

Luke

Pondering the Things of God
Luke 2:15-20

With Study Questions

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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.”¹⁶ And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷ Now when they had seen *Him*, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. ¹⁸ And all those who heard *it* marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things and pondered *them* in her heart. ²⁰ Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them (Luke 2:15-20).

Introduction

Responding to the things of God can be an interesting, fascinating and sometimes confusion enterprise. In certain circles it is asserted that reactions (primarily during a called worship service) should be very uniform. For example, the raising of hands, kneeling, shouting of an ‘amen’ are acceptable forms of worship, provided everyone is doing it together, as a body, so the argument goes.

But bodies have different part, as Paul argues (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), so one would expect those different parts to have different reactions. My ear does not have the same reaction to bright light as my eye. Of course, any single reaction (even if one can make a biblical argument for it) can become distracting. The saying of “Amen,” which is generally held as acceptable in worship (1 Corinthians 14:16) can become a distraction if you’re not willing to stop saying it on any given moment you feel moved.

So, becoming a distraction notwithstanding, I find it enjoyable and biblical to observe various responses to worship. As a younger pastor, I would be a bit discouraged when the worshipers in our church seemed a bit flat, lacking a demonstrative element. One man, an elder at that, would

look at the words on the screen, sing them, but almost seem stoic, as if unmoved. I recall asking him about it. His answer was illuminating. It plays into the various responses we see in our current passage. I'll take it back up in a moment.

Review

Like a movie or mini-series that keeps shifting from one dramatic plot to another, Luke opens his gospel with rapid swings from one drama to another. Beginning with the parents of John the Baptist he moves us to Gabriel's interaction with Mary. Then we are shifted to Mary visiting Elizabeth then back to the birth of John the Baptist then the birth of Jesus.

The birth of Jesus has its own multi-faceted presentation with a relocation from Galilee to a manger Bethlehem because of a censure, to the shepherds in a field and their encounter with an angel. Then we read of the heavenly host telling them of the birth of Christ the Lord and how a baby in a manger will be a sign to them. That brings us to our current passage.

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" (Luke 2:15).

A Trip to a Feeding Trough

I can't really say how long the angels, (the **"heavenly host praising God"**) remained with the shepherds, but since heavenly worship is the type that might shake the very foundations of the thresholds in heaven (Isaiah 6:4), I'm guessing it got pretty quiet all of the sudden. It was at this juncture that the focus of attention moved away from the angels, and they began to look at one another.

The passage doesn't say they were commanded to go to Bethlehem, they were just told what they would find when they went to Bethlehem (Luke 2:12). I suppose one of them could have said, 'God is everywhere, the promise extends to the whole world,' there is no need to make the trip to see a baby, maybe I'll just worship here in the field. This field is my church,' But I'm pretty sure that did not happen.

Sometimes geographical gatherings are significant. It may be true that a church is not a building, but it is a gathering.

Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice. ⁶ And the heavens shall declare his righteousness: for God *is* judge himself (Psalm 50:5).

My wife and I have children. They are our children wherever they may be. But we find it particularly enjoyable and profitable to have them all at the same table.

Though it is true that God is present everywhere, there are certain events where His presence is more deeply conveyed and known. Time does not allow, but one can make a convincing argument that a gathering where the word is preached, and the sacraments administered is a place where God's presence is deeper and more richly identified. Writing of Christ, the author of Hebrews explains,

For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹² saying, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise" (Hebrews 2:11, 12).

We may wish to reflect on who actually leads our worship.

But thou *art* holy, O *thou* that inhabitest the praises of Israel (Psalm 22:3)

Calvin taught,

And it is a truth, which may serve as a most powerful stimulant, and may lead us most fervently to praise God, when we hear that Christ leads our songs, and is the chief composer of our hymns.¹

¹ Calvin, J., & Owen, J. (2010). *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (pp. 66–67). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

We may not be visiting a manger, but we will never come as close as when His spiritual body and blood in the elements are before us.

And recognize that when the words of the shepherds are translated “**see this thing**” *idomen to rhema touto*, it is literally “let us see the word this.” They were responding to the word of the Lord (given through an angel). Similarly, we are called to respond to the words we find in Scripture.

Finally on this verse, even if one of the shepherds were hesitant, the encouragement of the others would be of aid. Sometimes a simple, “Let’s go to church” is sufficient. Will you ask that? Will someone ask that of you?

And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger (Luke 2:16).

Seeing the True Christ

The shepherds didn’t merely go, Luke goes out of his way to indicate that they made “**haste.**” The slow, lackluster, complacent trip to church many of us undertake on a Sunday morning is a sure sign of a problem. Maybe the problem is church. Maybe the problem is us. Probably some combination of both. But when it gets right down to it, these shepherds just left a pretty astonishing concert to go look at a baby—a baby full of promises to be sure, but a baby, nonetheless.

He had not yet lived a full, sinless life. He had not yet performed signs and wonders. He had not yet preached a sermon. He had not yet died on a cross. He had not yet risen again. He had not yet ascended to the Father. In a very significant way, when we are in our cars heading for worship, we are privy to that which the shepherds had not yet known.

I’m guessing they didn’t complain about the comfort of the chairs, the temperature, the sound of whatever worship might have been happening (probably the bleating of sheep), the articulation of the prayers or the sermon (not that this should be an excuse for these things not being as excellent as possible). They just wanted a look at the baby.

If we can see Christ in every, or any, element of worship, if one true thought of Christ can occupy our minds and hearts when we gather together, that would be sufficient for all our needs.

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. ³ Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. ⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips (Psalm 63:1-5).

