

Ministry of Grace

The Best Christmas Gift Ever

For Christians, Christmas means celebrating the birth of Jesus. But, while we focus on the manger in Bethlehem, the world is more focused on St. Nicolas, or more accurately his jolly old elf caricature and the commercialized version of this blessed holiday. A couple of years ago as I was driving to the store I observed, and counted, the number of houses that were decorated with a theme of commercialized Christmas versus those that were decorated with a Christ theme. On one street alone, I counted 20 houses that had decorations more than just lights hung on trees or on the house. Of those 20, how many do you think had Christ centered decorations? One, one in twenty!

The world has drifted away from the real “Reason for the Season.” But, this is not surprising given the effort our adversary is constantly putting into distraction and disinformation regarding the birth of our Savior. Even the church has been misinformed and misled. Let me explain. Every year at our house we decorate the inside with Christmas and other winter decorations. Of course, we have a tree with lights and ornaments. We even have garland with red and green accents laid across the mantle. And, we always set up the nativity scene in a conspicuous place. It’s a way of helping people focus on the birth of Christ, not the gift giving of Santa Claus. Over the past 15 or 20 years I have frequently done blog posts on Christmas. As I have, I’ve become less and less inspired by the typical nativity scene. Let me explain.

Most nativity scenes portray Mary sitting down, with Joseph standing by her, in a makeshift shelter constructed of wood, covered by a thatched roof. Before them is the baby Jesus wrapped in a blanket lying in a manger surrounded by various animals standing or lying down peacefully. With them are some shepherds (always with shepherd’s crooks so we know who they are.) In addition to the shepherds we usually see kings; always three, never more and never less. The kings have small treasure chests opened as they present gifts to the child. Frequently, there is an angel standing by and occasionally, there is a star above the scene shining down on them. In our house, we used to also have Santa standing by the kings with his gift for Jesus. Unfortunately, several years ago Santa took a fall and is now a broken man. Poor Santa!

So how much of this nativity scene is scripturally accurate? Some time ago in our study of the book of Matthew we discovered that the three kings were not kings, but Magi (wise men from the East). We also learned that we don’t really know how many of them there were. We assume it was three because there were three kinds of gifts given (gold, frankincense, and myrrh). We also learned that they did not come to the manger, they came to a house when baby Jesus was a year or two old. So, scratch the “three kings” from the nativity scene. They had been guided by the star, which, according to the Bible, did not appear over the manger, it came and stood over the house. Scratch the star from the nativity scene. The angel appeared to the shepherds out in the field at night, not at the manger and, the angel went up into heaven after delivering his message. Scratch the angel from the nativity scene. We’ve also been told that Jesus was actually born in a cave that had been used as a barn. Scratch the shelter from the nativity scene. That leaves Mary, Joseph, Jesus, a few shepherds and some animals in a cave. But – even this is not entirely correct.

Let’s look at this scene based on Luke’s account of the events of that night.

A Census

Luke 2:1-3

And it came to pass in those days *that* a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

Caesar Augustus – was born Caius Octavius in 63 B.C. In 29 B.C. the Roman senate declared him Rome’s first emperor (Caesar). Two years later, they honored him with the title “Augustus” (“exalted one” – a term indicating religious veneration) and required all Romans to worship him.

All the world – From the Greek word *oikoumenē*. This word was originally used by the Greeks to indicate the entire area conquered by Alexander the Great. Later, after Rome defeated the Greeks, it was used to indicate the entire Roman world.

Registered – This is from the Greek word *apographō*, which means “to make a list.” Initially, this was not for taxation purposes. The registration was for census purposes in order to compile a list of all the people in the Roman world. This census was to be performed every 14 years and later it was used to levy taxes on the people.

A Timely Birth

Luke 2:4-5

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

Bethlehem - These registrations required everyone to return to their family hometown to be put on the list. Since Joseph was a descendant of King David, they had to go to Bethlehem. (Actually, both Joseph and Mary were descendants of David.) The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 90 miles and may have taken them anywhere from six to ten days.

