

FOR ALL THE PEOPLE: THE SHEPHERDS' JOY

Luke 2:8–20

Key Verse: 2:11

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

This month we've been thinking about the hope, peace and love of Christmas. Today it's joy. What's the joy of Christmas? It's a time unlike any other, with Christmas trees, lights, music, gifts, cookies and funny Christmas movies. We long to spend time with loved ones. But where does the real joy of Christmas come from? It's from the meaning of Jesus' birth. The angel says his birth can bring great joy to all the people. This great joy can become real for anyone who hasn't experienced it yet. It also can come to those who once had it but somehow lost it. What is this great joy? Where does it come from? Why do we need it? And how can we have it? May God speak to us through his word.

In verses 1–7 the facts of the birth of Jesus are stated quietly. Now we see what his birth means and how people respond. Look at verse 8. Some key details are here. First is the *place*: it says “in the same region” and “out in the field.” It's the region of Bethlehem (verse 3), and the field is where sheep are kept. This place, way out here, seems unlikely to be glorious. Next is the *people*: they're “shepherds”—in modern terms, lowly workers, overlooked by society.¹ Third is *what's happening*. The shepherds are “keeping watch,” doing their best to protect their sheep when no one else is noticing. Finally is the *time*. It's “by night.” “Night” also points to the spiritual reality of “this present darkness” (Eph.6:12), where ignorance, danger, and evil are hidden.

The main word here is “shepherds.” Jesus' birth is first announced to *shepherds*? Some may find it hard to relate to those who care for animals. But so many of us here are actually shepherds. Parents, relatives, and those who serve our little ones, feeding, teaching, and protecting them, are *shepherds*. Student leaders are young *shepherds*. Coaches and teachers are *shepherds*. Researchers can be *shepherds*. Those doing menial night work, who work at UPS or Starbucks, in big box stores, as rideshare drivers, in manufacturing, or in law offices, IT and banking, as programmers or administrators, in business, health care, home and mental health, in elder care—we all can be *shepherds*. On top of all else they're doing, those who genuinely make friends with people, teach them Bible and pray for them, are *shepherds*. As Christians, we're all called to be salt and light in the world (Matt.5:13), *shepherds* wherever we go. As we work “out in the fields,” we experience the world's dangers, cold realities, and all its brokenness, in the same darkness as everyone else. But God is ready to reveal the meaning of Jesus' birth to people living as faithful shepherds.

Look at verse 9. This angel is just a messenger of God; the focus is on the light of the glory of God shining into the darkness. Jesus' coming is about to give light to those who sit in

¹ One of Luke's favorite themes is how God exalts the humble: 1:48,52; cf. 14:11; 18:14.

darkness and in the shadow of death (1:79). At first these men are “filled with great fear.” But the angel comforts them. Read verse 10.² The Romans used these words for their emperor. They would say his birthday was “good news of great joy for all the people,” that his day of reaching manhood was “good news of great joy for all the people,” that his day of taking the throne was “good news of great joy for all the people,” and that the day of his having a son was “good news of great joy for all the people.” It was just deceptive propaganda. Roman emperors were cruel, abusive and caused much suffering.

Yet how can the birth of a baby in a manger 2,000 years ago bring us “great joy” today? It sounds like nonsense. In many ways this world is a mess. Outwardly things may not seem so bad, but so many people are suffering. Suffering is sobering. It makes us question mere emotionalism. But this great joy is not just an escape; there’s real substance to this great joy. What is it? Look at verse 11. First, in the word order, what’s emphasized is the words *unto you*. It’s not just for these shepherds; Jesus was born for each of us. Isaiah wrote: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...” (Isa.9:6a). We may think we don’t matter. But Jesus was born and given “unto you”—meaning to each one of us. The angel adds “this day.” Literally, it’s the day Jesus is born. But “this day” can also mean “the year of the Lord’s favor” or “the day of salvation,” meaning *now*.³ Instead of obsessing about the past or the future, “this day,” right now, this Christmas, we can open our hearts and receive the One born “unto you.”

The angel adds “in the city of David.” It means God was keeping his promises to send a shepherd like David.⁴ Why is this such a big deal? In every time and place—in nations, companies, schools or families—without a compassionate shepherd, ruled by negligent, abusive leaders, people are harassed and helpless.⁵ In his time, David was famous as a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam.13:14). His people had suffered under the Philistines, but David fought hard and drove them out. Once as he was running for his life due to Saul’s jealousy, while hiding in a cave, 400 men who were in distress, in debt, and bitter in soul gathered to him (1 Sam.22:2). At that moment David didn’t just talk well; he was a real shepherd. He gathered, guarded, nourished, united, and guided his people. Yet David was a flawed man. The good news is, Jesus, the sinless Son of God, was born “in the town of David” to be our true Good Shepherd. It’s not just an old story; he’s the Living One (Rev.1:17–18) who feeds our souls each day and unites us in his love. We may think we’re self-sufficient and don’t need anyone. But we’re way more vulnerable than we realize. If we turn to him, we find that Jesus is “the Shepherd and Overseer” of our souls (1 Pet.2:25).

