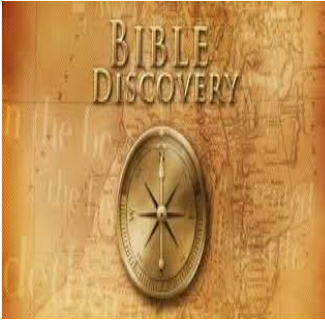


God Draws Near to Shepherds



Since the beginning of time, when mankind first disobeyed God, he has run away from Him. Adam and Eve hid themselves among the trees of the Garden when they heard the voice of the Lord God calling them. They didn't come to Him, confess the wrong they'd committed and ask for mercy. The natural effect of their sin (and ours) was to harden their hearts rather than lead them through repentance to the Heavenly Father—no, it led them to run **from** Him. So, when the Lord came walking in the Garden, in the cool of the day, it was not Adam who sought the Lord, It wasn't man pleading for mercy from God, but it was, as we're told, *"the Lord God called to the man, Where are you?"* Yes, it was God speaking with mercy to His wandering child. It was God reaching out, it was **God drawing near**.

Our Lord Jesus demonstrates this very trait in the parable of the lost sheep. Given its own design, the sheep would continue to move astray from the fold, the shepherd therefore went looking for the lost sheep and rejoiced when it was recovered - the shepherd reached out to the sheep, just as the Lord our God draws near to the lost and forsaken. That was the role given to the leadership of Israel, yet our Lord declared, *"Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves!"* [Ezekiel 34:2] Not only had the sheep gone astray but the shepherds have failed to care for them, to even go look for them.

Against this backdrop we have actual shepherds of sheep – sheep raised for the purpose of sacrifice in the spring festivities at the Temple in Jerusalem; sheep raised to pay the price for the very sinners who had turned their backs on God. It's so interesting to me that these caregivers for the sheep used to take the place of the sinner were themselves the outcasts of society – the unclean, the shunned. They could deliver the sheep to Jerusalem for the Passover, but unless they went through the arduous ordeal of purification, they could not go into the temple to worship. The shepherds weren't the guys you invited to your Christmas party. Remember when Samuel came to the home of Jesse to announce one of his sons as the successor to Saul as king? One by one the sons are paraded out but all are rejected by God. So Samuel asks Jesse, *"Are these all the sons you have?"* What was the answer? Jesse told him, *"There is still the youngest, but he's tending the sheep"*. David was out with the sheep, not even invited when Samuel came to visit along with his brothers. Yet it was this youngest son who not only would be anointed as Israel's next king but be the forefather of Jesus the King of Kings and Lord of Lords – God's Son and our King eternally.

The shepherds weren't the guys you invited to the Christmas party!

No the shepherds weren't well thought of in the social community. God could have chosen to reveal his incredible announcement first to anyone on Earth. It would make sense to announce the birth of the Messiah to students of His coming. It would make sense to proclaim His arrival to those who had the ability and authority to spread the news throughout the world. But God didn't do that. Rather than assigning the angel to visit some of the most prestigious people in society, God sent the angel to speak to humble shepherds. He chose to entrust this magnificent news to a group of shepherds with no social standing and no voice in the community. God, revealing such news to the shepherds is consistent with Paul's teaching at 1 Corinthians 1:27-28. He says, *"But God chose what is foolish to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are."* You might say, *but the religious leaders didn't know they were being put to shame!* That's right, and the wise, strong, and favoured in the world don't realize it either. We must be thankful God doesn't use our standard of judgment, our status in society, our popularity with everyone, but He searches the heart. Returning to 1 Samuel 16, we're told how God sees the people of the world: *"God does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."*

Where is your heart today? What relationship are you establishing with the Lord? Have you allowed the Lord Jesus Christ to draw near to you? The Lord seeks all who would come to Him. He sent His angel to the shepherds with good news because He knew their hearts. He announced the greatest gift given to man within a sky shining like the sun in the midst of a dark night. He opened their spiritual eyes to the truth of salvation having come in the form of a baby boy born in humble circumstances and laid in a borrowed manger because there was no room for Him in the comfort of the inn.

Where is
your heart
today?

Why does mankind neglect God's call, except that they do not want to think of God? The best-selling book in the world is the Bible, with most homes in North America having at least one. While there's hunger to secure mere portions of this precious Word in the far reaches of the earth, so many here leave their Bibles unopened, unread because God's name, God's Law, God's Gospel—which is all about God—has become distasteful to them? Like the fool of whom the poet David tells us, say in their hearts, "*There is no God!*" They don't want Him, they don't want the control they fear He demands in their lives, and if there could be an official announcement made today that there is no God, they would welcome it! In the busyness of life we have no time for God even in the midst of this season which celebrates His birth where our greatest **fear** is that He just might choose to draw near to us.

