

## **“Jesus’ Birth Was Celebrated”**

**December 24, 2022**

**Brian Watson**

Who is the most important person that you could ever meet? And what would you do if you found out that you could meet that person? How excited would you be? What would do to meet that person? To what length would you go?

Recently, fans of Taylor Swift attempted in very large numbers to purchase tickets to shows in her upcoming concert tour. Many fans couldn’t purchase tickets due to the enormous demand. But there’s a resale market for tickets on websites like StubHub, and there you can find tickets on sale for as much as \$9,000. Yes, someone is trying to sell a ticket to a Taylor Swift concert in Foxborough on May 20 for \$9,000. Is there anyone you would pay that much—or even a fraction of that amount—to see?

Well, what if it didn’t cost you anything but time and travel. How far would you travel to meet someone important? Would you make a day’s drive? Would you drive across the country? Would you travel to another continent?

Tonight, as we think about the first Christmas, we’ll hear a story about how people reacted to baby Jesus.

We’ll start by looking at Luke 2:8–20. Let me give us some context: Months earlier, the angel Gabriel came to tell Mary, an ordinary Jewish woman, that she would give birth to a baby who would be the “Son of the Most High” and the one who would inherit the throne of David and rule forever (Luke 1:32–33). In other words, he would be the “forever King” and he would be the Son of God. And Mary was told that this baby would be conceived in a miraculous way. Though she was a virgin, the Holy Spirit would cause her to become pregnant. In that way, Jesus is like a new creation. He will be what all previous human beings have not been like. He will be holy and pure, without sin. The coming of Jesus was the beginning of God’s renewal of the world. (We’ll talk about this more tomorrow morning.)

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the hometown of his great ancestor, King David. He was born among animals, whether it was in a stable, a cave, or in a common room where both people and animals slept. In the birth of Christ, God descended to earth, even appearing in the midst of our filth, in order to save us.

And now, here is Luke 2:8–14:

<sup>8</sup> And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. <sup>10</sup> And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”<sup>1</sup>

This scene takes place in the area of Bethlehem. Some shepherds are watching their flocks at night. They were watching them to make sure no one stole them. After all, sheep were valuable. While these humble shepherds were doing their job, they saw an amazing sight. An angel of the Lord appeared to them. Not only that, but “the glory of the Lord” shone on them, too. The “glory of the Lord” refers to God’s special presence. It is usually in the form of a brilliant light, but it was also associated with a cloud. In the book of Exodus, the glory of the Lord appears in a cloud when they received manna from heaven (Exod. 16:10) and when God’s presence entered the tabernacle, the tent where God dwelled in the midst of Israel (Exod. 40:34–35; see also 1 Kgs. 8:11). It also appeared on the top of Mount Sinai when God made a covenant with Israel (Exod. 24:16–17). The presence of God was literally awesome.

It’s no wonder that the shepherds were afraid. From what the Bible says about angels, they are probably frightening creatures. They’re frightening not because they’re evil, but because they’re powerful.

But the angel tells the shepherds not to be afraid. And he tells the shepherds, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” The angel is literally telling the gospel, good news, to the shepherds, a message that isn’t just for Jews, but for all kinds of people throughout the world, in all eras. And this is the message: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

There’s a lot packed into that one sentence. The first part of that sentence might have reminded the shepherds of this prophecy in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 9:6–7 says,

<sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
7 Of the increase of his government and of peace  
there will be no end,  
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
to establish it and to uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time forth and forevermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

In that prophecy, we're told a child would be born who would be called "Mighty God" and "Prince of Peace." He would be a king from the line of David, the most prominent king of Israel who reigned about a thousand years earlier. But unlike David, this King's government and peace would have no end.

They're also told this boy is Savior, Christ, and Lord. In Luke 1, Mary said God was her Savior (Luke 1:47). In the Old Testament, God is called the only Savior (Isa. 43:3, 11; 45:15, 21; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8). "Christ" means "anointed one." It's the same title as "Messiah." ("Christ" is based on a Greek word and "Messiah" is based on a Hebrew word.) This is a term used of one who would come to deliver the Jewish people (Ps. 2:2; Isa. 61:1). The term "Lord" was often used to translate the name of God in the Old Testament. So, these shepherds are told that the long-awaited, anointed king is born in this little town of Bethlehem. But there are also indications that this king is God himself. The long-awaited hope of Israel has come.

What's interesting is that some of this language was used of the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. An inscription dating to 9 B.C. says that the Greeks of Asia recognized that "Providence" had sent Augustus as a "savior" and that "the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world."<sup>2</sup> Augustus was the most powerful man in the world at the time. He strengthened the Roman Empire and established the *Pax Romana*. But he was not really a savior or a god. The true Savior, the true God, however, was born in a small town, among animals, to very ordinary people. And his birthday was the beginning of good news for the world.

---

<sup>2</sup> For details, see Craig A. Evans, "Mark's Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000): 67–81, available at [http://www.jgrchj.net/volume1/JGRChJ1-5\\_Evans.pdf](http://www.jgrchj.net/volume1/JGRChJ1-5_Evans.pdf).

When the shepherds are told this message, the night sky is filled with a multitude of the heavenly host, which means a heavenly army of angels. They filled the night sky with brilliance. This would have been an amazing sight, particularly for people who had never known electricity, machines, fireworks, or movies. Without a doubt, this was the most amazing thing they had ever seen.