Looking back at this event from our side of the cross, we know that Bethlehem was where the Christ, the Messiah was born. Back then, however, they only had prophecies to go by. There are two of Micah’s prophecies about where the Messiah was to be born. The first is:

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, being little among the clans of Judah, out of you He shall come forth to Me to become ruler in Israel; and His comings forth have been from of old, from the days of antiquity. (Micah 5:2)

The other is:

And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem. (Micah 4:8)

The words translated “tower of the flock” in Micah 4:8 are the Hebrew words *migdol eder*. This is a specific location on the outskirts of Bethlehem. These two scriptures are why, when Herod inquired of the scribes and Pharisees where the king would be born, he was told, “in Bethlehem of Judah.”

Betrothed – This is a translation of the Greek verb *mnēsteuō* which is from a root that means “to remember.” The betrothal (engagement) was usually sealed by a contract, then a gift of jewelry was given to the bride by the groom. By Jewish law, the engagement was considered binding and could only be

broken by issuing a decree of divorcement. The marriage ceremony would later take place just before the consummation, which was as much as a year after the engagement. Until then, the couple continued to live with their parents. However, this was not a requirement and the engaged couple could live together without upsetting any rules of ethical morality. So, Joseph and Mary were not married, they were engaged.

The Time Has Come

Luke 2:6-7

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Wrapped him in swaddling clothes – These words are translated from the verb *sparganoō*, which means “to swaddle,” that is, “to firmly wrap in pieces of cloth” or in a blanket.

Manger – This is from *phatnē*, which refers to a manger or crib at which animals are fed.

Inn – This is translated from the Greek word *kataluma*. This word is made up of *kata*, meaning “down” and *luō*, meaning “to loosen.” It was typically an upper room, or guest room, at a place where the guest was able to “unload” their animal and rest for the night.

Since, according to Luke, this was the first registration and everyone was to return to the town of their family for this registration, it is not surprising that there were no guest rooms available as all the descendants of David came to Bethlehem.

Upon arriving at Bethlehem (probably late in the day), Mary’s time came and she gave birth to her son, swaddled him, and laid him in a feeding trough, because there were no guest rooms available in town.

The Shepherds out in the field at night

Luke 2:8-9

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

Let’s learn a little bit about these shepherds. Shepherds did not spend all of their time out in the fields with their flocks; they only did this during birthing season. The primary birthing season for lambs is in the spring (March, April, May), but there are also shorter birthing periods during the winter and late summer. And, because of being out in the field all day and night, shepherds were not able to keep the religious ordinances and ceremonial responsibilities that were required of everyone by the religious leaders. As a result, these same religious leaders considered shepherds little better than the heathen Gentiles. Shepherds were even banned from entering the Temple.

Rabbinical writings indicate that any lamb that was born between Bethlehem and Jerusalem was considered sacred and was to be used only for the temple sacrifices. The male sheep were used for sin offerings and the female sheep were used for thanksgiving offerings. And, the shepherds who raised these sheep were specially trained by the rabbis in how to care for newborn sheep.

Out in the fields – This is a huge clue as to what time of year Jesus was born. As we said above, shepherds only spent the nights out in the field during the birthing seasons. Since the shepherds were out

in the field, Jesus must have been born during a birthing season. If Jesus was born during the short winter birthing season, Joseph and Mary would have had to travel during the rainiest part of the year. If he was born during the summer birthing season, Joseph and Mary would have had to travel during the hottest part of the year. It is most likely, therefore, that he travelled with his pregnant wife in the Spring.

Now, this is where the Greek language is very specific. It says, “The shepherds were in the *chora*.” The word *chora* (singular, not plural) means a pasture-land where livestock graze. In fact, the Greek says “The shepherds were in the pasture-land, the same one ...” So, we have to ask ourselves, “The same one as what?” What does the preceding verse say, “**And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, ...**” The shepherds were in the same pasture-land as Mary and the baby. Migdol Eder is right smack dab in the middle of the pasture-land. A cave in the town of Bethlehem was NOT in the middle of the pasture-land.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them – A literal translation would be “an angel of the Lord stood over them.” The words “stood over” are from *ephistemi*, which is made up of *epi*, meaning “above,” “over,” or “on” and *histemi* meaning “to stand.” This word is frequently translated “stood by” but it literally should be translated as “stood over.” For instance, in **Luke 4:39** when Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law, it is translated as “stood over.”

