

What Were the Shepherds Seeking?

Last Sunday, we started considering what some of the characters in the Nativity story *were seeking*. We saw that the innkeeper who turned Mary and Joseph away from his inn was simply seeking his own selfish interests. And we talked about how much many people today are just like that innkeeper when they reject Jesus. But, this morning, I would like for you to think about a group of people as we turn to the shepherds who were tending their flocks on the outskirts of Bethlehem. ***What were the shepherds seeking?*** Well, it depends upon which part of the story you are looking at. And if you look to the very beginning of Luke's account of the shepherds, this is what you will find—it tells us: ⁸ Now there were shepherds nearby living out in the field, keeping guard over their flock at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were absolutely terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid! Listen carefully, for I proclaim to you good news that brings great joy to all the people: ¹¹ Today your Savior is born in the city of David. He is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a vast, heavenly army appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom he is pleased!" Luke 2:8-14 (NET1) Let's stop there and examine this.

So again, ***what were these shepherds seeking?*** Well, at the outset, they were just out there in the fields minding their own business and seeking to protect their sheep from predators. They were seeking to make a living by doing the things that shepherds do. And, they were probably seeking to stay warm on "***a cold winter's night that was so deep***"—to borrow a few words from the Christmas carol.¹ And yes, it was a ***cold winter's night on December 25th*** according to our Gregorian calendar. I get so tired of hearing these arguments about Jesus' birth being at some other time of the year. In secular religious courses in colleges and universities, and even in many seminaries, it has become trendy to argue that Jesus may have been born in the spring time because that was when the flocks of sheep were out in the fields during that warmer season. They argue that if Jesus had been born in December, the sheep would have been closed up in pens nearer to town, and not out in the fields. But, more conservative New Testament scholars reject this notion and point out that it is based upon mere speculation and has no certainty to it whatsoever.² Of course, I guess that the sheep could have been pinned up at all times during December if those shepherds had had access to some John Deere tractors and hay balers. Those shepherds could have plopped down some square bales of hay and fed their sheep right there in pens throughout December, and not out in the fields. But for some reason, I suspect that the sales of John Deere equipment was down a bit in the vicinity of Bethlehem back in the

first century and square bales may not have been available. Why?—because not even the McCormack reaper was invented until 1831, so it follows that tractors, hay balers and square bales weren't in existence for about 2,000 years after those shepherds tended their sheep in the fields around Bethlehem. Hence, in the semi-mild, but still cold temperature of December, those shepherds likely took advantage of what little grass may have remained in the outlying fields. And that's where they were, tending their sheep, when the angels found them on the night of Jesus' birth.

And yes—I believe that **December 25th** is the exact date of Jesus' birthday. But again, liberal theologians like to speculate that this date was chosen by Christians centuries after Jesus' birth to compete with the Roman pagan festival of Saturnalia that occurred at this same time in December. Again, there is nothing to back up such wild speculation. But, by the time of the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century A.D. (ca. A.D. 306-337), the December 25th date was well established as the date of Jesus' birth. In fact, even much earlier than that, around the second or third century (A.D. 165-235) the Christian theologian, Hippolytus, mentions the December 25th date as the true birthdate of Jesus. So unless something more definite to the contrary should arise to prove December 25th wrong, I'm sticking with it for my purposes of celebrating Christmas.³ I hope that you will too!

Now what else can we glean from these verses that shed light upon what the shepherds were seeking? Notice that when the angel arrived, followed by a whole army of angels, the shepherds were desperately seeking something: **They were seeking how not to freak out** because they were **terrified**. They were seeking some assurance that all would be well. And they got that assurance when the angel told them, **“Do not be afraid!”** or as the other translations put it: **“Fear not!”** (ESV, KJV) Why were they afraid? Well, they probably were like a lot of us would have been. They knew that they had not lived the best of lives and were guilty of sin—everyone is. It has been popular lately for some New Testament scholars to offer yet another misguided interpretation of this. They maintain that shepherds living around the first century A.D. had bad reputations as scoundrels and thieves and were despised throughout their society—and that's why they were so afraid. Well, perhaps some were scoundrels and thieves. But scoundrels and thieves find their way into many occupations, and shepherds probably had no more or fewer than doctors, lawyers or Indian chiefs. Shepherds generally were just ordinary, plain, hardworking people that we all can identify with. Actually, it wasn't until around the 5th century that some Jewish materials began to take a very low view of shepherds. But, on that cold night in December, these particular hardworking shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem—reputation-wise—were not much different from the rest of us. Yet, they may have been aware of something that the Apostle Paul would one day declare when he said that **we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.**⁴ And

realizing that, they likely assumed that this initial messenger-angel was delivering a message of woe and judgment. Therefore, they were understandably terrified.

