

Chapter 6: The Annunciation to the Shepherds

Luke 2:8–20

From all that we have read about Jesus so far in the book of Luke, we may safely draw two conclusions. First, Jesus is *glorious*. Two miraculous births mark his entry into the world, and the chief function of the other child will be to prepare the way as Jesus' forerunner. Jesus will not only be *a* great one, but *the* great one in God's redemptive plan as the heir to the throne of David and the holy Son of God. Second, however, Jesus' glory is *veiled*. Gabriel announced the coming birth of Jesus to an unknown Jewish girl living in an unknown place. She was so insignificant in the eyes of the world that she could not even find a proper place to give birth to Jesus. Upon birth, her blessed son received only a manger for his bed. Luke, therefore, draws our attention to *both* the great glory of Jesus *and* to how concealed that glory is from public perception.

Why must there be such a contrast? Why must such great glory be hidden? What is God's purpose in veiling the glory of Jesus in this way? Later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus himself states, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Luke 10:21). Jesus' words suggest that God isn't hiding the glory of Christ altogether; rather, he is hiding the glory of Christ from the types of investigation characterized by human pride. If we wish to see the glory of Christ, we must seek him with the humble faith of little children. In Luke 2:8–20, this principle becomes clear in the way God announces the birth of Jesus to shepherds. Here, we see that *Jesus reveals ever-increasingly more of his veiled glory by his word and through faith*.

The Revelation of Jesus' Veiled Glory (Luke 2:8–14)

Up to this point, only Zechariah (Luke 1:8–17, 67–79), Mary (Luke 1:30–33), Joseph (Matt. 1:18–25), Elizabeth (Luke 1:42–45), John (Luke 1:41, 44), and Zechariah understand the significance of the coming birth of Jesus. Now that Mary has given birth to her firstborn son (Luke 2:1–7), the time has come for God to spread the message of the birth of Jesus to more people. Curiously, God chooses to announce the birth of Jesus first to shepherds:

[8] And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] 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. [10] 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. [11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:8–12)

At a basic level, these shepherds represent the whole of humankind.¹ That is, the shepherds receive this first burst of revelation about the birth of Jesus on behalf of the rest of humanity. For this reason, after the shepherds do find Jesus, they will pass along the message that they hear from the angel (Luke 2:17).

Humble Messengers

On another level, however, the shepherds unmistakably represent a specific kind of humanity: the humble and lowly.² They contrast sharply against Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, who possess high worldly power (Luke 2:1–2).³ The annunciation to these shepherds carries forward the theme we have observed frequently already through the Gospel of Luke, where God exalts the humble and lowly (e.g., Mary), rather than those with formal human power (e.g., Zechariah). God chooses to work through human weakness in ways that are foolish in the eyes of the world in order to demonstrate that God’s foolishness and God’s weakness surpasses all human wisdom and strength (1 Cor. 1:25).⁴ Earlier, Mary rejoiced that God will bring down the mighty from their thrones and exalt those of humble estate (Luke 1:52). Here, we see the power of the mighty Emperor Augustus diminished as he blindly issues decrees to fulfill God’s prophecies, while God instead exalts lowly shepherds by announcing the birth of his Son to them: “Good news comes to peasants, not rulers; the lowly are lifted up.”⁵

The Glory of the Lord

In the two previous angelic annunciations, Luke specifically identified the angel who visited Zechariah and Mary as Gabriel (Luke 1:19, 26). Here, Luke does not tell us the identity of the angel announcing the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, although Gabriel is perhaps implied from his previous annunciations. Here, though, we not only read of the appearance of an angel to these shepherds, but also that “the glory of the Lord shone around them” (Luke 1:9), which did not happen in the two previous annunciations. At a basic level, the effect of proclaiming this news in the middle of the night is that the glory of the Lord shines with terrifyingly bright contrast in the midst of the dark night.⁶ For the black night to be illuminated suddenly with the radiant light of the glory of the Lord would cause anyone to be “filled with great fear” (Luke 1:9). More than this, the fact that this annunciation takes place somewhat secretly, under the veil of night rather than in the most public places, during the most public times of day, is one more example of God’s delight to reveal his Son through foolishness and weakness.⁷

