

December 25

Lesson 4

THE SAVIOR HAS ARRIVED

DEVOTIONAL READING: Luke 2:1-7

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:1-21

LUKE 2:8-20

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.



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KEY VERSE

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.—Luke 2:11

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Retell the account of the announcement to the shepherds of Jesus' birth.
2. Explain how the angel's announcement and the shepherds' reaction fit within the larger picture of the arrival of Jesus.
3. Identify one or more elements to emulate in the shepherds' reaction and make a plan to do so.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Celebration of Good News
- B. Lesson Background

I. Announcing the Savior (Luke 2:8-14)

- A. Lowly Shepherds (v. 8)
- B. Heavenly Glory (v. 9)
- C. Stunning News (vv. 10, 11)
- D. Visible Sign (v. 12)

Manger

- E. Angelic Praise (vv. 13, 14)

II. Meeting the Savior (Luke 2:15, 16)

- A. Quick Decision (v. 15)
- B. Personal Discovery (v. 16)

III. Proclaiming the Savior (Luke 2:17-20)

- A. Exuberant Testimony (v. 17)
- B. Wondrous Reaction (v. 18)
- C. Silent Pondering (v. 19)

Keepsakes

- D. Glorious Praise (v. 20)

Conclusion

- A. Glorious Interruption
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Celebration of Good News

New parents are eager to announce the arrival of their precious newborn. They want to shout from the housetops "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!" Whether by telephone, e-mail, social media, written letters, or word of mouth, the news travels. The news of Jesus' birth also spread rapidly, but with a difference: it did not travel at the initiative of parents Mary and Joseph. Rather, the news traveled first at God's initiative, then at the initiative of shepherds.

The news of Christ's birth is indeed news to be celebrated in our hearts today! But doing so is only half the task. The other half is to spread this news to "all nations" (Matthew 28:19) from generation to generation.

This is news that never grows old. This Christmas season we can choose to respond in awe and wonder yet again to the fact that God's Son took on flesh to live among us, beginning his earthly life as an ordinary baby. He did so that he might offer the extraordinary gift of salvation to all who are willing to receive it. "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15), the gift of "surpassing grace" (9:14b) that is made available by the arrival of Jesus!

Today's text paints the scene in which the news of Christ's birth first begins to spread. As we consider reactions and responses on that long-ago night, we are reminded that we have the privilege of evaluating our own at this time each year.

B. Lesson Background

God brought about the birth of Christ by perfect and completed timing ([Galatians 4:4, 5](#)). The timing related closely with God's decision regarding the ideal place. Perfect time and perfect place intersected in the context of the Roman Empire during the reign of Caesar Augustus ([Luke 2:1](#)), originally known as Gaius Octavius, who was emperor from 27 BC until his death in AD 14.

The reign of Augustus saw the beginning of the so-called *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace. Since the empire was largely free of military conflict during this time, the good news of Jesus the Christ could spread more rapidly.

Little did anyone at the time know, however, that in Jesus' birth God was inaugurating a kingdom not only of peace but a kingdom never to be destroyed; this was to fulfill [Daniel 2:44](#) (compare [Daniel 7:27](#); [Luke 1:33](#)). God even used Roman taxation policy to fulfill prophecy regarding the perfect place for Jesus' birth: Bethlehem ([Micah 5:2](#); compare [Matthew 2:3-6](#); [Luke 2:1-5](#)). The fact that the Hebrew word *Bethlehem* means "house of bread" adds power to the imagery of the one sent to be "the bread of life" ([John 6:35](#)). The life he brought was deliverance from sin ([Matthew 1:21](#)).

The Son arrived in one of the most humble ways possible: by being born to a young peasant woman who had to give birth in less than ideal surroundings. Most of us cannot imagine any newborn child—let alone the Son of God—being placed "in a manger" ([Luke 2:7a](#)), which is a feeding trough for animals! Since "there was no guest room available for them" ([2:7b](#)), the Plan B of Joseph and Mary has resulted in the popular depictions of Jesus' birth in a stable. It was in such a context that "the Word became flesh" ([John 1:14](#)). What a lowly beginning for the Son of God's ministry!

