

# Luke

*An Unlikely Sign*  
*Luke 2:12-14*

*With Study Questions*

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**And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”<sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:  
<sup>14</sup>“Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men” (Luke 2:12-14)!**

## **Introduction-Dangerous Glitter**

There’s a somewhat apocryphal story concerning Thomas Aquinas meeting with the Pope (the story usually indicates Pope Innocent II, but he and Aquinas did not live at the same time. If the story were true, it would have to be Innocent IV or Gregory-no matter). In the story, Aquinas encounters the pope counting a pile of money. The Pope bragged, “Thomas, the church can no longer say, Silver and gold have I none,” (a reference to Peter’s healing of the lame man in the third chapter of Acts). Aquinas replied, “True, holy father, but neither can she now say, Arise and walk.”

The unique, historical supernatural abilities given to the apostles notwithstanding, the point of the story is well-taken. There appears to be a negative corresponding relationship between the focus on externals (money, in particular [1 Timothy 6:10]), and the value of that which is truly valuable.

This should not be approached as some sort of gnostic, anti-material, pseudo-spiritualism. There is a need for externals/things material. Food, clothing, healthcare, warmth, etc. are the necessities of life and we should work for them and pray to have them (Matthew 6:11). Later in this gospel, Luke will record Jesus telling a parable of The Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21).

In the parable his land “**produced plentifully.**” There’s nothing wrong with that. His response was to build bigger barns. Also, not a bad business decision. Where the parable takes a wrong turn is when he starts

talking to his own soul. **“Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”**

Though there may be sub-plots of sin in this parable (e.g., what of his neighbors and their needs?), it would appear that the heart of this folly is a false contentment in his soul with the acquisition of that which can be lost at a moment’s notice. This is the question that reveals the foolish nature of the man’s heart. **“Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”** The man was unconcerned with being **“rich toward God” (Luke 12:21).**

Glitter can be such a distraction!

**For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. <sup>17</sup> And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever (1 John 1:16, 17).**

Back when television was safer to watch, there was a program called *The Andy Griffith Show*. There was an episode where we see a dialogue between Andy (the sheriff and a dad) and hobo, played by Buddy Ebsen (Jed Clampett). Opie (Andy’s young son) becomes influenced by the hobo and begins behaving in a way his dad disapproved of. So, Andy visits the hobo, and they have a chat.

In this chat, Andy tells Ebsen that Opie is having a hard time telling right from wrong (not that it’s an easy thing. Lots of grown-ups still struggle with it). Andy doesn’t want Ebsen hanging out with Opie. Ebsen acknowledges that he does look at things differently, that he’s willing to bend the law. He then asks Andy, “Who’s to say that the boy would be happier your way or mine? Why not let him decide?” Something we hear all too regularly...let the kids decide (which, by the way, they eventually will).

Andy responds, “I’m afraid it don’t work that way. You can’t let a youngin’ decide for himself. He’ll grab at the first flashy thing with shiny ribbons on it. Then when he finds there’s a hook in it, it’s too late. Wrong ideas come packaged with so much glitter it’s hard to convince them that other things might be better in the long run. All a parent can do is say ‘wait, trust me, and try to keep temptation away.’”

Religion can be that way. It can be marketed, packaged, with all sorts of glitter. I do believe that plays into our current passage.

## Review

In our current text, Mary and Joseph were called from Galilee to Bethlehem for a census. About an 80-mile journey. When they arrive it's time for Mary to deliver her firstborn Son, Jesus. We're told that the inn was full, so they laid Him in a manger. The scene then transfers to nighttime in the fields where the shepherds are encountered by an angel.

For some reason God deemed it fit for one of the first recipients of the message of the birth of Christ to be shepherds. An unlikely choice according to human standards. After they are told that Christ is born **"to you this day"** they are told of a sign.

**And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger (Luke 2:12).**

## A Sign

How is a **"Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger"** a sign? A sign of what? For one, a sign that what they just heard from the angel was true. We might be inclined to think that any encounter with something or someone as supernatural and celestial as an angel need no further verification. In this we underestimate our own weakness. After all, the guards at the tomb of Jesus saw an angel and **"trembled and became like dead men"** (Matthew 28:4). But that didn't keep them from taking money and promoting a lie about the resurrection (Matthew 28:11-15).

Later in this gospel, Luke will give us an MRI of the darkness of the human psyche. The recently deceased rich man tells Abraham that if someone goes to his brothers from the dead **"they will repent."** Abraham responds,

**He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets (the Word of God), neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead' (Luke 16:31-parenthesis mine).**

The incessant request for miracles by skeptics would be insufficient to soften a hard heart. Of course, the shepherds (and I hope we) do not have hearts hardened to the truth of Christ. Even still, how often God needs to remind us of the glories of His promise!! Similar to our participation in the sacraments, first the shepherds will hear the message from the angel, then they will seek out the sign, which will further confirm their faith. Probably not too many babies in mangers. But the sign contains more.

