

Why Shepherds?

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[0 : 00] While shepherds watched their flocks by night all seated on the ground, an angel of the Lord appeared, and glory shone around. The story of how the angels appeared to the shepherds forms a central role in the Advent account. We try and put ourselves in their shoes and wonder as to the glory of the angels they saw that night. We try to hear the songs of the angels in our ears. Our attention is often drawn away from the shepherds to the angels.

We know why God sent the angels, for after all, the word angel means messenger. They are the messengers of God announcing to the world the greatest news it's ever heard, the birth of Jesus Christ the Lord.

But what kind of men were these shepherds? We tend to think of them as rough and ready, used to sleeping outside, and being denied the comforts that most of us enjoy. But over the last little while, I've begun to wonder why it was to the shepherds God sent the angels.

He could have sent the angels to fishermen, or to soldiers, to tax collectors, or to publicans. Why did God announce the birth of his son to shepherds in particular? What was it about them that made the announcement so fitting, and which filled the angels with such joy?

You know, I've been thinking about that question since last Christmas. Why did God announce it to the shepherds, and not to fishermen, or to soldiers? Now, while I don't always share my private meditations, the answer to this question will do us all good at Christmas, because it opens our minds to a greater glory than is at first apparent. The answer to the question, why shepherds, provides us with a piece of string which joins the whole of God's love together. The answer is to be understood according to two stages. First, because of the shepherds of the Bible, and second, because of the God of the Bible. Again, my aim here is to open us up to the greater glory of what we're reading, and how it reveals to us the love of a God whose son is born of the Virgin Mary, suffers under Pontius Pilate, dies on a cross to take away our sin and guilt. I did think this morning, in the light of Bette and Colin's death, of changing the sermon, but I remembered something in my mind that happened on the morning my own father passed away. He died at two in the morning, and at five in the morning, I phoned Colin Mackay, because of course, Colin was up at an earthly hours of the morning, and told Colin, and he was down at the house at seven in the morning, as Colin was just a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful elder. And I said, it's a Sunday morning, Colin, and I'm due to preach this morning.

[3 : 27] What am I going to do? And he said, preach what God has given you to say this morning. Preach what God's given you to say this morning. And so, I thought to honor Colin, I'll preach what God's given me to say this morning. So, the first reason that God sent the angels to the shepherds, in particular, was because of the shepherds of the Bible, the shepherds of the Bible. We'd all agree that shepherds and sheep is a theme which runs throughout the whole Bible, but especially in the Old Testament, there is hardly a story which doesn't contain a reference to livestock or to sheep. It could be the offering of sheep to God as sacrifices in Leviticus, or it could be how we all, like sheep, have gone astray in Isaiah 53, or how the Lord is our shepherd in Psalm 23. Sheep and shepherds are a theme which run throughout the whole Old Testament. It's natural, therefore, that the New Testament also begins with sheep and shepherds.

Given the subject matter of the angel's announcement, the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, shepherds weren't chosen at random. They were chosen for a very particular purpose indeed. Remember the Old Testament background of the Gospels. God chose these shepherds for a specific reason to be the recipients of the best news the world had ever heard. Because most of the greatest figures in the Old Testament were shepherds. They were the saints of the Old Testament through whom God shone a light on who the Messiah would be and what the Messiah would do. All of them lived in the expectancy that God would send a Messiah to win salvation for His people.

None of them knew all the details. It was a mystery to those who came before Christ, and yet they lived in hope that one day, the Messiah would come. This is one of the chief themes of Hebrews 11 with its list of the examples of faith in the Old Testament, all of whom believed in God's promise, even though they did not experience for themselves its fulfillment in Christ. Most of them were shepherds. So rather than viewing these shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem, to whom the angels appeared as a random group of guys, we are to see them as being representatives of all the godly shepherds of the Old Testament through whom

God promised His Messiah. Here then, these godly shepherds were the first to receive the announcement of the fulfillment of the fulfillment of God's promise of the coming of the Messiah. What they only saw in mysterious shadow before is now being revealed to them in the glory of its reality.

