

Is There More Than One Gospel?

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Galatians 1:6-9
Preached On: Sunday, October 4, 2020

Crossroads Ministries
301 S. 8th Street
Opelika, Alabama 36801

Website: www.fbcopelika.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/jeffmeyers

You know, when you think about it, the word Noel is probably one of the most recognizable words of the season and yet when you press somebody for the definition of the word, nobody seems to know what it means. In fact, in some languages they claim it means Christmas, in others they believe it means birthday, but really if you do an etymology of the word Noel, nobody really grasps what it originally meant but it has morphed into this word that, again, obviously means the birth of the Christ child. It's a perfect transition for the story of Luke 2, it's what we know as the Christmas story and can we be honest this morning, it's very familiar to us. In fact, it's one some of us have heard a dozen times, if not 100 times, and yet today we're going to actually go back and see who was involved in this famous story and what does it teach us.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we turn today to a very familiar passage, Lord, we confess from the very beginning that oftentimes we have lenses over our eyes, we have preconceived ideas and we just, we believe and think that it is a certain way. God, help us today to see what did you say about that first Noel. Lord, help us to grasp the characters that are involved and what they can teach us about our own life and, God, I pray today that we wouldn't see the Christmas story differently, we would see it as you wrote it. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, we're going to turn to Luke 2, obviously the very famous Christmas story. Now we're going to pick it up in verse 8. Before then we know that there's a great taxation that has been, shall we say, at the helm of Caesar Augustus. We know that Mary and Joseph have made a very long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We know that the Christ child has been born. Today we're going to pick up the story in verse 8 and we're going to look at the shepherds that were there tending to the flock, we're going to look at the angels that showed up and declared that he had arrived, we're going to look at the child that was in the manger, and we're also going to take a look at the sheep. You may think that they're not a very important part of the story but you're going to find out in just a minute they are a critical part of what you and I know as the Christmas story.

Luke 2, beginning in verse 8. It says,

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 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, good will toward men. 15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. 16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

Now when we talk about the Christmas story, obviously we know that Mary and Joseph are a critical picture, but at least in this section of the Christmas story, I want to deal with the other characters and I want to begin with the shepherds, these individuals who are just minding their own business, and one of the things that I want you to see is that each and every one of these characters whether it's the shepherds, the angels, whomever it may be, that you see them in a very typical manner and then you see them in a very non-typical manner.

Let's think about the shepherds for just a moment. You and I today have a perspective of shepherds that may or may not be necessarily socioeconomically accurate. We often see them as the lowest of the low, but yet keeping the flocks by night was actually a pretty lucrative business if you'd gotten involved in it. Oftentimes those that were involved in shepherding were not seen as the upper-crust of society, they were not seen as those that were the movers and the shakers but they were kind of that underpinning economic wheel that was churning behind the scenes. These are just typical shepherds. They're just minding their own business. They're doing what they did every single night of their lives, they're out with the flock making sure everything is okay. But we also discover that the shepherds are very non-typical. Have you thought about the characters in the Bible who the Lord calls out of being a shepherd? Joseph was a shepherd in the book of Genesis, pretty significant character. He became the second in command in what we know as Egypt. How about a little guy by the name of David? Now I understand that he was the eighth of eight boys and he was seen, for lack of better terms, as the runt of the family, but he was a shepherd who was entrusted with the entirety of his father's flock while all of his brothers were at war. How about Moses? Pretty important character, is he not? Those 40 years as he waited to go back into Egypt before the Lord would appear to him in a burning bush that would not be consumed, what was he doing on behalf of his father-in-law? He was tending his flock.