I. Announcing the Savior

([LUKE 2:8-14](#))

A. Lowly Shepherds (v. 8)

8. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

The phrase *in the fields nearby* refers to the area around Bethlehem (see [Luke 2:4](#) and the Lesson Background). This area has pasture suitable for livestock (compare [1 Samuel 16:4, 11](#)). Therefore it is not unusual for *shepherds* to be here as they keep *watch over their flocks at night* to guard against predators and thieves. "Humble" is a good description of this setting. The nighttime scene also suggests tranquility, but that is about to change (next verse).

B. Heavenly Glory (v. 9)

9. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

An ordinary setting is transformed into something extraordinary with the arrival of *an angel of the Lord*. His appearing illuminates the night with *the glory of the Lord* (compare [2 Chronicles 7:1-3](#)). Some think this angel is Gabriel, who has appeared twice already in this Gospel ([Luke 1:11-20](#) [[lesson 3](#)]; [1:26-38](#) [[lesson 1](#)]). Ultimately, however, that is speculation since the angel is unnamed.

For the shepherds to be *terrified* is understandable, since fear is a typical reaction in angelic encounters (compare [Judges 6:22, 23](#); [13:21, 22](#); [Luke 1:11, 12](#); [Acts 10:3, 4](#)). If there is such a thing as a once-in-a-lifetime experience for these shepherds, this is it!

C. Stunning News (vv. 10, 11)

10. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."

The shepherds' fears must be calmed before they will be able to comprehend the message *the angel* is bringing. The angel's declaration that he brings *good news that will cause great joy* establishes that the shepherds need fear neither the messenger nor the message. The message is not one of judgment and condemnation (contrast [Genesis 19:15](#); [Psalm 78:49](#))—quite the opposite!

What Do You Think?

How can we ensure that potentially counterproductive emotional reactions are minimized when launching a new ministry?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With regard to our words

With regard to our actions

What should amaze us yet today is that the forthcoming message that is intended *for all the people* is given first to lowly shepherds. We may naturally think that a message from God that is for everyone would be given first to the learned religious leaders. A Jewish commentary on [Psalm 23](#) says, "There is no more disreputable occupation than that of shepherd," and the religious leaders of the day undoubtedly hold shepherds in low regard. Yet the first ones to receive this most-important news are shepherds!

What Do You Think?

How can we avoid overlooking anyone with the message of the Savior?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding those who don't attend church on a regular basis

Regarding those who work on Sundays

Regarding those who exist on life's margins

Others

11. **“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.**

The angelic message unfolds in terms of **how** (*has been born*), **when** (*today*), **where** (*in the town of David*), and **who** (*the Messiah, the Lord*). These elements interact in important ways. The Greek word *Christ* and its Hebrew equivalent *Messiah* ([John 1:41](#)) both mean “anointed one.” This refers to the action that designates someone’s being appointed (consecrated, ordained) to an important office (examples: [Numbers 3:3](#); [1 Samuel 15:1](#)). *The Lord* is a title of authority. The helpless newborn is not predicted to be someone who will bear such designations in the future (compare [Isaiah 9:6](#)). Rather, this tiny infant has them now! He is worthy of these titles even though he is less than 24 hours old.

The elements of *where* and *who* interact in terms of fulfilled prophecy of [Micah 5:2](#). The similar phrase “City of David” occurs dozens of times in the Old Testament to refer to Jerusalem after its conquest by David ([2 Samuel 5:6-9](#)). But in the verse before us, the reference is to Bethlehem, as the author has already made clear in [Luke 2:4](#). In this sense, *the town of David* refers to where that man grew up and was anointed to be king ([1 Samuel 16:4-13](#); [20:6](#)). The prophecy of Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Christ is apparently well known in this era, as [Matthew 2:4-6](#) and [John 7:42](#) attest.

The message the shepherds should understand is that God is not sending another human-only judge, prophet, priest, or king. Jesus is much more, even as a newborn infant! In the Roman Empire, the word *savior* usually refers to a prominent political or military ruler. Yet the Savior in Luke’s narrative is neither. The Messiah is being revealed as God himself, entering the world as a human.

D. Visible Sign (v. 12)

12. **“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”**

The shepherds need a way to identify the baby in question, since there may be several newborns in Bethlehem. The *sign* revealed here allows not only correct identification but also indicates partially what kind of Messiah (Christ) is come.

