mentor was a spiritual giant. 40 years ago he instilled in me the 3 rules of the spiritual life:

1 – DON’T FUSS, 2 – LOVE GOD, and 3 – DON’T FUSS!

The shepherd-god Pan stampeded cattle and produced Pan-ic. Pan-ic has no place whatever in the Christian life. Panic is highly contagious, and arises when our view of God is untrue and faulty. The devil loves panic and encourages it, since it undermines our belief in God’s Fatherly love and Kingly rule.

PRAYER: Lord, use my fear when it is appropriate for my safety, but keep it in check when it puts us in danger and erodes our trust and confidence in you and your promises.

DAY 7. *‘...for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy...’*

For see... God, like a good parent, when it helps us, gives the reason for his orders. Scripture reveals God and his reasons and its study is essential. What was assumed to be ‘bad news of great fear’ is in fact **good news of great joy!** If the angel had not commanded ‘**Do not be afraid**’ the shepherds would have been in no state or position to hear the **good news** or to proclaim it. It was for their good and their blessing that God made them base their actions not on feelings, but on facts. It is an important lesson. Feelings can run riot; facts, like the Cradle and the Cross, cannot.

PRAYER: Lord, thank you that you, and all you have done for us in Jesus, is totally Good News for us. Through Scripture, help us to keep our faith rooted in facts.

DAY 8. *...for all the people:*

Although the Good News we receive from God blesses us greatly we are not its terminus or final resting place. **I am bringing you... for all the people.** We are not to be just those who receive God’s Good News, but channels and instruments of it to others. A failure to realise this makes Christians inward-looking and pre-occupied with their own survival. That which we have received, God wishes shall be to all. If we hug blessings to ourselves we crush them to death; if we offer them to others they spring into life! The Spirit is ‘living water’. Our blessing must not stagnate!

PRAYER: Lord, I thank you that so much of what I have received of you has been ‘channelled’ to me by other Christians. Make us channels of your great joy.

DAY 9. ...to you is born this day... a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Today. “History tells us about yesterday and may say something about today. Scripture tells us about **today** and may say something about yesterday.” There is always a **today**-ness about in-focus Christianity. Christmas today; Cross today; Resurrection today; Pentecost today (however much we space out their celebrations). God is always about now, as also are our responses to him. God’s angel discloses to the shepherds the three great titles of Jesus – **Saviour, Messiah and Lord.**

PRAYER: Lord I thank you for your saving acts in history, but marvel that you are also a God of ‘Today’. Take our history and transform it by your presence – now!

DAY 10. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

A sign for you. God frequently uses ‘signs’. There was no obvious proof that the baby in the cowshed was God Incarnate, the Saviour of the World! The shepherds, like us, would accept the seemingly impossible message if they trusted God, and reject it if they didn’t. God gave them enough to go on. If God’s messenger was right about the visible details – **child...bands of cloth...manger**, then the angel would probably be right about its invisible significance. Artists usually shun the difficulty, and make visually obvious what was not by turning the barn into a divine and regal maternity ward!

PRAYER: Lord, it can be difficult when you do not make things obvious. Tell us what we need to know. Teach us, Lord, that the greatest blessing you can give us is to learn to trust you.

DAY 11. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace...’

The shepherds, originally scared stiff by just one angel, had allowed the facts of the Good News to replace their feelings of fear. God could, therefore, open their eyes to more. The **multitude of the heavenly host** brought them joy and assurance. **Praising God** – Christian hymn books contain excellent hymns of praise, but the experience of praise is much more – and much rarer – than praise words. **Glory to God** – the experience of Christians praising can, for many a caterpillar-Christian, be a butterfly-experience – a life-transforming taste of a wholly different dimension.

PRAYER: Lord, not for the lips of praise alone, nor even the praising heart we ask, but for our lives made up of praise in every part. (Based on words of H. Bonar.)

DAY 12. *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, ...*

God is the sort of steward he calls us to be! He is generous but never wastes a thing; never wastes a moment! He does not command his angels (human or supernatural) to remain by us endlessly repeating his message. The **angels left them** – God prepares us for his message, ensures that it is delivered, and that we’ve had a fair chance to respond to it. He then expects, both of angels and us, that we get on with the next task he has given us. God is willing to die for us, but he will never pander to us – that would be poor-parenting, not good.

PRAYER: Lord, I hear much but listen less. Teach us, Lord, so to re-arrange our lives that we may miss no opportunity to listen for you and listen to you.