So when we think about shepherds, we sing the songs, we read the story, but we forget that some pretty important people in the Bible had this job, and what I think we often forget is how skilled they had to be to do so. Now I don't know about you but I've never "herded sheep" but I've tried to herd cats and it's hard. Can you imagine hundreds upon hundreds of animals who, shall we say, have a mind of their own and yet you have them in one location at one time, and they're doing everything they're supposed to do, but at the same time, particularly when you look back at David, we see that the skillset of a shepherd was very specific, very unique, and very strategic. Remember what happens when he comes to Saul saying, "Why will nobody fight Goliath? I'm willing to do so." He questions his background. He questions his qualifications. Do you remember what David said? He said, "I have fought off wild animals with my bare hands." Now I don't know about you but that's a very specific skillset that you have to possess, that you have the wherewithal to whatever is roaming on the outside to come and to destroy the flock to know how to eradicate, to eliminate them, and more specifically do we forget that in 1 Samuel 17 when David went to fight Goliath, the biggest of giants, the biggest of enemies, he didn't take the weapons Saul wanted to give him, he took the weaponry of a shepherd, a slingshot and five smooth stones. And I know the message isn't about David and Goliath but a lot of times people question why did he take five rocks? Was he scared he was going to miss four times? No, Goliath had four brothers and I believe David as the youngest of eight boys was saying, "I'm gonna take him and everybody he's got out." I just believe it. Five rocks, a slingshot, think about that for a moment. What did shepherds do in the middle of the night? They would hear a noise, there would be a wolf or whatever that was coming, and they either had to go out with their bare hands or they had to become skilled in a very specific means of eradicating the threat.

So the shepherds in this scene are very typical shepherds, we would see them on any given night in that culture but they were very non-typical in the skillset and the actions that they often portrayed. But then there's a second group that I've put in quotes, "the singers," and the reason I put it in quotes is because we declare in song of the season that the angels sang but technically speaking the Bible says they declared, they said loudly. Now there's nothing in the Bible that says maybe they did not do it in four part harmony, but nonetheless it says they said or they proclaimed and there in verse 13 it says, "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, good will toward men." Now I don't know about you but this would have been a very non-typical scene from my life. It's not everyday that I'm awoken or I'm startled in the night to a heavenly host of the angelic beings but this would have been very typical. You say, "Why was this typical?" Not because it happened frequently but because what we see in the Christmas story is a very typical portrayal of the angelic beings.

You know, when we think about angels, I think unfortunately we have this image in our mind of figurines that we buy at Hallmark rather than what the Bible declares. In fact, as you go throughout the Scriptures, you'll discover that angels actually are classified, there's different types of angels. There's these cherubim, these majestic types of angelic beings that are pictured in Ezekiel and Revelation as being around the throne and in one

case even above the throne of God. There are seraphim that are pictured in Isaiah as one going to the throne of God and taking the coal that is hot and placing it on his mouth because he has declared, "I'm an unclean man with unclean lips among unclean people." Oh, there's cherubim that show up and there's seraphim that arrive but the vast majority of the time angels are very typical but they're not typical at all. In fact, the Bible says that every single one when they arrive have the appearance of a man that is warlike. Remember the story when Abraham goes to Sodom and Gomorrah? Who is he pictured with? Three angels, correct? And last time I checked, that whole Sodom and Gomorrah thing was a pretty violent affair, was it not? When you see the angelic beings show up, they do not have this kind of short in stature, kind of portly, receding hairline, playing a harp look. I mean, that's not what is pictured in the Bible. In fact, in the prophets, particularly in Isaiah, it said that one angel, one of them, kills 185,000 men with one sword in one night. Now do you understand what Jesus said the night before his crucifixion, "I can call down legions of angels." If you want to do the math, basically what Jesus was saying is, "I've got enough 'firepower' to take out everybody in one instance."