To be *wrapped in cloths* is to be encircled with long strips of material for warmth and a sense of security. This is ordinary care for newborns. Indeed, an ancient nonbiblical work notes that the baby who later became King Solomon “was nursed in swaddling clothes, and that with cares. For there is no king that had any other beginning of birth” ([Wisdom of Solomon 7:4, KJV](#); the opposite of such care is seen in [Ezekiel 16:4](#)). Therefore, this manner of attire is a sign only in the sense of what the shepherds should not expect: a kingly baby identified by royal clothing.

Of greater value as a sign is the fact that the baby is *lying in a manger*. Since a manger is a feed trough for animals (see the Lesson Background), the implication is that the baby is to be found in a stable! One ancient Christian tradition suggests that this stable is a cave. Such a cave in this context may be a makeshift root cellar in a natural crevice below or near a house. These small caves are used for storage and to shelter domestic animals at night. A stable of any configuration would be unusual for any baby to be born in, much less the Messiah, sent by God himself! This element of the sign is therefore unique.

HOW TO SAY IT

Augustus Caesar Aw-gus-tus See-zer.

Bethlehem Beth-lih-hem.

Gaius Octavius Gay-us Awk-tay-vee-us.

Messiah Meh-sigh-uh.

Micah My-kuh.

Nazareth Naz-uh-reth.

Pax Romana (*Latin*) Pahks Ro-mah-nah.

Zechariah Zack-uh-rye-uh.

MANGER

When I was a little boy, I had no idea what a manger was. From the context of the Christmas story, I assumed it was a bed of some sort. All

the nativity scenes I saw had an X-shaped thing with slats for the sides. Eventually, I learned that a manger is a feeding trough for animals. Our word *manger* comes from the French word *mange*—“to eat.”

When we consider how Jesus’ life unfolded, we are humbled to conclude how appropriate it was for the one who became “the bread of life” ([John 6:35, 48](#)) to be laid in a feeding trough! It may sound a bit crude to refer to Jesus as our feeding trough, but he spoke of the need to eat his flesh and drink his blood ([6:53-56](#)). He is the spiritual food that gives sustenance to our spirits!

If bread is the staff of life, then Jesus is certainly the staff of spiritual life. The meaning of *Bethlehem* as “house of bread” enhances the imagery: the one born in the house of bread, the one who revealed himself to be the bread of life, had a feeding trough as his first place of earthly rest.— J. B. N.

E. Angelic Praise ([vv. 13, 14](#))

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

God provides the welcoming party for his Son: *the heavenly host*. This happens *suddenly*, as the singular angel of the previous three verses is joined by this *great company*. Such phrasing in Old Testament contexts typically identifies an army of angels (compare [Psalm 148:2](#)). Whether the multitude fills the sky or stands on the surrounding hillside is unstated; perhaps it’s both. What’s more important is the fact that the multitude voices praise to God, the content of which praise is described next.

**¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”**

The praise is for what God is doing. What God had planned from the beginning is taking place. What the prophets had prophesied is being fulfilled. And what the angels have longed to look into (see [1 Peter 1:10-12](#)) is coming to pass. No wonder the heavenly host praises God! Even those (or especially those) who reside *in the highest* parts of Heaven give *glory to God* for what he is now doing (compare [Luke 19:38](#)).

As glory is given to God in the heavenly realms, *peace* and God’s *favor* is extended to humanity *on earth*. God is the ultimate peacemaker as he takes the initiative in sending his Son to reclaim hostile, sinful people as his own. The Son is the promised “Prince of Peace” of [Isaiah 9:6](#). In biblical usage, *peace* often signifies security and harmony over and above the mere absence of hostilities (examples: [Isaiah 26:3](#); [Philippians 4:7](#)).

Some students perceive a progressive movement of God’s glory from tabernacle ([Exodus 40:34](#)) to temple ([1 Kings 8:11](#)) to the Bethlehem area. Thus the latter is figuratively seen as a new “Most Holy Place” (compare [1 Kings 8:6](#)). The speculative nature of this idea should make us cautious about making connections where the text does not.

