

THE RED THREAD

LESSONS FROM THE SHEPHERDS (BASED ON LUKE 2:8-16)

THE GIFT OF SALVATION

Acknowledge to yourself and to God that you have sinned (Romans 3:23).

In sorrow for your sins, turn from them to God and ask His forgiveness (Isaiah 55:7).

By faith receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, believing that He died in your place on the cross (John 3:16).

BETWEEN TIMES

BIRTH OF CHRIST BIBLE STUDY

Day 1—The Prophecy of the Babe
Isaiah 9:1-7

Day 2—The Prophecy of the Place
Micah 5:2

Day 3—The Time
Galatians 4:1-7

Day 4—Announcement 1
Luke 1:5-25

Day 5—Announcement 2
Luke 1:26-38

Day 6—Announcement 3
Matthew 1:18-24

Day 7—Elisabeth
Luke 1:39-45

Day 8—Mary's Magnification
Luke 1:46-56

Day 9—The Birth
Luke 2:1-7

Day 10—Praises
Luke 2:8-20

WHY & HOW

THE RED THREAD exists to be an encouragement to the men and women currently separated from family and friends in correctional institutions. It is published on 2nd and 4th Wednesdays by **Crimson House Ministries** at 1616 North Robberson, Springfield, Missouri, 65803. Please send all correspondence to that address. Subscription information is available online at: <http://readingroom.crimsonhouseministries.org/>

Mary and Joseph had made it to Bethlehem, the city of their ancestors, to be recorded for the census. Mary was very pregnant and very close to delivering. There were no rooms in the local inn, so they found lodging in a stable—probably a cave—warmed by the heat of animals in the musty hay.

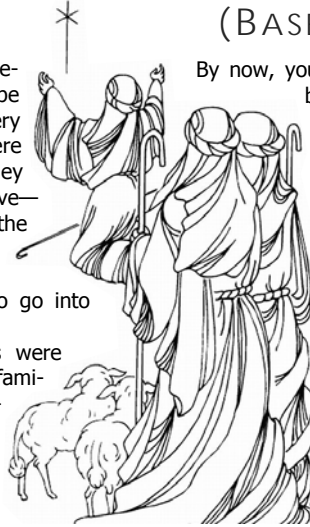
No sooner did they arrive at their meager accommodations than Mary began to go into labor, and Jesus was born.

Out in the hills of Judaea, shepherds were tending their flocks. These men and their families were the working lower class—owner-operators, blue collars, small businessmen, and hired help on the lower end of the economic spectrum. This night, like so many others, they were doing what they did—caring for the sheep. No sheep, no income. Sheep require constant care and supervision, night and day.

However, something happened on this night to this group that interrupted the monotony of the long, dark, chilly night in an unforgettable way. In my mind, I picture a campfire burning down to glowing coals. This mixed group of younger and older men were either reclining or sitting cross-legged around the fire. Supper had ended, and the talking had died out while one shepherd began playing a harmonica. (It's my imagination, so just go with it.) The music was soft, and the fire was warm, providing the perfect introduction to a restful night.

As a shepherd, imagine your eyes getting heavy, and you begin to yawn. Just before you drift off, suddenly, from out of nowhere, you're overcome by a bright, blinding light like the first piercing rays of the dawn! It's hard to focus because you're trying to shield your eyes, scrambling backwards on the ground. In the midst of the pandemonium of scuffling feet, shrieks of terror, and pots falling into the fire, a voice calls out. It's an image shrouded in the light! He's not shouting, but you can hear him as clearly as a trumpet blast.

"Do not be afraid" (Luke 2:10 NIV), he begins, and you think to yourself, "Oh, really? It's a bit late for that now!" The voice continues: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people" (v. 10 NIV).



By now, your fear has calmed. As you catch your breath, you edge out of your ineffective hiding place, quickly deducing two faces: this must be an angel, and if he were going to do you harm, you would already be dead. With your curiosity growing, you decide to face him.

The angel continues in that clear voice: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (v. 11 NIV). You know what he means—the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Lord! Your mind begins to whirl with thoughts of past teachings and instructions about the Messiah, the One who would come and save God's people from slavery and set everything right in the world.

"Could it be true?" you wonder as the messenger continues.

"This is how you'll know that I am telling you the truth: you will find the baby in Bethlehem, wrapped in rags and lying in a feeding trough in a stable (v. 12 paraphrased).