Why is that important? Because I don't think these shepherds had ever seen an angel show up at night, and this wouldn't have been a cute, cuddly, little figurine, it would have been a typical angelic being. But according to verse 13, there was a host of them. Now we don't know exactly how many a host is but can we just say it's a lot? There's a whole bunch of these guys that show up and here's where it gets very non-typical. When angels show up in the Bible, they have an assignment, they have a duty, they have a message. It is Gabriel that goes to Mary to tell her that she will birth the Christ child. It is Michael who goes to the prophet Daniel and declares to him that God will ultimately win the victory. Whether it be the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, whether it be Joshua conquering the Promised Land, there is an assignment that is given, a task that is completed but other than Revelation 4 and 5 when we get into the heavenlies, this is the only time we see them, shall we say, singing, corporately declaring. And I want you to see what happens, it says that the glory of the Lord shone round about them. That didn't happen when Gabriel came to Mary. It didn't happen when Michael came to Daniel. It didn't even happen in all the instances that we have in the Bible. This is the only place in the Bible where when the angelic beings show up, heaven opens up.

What did they declare? What was their song, if you allow me to say it? Notice what it says in verse 14. I want you to read what it says, not sing the song. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Now I know this is just one of those things that, I guess, I've just kind of got it bent in my life, but I want to make a big deal about the message that they gave. They did not say, "Peace on earth," and I know we sing it in the song and I'm not against singing the song, but you know, every candidate for a beauty pageant is promoting peace on earth, those who are elected into high office always talk about peace on earth. What did they declare? "On earth peace." For the very first time since humanity was removed from the garden of Eden, the agent of peace will be among us. In fact, in Romans 5:1 it says if you want to have peace in this world, peace with God, you have to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Listen to why they're so excited. Listen to why the glory of the Lord is shining, because it's been

thousands of years since humanity went the way of sin, it's been thousands of years of rebellion and all of a sudden heaven opens up because heaven has arrived on earth.

So the shepherds minding their own business, here we have the angel showing up and, by the way, speaking of the shepherds, did you notice that they didn't try to ward them off? Not like a wolf or a preying lion. They actually though they were afraid, they welcomed him to the countryside. Speaking of that that would bring on earth peace, let's talk about this sign for just a moment, let's talk about this individual that's lying in the manger. You've got to go back to verse 12 and it says, "And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Now believe it or not, this is very typical at least when it comes to signs. Now signs are not typical in the Bible but every now and then the Lord shows up and he does something only he can do.

I'll give you an example. When Moses goes into Pharaoh's court and says, "Let my people go," remember what he does? He takes his rod, he throws it to the ground, and it becomes a serpent or a snake. Do you remember what those who were employed by Pharaoh did? The exact same thing. They took their sticks, they threw them down and said, "Pfft, that's not a big deal. We've got this." You see, a sign in the Bible, a typical sign is something that only God can pull off and nobody else can. When Noah gets off the boat after 15 months, there's a rainbow in the sky. What does the Lord say? "This will be a sign unto you I will not do this by water again." Only God can do what happened in the Noah story. How about Gideon and his famous fleece? He goes out in the evening and what we know by the time he arrives in the morning is the garment is dry, the ground is wet. He says, "God, I don't know about that." So the next morning the garment is wet and the ground is dry. That's called a sign, only God can pull that off. You know what else is called a sign in Isaiah 7? A young woman who's never known a man who will conceive and give birth to a child.

Unto you a sign shall be given. Why is this important? Because this is a typical sign in the Bible. Only God can do what's happening on this countryside. Only God can split the heavens open. Only God can declare the truths of these angelic beings. And only God himself can become flesh and dwell among us. When they said a sign has been given unto you, this was the only sign in the Old Testament that people were actually to be looking for. Noah's sign of the rainbow, sure, it was a reminder but they weren't said to be looking for one. Gideon's fleece was a one-time event. But God told his people, "This will be a sign." Very typical but yet very non-typical.