And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them. (Luke 4:39)

So, what’s the big deal? The big deal is that the angel of the Lord did not just stand in front of or beside the shepherds, he stood ABOVE them. We know that because then next phrase is, “**and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear**” Anyone would be filled with fear if an angel suddenly appeared to them, but do you see what it says? “**The glory of the Lord shone around them.**” The word translated “shone around” is *perilampō*. This is made up of *peri*, meaning “all the way around (think of the English word perimeter), and *lampō*, which means “to radiate brilliance.” If the angel was standing in front of or beside the shepherds, his glorious brilliance would not shine all around them, there would be lots of shadows. The light could only shine all around them if the angel of the Lord stood ABOVE them. And, it doesn’t simply say that they were afraid, it says that the shepherds “**were filled with fear.**” A literal translation of the Greek says “**they feared with great fear,**” Well, duh! Wouldn’t you be afraid if an angel suddenly appeared directly overhead and his brilliance lit up the entire area?

The Birth Announcement

Luke 2:10-12

Then the angel said to them, "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. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

Luke just told us that when the shepherds saw the angel they were very much afraid. So, in typical God-like fashion, the first words out of the angel’s mouth were “don’t be afraid.”

I bring you good news – From the Greek word *euaggelizō* (from which we get the term “evangelize”), meaning “to proclaim good news.” In other words, the angel said, “I bring you the gospel.” The angel said that this gospel would give great joy to all the people.

Unto you is born this day – This literally reads, “A savior was born to you today.” When the angel made the announcement to the shepherds, Jesus had already been born.

Who is Christ – The word “Christ” is *christos*, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *Mashiach* (Messiah), meaning “anointed one.” Now, think about this. Of course the shepherds would want to go see the Messiah. But, how would they find him? They couldn’t just go asking around, because nobody knew that he had been born yet! They wouldn’t go knocking on every door, it was nighttime!

This will be a sign – The angel told the shepherds what to look for. But, this was also a huge hint to them about **where** He was, “you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

Why does that tell the shepherds where to look? Remember what we learned earlier from Micah’s prophecy about *migdol eder*? It was the tower of the flock. This was most likely a stone tower build with interior stairs that led up to a platform at the top. Towers like this had a room at the bottom used for various purposes. We also learned that the sheep raised there were destined to be used for the temple sacrifices. Since all sheep born between Bethlehem and Jerusalem were designated as sacrificial sheep, the shepherds to whom the angel appeared were quite familiar with birthing practices and kept a supply of swaddling clothes on hand. When a shepherd from the tower of the flock saw a ewe going into labor, he called for the other shepherds and they immediately brought her into the room on the first floor of the tower. In that room they cared for the mother while she gave birth. According to rabbinical teaching, as soon as the new lamb was born, they inspected it to ensure that it was healthy and without blemish. Then they swaddled the lamb and laid it in a feeding trough (*phatnē*) where they kept a close watch on it to ensure that it survived.

Do you see that?! The angel told the shepherds that their Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, was born at *migdol eder* and that he had already been treated like a sacrificial lamb! Remember the prophecy of Micah?

And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem. (Micah 4:8)

But that’s not all. It gets even better!

Singing Angels

Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

Multitude – The Greek word is *plethos*, meaning “to be full.” The sky was full of angels.

Heavenly host – Host is translated from *stratia*, which means “an army.” This was not an earthly army, but a heavenly army. These angels were in heaven (the sky) and they were “with” the original angel. This is more evidence that the first angel stood **above** them.

While the shepherds were still reeling from having a brightly shining angel appear over them, and still processing the message that the Messiah had been born nearby at *migdol eder*, suddenly the sky was filled with an army of angels proclaiming, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth for those on whom his favor rests.”

