The shepherds — good news for everyone (fact sheet)

> **Key verse**
>
> "I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2.10)

In one sentence: Night-shift shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem — overlooked by many and despised by some — were the first to hear the angel's announcement of the Saviour, were terrified, were reassured, hurried to see the child, and became the first people to spread the news.

At a glance

Fact	Detail
Who	Shepherds "living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Lk 2:8) — working-class, night-shift labourers
Where	"That region" — the countryside around Bethlehem, "the city of David" (Lk 2:8, 11)
When	By night. We do not know the time of year for certain.
Their reputation	May have been accused of lacking devotion, because staying in the fields kept them from the temple festivals. Had a poor reputation with Egyptians (Genesis 46:34).
The visitor	An angel of the Lord, then suddenly "a multitude of the heavenly host" praising God (Lk 2:9, 13)
Their first response	Terrified (Lk 2:9) — the first recorded response to the birth in Luke is fear
The reassurance	"Do not be afraid… I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people" (Luke 2.10)
The titles	Saviour — he will rescue; Messiah — God's anointed; Lord — the word used of God himself (Lk 2:11)
The sign	"A child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:12) — the manger is mentioned three times (vv7, 12, 16)
The song	"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours" (Lk 2:14)
The peace	Not the Pax Romana, real but limited: peace with God and release from the dread of death (Calvin)
Their response	"Let us go now to Bethlehem and see…" — they went with haste, found Mary and Joseph and the child, and made known what had been told them (vv15–18)
Afterwards	They returned "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" (v20); the first Christian evangelists

Fact	Detail
Mary's response	She "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (v19) — a different reaction, deliberately recorded by Luke. See also Luke 2:51.

What Luke records

The setting (2:8)

- In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night (v8).

The angel and the good news (2:9–12)

- An angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them; they were terrified (v9).
- "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2.10, Luke 2.10-11).
- "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (v12).

The heavenly host (2:13–14)

- Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God (v13).
- "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours" (v14).

The visit and the witness (2:15–20)

- When the angels had gone, the shepherds said, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us" (v15).
- They went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger (v16).
- When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about the child; all who heard were amazed (vv17–18).
- But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart (v19).
- The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (v20).

Background and some interpretation based on my personal notes

- **Luke's emphasis is deliberate.** There is considerable detail about the shepherds compared with how little we are told about the birth of Jesus itself — the birth takes two verses, the announcement twenty. Presumably this is to do with the way the significance of Jesus is announced. Only the angels actually speak; the shepherds' speech is really an amalgamation of the conversation. Perhaps this is meant to show that when God speaks, history happens and people react — that we are to "hear" God speaking (acting) and work out how to respond.
- **An ordinary class, on purpose.** Shepherds were ordinary working people, often undertaking difficult and demanding work. Some ancient Jewish sources reflect negative attitudes towards shepherds, particularly concerning their reliability. The striking point in Luke is that God chooses

working shepherds as the first recipients of the announcement of the Messiah's birth. God gave this privilege to them. Is that intentional? It looks like the great reversal we see so often in the gospels: what the world values, God does not; what the world sees as ordinary, God values.

- **Fitting, not just ironic.** David was a shepherd (2 Samuel 7:8) and looked after sheep at Bethlehem (1 Samuel 17:15). Jesus is, like David, a ruler born in shepherd country. Liefeld adds that in both testaments shepherds symbolise those who care for God's people, including the Lord himself (Psalm 23:1; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 23:14; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:2), so the shepherds of Luke 2 may symbolise all the ordinary people who have joyfully received the gospel and become, in various ways, pastors to others.
- **One angel is enough.** The first recorded response to the birth in Luke is fear — though perhaps that is the shepherds' response to the angels rather than to Jesus. God's glory is terrifying: perhaps this is a throwback to the terror of the mountain of the Lord (Exodus 19). Nolland notes that περιλάμπειν ("to shine around") is used elsewhere in the NT only at Acts 26:13.
- **"Do not be afraid" is reassurance, not a rebuke.** This is not to say their terror was unjustified; it is that the message is good news and they need not fear what the angel is about to tell them. The angels correct their fear and inform them that a more appropriate response is joy — perhaps indicative of the difference between the Old and New Covenants. Is that how the gospel and the kingdom are seen today?
- **"All the people."** "All the people" would naturally have been understood against Israel's expectation of God's promised salvation. Yet Luke's Gospel progressively reveals that the good news has implications far beyond Israel, extending to all nations (Luke 2:32; 24:47).
- **The names are highly significant.** The three titles are highly significant. Saviour identifies His saving mission; Messiah identifies Him as God's promised Anointed King; Lord identifies His authority and sovereignty. The title Kyrios is particularly significant because it is also used in the Greek Old Testament for the divine name. Luke is announcing a child whose humble circumstances contrast dramatically with the greatness of His identity. The message is about a Saviour coming in humility and vulnerability, yet identified as Lord and Messiah. It sounds ridiculous — but it has been announced by an angel and confirmed when the shepherds find things just as he said.
- **A rival to Augustus.** Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, established the Roman imperial system and presented himself as Divi Filius, son of the deified Caesar. Roman imperial propaganda associated him with peace, salvation and divine favour. Against this background, Luke's announcement that a Saviour, Messiah and Lord had been born carries an extraordinary resonance. The child in Bethlehem, not the emperor in Rome, is the true source of God's promised salvation and peace. The contrast between imperial claims and the Christian proclamation of Jesus as Lord is particularly significant.
- **"To you" is personal.** "To you" is personal. The good news is not an abstract announcement about God's saving purposes. It is addressed directly to the shepherds, who are invited to recognise that the promised Saviour has come. The plural "you" includes the shepherds as a group, and the wider announcement is good news for all the people.
- **The manger, three times (vv7, 12, 16).** The shepherds knew which baby to look for and found the angels were telling the truth. It is also a sign of humility — a peasant home with the animal stall distinguished only by the raised floor of the living area.
- **The host is an army — announcing peace, not war.** "Appeared" is not a glimpse of heavenly reality but heaven breaking into ours; the heavenly residents are impressed with what God has achieved.

