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Seeing Jesus the Way the Shepherds Did

FRANCIS A. SCHAEFFER



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“And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.— [Luke 2:16–18](#)

Come See the Child

After the angels had appeared to them, the shepherds of Bethlehem ran down the hill to see the baby they had been told about. They came “with haste.” Luke’s account in [Luke 2:8–18](#) ties together a glorious opening of the heavens, the speaking or singing of angels, and some ordinary shepherds who were simply tending their flocks. The utterly supernatural took place in the framework of their natural habitat, and their reaction was simple and human: “We’ve heard about this thing; let’s go see it.” In a profound sense, the act of religious intensity is as natural as any other movement of life. And they went to Bethlehem with haste, obviously because of the reality of the situation that confronted them.

Let us imagine that we are with the shepherds on those hills in Palestine. We have seen and heard the angels, and we have begun to run to Bethlehem. We come bursting into the presence of Mary, Joseph, and the baby, and immediately we wonder: what are we looking at?

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First of all, we are looking at a true baby. He is not an idea or a religious experience. He is a newborn infant who makes noises and cries when he gets hungry. What we are looking at is real, simple, definite, complete. We are looking at a true baby.

There is no reason to think that the baby shows any special manifestations. An artist such as Rembrandt can paint him with light emanating from his body, and if we understand the light as symbolic, it is safe enough. But if we think of it as more than that, it is harmful. There is no halo about the baby's head. Certainly there is no halo around Mary's head. What we see is a young Jewish mother, probably seventeen or eighteen years old. She may be pretty or she may not be. We see her husband, and we see a little baby who does not show any marks that would distinguish him from any other infant. And yet this little baby we see lying here is the second person of the Trinity. He himself has been God forever. This baby is God who has taken on flesh.

God So Loves the World

Why did God come into this world? Only the scriptural answer will suffice: the second person of the Trinity has been born because he loves the world.

But why did he come this way, as a little baby? Why did he choose to lie in a manger and be cared for by a human mother, with the sweetness but the utter weakness of a newborn babe? He came this way because he came to meet the central need of men. He did not come to overthrow the Romans, though a lot of the Jews would have loved that. If he had, he would have come riding on a great conquering steed. The central reason he came was not to raise the living standards of the world. Surely if modern man were going to vote on the way he would like a messiah to appear, he would want him loaded down with moneybags from heaven.

He did not come primarily to teach and relieve ignorance—perhaps then he would have come laden with books. An angel had revealed to Joseph the primary task for which he came: “Thou shalt call his name JESUS; for he shall save his people from their sins” ([Matt. 1:21](#)). He is here to cut the nerve of man's real dilemma, to solve the problem from which all other problems flow. Man is a sinner who needs an overwhelming love. Jesus has come to save his people from their sins.

Many believed in him when he was still an infant, and when they did so the baby became their Savior. The shepherds believed, regardless of the simplicity with which they understood: “And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them” ([Luke 2:20](#)). Though they believed with less understanding than we who have the New Testament, and though we might even think of them as believing within the Old Testament framework as Old Testament

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saints, they nonetheless did believe, and they will be in heaven with us. They are in the church of Jesus Christ.

But many, I am sure, did not believe. The shepherds must have run into a tremendous dilemma when “they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child” ([Luke 2:17](#)). Luke goes on to tell us that “all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds” ([Luke 2:18](#)), and we cannot doubt that those who wondered must have been split into two camps. Some believed, while others did not. Some must have shrugged their shoulders: “All right, but I don’t need a Savior.”

As we ourselves have run down the hill with the shepherds, looked at the baby, and heard the shepherds’ testimony, have we believed? If we have, that is a happy thing indeed, for it means we are now Christians. That is fine, but then we must ask ourselves: what difference has this looking made in our present lives?

The Difference Christmas Makes

At Christmastime, we set up our Christmas trees and toy trains. We may even walk along singing carols, or we may preach a sermon, but these bits and pieces are barren if we are thinking only of them or even thinking only of being in heaven, and are not stopping to ask ourselves, “What difference does it make in my life now?” What difference has looking made? I think we can approach the answer by thinking about the shepherds. Having had this overwhelming experience in the midst of their normal environment and having believed in the Savior, can we imagine one of the shepherds remarking, “It’s very nice that I’ve seen an angel, and it is nice I have seen the Christ, the Messiah the Jews have been waiting for, for so long. It’s nice that I’ve believed in him (unlike some of the other people in Bethlehem) and that I’m going to be in heaven. But really, in practice, it’s not going to make any difference at all in my life.” This is inconceivable.

*Man is a sinner who needs an overwhelming love.
Jesus has come to save his people from their sins.*

Since the shepherds were much like each one of us, they faced a round of old sins when they returned to life as usual. In the light of their experience of looking at the face of the baby Jesus, in the light of their understanding of that situation, can we imagine them continuing to live in sin as though it were normal, without being sorry and having real repentance? I think not. I would suggest that the shepherds, full of the reality of what

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they had seen in the heavens and in the manger, would have been sorry for their past sins and even more if they sinned again.

We can imagine a shepherd being jeered at by the first man to whom he told his story, but can we imagine the ridicule stopping him? The shepherd might have been brought up short; successive jeers might have worn him down; but surely, because of the objective reality through which he personally had gone, he would not have been silenced.

While the reality of all this was upon the shepherds, I think prayer would have been an exceedingly simple experience. Communication with God would have become easy because they had seen the supernatural. For if the shepherds heard the angels, why shouldn't God now hear the shepherds?

God's Overwhelming Glory

Having seen the glory of the heavenly host, could a shepherd any longer think of himself as the center of the universe, expecting all things to get out of his way? The glory would have been too overwhelming. Facing the glory of heaven, the shepherds of Bethlehem surely would not have thought that they could drive their little cart through all the universe, stamping harshly upon God's place.

Likewise it is difficult to imagine the shepherds quarreling about personal prerogatives. I cannot imagine being faced with the glory of heaven and the Savior of the world and then immediately saying to someone else, "I'm first, fellow. I'm first."

After this experience, would the shepherds have accepted materialism as either an adequate philosophy or an adequate practice in life? Wouldn't looking at the glory of heaven readjust one's values? I think so. Grasping to have gold jingling in the pockets and angels singing in the heavens do not quite fit together.

The angel had said to them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord" ([Luke 2:10-11](#)). Joy is part of this too. Certainly the shepherds were glad.

This does not mean a stupid kind of happiness or a sick smile, nor does it mean there are no tears or that things in this world are not as bad as God says they are. This joy is connected with the reality of our knowledge of who Jesus is, our relationship with him, and our worship of him.

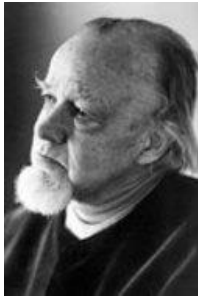
Imagine you are a shepherd on the hillside, and when the heavenly host appears you are not to be afraid; you are to have joy.

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It is the same with all the teaching of the gospel that flows from the event when the shepherds saw and heard the angels, when they ran down the hill and looked upon Jesus. This is the difference it makes in our lives. "And they worshiped him . . . with great joy."

This article is by Francis A. Schaeffer and is adapted from Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus: Experiencing the Peace and Promise of Christmas edited by Nancy Guthrie.

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Francis A. Schaeffer (1912–1984) authored more than twenty books, which have been translated into several languages and have sold millions globally. He and his wife, Edith, founded the L'Abri Fellowship international study and discipleship centers. Recognized internationally for his work in Christianity and culture, Schaeffer passed away in 1984 but his influence and legacy continue worldwide.

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