The shepherds had heard that “**a Savior, who is Christ the Lord**” is born. The promise from the dawn of history is now fulfilled!!! Should they expect a traffic jam? Would there be royal guards watching over this child who is King? Would He distinguished from the other children by His wearing of purple? Would the shepherds need a backstage pass? The angel would not have the shepherds confused. He is swaddled among the animals.

D. L. Bock observes,

**Messiah’s life will contain an unusual bookend for a king, since he was born in an animal room and will die with robbers.<sup>1</sup>**

It’s as if the angels were told in advance to temper their expectations. In a moment we will read of a heavenly army praising God! Who can even imagine such a thing? But when they find the Babe, the only song will be the bleating of goats and lambs. Matthew Henry taught,

**When Christ was here upon earth, he *distinguished* himself, and made himself remarkable, by nothing so much as the instances of his *humiliation*.<sup>2</sup>**

We must be careful to avoid catering to images of Christ in our own minds. We will inevitably alter Him into who we want Him to be over who He truly is. J. I. Packer in his excellent book, *Knowing God*, speaks of how images dishonor God, for they obscure His glory and convey false ideas about Him (*Knowing God*, pp. 45, 46).

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<sup>1</sup> Bock, D. L. (1994). *Luke: 1:1–9:50* (Vol. 1, p. 219). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

<sup>2</sup> Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (p. 1828). Peabody: Hendrickson.

Scripture is not unclear when it speaks of the insignificance of the way the Savior might look.

**Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? <sup>2</sup>For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, *There is no beauty that we should desire Him* (Isaiah 53:1, 2).**

What a remarkable contrast these shepherds beheld. From a frightening angel and the heavenly host to a Babe impoverished. They needed to know the road to glory is down the path of weakness, pain, sorrow and (for Christ and many of His followers) even death. The cost of discipleship will be a recurring theme throughout Luke.

Be wary of presentations of the Christian faith that immediately deliver you to riches and health. The call/invitation to follow Christ is sure, but it may include an invitation to have a rock for a pillow.

**As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” <sup>58</sup> And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Luke 9:57, 58).**

Few televangelists call upon that verse.

I had a friend who recently passed. I invited him to church many times. He finally visited a beautiful church. It was a church designed by a famous architect and renowned for how strikingly beautiful it was. My friend said, “If there is a god, he’s in that church.” Sadly, the beauty of the building got in the way of the beauty of the message.

We were recently in Rome and visited St. Peter’s Basilica. The sheer power and opulence on display is both impressive and dark. One may ask, what is reasonable? After all, Jesus wasn’t born in a palace, but neither was He born in a ditch. Of many things, including church buildings, we may wish to learn from Agur,

**Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: <sup>8</sup>  
Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither**

**poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, <sup>9</sup>lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God (Proverbs 30:7-9).**

**And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: <sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men" (Luke 2:13, 14)!**

### **A Singing Army**

What a contrast! We are told "**suddenly**" as if to shock us into recognizing that at the mere mention of a Babe in a manger, all of heaven (*stratias*-heaven's armies) breaks into song. The angels are not confused when it comes to the chief end of all there is. "**Glory to God in the highest.**"

Having met over a thousand times in about a five-year period, over one hundred of the finest theologians/pastors in the world came up with a catechism that we all might benefit from their time together. Question number one of this catechism was,

*What is the chief end of man?*

**Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.**

If we find our lives to be meaningless and without direction and inner peace, it is due, in large part, to our failure to understanding why we are here.

### **Peace**

What is this peace of which the angels sing? It is a word that occurs with great regularity in Scripture. In a well-known passage often highlighted during Christmas, we read,

**For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will**

**be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).**

This peace contains an eternal harmony, a tranquility first and foremost between God and man. Whether we realize it or not, man's primary dilemma, the dilemma which is the father of all dilemmas is that we lack peace with God. In our natural state, we are at enmity with God. It is a hostile (shaking of the fist on our part) relationship.

When through Christ, we find peace there, all other peace follows.

**But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:13, 14).**

When we have peace with God, what follows is the peace of God, and what follows is peace with one another. He is the Prince of Peace and all peace flows from His fountain.

And the impetus for all these rich blessings is **"God's good will toward men."** We may, in our flesh, be shaking our fist at God,

**But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).**

In conclusion, I think it is worth noting that the heavenly host offering praise are offering this praise as mere observers of what God is doing through Christ. The Babe was not born to save angels (Hebrews 2:16), yet we hear the angels sing. It is the act of redeeming beauty that that Peter writes,

**...things into which angels long to look (1 Peter 1:12b).**

It's as if they're watching a rescue movie and can't help but break out in applause, even though they are not in the plot. It makes me wonder how they feel when they hear us sing.



## Questions for Study

1. How can focusing on things eternal rob us of deeper beauty (pages 2, 3)?
2. The shepherds are told they will see a sign. What is that sign? What are some things it might signify (pages 4, 5)?
3. Share some expectations you might have when it comes to the things of Christ. How should our expectations be tempered (pages 5, 6)?
4. How can some churches or presentations of Christ contain glitter (page 6)?
5. What is the first things the angels sing about? Why (page 7)?
6. In what respects is Christ the Prince of Peace (pages 7, 8)?