What does it say the sign will be? "A babe wrapped in swaddling clothes." Now I don't know if you're familiar but in the coming years the International Olympic Committee has decided that one of the newfound sports is going to be break-dancing. Yeah, I had the same reaction. But we're kind of loosening the bounds of sports, are we not? I believe that one of the Olympic sports if we're going to have break-dancing ought to be swaddling. Now you're laughing because you've been there. It's 2 o'clock in the morning, your child, your grandchild, whoever you're caring for is restless and crying and can't go to sleep. What do you do? You take that garment, you take that blanket and you get it as tight as you can. Now I don't know about you guys but at least in my house, I took it as a

personal challenge. Can I get these guys to not be able to move? And by the way, I hate to emulate but it's just you know you swaddle good when they get and they go [struggling sound], and then they do this [going limp], like, "I can't do this."

Notice what it says: swaddling clothes. You see, this is where it's very non-typical. The blankets that we swaddled our boys in were normal blankets like you did, but swaddling clothes were actually death garments. John 11, when Jesus calls Lazarus up from the grave, remember what he says to him? "Remove the cloth from his face." Remember what Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea did the day that he breathed that last breath, they prepared his body for death. The women after four days, they go, or after three days, but on the fourth it would have been they go to the tomb that they will discover that's empty to finalize the burial proceedings. You see, the sign was very typical, this has God written all over it but it's very non-typical to find a newborn baby wrapped in funeral cloths. That's exactly what they discovered. You know, people have asked, "How will we know he's the right one? Lots of babies get born in Bethlehem." It would have been pretty easy to find, he was the only one that would have been dressed as if for his own funeral on his first day of life.

Last but not least, we have the sheep. Now can we just agree they're the overlooked ones of the story? We don't often focus on the sheep but the sheep were very typical sheep, and I don't mean to offend anybody who has sheep, who's raised sheep, but we had a few sheep up here the other night at our live nativity and let me tell you about sheep, they stink. I mean, plain and simple. They're cute from 20 feet away but you get up close and they're nasty. I mean, you go and touch and go, "Oh, that's gonna be so cute." And you touch it and you go, "Ew, what was that?" I mean, just their whole being has just that raw umph about it. And there's another quality about sheep, very typical, they're not known to be highly intelligent. In fact, how many analogies have we given as parents, "If your friend jumped off a cliff, would you do it too?" Where do we think we got that? From sheep. Why? Because if one sheep leads, the whole crew, the whole flock will go, which made the job of the shepherd even more difficult.

These are just typical sheep but they're very non-typical. Read the story. They didn't go anywhere. They didn't take off. I mean, think about this for a moment. Heaven has opened up, a spotlight has shown up, angels have appeared declaring glory to God in the highest, their shepherds, their leaders are taken aback and they don't take off. This is critical to the story in just a moment because they respond not to what they see in the air but to the shepherds who were tasked for them. They did not retaliate against the angels. The shepherds did not get panicky and say, "Oh, we've got to run to the next hill." No. They listened. They embraced. And then here's the best part, they go to Bethlehem, what happens to the sheep? Have you ever thought about that for a moment? They just stayed there. That's not typical. The sheep normally would have, "Baa," just gone right after them, right? There is no record that the sheep went to Bethlehem. There is no record that the shepherds say, "Hey, new guy, you're the intern, you stay back." They experienced all that they experience and they did not leave the hillside.

That's critical because that's the script, but can we do the proverbial flip? Let's flip the script for just a moment because that's the Christmas story as we know it, as it was written, as it's presented, but you and I have an advantage, we have 2,000 years of hindsight, but more importantly we have an empty tomb. We have the ability to see the Christmas story not just through the eyes of Bethlehem and an inn that was full and a manger that was filled with animal beings, we have the ability to look back through the whole New Testament, through the empty tomb, through the early propagation of the gospel, through the formation of what we know as the church and looking forward to his soon return.

