

## Have We Recognized Our Greatest Need?

In this most recent series from Luke 2, we're seeing that God sometimes uses world rulers, as well as common, ordinary people to fulfill his purposes. In my previous article we were introduced to a Roman Emperor by the name of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1) whom God used to issue a decree for the purposes of taxation which resulted in Jesus being born in Bethlehem. In this article, I want us to meet some very ordinary, obscure shepherds whose names we don't even know. Somewhere in the vicinity of Bethlehem, surely somewhat close to where Mary and Joseph and the baby are, there were "shepherds out in the fields watching over the flock at night." It's only in the gospel account of Luke that we're told about these shepherds and their connection to the story. Why shepherds? Even though we may often think of shepherds as these quaint young men and boys faithfully watching over their flock, the reality was somewhat different. Shepherds were some of the most despised people in Jewish society. Because their occupation included staying with the sheep night and day for long periods of time, they were often unable to keep the Old Testament ceremonial laws. Therefore, they were considered ceremonially unclean. They were seen by many as untrustworthy liars and their testimony was inadmissible in Jewish law courts. Excepting maybe lepers and tax collectors, shepherds were generally regarded as the lowest class of men in first century, Jewish society.

And yet, in spite of being despised by many, "an angel of the Lord" comes to a group of shepherds with the message of the birth of "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. .... 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 among those with whom he is pleased!'" (Luke 2:11-14) Who are those with whom God is pleased and who receive God's peace? It can only be those who've been given a new heart (Ez. 36:26; Rom. 2:29). Even though the shepherds were certainly a lowly and despised group, it's not, ultimately, the *outward* circumstances that point to *true* humility and need, but rather, it's what God does in our hearts.

I once read an account of a large, prestigious church in England that had three mission churches under its care. On the first Sunday of the New Year, all the members of the mission churches came together at the larger church for a combined worship and communion service. In those *mission* churches, which were located in the slums of the city, were some amazing stories of conversions. Former thieves, addicts and others would receive communion side by side. As the people at the special worship service came forward to kneel at the communion rail, the pastor saw a former *burglar* kneeling beside a *judge* of the Supreme Court of England—the very judge who had sent the burglar to jail where he had served seven years. Somewhere during the time of his arrest, conviction and imprisonment, the former burglar had become a Christian. Yet as they knelt side by side on that Sunday morning, neither seemed to be aware of the other.

After the service the pastor was walking out with the judge when the judge asked the pastor, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me this morning at the communion rail?" The pastor responded, "Yes, but I didn't think you noticed." The two walked along in silence for a few moments and then the judge said, "What a miracle of grace." The pastor nodded in agreement. "Yes what a *marvelous miracle* of grace." The judge looked at the pastor and said.

“Who are *you* referring to?” The pastor replied, “I’m speaking of the conversion of the convict.” But the judge said, “I wasn’t referring to him, I was talking about myself.” The pastor looked at the judge amazed and declared that he didn’t understand. The judge explained, “I can imagine that when the burglar was imprisoned, and as he pondered his life of emptiness and waste, he found that he had nothing to show for his existence but a history of crime. When he heard about salvation in Jesus, it just seems natural that he would *recognize his need* and be saved.

But look at me. I was taught all my life to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be true; that I was to say my prayers, to go to church, take communion and so on. Later on I went to Oxford to receive my law degree, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge. Pastor, it was God’s grace that drew me; it was God’s grace that opened my heart to receive it. I didn’t think I needed *anything or anyone* and God gave me a new heart, humbled me and graciously saved me. If it’s possible, I’m an even *greater* miracle of grace than the convict.” I’ll ask the question that I asked in my previous article: “Where do you fit in the Christmas story?”

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