- **Glory to God comes first.** Though the blessings come to humankind, God deserves the honour for what he is doing and who he is. The Christmas story is about God — his mercy, love and grace — and we should give him honour in how we speak, pray and sing.
- **What peace means.** The peace announced by the angels is God's peace, associated with His saving favour towards humanity. It is deeper than political stability or the Pax Romana. Through Christ, people can be reconciled to God (Romans 5:1; 2 Corinthians 5:18–19). Calvin particularly emphasises peace with God as freedom from divine wrath and the dread of death. The political peace of Rome was limited and could not provide this reconciliation.
- **"On whom his favour rests".** God acts to bless people not according to what they deserve but according to his mercy — a message of hope and favour.
- **Great urgency.** "Let us go" is a healthy example of obedience. They understand the angels as conveying God's message. Note that Mary is mentioned first in verse 16.
- **The first evangelists.** "When they had seen him" — interestingly, seeing is enough; they don't stay long. Awe surrounds the story (v18). Luke deliberately records Mary's different reaction (v19). In verse 20 they are convinced this was good news, and their glorifying and praising matches the angels'.
- **Night-shift people.** It is as if they are working in "an alternative universe" to the successful and noticed. Their movements are "they seek, they see, they share" — God values the overlooked and wants them to know the good news.

Mary and the shepherds — parallels

Parallel	Mary	The shepherds
Overlooked by the world	A nobody from a nothing-town in Nazareth	Night-shift labourers, despised and considered unreliable
Visited by heaven	Gabriel sent to Nazareth	An angel of the Lord, then the heavenly host
Terrified / troubled	Greatly troubled at his words	Terrified at the angel and the glory
Told not to fear	"Do not be afraid, Mary"	"Do not be afraid… good news of great joy"
Given a sign	Elizabeth's pregnancy (Lk 1:36)	A child in a manger (Lk 2:12)
Asked a question	"How can this be?" — engaged faith, not unbelief	No question recorded; their words are an amalgamation of the response
Responded in obedience	"Let it be with me according to your word"	"Let us go now to Bethlehem and see"
Pondered / marvelled	Treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart (Lk 2:19)	All who heard were amazed at what the shepherds told them (Lk 2:18)
Glorified and praised God	The Magnificat (Lk 1:46–55)	Returned glorifying and praising God (Lk 2:20)

Shepherd Imagery in Scripture

- Psalm 23:1 - The LORD is my shepherd

- Isaiah 40:11 - God gathers and carries His flock
- Ezekiel 34:11–16 - God Himself seeks and cares for His sheep
- Jeremiah 23:1–4 - God's judgement on unfaithful shepherds
- John 10:11–16 - Jesus is the good shepherd
- Hebrews 13:20 - Jesus is the great Shepherd of the sheep
- 1 Peter 5:2–4 - Elders are instructed to shepherd God's flock

The progression

1. They heard
   The shepherds received God's announcement (Luke 2:10–14).
2. They believed
   They accepted that what the Lord had made known to them was worth investigating (Luke 2:15).
3. They went
   They acted with urgency (Luke 2:16).
4. They witnessed
   They made known what had been told them (Luke 2:17).
5. They praised
   They returned glorifying and praising God (Luke 2:20).