Let's think of three of these godly shepherds represented by the shepherds to whom the angels appeared. Let's think, first of all, of Abel. Abel, son of Adam and Eve, was the first shepherd. [6:54] He was the brother of Cain. We read in Genesis 4 verse 2 that he was a keeper of sheep, or more literally, a shepherd. Now, we all know the story of Abel. When it came time to offer a sacrifice to God, Cain brought the fruits of the ground. But Abel brought to God the firstborn of his flock, which he had slaughtered. You see, Abel knew that his sin was of such a serious nature that it required the blood of a sacrifice to take it away. Cain, by contrast, thought that fruit and flowers were enough. I wonder whether in his mind's eye, Abel saw how the only way forgiveness for a sinful humanity can be achieved would be an even greater sacrifice than that of any animal.

Abel's foresight drove his brother Cain mad, and what happened, of course, was the first case of homicide in history. Abel was a shepherd who knew that sin before God was of such a serious nature that it required the blood of a sacrifice to take it away. So, these shepherds gathered outside Bethlehem, that faithful knight described in this chapter, represent him. They are the first to hear the good news that God has provided a lamb of sacrifice, his only beloved son, as the ultimate atonement for sin. Can you imagine Abel's face among them and his amazement at how God has worked, not through the firstborn of a flock, but through the provision of a greater altogether, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Well, let's think second of Moses. Moses. Moses was raised as an Egyptian prince, but having fled from Egypt, he became a shepherd for 40 years. It was while he was shepherding, he came across a burning bush, which, though it burned, was not being consumed.

It was there he met with the living God and heard God's voice commissioning him to go to the Pharaoh of Egypt and to demand the release of the Hebrews from their slavery. God miraculously worked through Moses and the Hebrews were liberated. For 40 years after, Moses led them to the desert, guiding them and providing them. It was through Moses God gave his people the moral, civil, and ceremonial law. From Mount Sinai, God gave Moses the two stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments.

Moses knew that these laws were holy, pure, and righteous, but the people to whom they were being given were sinful, impure, and weak. Moses also began to speak to his people about their need for a greater leader than he. He prophesied that God would raise up for them a perfect prophet who wouldn't just lead his people into all truth, but would finally lead them into the promised land of grace, favor, and blessing.

So the shepherds gathered outside Bethlehem that fateful night described in Luke 2 represent him. They're the first to hear that God has provided a better leader than Moses, the perfect prophet who will liberate them from their slavery to sin and bring them into the promised land of his heavenly blessing.

[10:44] Can you imagine Moses' face among them? His amazement at how God has worked? Not through a burning bush, not through ten plagues or the division of the Red Sea, but through a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem.

And then thirdly here, think of David, King David, because of all the shepherds of the Old Testament, he's the most famous. He's often called the shepherd king. It was while he was out shepherding the sheep, the prophet Samuel came to his house looking to anoint the next king. He wrote Psalm 23, which we'll return to in a moment, the Lord is my shepherd. During David's reign as king of Israel, the common people began to refer to a king as a shepherd. The only difference being that what as a shepherd guided, guided, provided, and protected his sheep, the king did the same for his people.

During David's reign, Israel enjoyed an unprecedented level of national success. He was Israel's greatest ever king. He made Jerusalem his capital city. He expanded the borders of the nation. But though David was a great king, he was not a perfect king. He loved God, but he was also a great sinner whose litany of sins include murder, deceit, adultery.

But David was self-aware, at least in this. He knew that Israel needed a greater king than he was. And so he wrote Psalm 2, which speaks of the glory of God's king. And in Psalm 22, at the end of the psalm, he speaks of the enduring glory of the sacrifice of the Messiah. So the shepherds gathered outside Bethlehem that faithful night, described in Luke 2, represent him. They are the first to hear that God has provided a greater king than David, the perfect king who will reign over his people in love and righteousness. Can you imagine David's face among them and his amazement at how God has worked?