II. Meeting the Savior

([LUKE 2:15, 16](#))

A. Quick Decision ([v. 15](#))

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

The focus shifts back to the shepherds *when the angels* depart, having completed their assignment. The shepherds reveal no confusion regarding “the town of David” ([Luke 2:11](#), above); they know it is *Bethlehem*, not Jerusalem. They embrace the message by immediately expressing their intent to go *and see this thing that has happened*, which the angelic message implies they should do.

What Do You Think?

What would have to happen for you to “drop everything” and react to a ministry opportunity on a moment’s notice?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Concerning ministry to unbelievers

Concerning ministry to believers

B. Personal Discovery ([v. 16](#))

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

The shepherds do not waste any time! They are eager to see the reality of God’s message. What and whom they find are just as the angel promised.

It’s easy to imagine that the shepherds share with *Mary and Joseph* the story of their angelic encounter and the content of the angelic message. The parents (Mary in a biological sense, Joseph in a legal sense), would have no trouble believing this account, having had angelic

encounters of their own ([Matthew 1:20, 21](#); [Luke 1:26-38](#))! It's also easy to imagine a joyous time of fellowship and worship as all gather around *the baby ... lying in the manger*.

III. Proclaiming the Savior

(LUKE 2:17-20)

A. Exuberant Testimony (v. 17)

¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,

The shepherds do not have the message of the entire gospel, but what they do have they are eager to share. The prophecies of a Christ, now hundreds of years old, are coming to pass! What news could be more exciting than this?

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to regain the excitement we had when we first understood the gospel?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

During times alone (personal devotions, etc.)

During fellowship with other believers

Other

B. Wondrous Reaction (v. 18)

¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

When God is at work, he gives credibility to his messengers. The word *amazed* (or *marveled*) is used frequently by this Gospel writer to indicate reaction, often with an element of doubt or confusion, to a divine initiative (examples: [Luke 8:25](#); [9:43](#); [24:41](#)). Part of the astonishment *at what the shepherds said to them* may be that of why God would choose shepherds over religious leaders to receive a message from angels. Further, the people may find it difficult to believe that the Messiah has been born in a stable rather than a palace. As with those who witnessed the return of speech to Zechariah, they may have no answer to the question they ask of themselves, "What then is this child going to be?" ([Luke 1:66](#)).

What Do You Think?

What reactions to our witness can we expect? What responses can we prepare in advance?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding witnessing to strangers

Regarding witnessing to friends

All people in all eras do well to remind themselves that God's thoughts and ways are not the same as ours ([Isaiah 55:8, 9](#)). He does not always operate according to our own thinking processes. Whenever we conclude how God "must" or "is bound to" act in any given situation, danger looms (compare [Job 38:1, 2](#); [Micah 4:11, 12](#); etc.).

C. Silent Pondering (v. 19)

¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

Mary has much to ponder: being favored to be the mother of "the Son of the Most High" ([Luke 1:31, 32](#)), her special time with Elizabeth ([1:39-45](#)), the (likely) whispers and doubts of the people of Nazareth, the long trip to Bethlehem, the smelly stable, the excited shepherds, etc. She gathers all these memories in the treasure chest of *her heart*, undoubtedly to sort through many times as the years pass (compare [2:51](#)). We easily imagine her verbal celebration of wonder in [Luke 1:46-55](#) now giving way to a silent celebration in amazement of all God has done through her thus far. Mary knows that her child is no ordinary baby!

KEEPSAKES

Merriam-Webster's defines *hope chest* as "a young woman's accumulation of clothes and domestic furnishings ... kept in anticipation of her marriage; *also*: a chest for such an accumulation." She may decide she wants her hope chest (whether a physical or a figurative one) to be filled with clothes, dishes, linens, quilts, etc., that she expects to use once she is married and sets up house. As "the big day" approaches, she may check the inventory frequently as she ponders life ahead, thinking of the usefulness of each item.

The passing years may see her reexamining these same items periodically, either by physical touch or in her heart. Doing so may bring back memories of especially good times in her marriage. She may even remember who gave her each item, fondly experiencing again the joyous moment of opening the gift.

What we might call “Mary’s hope chest of the heart” was not one she asked for, but one given her by God at his decision and initiative. She did not avoid reflecting on its contents, but actively pondered them. Over the three decades that followed, she could reflect periodically on her experiences and consider how they fit into the working out of God’s plans—and not all the hope chest’s contents were pleasant to recall ([Luke 2:35](#); [John 19:25-27](#); etc.). When was the last time you examined the contents of your own “spiritual hope chest”?—J. B. N.