A Savior? Messiah? Bethlehem? Baby? Manger? Before you can get your mind around everything the angel is saying, the sky behind, above, and around the messenger lights up with thousands—maybe hundreds of thousands or more—of angels like the first, a panorama of bright images dispatching the darkness in light brighter than daylight!

This time, you are not so much afraid as you are overwhelmed by the radiance of this angelic army filling the night sky with sights and sound too wonderful to express. It's different from anything you have ever heard before—harmonious, clear, jubilant, and powerful!

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (v. 14 NIV).

As you continue to watch, speechless and motionless, the multitude of angels fades into the stars of the night sky. You stand in the quiet, dark, chilly night in dazed wonderment until something moves near you and catches your eye. Finally able to look

(Continued on page 2)

Important Announcement!—This will be the last issue of the Red Thread this month. Starting on January 15, 2011, it will return on a once-a-month basis in a new, larger format. We'd like to thank you for reading, encourage you to send in your thoughts (see *Let's Hear from You* on page 2), and wish you all a blessed new year. ■

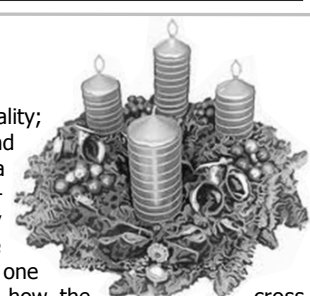
THE ADVENT WREATH

The Advent wreath is part of a long-standing Catholic tradition. However, the actual origins are uncertain. There is evidence of pre-Christian Germanic peoples using wreaths with lit candles during the cold and dark December days as a sign of hope in the future warm and extended-sunlight days of Spring. In Scandinavia during winter, lighted candles were placed around a wheel, and prayers were offered to the god of light to turn "the wheel of the earth" back toward the sun to lengthen the days and restore warmth.

By the Middle Ages, the Christians adapted this tradition and used Advent wreaths as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. After all, Christ is "the Light that came into the world" to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the truth and love of God (cf. John 3:19-21). By 1600, both Catholics and Lutherans had more formal practices surrounding the Advent wreath.

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is beautiful. The wreath is made of various evergreens, signifying continuous life. Even these evergreens have a traditional meaning which can be adapted to our faith: The laurel signifies victory over persecution and suffering; pine,

holly, and yew, immortality; and cedar, strength and healing. Holly also has a special Christian symbolism: The prickly leaves remind us of the crown of thorns, and one English legend tells of how the cross wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life found in Christ. Any pine cones, nuts, or seedpods used to decorate the wreath also symbolize life and resurrection. All together, the wreath of evergreens depicts the immortality of our soul and the new, everlasting life promised to us through Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, who entered our world becoming true man and who was victorious over sin and death through His own passion, death, and resurrection.



—Reprinted from <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0132.html>

(Continued from page 1, *Lessons from the Shepherds*) around again, you see your companions, whom you had completely forgotten in the initial confusion and ensuing splendor, all scattered about here and there. Some are on their knees peeking out from behind rocks, some are lying still on their backs, while others are standing. All of them are looking heavenward, still awestruck.

Each expression carries the same unspoken questions: "What just happened here? Did you see that? Was that real? Am I crazy?" As the affirming glances and nods give way to words, you slowly begin to realize that you are not crazy and it wasn't a dream because everyone else saw it too.

Someone exclaims, "Hey, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened that the Lord's angels just announced!"

Everyone quickly gathers the bare essentials they will need for the trip to Bethlehem. You are then hastily stumbling along the dark path toward the City of David, sharing laughs and stories of each individual response to the indescribably even that just took place. Through the chatter, however, you remember, "What about the sheep?" As you glance back into the valley, you see them resting peacefully in the soft light of the moon.

"Who'll watch the sheep while we're gone? If we don't get back before dawn, they might wander off and we'll have to spend days gathering them again."

What Would You Do?—If you're a shepherd on that night, you keep going. And they did. "...They hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger" (v. 16 NIV).

It's your choice today. Do you leave your flocks in the field and your other possessions in order to go worship the Christ? Or do you succumb to the pressures of business and trade, leisure activities, or other responsibilities you feel you cannot leave even for a few moments of each day, plus an hour or two each week?

Many times, we offer little time worshipping, honoring, and praising the Savior, the Anointed One, Emmanuel: "God with us." He's the One who gives us more than a holiday; He gives eternal life!