Not so the shepherds. As the angel quieted their understanding fright, they listened intently to the news that a Saviour had been born to them in the city of David, Bethlehem, only a few miles away. They fell on their knees and worshiped Almighty God as the sky lit up with angels proclaiming, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.*" They responded by choosing to go and see what had been told to them – to see with their own eyes, to touch with their own hands the Saviour born and wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. What was too incredible to comprehend with the great intellectual minds of the world was accepted and believed by these humble shepherds.

Isn't
God
wonderful!

Within the heart of each of us, though we too may have gone astray from God, though we may too have created a distance so far from Him, there is this truth – that we are loved by God and in His kindness, despite our folly, if we seek to return, we're already halfway back. Knowing this to be true, I'm glad to be able to give those who are far off from God the only sure cure for such sinful wandering which is for the sinner to come back to God. Remember when the prodigal was in the far country, he made the first step towards getting back into his right position was his resolve; "*I will get up and go to my father.*"

Remember too we're told that while he was still some distance away, his father saw him and ran to him? He ran **to** him! With skirts pulled up and his sandals flopping without concern for appearance, his father ran to him! God is always looking and God always draws near to those who recognize their need for Him. In fact, God gives us his Holy Spirit to urge us and draw us to recognize him. Isn't God wonderful?

A Message of Hope

In this example of the shepherds, let us first consider this as a message of hope. There's understood here something which is manifest to every one of us and which shows that the Grace of God is implied at the back of it all. Hope is explicit at Christmas. It's in the stories, it's in the family gatherings, and it's in the gifts we give to one another. It's even a season to hope for forgiveness – for instance, if you'd offended a friend, wished to make up, wouldn't you'd find it easier if your friend invited you to come – if he took the initiative and asked you to come to him. In the same way God is calling! He's saying it's time for mending fences and building new memories together. This year have you broken relationships which the Christ child can bring you through resolution? Let God's Holy Spirit anoint your heart and lead you to come and see the Saviour! Let Him guide you from darkness into light. Let Him have pre-eminence in all your relationships.

Learn How to Draw near to God

Though our text does not give us explicit direction, allow me to be fanciful for a moment and suggest that the hearts of these shepherds were open to God. How can we draw near to God? We must begin by expecting Him, seeking Him in our daily lives. God isn't in any one place so we go on a pilgrimage in order to reach Him. "*God is Spirit,*" and the way to draw near to a spirit is, first of all, to open ourselves to Him in our own spirit. Take time to think about who God is. More than a baby born in a manger, more than a man who taught and encouraged a nation to return to God, He's your Creator, Preserver, Provider, Guardian, Friend, Judge, and Saviour. To help you to think of Him, the place to begin is reading His Word - Scripture both gives you the best to fill your mind and heart, and assists you to understand and know more of God.

Learn to Trust God

For the shepherds to leave their sheep, probably in the care of angels (*for which of the shepherds who had witnessed the angels and heard the good news would want to be left behind*) meant they must trust in what they'd been told – trust it had come from God, and trust God that He's worthy to follow. Have we trust in God this morning? Charles Spurgeon has said if we would trust God, we would acknowledge saying, "*If these things are true, I will trust myself upon them. As God has revealed them, they are true and I will just cast myself upon Him. Jesus Christ has shed His precious blood to put away sin and He promises to forgive all who confess their sin and trust Him. I will confess my sin and trust Him to forgive me.*" He will accept your trust and He will welcome you.

Have Joy in this Gift from God

God reveals Jesus' birth to the shepherds to bring them joy. The angel says this news is "great joy for all people. Even as the shepherds received this announcement that night, God directed Luke to record the event so every believer can share in the joy of their Messiah's birth. Does it bring you joy to know the Son of God became flesh *for you*? Do you realize you didn't deserve to hear the gospel and receive eternal life? God sent His Son to be the Saviour to a world where many people were ignorant of His birth. The same is true today. If you're a recipient of His gracious salvation, it's for your joy. You don't deserve to be saved, but God revealed Himself to *you* for your joy.

Some suggest others in Bethlehem would have already figured out through their own curiosity a baby had been born in the stable. They suggest man has his own way of finding God and coming to terms with his birth. They would negate the need for the drawing near of God to us; they would marginalize the spectacular event on the hills of Judea to the already marginalized shepherds.

What I Believe...

But *I believe* just what God's Word imparts to us here by the historian Luke. *I believe* shepherds were the first to hear the good news, the first to go to the Saviour and the first to go and tell others concerning what'd been told them about this child. And *I believe* the world of the shepherds was turned upside down. *I believe* all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. *I believe* Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. *I believe* the shepherds were transformed and went on through their lives praising and glorifying God for all the things they'd heard and seen.

And *I believe* we too are transformed when we witness the coming of the Saviour, when we hear the good news and our hearts are filled with the sweet sounds of "*glory to God in the highest*" as we lift glory and praise to our Lord. *I believe* we're blessed when God draws near, and *I believe* God is calling to each of us, seeking that we might make Him King of our lives and let Him reign today and forevermore. And *I believe* that is what Christmas is all about. ***How about you?***

For further discussion, contact us at 519-317-8659 or by email to office.mbbc@xplornet.com. Merry Christmas.