Why does Luke tell us about the presence of the glory of the Lord? The Old Testament background of the phrase “glory of the Lord” gives us further help in understanding the significance of this event in two ways. First, the “glory of the Lord” refers to the indwelling *Shekinah* glory of God’s presence with his people—especially in the form of a glory cloud that filled the tabernacle and the temple (cf. Ex. 16:10; 40:34–38; 1 Kgs. 8:10–11; Ps. 63:2; Isa. 40:5; Ezek. 1).⁸ The appearance of the glory of the Lord *now* underscores what the angel is telling the shepherds: that God has come to dwell in the midst of his people as an infant. Jesus *is* the tabernacled presence of God in the midst of his people (cf. John 1:14).

Second, the glory of the Lord appeared not only as a pillar of cloud by day, but also as a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21–22; 14:24). By that bright revelation of the glory of the Lord by night, God led his people out of their captivity in Egypt, through the wilderness, and toward the Promised

Land. The same bright revelation of the Lord's glory now appears to lead these shepherds to the Person toward whom all these elements always pointed as a shadow and a type: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Savior (Luke 1:11) who leads his people out of captivity to their sins, through the wilderness of this world, and toward their eternal inheritance with him in the new heavens and the new earth. By the appearance of the glory of the Lord, the shepherds gain a pillar of fire by night leading them to Jesus.

In the City of David a Savior, Who Is Christ the Lord

The angel makes the identity and significance of Jesus' birth clear in five ways. First, the angel declares that he comes to bring "good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). Although the glory of the Lord would naturally cause fear, the angel insists that the shepherds—along with "all the people"—have reason for rejoicing, not for fear. Second, the angel notes that the child is born "in the city of David" (Luke 1:11). By this, the angel is referring to Bethlehem, the city of David's ancestry (1 Sam. 16:4). This is somewhat unusual, though, since the Old Testament regularly refers to Jerusalem as the city of David (2 Sam. 5:7, 9; 6:10, 12, 16; 1 Kgs. 3:1; 8:1; 2 Kgs. 9:28; 14:20; 1 Chron. 11:5; 2 Chron. 5:2; 21:20).⁹ The reason for referring to Bethlehem as the city of David, then, is to draw an explicit connection between Jesus and the covenant promises that God made to David to establish his kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7). We have already seen Luke refer to these promises in the scenes involving Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah (Luke 1:27, 32–33, 69–70). Now, the revelation of the Davidic kingship of Jesus comes to these shepherds as well.

Third, the angel refers to Jesus as "a Savior" (Luke 2:11). This is the first reference to Jesus as *Savior* in the Gospel of Luke; however, Mary referred to *God* as her "Savior" in her Magnificat (Luke 1:47). Indeed, the Old Testament contains several passages where God's people speak of God as Savior (2 Sam. 22:3; Ps. 17:7; 106:21; Isa. 43:3, 11; 45:15, 21; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8; Jer. 14:8; Hos. 13:4). While the word *savior* sometimes refers to merely human agents who assist in the salvation of God's people (e.g., 2 Kgs. 13:5; Neh. 9:27), the Lord insists that his people ultimately have no Savior apart from him (Isa. 43:11; 45:21; Hos. 13:4). While the shepherds may not have grasped the full significance of this statement, the word may signify *both* that Jesus is a human savior whom God is raising up for the salvation of his people *and* that Jesus is God, besides whom Israel has no other Savior.