Read verse 11. This is the good news, the source of the shepherds’ joy. At that time people called Roman Emperors “Savior,” “King,” and “Lord.” But none of them could save anybody; none were worthy to be king or lord. Only Jesus is our real “Savior.”⁶ We may think we need saving from poverty, bad health, or broken relationships. But what we really need saving

² Cf. Isa.40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1.

³ Cf. Luke 4:19; 2 Cor.6:2.

⁴ 1:32,69; 2:4; cf. 2 Sam.7:12–13; Eze.34:23; 37:24.

⁵ Prov.29:2; Matt.9:36.

⁶ Acts 4:12; 5:31; 13:23.

from is our sins. It's our sins that cut off our relationship with God and others, and that ruin his image within us. Because Jesus was the only one born without sin, he's the only one who could die in our places and bring us God's forgiveness. Only Jesus who died for our sins can heal and save and restore us. Only Jesus is our Christ, our real King. Only the Lamb who was slain is worthy of all our loyalty, devotion, and honor (Rev.5:12). Only Jesus is our Lord. Only he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, proving he is Lord of all (Acts 10:36). "Christ the Lord" also means he's coming again as Judge of the living and the dead.⁷ For now, evil people and nations abuse power and get away with gross injustice. Today people are really suffering in the DR Congo, in Somalia, in Ethiopia, in Niger, in Gaza, in Syria, in Ukraine and in Burma. But when Jesus comes as Christ the Lord, he'll bring his kingdom of grace and righteousness, and all his people will shout for joy. Even now, our brothers and sisters in Ukraine, though they're being bombed, are full of such joy because they believe Jesus is Christ the Lord.

But the angel tells the shepherds, "...you will find a baby...lying in a manger" (12). The Savior, Christ the Lord...lying in a manger, an animal's feedbox? How can that be good news of great joy? It seems so *sad*. But in this baby is all the mystery of God. It's called "the Incarnation." Apostle Paul wrote: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor.8:9). His humble incarnation to be with us was God's plan to share his grace with "all the people," Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, from any place, any race. He's for anyone, no matter how great we think we are, how flawed, or how much wrong we've done. The grace of his incarnation is so great, it still can change the most self-righteous, and the most sinful. We can experience this good news of great joy if we would just repent of our sins and put our trust in Jesus. When we do, he fills us with righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom.14:17). We can always tell the Spirit's fruit: it's love, *joy*, and peace (Gal.5:22a). So whoever repents, puts their trust in Jesus, and receives the Spirit tastes this great joy. It's that simple. No human effort, traditions, spending, eating, gatherings, entertainment or vacation can give us such joy.

We may have experienced this joy in the past, but we all need to be renewed in this joy. It's because the world is always working to rob us of our joy. Our Lord Jesus warned that at a time of testing, we can lose our joy and fall away, or, life's cares, riches and pleasures can choke out our joy (Luke 8:13–14). After he sinned and came back to God in repentance, David wrote, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation..." (Psalm 51:12a) What's the source of our greatest joy? It's not presents, not people, not achievements or money. Apostle Peter wrote: "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Pet.1:8–9). What a statement: "Joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory." We don't see him, but our greatest joy is loving Jesus, assured that one day he will save our souls for all eternity to be with him and share his victory.

⁷ Acts 10:42; 2 Tim.4:1; 1 Pet.4:5.

Apostle Paul was put in prison on account of his faith in Jesus. But even from there, he wrote a letter to the Philippians with this theme of joy. He said he was always praying for them with joy (1:4). He was rejoicing because he had the greatest privilege of all, to live for Christ (1:21). Even while pouring out his life, he was rejoicing (2:17). His words urge us, even in the midst of problems, conflict and trouble, to rejoice in the Lord always (4:4). In light of his words, great joy isn't found in good circumstances; it comes from having a personal relationship with Jesus. *Anyone* can experience this "great joy." The prophet Isaiah wrote: "And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (35:10; 51:11). When we personally encounter Jesus as our Risen Lord, he promises that we will rejoice, and no one will take our joy from us (John 16:22b). As a little boy I cried a lot because my mom grew sicker and sicker. Over the years it made me so bitter and rebellious that at age 18 my face was angry and dark. But through UBF Bible study God opened my heart to accept the good news that Jesus was born for me. As I tasted his grace, he changed my sorrow and darkness to joy and light. Sometimes I get burdened with responsibilities. But through this study I realized I just need to repent, get closer to Jesus, and let the Spirit renew in me his great joy. Let's pray for the sorrowful, forgotten people in the world to know this joy.

Read verses 13–14. This good news of great joy for all the people leads to glorious praises to God. Likewise, as we actively praise and give glory to God, our joy becomes more real. And as we see people experience his peace in Jesus, our joy increases. The shepherds respond by going to Bethlehem to confirm what they heard. When they find the baby in the manger, they realize it's all true. They immediately start telling people. The shepherds' joy becomes contagious, and sharing it causes their joy to overflow (20). This Christmas, if we try to enjoy everything selfishly, we won't be joyful. But if we share with others what Jesus' birth means, we'll experience the shepherds' joy.

[image]Some believe in Christmas magic. But there's no magic. If we've never experienced this joy, or really need to get it back, we just need to ask God in his mercy to help us turn to Jesus in genuine repentance and faith. This Christmas we may not experience very many human joys. But let's pray that God may help us experience the best joy, *spiritual* joy: the good news of great joy for all the people in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.