DAY 13. *...the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, ...’*

Said one to another, ‘Let us go...’ God did not command the shepherds to go. In case they could not hear his Good News, God had commanded them **do not be afraid**. Once they had heard, the response was up to them. TV audiences have CLAP NOW boards to create false responses. But God wants true responses. **Let us go** – shepherds leaving sheep are like mothers leaving babies or nurses leaving patients. Those who went demonstrate to us that our relationship to Jesus is even more important than our relationship to those we love most. Before **Let us go** they had to **let go!**

PRAYER: Lord, I can hardly grasp that my relationship to you is more important than all else. Teach us this, and that only in our total surrender can we have total security.

DAY 14. *‘...which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste...*

It is an easy trap and temptation for Christians to focus on the messenger/speaker /preacher. The shepherds’ example is good. **Which the Lord** (not the angel) **has made known**. The best Christian messengers are transparent! When we look in their direction we see Jesus. The experience in the field was not about angels, but about JESUS.

With haste – a common Bible theme. Earlier (Luke 1:39), Mary had rushed off to her cousin to tell her God’s/the Angel’s news of her conception. Lethargy and indifference cannot survive when God and his Good News are in focus. ‘En-thus-iasm’ is being ‘en-theos’, i.e. ‘in God’. (Lethargy is abnormal and ungodly!)

PRAYER: Lord, forgive my fears and suspicions of spiritual life. Teach us what is ‘normal’, and grant that we may ever more dwell in you, and you in us.

DAY 15. ...and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

The angel’s remarks focused on Jesus, and did not mention **Mary and Joseph**. Only one baby in Bethlehem would be sleeping in an animal’s feeding trough (manger)! God seemed to be turning the whole world upside-down! When God appeared to the shepherds they were terrified and vulnerable; but now, it was the vulnerable God to whom the shepherds appeared! **The child lying** – did their bristly faces frighten the Christ Child when (as men so easily do) they bent too close? Although Mary and Joseph were not part of the Good News as such, it is true to Christian experience that when we meet Jesus we meet his family.

PRAYER: Lord, I marvel at the way you turn things upside-down. Lord, we thank you that, true to Christmas, your strength is made perfect in our weakness. (2 Cor. 12:9)

DAY 16. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ...

In her relation to Jesus Christ, Mary stands as the pinnacle of Old Testament Jews and the prototype of New Testament Christians: she awaits the Messiah, she says ‘Yes’ both to Jesus and to God’s Holy Spirit. No one else was at Cradle, Cross and Pentecost. **When they saw this, they made known.** Not a bad text that! According to Luke, God uses these local yokels to tell Mary the three most important things about her son. The helpless baby before them was –

- The longed-for Jewish **Messiah**
- The **Saviour** of the world, and
- The **Lord** (God) himself.

PRAYER: Lord, make your Christmas afresh in me. Send daily upon us the Power of the Most High so that, like Mary, Jesus may be ‘born in us’ today.

DAY 17. ...and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

All who heard – the only two named are Mary and Joseph. **Were amazed at what the shepherds told them** – amazed both at the message and, perhaps even more, at the messengers! Christians too readily assume that God’s ‘important work’ is always done by Christian leaders. The **shepherds’** message will have been just country folk telling simply in their own dialect what their experience was.

‘This angel-like-bloke said as ‘ow yer kid wuz the Messiah!’ ‘Didn’t ‘ee say ‘Saviour’ as well?’ ‘Dunno abah’ that, but I distinctly ‘eard ‘im say somefink abah’ ‘ow’ee wuz Lawd!’ ‘Good Gawd, fancy ‘at ‘en!’

So went one of the greatest messages in history! Encouraging isn’t it! God is not dependent on public speakers. At the first Christmas God by-passed the recognised ‘religious leaders’ completely! They’ll be great messages God is entrusting you with about Jesus – messages for your neighbours or relations who would never hear or heed a ‘religious leader’, but who need to hear from you in your ordinary language of ‘the good things the Lord has done for you’.

PRAYER: O Lord, open my lips. May our mouths show forth your praise.

DAY 18. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Mary had to be the ‘right one’ because through human birth God allowed her to provide his Son with human personality. She was not God, but she had to be godly! She **pondered**. Scripture can be used in many ways. This bible study each day has helped us to ponder on God’s activities during the first Christmas. **In her heart** – the heart is the place where Christmas starts for us today. A knowledge of historical events is not enough to make Christmas Christ-mas. Christ coming then needs Christ coming now to make Christmas true and real for us.

PRAYER: Lord help me to open my heart to you. Come to us, Lord Jesus, abide with us today. God with us.

May God be with you.