Are there still men and women of God who will leave their flocks, putting their pursuit of Christ ahead of their business interests and personal concerns? Are there still people who do like the disciples and, at the call of Jesus to "follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19), drop their nets, leave their boats, and dedicate their lives to following Him?

What does Jesus' statement—"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23)—really mean at Christmas or any other day of the year?

It's not that these shepherds were going to lose their flocks completely while they went to worship, but every moment they were away carried a risk of injury to sheep and extra labor. These concerns did not deter them from worship, pursuing a deeply personal and intimate relationship with God. The shepherds chose to pursue. What about you?

If we saw what the shepherds witnessed that night, wouldn't "church" be different? Wouldn't we open ourselves up more personally? Wouldn't our private times with God be transformed, not to mention longer and more frequent as well? After all, it's hard to ignore the call of an army of angels appearing in a spectacular display of the glory of God, singing the shepherds into awestruck silence. But in the same sense, shouldn't it be harder for us to ignore the chorus of hundreds, if not thousands, of God-given blessings in our lives, singing out the love of a God who has purchased eternal life for us?

Is Christ any less worthy of our worship today? If, when He came as a baby, it caused the heavens to explode in angelic revelry, how much more should we praise Him now that He has gone to the cross and paid the price for our forgiveness?

And if that's not enough, Christ rose from the dead! And if that's not enough, He ascended back into heaven! And if that's still not enough, He's coming back soon! What are we waiting for? It's always the right time to pursue a deeply personal relationship with Him. Worship!

—John Newson, pastor
Olathe, KS

PASTOR'S DEVOTION

Text: Matthew 1:18-25—In the Bible, only four ways are noted to get a physical body: (1) without a man or a woman—as Adam did, made from the dust of the earth; (2) with a man, but no woman—as Eve did, made from Adam's side; (3) with a man and a woman—as all humans are born; or (4) with a woman, but no man—as Jesus was born, having an earthly mother but no biological father. It was important that Jesus be born of a virgin that He might have a sinless human nature, conceived by the Holy Spirit (see Luke 1).

Why?

"When Adam sinned and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he died: he died spiritually, and ultimately physically. Since we know that life is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11) something happened to Adam's blood as well. Sin affected the blood of man, not just his body, because the flesh is supplied by the blood. Because sin affected the blood of man it necessitated the virgin birth of Christ who was to be a son of Adam yet a sinless man. For this reason Christ could partake of Adam's flesh which is not inherently sinful, but he could not partake of Adam's blood which was completely sinful as the result of the fall. The Father in his infinite wisdom provided a way by which Jesus, born of a woman (not man) could be a perfect human being because he had not a drop of Adam's blood in his veins and, thus, he did not share in Adam's sin."

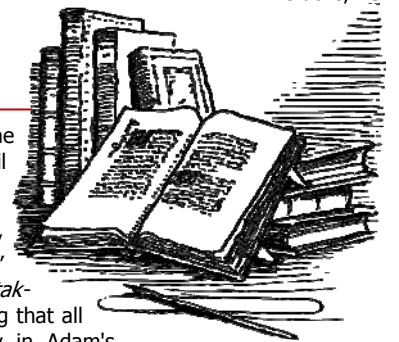
For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15 ESV)

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he

might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil (Hebrews 2:14 KJV).

The words "took part" as applying to Christ is an entirely different word from "partakers" as applied to the children. *Partakers* mean *to share fully* meaning that all of Adam's children share fully in Adam's flesh and blood; however, *took part of the same* means to "take part but not all." Thus Jesus took only part, that is, the flesh part from Mary and the blood was the result of the Holy Spirit's overshadowing. This means that, indeed, Jesus became the seed of David according to the flesh: He was the son of man birthed through Mary, but He was the Son of God according to the blood. The blood flowing through His veins was divine because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, the blood Judas betrayed was innocent, and the blood soiled at the Cross was incorruptible! And it still flows today.

Prayer Focus—"But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him" (Romans 5:8-9 KJV). Rejoice that our Father gave the Gift of gifts in His Son; celebrate His birth with either thankfulness for being born again, or with a personal repentance in accepting God's Gift—Christ Jesus!



LET'S HEAR FROM YOU ... !

We love hearing from you and so do our readers. Please send your articles, poems, praise reports, testimonies, etc..., to *The Red Thread, Crimson House Ministries, 1616 North Robberson, Springfield, MO, 65803.*



1616 NORTH ROBBERSON
SPRINGFIELD, MO 65803