Fourth, the angel states that Jesus is the "Christ" (Luke 2:11). The Greek word *Christ* is a translation of the Hebrew term, *Messiah*, meaning "Anointed One." In the old Testament, the three anointed offices were prophets (e.g. 1 Kgs. 19:16), priests (e.g. Ex. 29:7), and kings (e.g., 1 Sam. 10:1; 16:13). These were the mediators that God sent to proclaim his word, minister his word, and execute his word. Jesus will come as the ultimate Christ—the ultimate Prophet, Priest, and King—of God.

Fifth, the angel declares that this child is Christ "the Lord" (Luke 2:11). In those days, all those subjugated under the Empire of Rome were permitted to refer to Caesar alone as Lord. Indeed, we saw in the previous passage how Caesar Augustus gave a decree that the "whole world" had to observe—including Mary and Joseph, the biological and adoptive parents of Jesus (Luke 2:1). To declare that this baby is Lord means "that another ruler has been born, one whose dominion is both universal and everlasting (1:33); and, appearing as it does in such close proximity to 2:1, this 'good news' must be seen as countering the exalted claims made by and on behalf of Augustus."¹⁰ Even from his birth, Jesus Christ is declared to be Lord.

A Sign for You

At this point, the angel tells the shepherds where to find this extraordinary child by giving them a sign: “you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12). All infants, regardless of class or status, were wrapped up in swaddling clothes at birth; however, it is remarkable that even a humble, lowly, poor child should be lying in an animal’s manger.¹¹ This Davidic king, a Savior, Christ the Lord—this Jesus—is born in the humblest of ways. If the angel does not tell the shepherds to look specifically for a child in the manger, there is no way that the shepherds would think twice about searching for a child in such a place.

As John Calvin points out, this is the way that all God’s signs work. The world looks upon the signs of Christianity as absurd and ridiculous, but we believe God’s word: “Having promised to us spiritual righteousness, he places before our eyes a little water: by a small portion of bread and wine, he seals, the eternal life of the soul.”¹² God does not tell us *how* such ordinary, common, unadorned, inexpensive elements should work toward our salvation; he simply insists that they *do*. God’s word instructs us to seek out the signs that point us to Christ, and God’s sacraments confirm and authenticate (that is, they *seal*) God’s word in the gospel of Christ.

The Heavenly Host

At this moment, a multitude of angels join the single angel. These multitude of the heavenly host do not declare any further information to the shepherds. Instead, the angels simply praise God:

[13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

[14] “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:13–14)

Earlier, we noted that not only the angel was present, but the “glory of the Lord” (Luke 2:9). Here, a multitude of the heavenly host appear. This amazing event does not happen in the temple, the former dwelling place of God in the midst of his people, but in the fields among common shepherds: “Luke thus puts us on notice that the new world coming is of a radically different shape than the former one, that questions of holiness and purity must be asked and addressed in different ways, and that status and issues of values must be reexamined afresh.”¹³

The song of the angels both glorifies God for his salvation and announces that peace has come to the people of God’s special favor through Jesus.¹⁴ In these two lines, God’s *glory* is parallel to human *peace*; God’s status in the *highest* is contrasted with *earth*, and *God* is set in parallel with those “with whom he is pleased” (Luke 2:14).¹⁵ The result of this poetry is to display the intimate connection between the God in the highest and the people on earth who will receive his peace through Jesus Christ.

The Resource of God’s Word (Luke 2:15–17)

The shepherds do not delay to respond to the message that they have received from the angels:

[15] 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.” [16] And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. [17] And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. (Luke 2:15–17)

Like Mary, the shepherds believe the word that they have received right away (cf. Luke 1:38).¹⁶ It is interesting, though, that they describe the revelation they have received as something that “*the Lord* has made known to us” (Luke 2:15), even though only the angels spoke.¹⁷ This idea parallels Gabriel’s reaction after Zechariah expressed doubt over the prophecy of John’s birth: “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news” (Luke 1:19). The identity of the messenger does not detract from the reliability of the original source of the message: God. In this case, the shepherds recognize that *God* sent the angels to announce his word to them.