Away in a Manger

Luke 2:15-20

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that 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." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, 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. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Let's put ourselves in the shepherds' sandals for a minute and go back over what had just happened. They were out in the field while their sheep slept peacefully on an early spring night, when suddenly there was an intensely bright light from the sky. As they looked up they realized it was an angel of God. Surely, they had heard of angels, but never before had they actually seen one. Then this angel spoke to them and told them that the Messiah had been born and was lying in a manger at *migdol eder*. Then, just as suddenly, the sky was filled with angels proclaiming "Glory to God in the highest!" Can you say, "Struck with awe?" What about, "Mind blown!" When the angelic chorus was finished, the angels all disappeared up into heaven and there was stillness in the night. The only sound the shepherds could hear was the wild beating of their own hearts.

After they recovered their senses, they went to the tower of the flock and found Mary and Joseph with the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Not in a makeshift shelter, not in a cave, and no other animals lying on the ground. Scratch the other animals from the nativity scene.

We also are told by Luke that once they had seen Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus, "they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child." This makes it sound like they went out and told everyone about the child, but that's not what Luke said. The Greek literally reads, "and having seen, they made known concerning the statement spoken to them about this child." They shared with everyone in the room the message from the angelic messenger that this was the Messiah.

Then Luke tells us, "And **all** who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them." We have to ask ourselves who the "all" refers to. It didn't include Mary, because we are told that she "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." So, other than the shepherds who heard the message from the angel, and Mary, who was left? If it was just Joseph, why did Luke say "**all** who heard it wondered." It must have included the other shepherds, the ones who normally cared for the sheep at *migdol eder*. Now, we have to add a few more shepherds to our nativity scene.

I wonder how long the shepherds stayed. I suspect they stayed the rest of the night watching the baby in awestruck wonder to ensure that the Messiah, the sinless Lamb of God, was safe and healthy. Or, perhaps to be polite, they left almost immediately, having seen what they came for.

Remember, all the male lambs born at *migdol eder* were destined to die as a sacrifice for sin. I wonder whether it occurred to any of those shepherds that this baby, their Messiah, would also be offered as a sacrifice and die for sins?

So What?

I don't expect any of you to go home and re-do your nativity scene – if you have one. I also don't want any of you to be critical of other nativity scenes you see during this Christmas season. That's not the point

of this message. The point is that Christmas is all about giving and receiving gifts. Yes, you heard me right; Christmas is all about giving and receiving gifts. No, not the commercialized, Santa Claus selfish giving and receiving gifts. It's all about the humble, self-less Godly giving and receiving gifts. Speaking of the nativity scene and the birth of our Savior, let's review the details of this memorable day and add just a pinch of sanctified imagination to recount what Dr. Luke just told us.

Joseph and his fiance were on the final leg of their 10-day journey from Galilee, Nazareth of Galilee according to verse 4. And, that's where they went later on after leaving Egypt (but that's another story). They probably arrived late in the day, and as they came to the outskirts of town, they passed by *Migdol Eder*. There, they may have asked a shepherd if he knew where they could lodge for the night. The shepherd surely had already heard that all the guest rooms were taken because of the census. Upon learning that Mary was about to give birth, he offered the birthing room at the bottom of the tower.

Wait a minute! The other prophecy of Micah said that He would be born in Bethlehem and Migdol Eder is on the outskirts of town, not in the town. Anyone would say that the building that we are in right now is in Salem, right? Well, actually, we are not technically in the city of Salem, that would be just on the other side of the fence line. We are in unincorporated Marion County. We're on the outskirts of Salem, just as *Migdol Eder* is on the outskirts of Bethlehem. Meanwhile, back to our story.

The shepherd that offered Joseph and Mary a place to stay was well versed in the process of birthing baby sacrificial lambs, and he knew that the room had been fully prepared for birthing. It was cleaned up. It had fresh swaddling clothes and fresh hay in the manger. After all, this was the prime season for the sheep to give birth. He ushered Joseph and Mary into the room, explaining where the supplies were and showing them the hay-lined stall where they could lay down afterward. Then he went back to the top of the tower to look for any ewe who was also going into labor. Some time after he arrived at the top of the tower, his replacement came, and he returned to the rest of the shepherds where he could get some much-needed sleep. That evening Mary went into labor (after all aren't all babies born at night?) She gave birth, wrapped him up and laid him in the manger, which Joseph had moved over by the stall so Mary could sleep next to her baby.