Not through the power politics of palaces, but through the weakness of an infant born of a virgin. So here you have these three Old Testament shepherds. Abel, representing the Old Testament's vision of the need for a greater priest and sacrifice. Moses, representing the Old Testament's vision of the need for a greater king and shepherd. They're all represented here by these shepherds to whom the angels appeared. Abel the priest, Moses the prophet, David the king. The angels appear to them, the greatest of them, the greatest of all news, the birth of Jesus Christ, the ultimate prophet, priest, and king. What Abel and Moses and David saw only in mysterious shadows, these successor shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem saw in the full light of angelic proclamation and the scene they encountered in the stable. Can you imagine the great joy they experienced in all the shadowy visions that they had of the coming Messiah had now been fulfilled in the birth of this child?

[14 : 49] It's as the Christmas carol which we'll sing tonight, I'm sure, rightly says, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. That's the first reason God sent the angels to announce the birth of Jesus to shepherds, not to soldiers, not to fishermen, because of the shepherds of the Bible and the fulfillment of all their hopes and dreams. But the second reason he sent them to shepherds is because of the God of the Bible, the God of the Bible. We all have favorite ways by which we are described, and God also has his. One of the ways he describes himself in the Bible is as a shepherd. At other times he calls himself the Holy One, and Jesus calls himself the Son of Man.

But shepherd stands alongside them all as one of God's favorite self-designations. This is how he wants to relate to his people, a shepherd to a sheep. It begins all the way back in Genesis 48 and verse 15, where Jacob, who himself was a shepherd, looking back on his life, said, God has been my shepherd all my life long to this day. Can you imagine that Jacob said that? God has been my shepherd all my life long to this day. Think of Jacob's eventful life and how he was forced to leave his family home and work for 14 years as a shepherd for Laban. Think of how at the end of his life he emigrated to Egypt.

Think of that night where Jacob wrestled with God. All the years of Jacob's life, God was his shepherd. Hundreds of years later, think of how God led his people through the wilderness as they traveled from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. He led them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

He protected them by his mighty hand. He provided water and manna for them. He was with them in the good times and in the bad times. He was with them in the mountains and in the valleys. He was the shepherd of his people. Later in Psalm 80 verse 1, referring to those wilderness years, he is described as the shepherd of Israel, the God who brought his people from a land of slavery into a land of plenty.

But then most famously, of course, we hear the words of King David in Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd. David knew what it meant to be a shepherd king.

[17 : 45] And as he thinks about the way in which God related to him in sovereign love and power, he views it in the way he used to shepherd the sheep. Such a tender shepherd who leads him into the green pastures and beside the still waters. Such a courageous shepherd who was with his people in the valley of the shadow of death, leading them with his rod and protecting them with his staff. The Lord is our shepherd. The God of the Old Testament related to his people like a shepherd to our sheep. If I may say so reverently, God is comfortable with the image of his being a shepherd. But it's in the New Testament that the shepherd imagery for God comes into its own. Jesus describes his mission of salvation in terms of a shepherd who, having lost one sheep out of a

hundred, leaves the ninety-nine behind and looks for that one sheep until he finds it. And when he finds that sheep, he carries it with joy on his shoulders back to its fellows. When Jesus looked over the crowds who were following him, he had compassion upon them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

But most famous of all, of course, in John chapter 10, Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd. As the good shepherd, he knows his sheep. But even more importantly, he lays down his life for the sheep. See how Jesus describes salvation in the work of the cross upon which he died as being like that of a shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. That's what's happening on the cross.

The good shepherd is laying down his life for the sheep. He is allowing himself to be ripped apart by the wolves who otherwise would have attacked and killed his sheep. Who is that on the cross but our good shepherd, the Lord of Psalm 23, laying down his life for the sheep. Later on in the New Testament, he is described by the apostle Peter as the chief shepherd, after whose example every faithful pastor must model himself.

The word pastor is taken from the word shepherd. The preacher and minister of every congregation of God's people is its pastor, its shepherd who must model himself on the humility, the self-giving and self-sacrifice of how Christ shepherds us. Later still, the writer to the Hebrews calls Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep.

Jesus is the good shepherd, the chief shepherd, the great shepherd. And then last of all, in Revelation 7 verse 17, we read these words concerning God's people in heaven, the first words to come into my mind this morning when Helen phoned me at 10 to 7. The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd.