Laying Hold of the Promises

In response, the shepherds go “with haste” to find Mary and Joseph, along with the baby lying in a manger (Luke 1:16). That word for “in haste” (*spoudantes*) is closely related to the word used to describe Mary’s “haste” (*spoudēs*) to go visit Elizabeth to confirm what Gabriel had spoken to her.¹⁸ In both cases, we see faith illustrated by the haste with which God’s people rush to lay hold of God’s promises for themselves. Both Mary and the shepherds recognize that the word they have received declares to them unspeakable joy. Why, then, should they delay a moment to take possession of that joy? What would be the use of analyzing the message from afar when they might simply rush to receive it? It would be the height of foolishness for a man to gain the *right of property* (that is, a lawful claim) over some real estate or other valuable prize, but to delay taking hold of that wealth by neglecting to assert the *right of possession* (that is, actually taking custody) over the property. In the same way, we should rush to God’s word with haste, seeking in all eagerness to lay hold of the promises that he has granted to us in Christ by faith.

Proclaiming the Promises

Notably, the shepherds do not only satisfy their own curiosities by finding Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Beyond this, they make “known the saying that had been told them concerning this child” (Luke 2:17). It was remarkable that God chose to reveal the birth of his Son first to shepherds, and now it is remarkable that those same shepherds should become the first evangelists of Jesus! To this day, God continues to declare the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ not by calling the high and mighty to preach the gospel, but the lowly, the plain, and the unimportant in the eyes of the world: “That the Lord should adopt such a method of proceeding as this, — should employ inconsiderable men in publishing his Word, may not be quite so agreeable to the human mind. But it tends to humble the pride of the flesh, and to try the obedience of faith; and therefore God approves of it.”¹⁹

The Response of Treasuring Faith (Luke 2:18–20)

The final three verses of this section record various responses to the message that the shepherds have made known:

[18] And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. [19] But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. [20] And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:18–20)

First, Luke tells us that *all* who heard the word of the shepherds wondered at what they heard. Second, Luke informs us that Mary treasures these things, pondering them in her heart (Luke 2:19). It is important for us to recognize, though, that Luke is drawing a *contrast* between these two reactions: all who heard this message wondered at it, *but* Mary's reaction was different. On this point, Darrell Bock writes, "The report tickles the crowd's ears, but it may have missed their hearts."²⁰

Wonder without Faith

As we will see later during the earthly ministry of Jesus, Jesus will often draw curiosity and intrigue that are not accompanied by faith. Perhaps the clearest example of this comes at the end of Luke's Gospel, when Pilate refers Jesus to Herod after learning that Jesus is a Galilean, and thus under Herod's jurisdiction: "When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him" (Luke 23:8). Herod is delighted to see Jesus in the way that a child is eager to see a performing magician; however, this interest in Jesus is not the same thing as faith in him. By and large, the crowds are astonished about what the shepherds have said concerning Jesus, but their astonishment does not translate into genuine faith.

Treasuring Up Jesus in Mary's Heart

Mary, on the other hand, treasures up all the things that the shepherds declare, pondering them in her heart. The verb for "treasure up" appears in two significant places in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. First, the word appears in Genesis to describe the way that Jacob "kept the saying in mind" after Joseph declared his dreams about how his family would bow down to him (Gen. 37:11). Second, Septuagint translation of Daniel 4:28 is fuller than in the Aramaic that is translated in our Bibles: "At the end of the words Nebuchadnezzar, as he heard the judgment of the vision, treasured these words in his heart." Joseph Fitzmyer, pointing out these similar passages, writes, "Both the Genesis and Daniel passages show a person puzzled by what he has heard, keeping the words in mind in an effort to fathom their meaning. This too would be the picture of Mary here."²¹ Mary does not merely wonder at Jesus; she pores over everything she has heard and observed about him to understand the identity of her son. The phrase "pondering them in her heart" means something like our English idiom, "mulling things over."²²