D. Glorious Praise (v. 20)

²⁰. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

The shepherds are changed forever by the dramatic message that they in turn deliver to others. The lowliness of Christ has connected with their own lowly (in the eyes of the world) status. The Son of God has found a place not only in a manger but also in their hearts. While Mary quietly ponders, the shepherds shout from the rooftops.

The shepherds can never again view their lives as they have before. We have no record that any of them gave up his vocation as shepherd to become a full-time herald of the gospel. But ultimately that is irrelevant. They can be gospel messengers in their own families and towns without changing their means of livelihood.

Conclusion

A. Glorious Interruption

We too can become messengers of the gospel without changing our earthly vocations. Although we have not had the experience of the shepherds who were privileged to talk about what they witnessed personally, we should recall Jesus’ words to Thomas: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” ([John 20:29](#)).

We do not wait for a glorious interruption on the order of the one experienced by the shepherds before getting started. God can indeed provide an interruption of such a magnitude yet today, but it’s much more likely he will try to get our attention in ways more subtle. For instance, an open door of opportunity to bring the comfort of Christ to a depressed colleague may present itself suddenly during the course of an otherwise ordinary day. God can and does interrupt ordinary days with glorious opportunities. Expect them!

B. Prayer

Almighty God, we invite you to interrupt our routines! As you do, grant that we will recognize your interruptions that we might better share the news of Christ’s arrival in a world desperately in need of it. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Celebrate Jesus’ arrival again for the first time.



Visual for Lesson 4. Point to this visual as you ask, “Would you be willing to invite God to disrupt your remaining plans for the season? Why, or why not?”

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

To begin, help the class participate in a story collaboration exercise about being interrupted during work. You will begin the story. Then one volunteer at a time will add to the story, making it more outrageous as it goes. Start by saying, “I was sitting at my desk working when ...”

Ask for a volunteer to add the next line, another to add a subsequent line, and so forth. Each line should end with an incomplete statement and the next person should continue. A story might develop like this:

I was sitting at my desk working when ...

... the phone rang. It was ...

... a wrong number. So I ...

... slammed down the receiver, and I ...

... smashed my thumb! I immediately ...

... ran to the first-aid kit. I discovered ...

Continue for a while, allowing anyone wanting to add to your fractured tale to do so.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Corruption by Interruption” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Allow students to work individually to guess the extent of time wasted because of interruptions at work.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “We all have been interrupted at work. The results may not be as dramatic as these, but we do not look forward to work interruptions. Today we will look at a group of men who were interrupted at work and what resulted.”

Into the Word

Say, “Haiku is a Japanese poetry form. A haiku uses just a few words to capture a moment and create a picture in the reader’s mind. Traditionally, haiku is written in three lines, with five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second line, and five syllables in the third line.”

Divide your class into groups of three to five. Give each group pen, paper, and one of the following haiku writing assignments. Each group is to write a haiku based on the content of the portion of the lesson text assigned.

Assignment 1—Reception. The shepherds were interrupted by receiving a great message ([Luke 2:8-14](#)).

Assignment 2—Research. The shepherds were interrupted by checking out what they had heard ([Luke 2:15, 16](#)).

Assignment 3—Reporting. The shepherds were interrupted by telling others what they learned ([Luke 2:17-20](#)).

Here are some sample poems:

([vv. 8-14](#))

Poor social outcasts
Met by heavenly heralds
Salvation has come!

([vv. 15, 16](#))

The sheep forgotten
They were off to Bethlehem
To find God’s shepherd

([vv. 17-20](#))

Finding the Savior
They kept silent no longer
While mother pondered

Alternative. Write out three sample poems on the board in any order. Read the text, one section at a time, with your class. Match the text with the poem and discuss the content.

Into Life

As the birth of Jesus interrupted the routine of the shepherds, should it not interrupt our Christmas Day routines as well?

Brainstorm with the group and create a list of Jesus-centered activities that could be done in their homes after the gifts are opened.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Name That Carol” activity from the reproducible page to each student. Encourage them to break the routine of Christmas afternoon by using this activity with their families.