

A JOYFUL RESPONSE (vv. 15-20)

What do you do when God announces good news and reveals his glory? I suppose the shepherds could have stayed there, warming their hands over the fire marveling at what they just experienced. They might have been tempted to discuss the theological significance of the angel's message. The angels didn't have to tell the shepherds, "You guys need to go to Bethlehem." "The shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.'" When you receive good news, you don't merely marvel over it, or even discuss it. You act on it.

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.

1. What is admirable about the shepherds' response?
2. What is admirable about Mary's response?
3. What is the best way we can respond to the good news?

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Gaius Octavius Caesar was the first and, by most accounts, the greatest emperor of Rome. Luke introduces us to him as "Augustus" or the "Illustrious One." He once boasted, "I found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble." He ushered in an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity. Roads were built. Temples erected. The Roman aristocracy was enriched beyond measure. By the end of his life, Octavius was adopted into the Roman pantheon as a deity.

One temple erected in his honor bore the inscription:

[Augustus] is the father of his divine homeland Rome, inherited from his father Zeus and a savior of the common folk. His foresight not only fulfilled the entreaties of all people, but surpassed them, making peace for land and sea, while cities bloom with order, harmony, and good seasons; the productivity of all things is good, and at its prime, there are fond hopes for the future and goodwill during the present which fills all men, so that they ought to bear pleasing sacrifices and hymns.

The phrases "savior," "all people," "peace," "goodwill for all men," ought to have a familiar ring. The exalted language the Romans used to describe Augustus is not lost on Luke. His story, however, is about one who was far more worthy of acclaim than Caesar.

Augustus scribbled his signature on a piece of parchment and set the entire Roman world in motion. At his word, a young mom in the late stages of pregnancy and her fiancé make their way to Bethlehem. While they are there, a king far more powerful than Augustus is born.

CAESAR ISSUES A DECREE (vv. 1-3)

As compelling as Luke's story is, one detail is conspicuous by its absence. Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth. In one of the most explicit messianic

promises in the Old Testament (Micah 5:2-4), God promised that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. By all appearances, Caesar is calling the shots. But appearances are deceiving. It is God who is working behind the scenes to fulfill an ancient promise.

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

1. How would you describe God's sovereignty?
2. How do these verses demonstrate God's sovereign control over rulers and nations?
3. Why is God's sovereignty encouraging?
4. How do these verses demonstrate God's commitment to keeping his word?
5. Why is God's commitment to keeping his word encouraging?

A BABY IN A MANGER (vv. 4-7)

It would be hard to script a more ordinary scene. Mary is a teenage mom expecting her first child. Joseph was more than likely a stonemason, rather than a carpenter. As a resident of Nazareth, he would have been one of the hundreds of day laborers who made the short hike to Sepphoris every morning to lay stone for Herod.

The journey to Bethlehem takes us from one small town to another. Bethlehem was far too little to boast of a commercial "Inn." Most of the homes were too modest to include a guest room. The baby is born in a space generally reserved for farm animals and laid in a feeding trough. Humble beginnings do not even begin to describe the scene.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

1. Why do you think God chose to enter the world in such a humble fashion?
2. The "city of David" typically refers to Jerusalem. In this instance, it refers to David's humble beginnings in Bethlehem.
 - a. Why is David an essential part of the story?

- b. What made David a great king?
- c. What do David and Jesus have in common?
- d. What makes Jesus an even greater king?

AN EXTRAORDINARY BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT (vv. 8-14)

To make an ordinary scene even more ordinary, all you need to do is throw in a handful of shepherds. Shepherds were as common in Bethlehem as stonemasons were in Nazareth. They were so common, they were practically invisible. But the ordinary soon gives way to the extraordinary.

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."

1. Jesus is not only born in humble circumstances. The first to hear the news of his birth were people of humble circumstances. Years later, Jesus will stand up to speak in the synagogue in Nazareth. The attendant will hand him the Isaiah scroll, and he will read, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor (Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1)." "Good news for the poor" is a big deal in Luke's gospel.
 - a. Why is the gospel good news for the poor?
 - b. Why do we need to become "poor (in spirit)" to receive and enjoy the gospel?
2. This is not the first time we've encountered angels in the gospel of Luke, but it is the first time "the glory of the Lord" enveloped the audience.
 - a. How would you describe God's glory?
 - b. How would a baby wrapped in cloths demonstrate the return of God's glory to Israel?
3. How do the angels describe this baby? What is the significance of each of these titles? Which of those titles is most meaningful to you? Why?
4. How would this good news impact those who received it?
5. Who will experience the "peace" that Jesus brings?