But this wasn't the time to be afraid because Jesus's birth was not for bringing on judgment, but was the time that initiated a new age—one that brought on the opportunity for salvation. We all know John 3:16 by heart, ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” But sometimes, we forget the assurance offered by the next verse which adds the all-important follow-up: ¹⁷ “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” John 3:16-17 (NKJV) That's why Jesus came. His birth is all about the opportunity of salvation through **re-birth**.

On a Christmas day a few years ago, there was a front page story in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled, **“At Christmas, a rebirth.”** It told about a 41 year old woman who had come to this country as a recent immigrant from China. Her name is Su Yuan. And when she first came here, she was not a Christian. She didn't know anything at all about Christmas. Su was under the impression that it was the patriotic duty of every American to celebrate Christmas. She thought Christmas was nothing more than a “feel-good” holiday where people freely exchanged gifts and prepared huge family feasts. She noticed a sizable upbeat in her business as a seamstress and felt the commercial emphasis of store owners who went overboard in advertising their sales. That's pretty much what she thought Christmas was all about. I am afraid that many Americans today who were born in this country and whose families have lived here for generations have no better understanding of what Christmas is all about than this poor Chinese immigrant did. In any event, during her first eight years in America, no one bothered to tell Su the true meaning of Christmas. Until finally one day, someone invited her to their church where she heard for the first time about the birth of Jesus and why He came into this world. And one Sunday morning in December, Su celebrated two birthdays—she celebrated the **birth of Jesus** for the first time, and then celebrated **her own rebirth** as she was immersed in the waters of baptism at the Chinese Christian Union Church there in Chicago. And when she came up out of those waters, she identified with the baby Jesus, perhaps more than anyone else in the congregation that day—for it was then that she was a **newborn Christian**. When asked how she felt, Su replied: **“I have peace in my heart and joy. I'm giving the heavy burdens to Jesus. Today is like a holiday. It's like having two Christmases.”**⁵

You know, when you slow down and think about what Christmas is really supposed to be about, you'll find that same peace and joy that Su Yuan experienced for the first time. Forget about all the running around for presents, or stressing out as to whether Amazon is really going to deliver that gift on

time. Forget about the holiday traffic jams, the pushing and shoving, the cleaning and cooking, and seek something else.

Take a cue from what the shepherds sought after, for as the story continues this is what we find:
¹⁵ “When the angels left them and went back to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, that the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they hurried off and located Mary and Joseph, and found the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ When they saw Him, they related what they had been told about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were astonished at what the shepherds said. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these words, pondering in her heart what they might mean. ²⁰ So the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; everything was just as they had been told. Luke 2:15-20 (NET1)

After the angels departed, the shepherds were seeking a manger. They were seeking to find out about **“this thing”** that the Lord had announced to them through the angels. And they finally found Mary and Joseph there in Bethlehem and when they looked into that manger, the **“thing”** that they saw was truly amazing. It was the Christ Child—God incarnate, Immanuel, God with us.⁶ And this had a profound effect upon the shepherds, and now they sought something else. They went about seeking to share their experience with everyone they came across. Can there be any other response if you truly believe in the saving power of Jesus Christ?!! Jesus would grow up, of course, and made this point Himself when He told us not to hide our light under a bushel basket. In fact, Jesus said: ¹⁵ “No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” Matthew 5:15-16 (NLT2) We need to follow the shepherds’ example when it comes to sharing the light of the Christmas message. They shared that light with all that they came in contact with.

But notice something here. Notice a contrast in the reactions to the shepherds’ news about what they had experienced that night. Notice that Mary’s reaction is vastly different from the rest of the residents around Bethlehem. It tells us that “Mary treasured up all these words, **pondering** in her heart what they might mean.” God wants us to ponder and think about the treasures He has bestowed upon His people over the centuries. God wants us to use our minds and reason in coming to Him in faith. In fact, King David even asked for holy guidance in this, as we should as well, when he prayed to God: “May the words of my mouth and the **meditation of my heart** be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.” Psalm 19:14 (NIV) The meditations of Mary’s heart—her **“ponderings”**—led her to trust and obey God from the time of Jesus’ birth, to His death on the Cross, and even unto His

Resurrection and Ascension. You see, “**pondering**” can be a good thing—but only if you act upon it once you have made up your mind.