[21 : 01] He will guide them to springs of living water. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. God will wipe away every tear from the Lord. We need a shepherd on earth to know us, to love us, to protect us, to provide us, provide for us, to guide us, to lay down his life for us. And in heaven, for the long ages of glory, Jesus shall be our shepherd, leading us to springs of living water.

The God of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, chooses to describe himself as shepherd of his people.

He could have chosen many other self-designations, the fishermen of his people, the soldier of his people, but he chose to call himself shepherd. Given then the significance of shepherds in the Bible and the shepherd imagery God uses to describe himself, it's perhaps not so surprising after all that God chose to send the angels to shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem. Well, this is all very interesting. And let me tell you, it was well worth a year's meditation and study. But let me conclude with three important applications of this truth, which we most commonly associate with Christmas. First, for any here who are doubtful of the divine inspiration of the Bible, see how this imagery of shepherds is carried throughout the whole of Scripture?

Our confession of faith talks of the heavenly perfections of the Word of God, and this is one such example. The Bible is entirely consistent as we hear week on week through our lectionary readings.

[22 : 50] The shepherd imagery is from Genesis to Revelation inclusive. The Bible is divinely inspired and is altogether without error. We can have confidence in the Word of God.

That's good. But remember, the Christmas story according to the Bible isn't about fairy lights and Christmas trees, but the incarnation of God Himself, of the Son of God being born of a virgin, miraculous things which the human mind dismisses as too hard to believe. But if the Bible is divinely inspired, these things are also true.

Mary's a young girl walks into the royal hospital and says, I'm pregnant, and the doctor says, who's the father? And she said, no one. It just happened.

And we know it's not true. But on this occasion, the Son of God was born of a virgin. Let's remember that.

Second, let's entrust ourselves to the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The Old Testament shepherd saw Him in shadow, but anticipated His coming with joy, knowing that He was the fulfillment of all God's loving plans for the salvation of the world.

[24 : 22] The Jesus born in that stable was the Jesus who died on the cross. The Jesus who took His first breath in the arms of His mother Mary, took His last breath with His mother Mary, looking on in horror and grief.

He died as God's prophet, priest, and king, as the way to God, to take our sins away, to rise triumphant over sin and death on the third day.

To whom else can we entrust ourselves as frail, human, mortal beings? Social media, the dream of prosperity, respectability, the tyranny of the pursuit of pleasure, never will we find a shepherd so strong and so loving and faithful as Jesus.

So why not entrust ourselves to Him through faith in His name? And lastly, this assumes very special emphasis on this day.

Let's renew ourselves in the sure, uncertain hope that one day, one day, we shall see our shepherd king face to face, where He in person shall lead us by the hand to springs of living water, and God Himself will wipe every tear from our eyes.

[25 : 50] Psalm 23 begins with the confidence that the Lord's our shepherd, but it ends with the astonishing statement, Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Little did King David anticipate the fullness of John's vision and revelation. For all that King David hoped in God, we have so many more reasons.

For if Jesus has died and risen again, how much greater our certainty that the exalted and glorified Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, will joyfully welcome us into His heavenly fold.

Let's strengthen each other in the hope of Jesus. What began with this minister's year-long meditation ends, I trust, with us all being filled again with the joy of gospel truth.

Yes, this story of the shepherds and angels belongs, I guess, to Christmastime. But really and truly, to the gospel Christian, this story belongs all year round.

[26 : 59] May the God who is our good shepherd, our chief shepherd, our great shepherd, our heavenly shepherd, bless us all with a merry Christmas and a very happy new year.

Let us pray. We thank you, Lord, for the clarity of your word. You, O Lord, do everything with reason and purpose, and the way in which you sent the angels to announce to these shepherds the birth of Christ was with the reason, was with reason.

You wanted to point to the fulfillment of all the hopes and dreams of the Old Testament in Christ Jesus, of how Abel and David and Moses looked forward with hope and expectancy to the coming of a greater prophet, priest, and king, and then Jesus was born.

Father, we pray today that you would help us to entrust ourselves to you, knowing that there's no valley so dark and no valley so long that you'll not be with us there. In Jesus' name, amen.