Now when they had seen *Him*, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child ¹⁸ And all those who heard *it* marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. (Luke 2:17, 18).

Spreading the News

These uneducated, not-officially-ordained shepherds, apparently, couldn't keep this to themselves. It's been said that "Silence is wise if we are foolish, but foolish if we are wise." Or, as someone else said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."²

The word "**saying**" in this verse is the same root word for "**thing**" in verse 15, *rhema*. They heard the words and couldn't help but pass them on. Paul wrote, "**Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel**" (1 Corinthians 9:16). We need to find a bit of that in us. Later Luke will write the words of Jesus,

The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks (Luke 6:45).

What is it that you are so strong in conviction, that you can't help speaking it? Paul will, on a number of occasions, write that he delivered to others what which he received (1 Corinthians 11:23; 15:3). Are we a mere

² Martin Luther King Jr.

dumping ground for the gospel or a channel, a river, where the water flows into you, through you and unto others?

Maybe not everybody will “**marvel.**” By the way, that they marvel does not necessarily mean that they received it in faith, though that should be the desired end. A flowing river cleans some rocks and dislodges others. But it flows, nonetheless. No matter how many coyotes howl at the moon, it doesn’t halt it from its course.

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things (2 Corinthians 2:14-16)?

Apparently, the shepherds were (sufficient).

But Mary kept all these things and pondered *them* in her heart. ²⁰ Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them (Luke 2:19-20).

Glorifying, Praising, Pondering

We read of two distinct (really three) responses to these events. The shepherds, who “**returned**” to shepherding I suppose, glorified and praised God for all they had heard and seen. Their part of the story is over. We don’t read of them again. But I think it is safe to conclude that their lives were never the same.

Some people have significant and memorable conversion experiences that change their lives forever. Others were raised in the church and don’t ever remember not believing. But that doesn’t mean they don’t have highly significant and sanctifying experiences. I am not sure these shepherds weren’t already believers.

A conversion experience, as wonderful as that is, is not the only way God makes a significant impact in our lives. Sometimes it requires some effort on our part. We have to do something. To be sure, there are

times when we have nothing to offer. There are times when God works in spite of our faithlessness and weakness. The Israelites complained to the very end (“**Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?**”-Exodus 14:11?) yet God split the Red Sea.

But at the Jordan, it would not cease to flow until they put their feet in the water (Joshua 3:13). A group of young people raised (mainly) in our own church stood before the congregation and spoke of how God worked when they served at Boardwalk Chapel. In order for them to have that experience, they had to make the trip to Bethlehem (or in this case, Jersey). If you desire to have a life that very naturally will yield glory to God and praise to His name, you may have to put your toe in the water. Ships that stay in the dock merely collect barnacles.

The shepherds returned “**glorifying and praising God.**” To glorify means to magnify, extol, ascribe honor. Praise is what the heavenly host was doing a bit earlier. I’m guessing the shepherds didn’t sound quite as impressive as the heavenly host. I’m also guessing it didn’t matter much.

Mary had a different response. This gets me back to my elder friend. We are told that she “**kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.**” Some versions say she “**treasured up**” these things. The word *syneterei* means to preserve, protect, keep close, in good condition. I remember speaking with a very sweet young lady, a godly one at that (so this is not in any way to diminish this wonderful girl), who could tell me every last single detail about the Gilmore Girls that a person could possibly know. This should be a goal for us when it comes to the words of Scripture.

This may have been an example of Mary hiding, as it were, God’s word in her heart. The Psalmist writes,

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you (Psalm 119:11).

We are also told she “**pondered**” them. What does it mean to ponder something? This is what my elder friend would do during worship. This is what he marveled at. It literally means to ‘throw together’ *sumballousa*. Mary was combining all of these things in her heart with a holy fascination of how they all work together. Our confession, in speaking of Scripture, highlights how it contains...

...the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God).³

Mary was meditating upon the consent of all the parts. The Bible is not some discombobulated, random collection of stories. Looking through the many facets of this diamond reveal one author, one story. Most, if not all, bad theology is due to our inability or unwillingness to appreciate the “**full counsel**” (Acts 20:27) of God’s word and how it all works harmoniously.

One of my own Bethlehem experiences was my first trip to teach the underground church in China. I stood, as an instructor, in a room full of mainly men, who were in countless ways, superior to myself in terms of faithfulness, courage, sacrifice. I would also not want to get into a Bible quoting contest with any of them. There was not a single verse I could quote that they all couldn’t finish. So why was I there?

What they lacked at the time was not a knowledge of Scripture, but how it all worked together. They lacked a systematic, confessional grasp of the unity of the message found in the Bible. It fed my soul when I observed their faithfulness and knowledge of the word. It fed their souls when I helped them grasp how it all worked together.

This is what Mary was doing when she pondered these events in her heart. Glorifying God, praising God and pondering all the things of God are all components of deep and genuine worship.

³ WCF, 1, 5.

Questions for Study

1. Discuss your thoughts about how people worship. How do you find yourself worshipping (pages 2, 3)?
2. Why did the shepherds go to Bethlehem? Does our location or company make any difference when it comes the things of God? Do you invite people to church or church related events? Are there people who invite you (pages 3-5)?
3. Since neither you nor your church is perfect, how can the event be edifying or profitable (pages 5, 6)?
4. Do you find yourself spreading the news about Christ? If so, how? If not, why (pages 6, 7)?
5. Can you think of spiritual experiences in your life you can compare to the shepherd's trip to Bethlehem? How did God affect you? Explain (pages 7, 8)?
6. Define and contrast praising, glorifying and pondering (pages 8, 9).