

THE LOOKOUT

DECEMBER 2021

Unit: LUKE
Theme: SURPRISE!

Overview: The God of the Bible is a God of surprises. About the time we think we have God figured out, he does a “180” and leaves us with our mouths open. Luke’s Gospel of messianic joy holds surprises for soldiers, disciples, shepherds, religious leaders, and others. The ultimate surprise to the crucifixion may well be the resurrection. Buckle up for a study in Luke about a God who surprises.

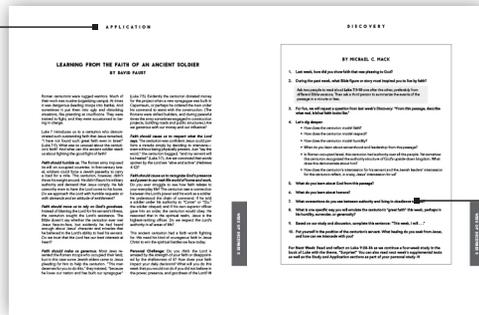
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF DECEMBER 19, 2021

LESSON AIM: **Let the angels' unexpected message challenge you to investigate the Lord's work and respond.**

UNIT: Luke

THEME: Surprise!

LESSON TEXT: Luke 2:8-20

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25;
Acts 9:1-6, 17-20; 10:1-23; 16:6-10

UNEXPECTED RESPONSE

BY MARK SCOTT

In an area just southeast of Bethlehem, in a community known as Beit Sahur in the West Bank of Palestine, lies a site known as Shepherd's Field. Archeologists have found caves and a fifth-century monastery there. This is probably where Ruth gleaned in Boaz's field (Ruth 2:2), but even more significant, it likely is where the angels appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus. The Franciscans keep it beautiful to this day.

Unconventional Visitors*Luke 2:8-14*

Following the prologue (1:1-4) and the birth announcements of John the Baptist and Jesus (1:5-38), Luke recorded what might be called songs of the coming Messiah. There is Elizabeth's song (1:39-45), Mary's song (1:46-56), and after the birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah's song (1:67-80). Next was the Christmas story. Caesar's decree caused Mary and Joseph to journey to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born (2:1-7).

Shepherds were the first people to hear this good news, which came from a very unconventional visitor. The Bible has a love/hate relationship with shepherds. On the one hand, shepherding was a noble occupation. These shepherds may well have been watching sheep that would be used in temple sacrifice. David the great king of Israel was a shepherd, and spiritually speaking, the Lord is our shepherd (Psalm 23:1). On the other hand, shepherds were despised (Genesis 46:34), and they were not allowed in the temple in Jesus' day.

But while they were *keeping watch* (guarding) *over their flocks at night*, an *angel of the Lord* appeared to them. The phrase "angel of the Lord" appears 11 times in the New Testament, most often in the birth narratives of Jesus and deliverances from prison in Acts (chapters 5 and 12). With the angel came *the glory of the Lord*. This glory was so brilliant that the shepherds were *terrified*.

This unconventional visitor told them to stop being afraid and receive the good news (literally, "be evangelized") and experience *great joy*. For if this universal Messiah was *for all the people*, that would include the shepherds. They were told to go to Bethlehem (*the town of David*) and were given a sign so they could find the Savior-Messiah. The word *sign* is often associated with miracles. Here it is used in the sense of what it would point to. Every baby was wrapped in swaddling clothes, but not

every baby was placed in a cow-feeding trough. That was unusual, and that was the sign.

The unconventional visitor was then joined by a *heavenly host* of visitors. This angelic choir spoke the praises of God. The glory shone around the shepherds, but all the glory went to God. The *highest heaven* indicated his supreme authority. Heaven's *peace* would come to those whom God would favor which, in this case, were the ragamuffins known as shepherds—a key to Luke's inclusiveness in his Gospel.

Unlikely Evangelists*Luke 2:15-20*

To some extent, the credibility of a message is impacted by the ones who bring that message. You expect a lawyer to bring a legal message. You expect a teacher to bring a lecture. You expect a doctor to bring a diagnosis. But would shepherds bring the greatest news the planet has ever heard? God thought these shepherds would make the best evangelists—though many would think of them as unlikely messengers.

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds resolved to *go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened*. The word *thing* is significant. The same word is translated "word" in verse 17 and "things" in verse 19. It is the Greek word *rhema*. It is the other word besides *logos* that is usually translated "word" in the New Testament. Often it distinguishes itself from *logos* as referring to a "spoken word." While Jesus himself is called *the Word*—the content of God (John 1:1, 14), his message is often called *rhema* (Romans 10:17).