Let's flip the script for just a moment, lest you think that there's been a typo on the screen, let's talk about the shepherd. Not the shepherds. You do realize that in this story the shepherd is the one in the cradle. The baby is a shepherd. In fact, in John 10, Jesus gets into this incredible discussion with those who are contrary to his message and he compares himself to a hireling, he compares himself to the devil himself, and he says, "I know you're falling for all of his tactics and his tricks, but he comes over the wall the way he's not supposed to. He entices you and then when things get bad, he takes off." Remember what Jesus says in John 10? He says, "I am the good shepherd. I'm the one," who later in John 10, listen, "will lay down his life for his sheep." Now think about that imagery of a shepherd. Day in and day out just normal life, but when the hireling comes, when the enemy comes, he is there to fend off, he is there to eradicate, he is there to protect his flock so much so he's willing to give his own life, and that shepherd that was in swaddling clothes would give his life and shed his blood so that we could be saved.

What about the singers? What about those that proclaim the good news? Do you find it interesting that in verse 16 and 17, that what we know as the shepherds become the singers? Instead of the angels, I mean, think about it, it would have been better optics, would it not? If the Lord had gone to Bethlehem and said, "Spotlight, here you go." Jerusalem. I mean, every city on the planet. But what did he do? He took those individuals who were with the flock by night, those individuals that would have been just normal everyday people, and he gave them the most valuable piece of information on planet earth at the time. Think about that. The professors, no insult insinuated, did not hear first. The pastors and the priests did not hear first. The politicians, well, they're a whole other sermon for a whole other message. But what takes place? The people of the pew, the everyday people are given the opportunity to be the first ones to declare. They not only go see the Christ child but then they go around and they tell everybody that he has been born.

So the shepherd is the child, the singers are the shepherds, and what about that sign? You know, it's interesting, Isaiah 7 is the only sign that we were told to be looking for, that a woman would conceive without a man and give birth to a child. Did you know in the entire ministry of Jesus Christ in Matthew 12 he only gives us one sign? That's it. Just one. Those that, again, are opposed to his message and his teachings say, "We want to hear more. Give us a sign." He says, "Okay, I'll give you a sign. As Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights." Let me tell you what Jesus said, "You want a sign?"

You wait until I've been dead three days and three nights and come back and look at the tomb. That'll be your sign." So now what we discover is the sign that has been given to you and I is not the sign of a young lady without a husband giving birth to a child, it's the sign that this child, this shepherd spent his entire earthly existence rejecting temptation, not giving in to the wiles of the enemy, shedding his blood for humanity, and raising from the dead.

You see, the shepherd is the child, the singers are the shepherds, and the sign is an empty tomb that still remains empty which leads us to those sheep. This is where it's bad news. That's us. That's right. Remember the description that I gave earlier about sheep? I'm sorry but that's who we are. You say, "Well, no, no, no, not me. I'm not stinky." Go a week without a bath and then we'll test you. "I'm definitely not intellectually challenged." Then why is it that during your favorite ball game when they run a commercial for potato chips you go in the kitchen and eat? It's because you're a sheep. And, baa, I am too. I confess. I am. I'm not hungry until I watch a commercial, all of a sudden I'm hungry. We are sheep and we're going to follow somebody, and we're going to be in a flock, the question is whose flock are we going to be in and whose voice are we going to follow?

Remember that passage in John 10 where Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. I lay my life down for the sheep." Verse 27 of John 10, listen to what he says, "My sheep know my voice and they follow me." You see, when we look at the Christmas story, not only is there this script that we know so well but there is this flip. Jesus Christ is the shepherd and you and I are the sheep, the question is whose flock are you in? Are you in the hireling's flock or are you in his? Whose voice do we listen to? Do we listen to the voice of the hireling who tempts us and then when it gets bad runs away from us, or the voice who said, "I will lay down my life for you"? You see, 2,000 years ago, you weren't there in Bethlehem and neither was I, but according to the story we actually were because we are the ones who have the privilege that he shed his blood for, we are the ones that had the opportunity to hear his voice, we are the ones that can be a part of his flock, the problem is we oftentimes spend so much time focused in on the other things we don't realize where we fit in the story and the question today is really this: whose flock are you in and whose voice are you listening to?