And the shepherds are told that this message brings glory to God and peace to those on earth with whom God is pleased. The fact that God comes in the form of a baby to rescue his people brings him honor and praise. It brings him glory. But it also brings peace to those who receive God's favor. And it's not some kind of generic peaceful feeling. It's a peace that encompasses all of life. It's a peace between two parties that had been at war. Mankind has been in rebellion against God from the beginning. Jesus came to bring peace by living the perfect life that we should live, a life of love and obedience, a life devoted to God. And he came to be our Savior, by dying in our place so that our sins could be punished. All who turn to him in faith are those who receive God's favor. Anyone who turns to Jesus can experience peace with God. In the rest of the Bible, we're told that Jesus will come again in the future, to remove all evil from the world, to make it new. There will be no more death. There will be no more rebellion against God. This is indeed very good news of great joy.

I suppose it's no accident that shepherds were the first people to hear about Jesus' birth. Throughout the Bible, many important figures were shepherds. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David were shepherds of literal sheep, who also became leaders of people. Leaders are obviously important. We obviously realize this, which is why so much money, time, and effort is spent on presidential elections. We need a leader, but we truly need a leader that is far better than any politician we've ever known, or any CEO or coach. When Jesus grew up, he claimed to be the "good shepherd" (John 10:11, 14). Shepherds are important in the Bible because sheep are important. In the Old Testament, sheep were sacrificed in place of sinners, bearing the penalty that sinners deserve. It's possible that some of the sheep that these shepherds were watching over would be sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem as part of the Old Testament sacrificial system. They were slaughtered in place of sinners. Jesus, the true "lamb of God" (John 1:29), laid down his life for his people, his sheep (John 10:11, 15, 17–18). He died to pay for our sins. The true lamb was born in Bethlehem, and those who tended lambs were the first people to hear this good news.

Once the shepherds receive this great news, they rush to Bethlehem to see this child. They were told he would be in a manger, which is a feeding trough. What a strange thing to think that their God, Savior, and King would be in that setting. But there he was. Let's read verses 15–20:

<sup>15</sup> When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." <sup>16</sup> And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. <sup>18</sup> And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The shepherds make like bakery truck drivers and haul buns to Bethlehem to see this child. And when they find the baby there, just as they had been told, they report this message to the people there. I suppose some other people beside Joseph and Mary were there. All who heard the message, that this baby was also Savior, Christ, and Lord, wondered. I don't suppose this means they all really believed it. But they must have thought it was an amazing story.

Mary, however, "treasured up these things, pondering them in her heart." Even though she was the mother of Jesus, and even though the angel Gabriel told her that Jesus would reign forever and was "the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32–33), she probably didn't immediately understand what was happening. But she meditated on what the shepherds said. She thought about it.

The shepherds then went back to where they came from, and they praised God. They had seen an incredibly impressive sight when the angels appeared to them. They probably saw the most brilliant light that the world has ever seen. Yet seeing this ordinary-looking baby in a feeding trough was a more amazing sight. Somehow, this was God in the flesh. This was Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man. The eternal God entered into time. The God who lacks nothing and needs nothing became a vulnerable, helpless baby who relied on his parents. The God who created the world and everything in it became a part of creation. The God who wrote the story of history and the story of the Bible wrote himself into the story, in order to make himself known, and in order to save us.

In this brief story, we see different responses to the birth of Jesus. The shepherds heard a message and responded with action. They went to see if it was true. And when they saw it was true, they praised God and they told other people what they had seen. This is a response of faith.

Others wondered at the message the shepherds delivered. But I'm sure many of them really didn't believe it. They probably thought, "There's no way this baby could be what these shepherds are saying he is. No way. How could a baby born like this be divine? How could he be the Messiah?"

Mary, for her part, took in all the words the shepherds delivered to her. And she thought about it.

These aren't the only reactions to baby Jesus. About a year or two later, some others came from a long distance on foot to see Jesus and give him gifts. (You can read about this in Matthew 2.) Wise men came from hundreds of miles away, somehow discerning that a great king, the king of the Jews, had been born. So, they came to the capital city of Judea, Jerusalem, and dared to approach Herod the Great, to ask him where the king of the Jews was born. They said they wanted to worship the one born king of the Jews. These wise men went to the king of Judea and asked him where the *real* king of the Jews was. Whether they realized what they were doing or not, that was bold. The wise men wanted to see this great King, and they brought him gifts. Herod had no desire to see this King, though he lied about it. He told the wise men to report back to him when they found Jesus, so that he, too, could worship him. But Herod was troubled; he was threatened. He didn't want anyone to challenge his authority, his status, his power. So, he planned on eliminating what he perceived to be a threat. He ordered all the male infants in Bethlehem to be killed. Jesus was spared because an angel warned Joseph to flee.

The wise men represent one response to Jesus. They came a great distance to worship him. They risked upsetting the powers that be. They brought Jesus precious gifts.

Herod the Great represents yet another response to Jesus. He was threatened by him and wanted nothing to do with him. He would rather kill dozens of babies than lose his power.

How do you respond to this message? Do you think, "Yeah, that's a nice story," and then go about your life, pretending that you never heard this? If that's you, I would encourage you to be more like Mary. Ponder these things. Be more like the shepherds and do some work to see if it's true. Have you ever really investigated to see if Christianity is true? I would love to help you.

You may be surprised to find that there are many rational arguments for the truth of the Christian faith. You may be surprised at the different lines of evidence that support this message.

But maybe you're like Herod, keeping the King of kings at arms' length. You can ignore Jesus now, but you can't ignore him forever. To reject Jesus now is to reject the most important person who has ever walked this earth, the only one who has the power to destroy death and bring about a perfect world.

My hope is that we would all respond to the message of Christmas with joy, with thankfulness, in faith and obedience. God has come to us to save us. The greatest, most glorious thing we could ever see is not a rock concert. The greatest person we could ever meet isn't a politician, an entertainer, or any athlete. The greatest thing we could see is the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ, the greatest person.