The Joy of the Shepherds

After discovering the baby and declaring what the angel spoke to them, the shepherds return to

their sheep. As they go, they glorify and praise God for all that they have heard and seen, as it was told them (Luke 2:20). Of course, they rejoice in part because they recognize that this baby offers salvation for *them*. Beyond that, however, they also rejoice to have received a role in announcing God's revelation about Jesus to the world. In this way, we should follow the example of the shepherds by continually rejoicing and glorifying God for the salvation he has provided in Jesus. John Calvin writes, "If the cradle of Christ had such an effect upon them, as to make them rise from the stable and the manger to heaven, how much more powerful ought the death and resurrection of Christ to be in raising us to God? For Christ did not only ascend from the earth, that he might draw all things after him; but he sits at the right hand of the Father, that, during our pilgrimage in the world, we may meditate with our whole heart on the heavenly life."²³ As remarkable as the birth of Jesus is, the birth is only the first part of God's breathtaking redemptive plan of Jesus' total conception, birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return. Let us glorify and praise God for all that we have heard from what these first eyewitnesses have seen and recorded for us and for our salvation!

Discussion Questions

- 1) What do the angels reveal about the glory of Jesus? What is the significance of Jesus' being born in the city of David? What is the significance of Jesus as Savior? What is the significance of Jesus as Christ? What is the significance of Jesus as the Lord? How do the angels conceal the glory of Jesus? Why does God choose both to reveal and to conceal Jesus' glory?
- 2) Why do both Mary and the shepherds go to confirm the word of the Lord "with haste" (Luke 1:39; 2:16)? What does this reveal about their faith? How might we seek to confirm the word of the Lord *with haste*? Why do the shepherds proclaim the word they received after seeing Jesus (Luke 2:17)? What does this tell us about the ongoing importance of the word in our life?
- 3) What kind of response is shared by "all who heard" what the shepherds declared (Luke 2:18)? How is the *wonder* different from Mary's faith (Luke 2:19)? In what ways might people *wonder* at Jesus, but without true faith? How do we evaluate our own response to Jesus against true faith? How are you relating to Jesus in a way that may simply be impressed with him, but not believe in him?
- 4) What does it mean that Mary "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19)? Why did she need to continually mull over in her mind and heart the word of the Lord concerning her child? What does Mary's treasuring and pondering teach us about true faith? How well are you actually treasuring up and pondering in your heart the word of the Lord?

Notes

1. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 213.

2. Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, 113. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.xvii.html>>

3. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 131.
4. Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, 113. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.xvii.html>>
5. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 131.
6. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 214.
7. Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, 113. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.xvii.html>>
8. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 214.
9. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 204.
10. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 134.
11. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 219.
12. “But if the stable gave no offense whatever to the shepherds, so as to prevent them from going to Christ to obtain salvation, or from yielding to his authority, while he was yet a child; no sign, however mean in itself, ought to hide his glory from our view, or prevent us from offering to him lowly adoration, now that he has ascended to heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father.” Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, 118. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.xvii.html>>
13. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 131.
14. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 220–21.
15. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 411.
16. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 221.
17. “They had only heard it from the angel; but they intentionally and correctly say, that the Lord had revealed it to them; for they consider the messenger of God to possess the same authority as if the Lord himself had addressed them. For this reason, the Lord directs our attention to himself; that we may not fix our view on men, and undervalue the authority of his Word. We see also that they reckon themselves under obligation, not to neglect the treasure which the Lord had pointed out to them; for they conclude that, immediately after receiving this intelligence, they must go to Bethlehem to see it. In the same manner, every one of us, according to the measure of his faith and understanding, ought to be prepared to follow wheresoever God calls.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, 123. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.xviii.html>>)
18. John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35A (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 109.
19. Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, 124. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.xviii.html>>
20. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 222.
21. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 413.
22. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 223.
23. Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, 125. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.xviii.html>>