In the early morning hours, during the darkest part of the night, the shepherds were awakened by a brilliant light. It was the light of the glory of an angel shining down on them. The angel announced the good news to them that the Messiah had just been born! They all wanted to go see the new-born Messiah, but they didn't know where to look. That's when the angel said, "You will find him wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

One of the younger shepherds said, "Hey, that's just how we take care of our new-born lambs, the ones that will be taken to the temple and offered as sacrifices?"

Then, the shepherd who had taken Joseph and Mary into the birthing room said, "May Yahweh be praised! There is a young couple in the birthing room this very night! I offered it to them because there was no place for them in town and she was about to give birth. Could that possibly be the baby the angel is talking about?"

Suddenly, the sky was filled with angels singing and praising God. Now shepherds may not be very smart, but even they didn't need any more hints about where to look. At once, they wanted to run to the tower of Eder, but were reminded by some of the others that the mother and her baby were probably sleeping and shouldn't be disturbed until morning.

The next few hours were probably the longest that these shepherds had ever endured. After morning light had passed and it was bright outside, they all went up the hill to the tower. Having knocked on the door

and having been invited in, they quietly entered the room. There they saw the mother sitting next to the manger where they saw the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and they all fell to their knees. “We’re sorry to disturb you, ma’am, but we wanted to see our new-born Messiah.”

Mary responded, “Why do you call him Messiah?” and the shepherd responded with, “That’s what the angel told us. He said we would find the new-born Messiah wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

The shepherds looked at the baby for what must have seemed like hours. Then one of the shepherds said, “We’re sorry we don’t have any gifts for you and the baby and you must be very tired, so we’ll just leave you alone and go back to the flock.”

As they were heading back down to the flock, one of them said, “Isn’t it amazing that the Pharisees won’t let us even enter the temple and yet, Yahweh has allowed us to see our new-born Messiah in person. What a special gift this is.” One of the other shepherds said, “I’ll bet the Pharisees wouldn’t recognize him even if he were talking directly to them.”

“Yeah,” said another one, “and they would probably kill him if he claimed to be the Messiah!”

Well - I know I’ve taken a lot of liberty with what was not written in the text of Luke’s gospel account, but look, the baby born on Christmas Day is an amazing gift to all mankind. A very special Christmas gift to you and me. We are sinners, and because of that sin, God’s justice requires that we die because, “... [the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. \(Romans 6:23\)](#) Jesus was born into a human body and lived out His life as a sinless demonstration of love for mankind and humble submission to the Father. He fulfilled all the legal requirements of the Law. He even fulfilled all the requirements of a sacrificial lamb, including being born in the right place and in the right manner. Because He lived without sinning, His life could be, and was, offered as payment for our sins.

The sacrificial lambs born at *migdol eder* did not have a choice as to whether or not they would be sacrificed. The spotless Lamb of God did have a choice, and it wasn’t an easy one. In the garden of Gethsemane He pleaded with the Father because He didn’t want to go to the cross. But His prayer ended with “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.”

On Christmas Day, God the Father gave us a gift in the form of a little baby, the Lamb of God born at *Migdol Eder*. He lived his life according to the Father’s will and He gave Himself **as a gift** at the cross. Then He was buried in a tomb. But – He was not through with His giving. He rose from the grave, conquering death, so that He could offer us the **gift of eternal life**.

Have you received that gift, my friend? If not, there is no better time than Christmas to receive God’s give of salvation from your sins and the gift of eternal life with Him.

But Christmas is not just about receiving gifts, it’s about giving gifts as well. “But what do I have that God doesn’t already have,” you may ask. The answer is “You.” Recently we learned that Jesus asks us to take His yoke on us. That’s the only gift He wants from us. He wants us to give ourselves by submitting to His will, by forsaking the things we want, and doing the things that He wants. “But that might be painful,” you may say. Yes, it probably will be, but so was the cross. And He asks us to take up our cross daily, and follow Him.

If you are a Christian, you have received His gift. What have you given Him in return? If you’re still living your life your own way, you haven’t given Him what He wants. This Christmas let’s give God the only gift that He wants, a humble, submissive child, dedicated to serving Him!

Let’s Pray