

GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S GREAT LOVE

Selected Scripture

Introduction:

[From Illy]... A TALE OF TWO ANGELS

"J. B. Phillips tells the story of an angel describing the splendors of the universe to a newcomer. Past whirling galaxies and blazing suns, they crossed the infinite distances of space to a galaxy of 500 billion stars.

"The senior angel pointed to a small sphere turning slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen. 'Watch that one particularly,' said the senior angel, pointing with his finger. 'It looks very small to me,' said the little angel. 'What's special about that one?'

"He listened in stunned disbelief as the senior angel told him that this planet, small and insignificant and not overly clean, was the renowned Visited Planet.

"Do you mean that our glorious Prince stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?'

"I do, and I don't think He would like you to call them creeping, crawling creatures. For as strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him.' The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension."

Philip Yancey observes: "It is almost beyond my comprehension, too, and yet this is the key to understanding Christmas. I believe that we live in parallel worlds. One consists of lakes and barns and politicians and shepherds watching their flocks by night; the other of angels and sinister forces and places called heaven and hell. One night in the cold and dark, those two worlds came together. God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space.

"Could it be true, this story of a Creator descending to be born on one small planet? If so, it is a story like no other. Never again need we wonder whether what happens on this dirty little tennis ball matters to the rest of the universe. Little wonder a choir of angels broke out in spontaneous song, disturbing not only a few shepherds but the entire universe."

[Servant, Winter 1996. Page 7.]

Imagine with me for the next few minutes what it would have been like to have been one of those shepherds 2000 years ago, and try to imagine the excitement they experienced that special night.

There are a number of questions we need to ask ourselves. Who were these shepherds? Where were they? What were they doing there? And how did they know where to go to find the baby Jesus?

(Mention article from "Canadian Communique" - Friends of Israel)

First of all, a careful investigation of the historical and Scriptural evidence indicates that the shepherds watching the sheep on the hills around Bethlehem that night were not just ordinary shepherds. They were part of the Levitical priesthood that was entrusted with the care of temple flocks. They were versed in the Hebrew Scriptures and were certainly familiar with Israel's history including God's covenant with David.

Prophecy

The shepherd's knowledge of Scripture undoubtedly included the prophecies concerning the Messiah. A key Messianic prophecy given by Isaiah was delivered to Judah during the rule of King Ahaz. It was a dark period of history when Israel to the north had created an alliance with Syria against Judah.

Isaiah assured Ahaz that the alliance would ultimately fail and pressed him to request a sign that would authenticate the prophecy (Is. 7:10-12, 16). Ahaz did not trust God and refused to ask for the sign.

In spite of the king's refusal, Isaiah gave the sign—not to unbelieving Ahaz—but to the house of David. We have it recorded in Isaiah:

"Hear now, O house of David...Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel." (Is. 7:13-14).

While there was a time frame regarding the current threat to unbelieving Ahaz embedded in the prophecy, the sign had even greater significance for the future. The prophecy tied fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant to the promised Messiah.

The sign was clear. It was the indisputable test that would verify the identity of the promised Messiah—the virgin conceiving and bearing a Son. The use of the definite article identifies a specific virgin referring to the promise of Messiah through the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15).

These shepherd would certainly have been aware these prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah, to be born of a virgin. They would

also have been aware of the prophecy of Micah that not only pinpointed the location of Messiah's birth in Bethlehem, but confirmed Messiah's connection to the Covenant with David.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." (Micah 5:2)

In the broader context of this prophecy, Micah states,

"And you, O tower of the flock [Heb. Migdal Eder], the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, even the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem." (Micah 4:8)

Although this is an often overlooked passage, Micah is telling us that Messiah, who fulfills the Davidic Covenant (the former dominion), was to be revealed from Migdal Eder—the tower of the flock.

Interestingly, history documents that Migdal Eder, located on the northern out-skirts of Bethlehem, was a watchtower built for the protection of temple flocks. On the night of the nativity, the sky burst into blinding light on the fields near Bethlehem, and the angel announced to the shepherds,

Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord [a Deliverer who is the Messiah, the Lord (CJB)]. And this will be the sign to you: you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger (Lk. 2:10-12).

The angel did not give directions to guide the shepherds to the manger yet there is no mention of confusion or frantic discussion about where to look for the baby. The record candidly asserts, they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger (Lk. 2:16). The location of the closest manger was likely Migdal Eder at the edge of the fields where they were watching their sheep—the very place Micah prophesied that Messiah would be revealed. With the city of Bethlehem crawling with people, customary guest-rooms filled to capacity and the delivery close at hand, the Tower of the Flock that Joseph and Mary had passed entering Bethlehem may have been their only

hope for shelter and seclusion, and the first place the shepherds would look after receiving the thrilling news.

Implications

I'm sure the shepherds immediately understood the implications of the angel's message and everything about the new-born baby provided confirmation. They knew Messiah had to be a descendant of King David in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. Mary and Joseph's presence in Bethlehem as a result of the census imposed by Caesar Augustus confirmed His lineage (Lk. 2:4).

The shepherds would also have known the sign Isaiah had given to identify the promised Messiah. No doubt, Mary and Joseph confirmed the sign by telling the shepherds about Gabriel's announcement nine months earlier. Gabriel had appeared to Mary explaining that even though she was a virgin, she would give birth to the Messiah.

Highlighting the elements of the Davidic Covenant, Gabriel described her Son saying,

"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Lk. 1:32-33; cf. Dan. 9:24-27).

Expectantly awaiting fulfillment of Micah's prophecy, the shepherds even knew where Messiah would be born. Upon hearing the angel's announcement, we read...

"...the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.'" (Lk. 2:15)

After finding Mary and Joseph and the infant lying in the manger,

"They made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds." (Lk. 2:17-18).

The shepherd's actions demonstrate that they understood the significance of the circumstances (v. 17-18). The baby they had just seen was a descendent of King David; He was born of a virgin; He was born in

the city of Bethlehem. This was not a night to keep silent—they shared the Good News!

What about us? What are the implications for us today? I would like to mention a couple of things.

1. The message the shepherds received that night was the ultimate message of love – to you is born this day...a Saviour. The birth of Jesus is the ultimate gift of love.
John 3:16 – “For God so loved...He gave His only Son...”
1 John 4:9 – “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.”
Romans 5:8 – “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
2. Like the shepherds, it is incumbent upon us to share the good news. The night Jesus was born, the shepherds spread the news with joy and gladness. Now, some 2000 years later, as we think about the significance of God’s Son leaving heaven’s glory to come to earth, to take our sin and our punishment on himself, how can we keep silent?

This Christmas season when we see the depth of God’s love for us. He loved you and me so much, he sent his one and only son into the world to open the way for us to be reconciled to himself. What a glorious message that is! How can we keep that message to ourselves.

Let us follow the example of the shepherds, who “...made know the saying that had been told them concerning this child.”