These evangelistic shepherds were on the run. They *hurried off*. Their search was successful. They *found Mary and Joseph, and the baby*, just as the angels had told them, i.e., *lying in a manger*. We do not know how long they stayed, but evidently it was long enough to be filled with joy so as to spread this good news.

Four reactions attended these unlikely evangelists. The shepherds spread the word. The people were *amazed* (caused to marvel). Mary *treasured* and *pondered* the events. And the shepherds joined the angelic choir by glorifying and praising God. Shepherds were the first Christmas evangelists, and their message is worth investigating. ■

WHEN FEAR GIVES WAY TO GLORY

BY DAVID FAUST

It started with fear, and it ended in glory.

Many things start and end that way. A young mother fears the pain of childbirth, but she rejoices after the baby is born. A football player faces possible injury as he sprints onto the field, but the thrill of competition and the possibility of victory motivate him to take the risk. Stage fright plagues a jittery public speaker, but he feels relieved when listeners smile and nod. A young physician steadies her grip on the scalpel as she begins her first solo surgery, but later she quietly rejoices when the patient recovers. Good things often start with fear and end in glory.

Good News Ambassadors

On a visit to Bethlehem a couple of years ago, I saw a shepherd at work. He didn't look like the robed shepherds depicted on Christmas cards. This modern shepherd wore sneakers, jeans, and a T-shirt, and he was talking on a cell phone; but he had full command of his flock. He whacked his staff on a rock, and the sheep listened and followed. Supervising the flock looked like routine work for him.

When a group of first-century shepherds began their night shift near Bethlehem, they didn't anticipate anything unusual, scary, or wonderful would happen. Tending sheep was routine work for them. They didn't expect to see God's glory shining around them . . . or to hear a concert by an angel choir . . . or to have a personal encounter with the Messiah.

The shepherds had no idea they were role-players in an unfolding drama that would forever change the world. They didn't realize that centuries later, people would sing carols about them or portray them in holiday pageants. If the shepherds had been forewarned that something terrifying would happen that evening, they might have called in sick. But if they

hadn't gone out to serve in the field, they would have missed the glory.

The angels sang about peace on earth, and the terrified shepherds needed some peace themselves. Intense fear soon gave way to overwhelming joy. These unsuspecting shepherds became eyewitnesses of the Prince of Peace . . . the Lamb of God . . . a baby King swaddled not in a royal robe but in plain strips of cloth, with a manger for his throne. Now it was time for the shepherds themselves to become God's good news ambassadors.

The night started with fear and ended in glory. "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told" (Luke 2:20).

'Grace My Fears Relieved'

What are you afraid of right now? What makes you shudder with worry and dread? The song "Amazing Grace" contains this thought-provoking line: "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." Fear is a natural response to the unknown—to danger and uncertainty. And faith is the right response to fear. When darkness descends, faith ascends. God can be trusted even in scary situations. His grace teaches our hearts to fear, and then it brings relief.

The Christmas story starts with fear and ends with glory, and faith is the deciding factor. If we don't risk facing danger—if we never venture out to the dark field where unexpected things can happen—we might miss the glory.

Personal Challenge: On a piece of paper or in your personal journal, write a list of concerns that scare or worry you. In prayer, lift these fears up to God, knowing that he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). Ask the Prince of Peace to put your heart at rest. ■

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. How did you focus on listening to and obeying God last week?
2. What encouragement did you receive last week?

Ask two people to read aloud **Luke 2:8-20** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly retell the narrative in their own words.

3. This is a familiar story for many of us. What new detail or understanding do you notice today?
4. Let's dig deeper:
 - How would you describe the circumstances of the shepherds?
 - How is the angel of the Lord and the company of the heavenly host described?
 - In what ways do the angel and the heavenly host proclaim aspects of the gospel message?
 - What different emotions did the shepherds feel throughout this story?
 - How did different people respond to the good news of Jesus' birth?
5. What do you learn about God and the heavenly realm from this passage?
6. What do you learn about people?
7. What do you learn about obeying God from this passage?
8. Through the rest of the Christmas season, how will you follow the shepherds' example of spreading "the word concerning what had been told them about this child"?
 - The shepherds returned to their work, "glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen" regarding Jesus. How will you seek to have this same attitude in your workplace, school, or another place?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
10. In what way do you need great joy or peace this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Luke 20:27-40** as we wrap up a four-week study in the book of Luke. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. **L**

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