Now compare Mary’s response of faith to the rest of those who heard the report of these shepherds. How did they react to this Good News that was meant to bring great joy to all people? Well, from what we just read, it says that all who heard the shepherds’ story—about the angel’s message of the coming of the Savior, about the heavenly host taking up the entire night sky and praising God, about the baby Son of God that they had found there lying in an animal trough in that Bethlehem stable—about this most wonderful news—it simply says that they were “**astonished**.” One source indicates that the Greek word for “**astonished**” means that those hearing the shepherds’ reports experienced a “**mixture of amazement and pondering in considering these surprising events**”⁷ that had transpired.

Think about that. The shepherds, with great gladness and joy, told every person they met on the streets of Bethlehem this great news of the Messiah’s birth—and, how did the people react? They were merely **astonished**. **Is that all?** This news that God’s people had been awaiting for centuries—the coming of the Messiah who would make all things right and take away the sins of the world—their only reaction was to be **astonished**? It sounds like the world, upon hearing this wonderful news, gave nothing more than a **Homer Simpson type response**—something like: “**Oh well—that’s something**”—and that was it, nothing more. It doesn’t say that even one of them went about **seeking the Messiah** even after these shepherds testified as to His coming. I am sure that the shepherds told them with great excitement, “**You gotta go see Him—He’s just down the street in that stable next to the innkeepers’ house!**” But, the people apparently just went on about their business as if nothing had ever happened. God had come to dwell among men, to minister to us, to die for us on a cross—and they gave it no more attention than what someone might give today at the report of some basketball or football score in some game that they couldn’t care less about.

Oddly enough, the truth is that Christmas is not about the living Son of God coming down out of Heaven into this dark and wicked world to tell us that He’d come to save humanity, and then everyone hearing it and believing it—and **then actually acting upon that belief**. Unfortunately, Christmas isn’t about that at all. **N. T. Wright** expresses this same sad thought when he says that Christmas “**isn’t about Jesus speaking the truth and everyone saying: ‘Of course! Why didn’t we realize it before?’ It is about God shining His clear, bright torch into the darkness of our world, our lives, our hearts, our imaginations—and the darkness not comprehending it.**⁸ **It’s about God, God as a little child, speaking words of truth, and nobody knowing [or even caring] what He was talking about.**”⁹

That was the world in the first century A.D., and after the passage of 2,000 years things really haven't changed very much at all. Men and women still seem to love darkness rather than light. We read John 3:16 & 17, let's not leave out the following message in verses 18 & 19: ¹⁸ "Whoever believes in Him [Jesus Christ] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." John 3:18-19 (NIV)

And so the Christmas question that each of us must answer is this: ***What will you seek—darkness or the Light?*** Will you be like the shepherds who both sought out Christ, found Him and then could not be contained from spreading the wonderful news of His coming? Or will you simply blend in with the rest of the apathetic horde of humanity who might find the announcement of Jesus' birth and offer of salvation nothing more than something to ponder, yet never act upon it? And for those who like to merely ponder, their time for pondering is running out. Paul warns those who are stuck in pondering, but in never deciding to commit to Jesus, that: "The night is far gone, the day of His return will soon be here. So quit the evil deeds of darkness and put on the armor of right living, as we who live in the daylight should!" Romans 13:12 (TLB) No doubt about it, Jesus is coming again very soon. Only the next time He comes, it won't be to save the world, but to judge it. The Bible tells us in no uncertain terms: "For [God] has set a day for judging the world with justice by the Man He has appointed, and He proved to everyone who this is by raising Him from the dead." Acts 17:31 (NLT2) That Man is the same One whom the shepherds found in that wooden manger, and who died on that wooden Cross—That Man is Jesus Christ, the Son of God and our Lord and Savior! Seek Him with all your heart¹⁰, then stop pondering and commit yourself to Him. And like the shepherds, proclaim His name to a world so accustomed to the Darkness, but so much in need of the Light of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

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¹ *The First Noel*, published 1833, author unknown, first appearing in "Christmas Carols: Ancient and Modern," a collection by William B. Sandys.

² *NET Bible*, First ed. (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 2".

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Romans 3:23 (NIV) For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

⁵ Manya A. Branchear and Andrew L. Wang, "At Christmas, a rebirth," Chicago Tribune (12-25-07), PreachingToday.com.

⁶ Matthew 1:23 (NKJV) Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated, "God with us."

⁷ *Id.* *NET Bible*.

⁸ John 1:4-5 (KJV) ⁴ In him was life; and the life was the light of men. ⁵ And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

⁹ N. T. Wright, "What Is This Word?" ChristianityToday.com (12-21-06) PreachingToday.com.

¹⁰ Jeremiah 29:13 (NIV) You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.