

For the past few weeks, many of us have been preparing to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. While our hearts are filled with joy because Christmas is finally here, some of us are probably happy just to be able to sit down and rest. In the days before Christmas, our often long “To Do” lists got even longer. Does this sound familiar to you? Shop. Cook. Bake. Decorate. Buy and wrap gifts. Send Christmas cards. Give glory to God. Give glory to God? Absolutely! Even though we might not write it down, giving glory to God should be at the top of our “To Do” lists—not just at Christmas, but on every day of our lives. As we meditate on Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, let’s see how the individuals involved in the first Christmas gave glory to God. May the Good News of our Savior move us to always give glory to God in the highest!

Ironically, the first person whom Luke mentions was undoubtedly the least likely person to give God glory. It’s hard to imagine that the Emperor Caesar Augustus would have given glory to anyone other than himself. Why would he? In those days, emperors had such awesome power that some of them claimed to be gods! So even if Augustus had heard about the God of Israel, there’s no way that he would have given God the honor that Augustus thought that he himself deserved. Yet, God used this unbelieving Roman emperor in such a way that Caesar ended up giving glory to the one true God, even though he was completely unaware that he was doing just that!

How did God use Caesar? You know that the Roman Empire was huge. You also know that it takes a lot of money to run such a big government. So, the good administrator that he was, Caesar ordered that a census be taken of the entire Roman world. That way, Augustus would know exactly how many taxpayers were on the books so his tax collectors could squeeze every possible denarius out of his subjects. Caesar’s decree directed that every adult male had to go to his hometown to register. Not coincidentally, God’s prophets had foretold that the Savior would be born in David’s hometown of Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph fit the bill since they were David’s descendants; the problem was they weren’t living anywhere near Bethlehem; they were eighty-five miles away in Nazareth. God used the census, not to help the Roman Revenue Service collect taxes for Caesar, but to get Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem so that the Scriptures would be fulfilled!

Had it not been for the census, Joseph would never have left Nazareth. Joseph probably thought, “This is no time to be traveling, especially when Mary is ready to give birth almost any day now. Caesar’s decree couldn’t have come at a worse time. This isn’t going to be an easy trip. Even though the road is good (which I helped pay for with my taxes), it’s going to take us a good three days to get to Bethlehem. What if she has the baby when we’re out in the middle of nowhere? Maybe we should wait until the baby is born and then go; or maybe I should go by myself and let Mary stay in Nazareth; but who would help Mary if the baby comes when I’m gone? What am I going to do?” Joseph might have had those thoughts. But he didn’t hesitate to do the right thing. Joseph gave glory to God by obeying the emperor’s decree. Mary also glorified God by accompanying her husband. Mary couldn’t have been looking forward to travelling three long days while carrying a baby. (What pregnant woman would?) But Mary set aside any misgivings she might have had and followed her husband. By submitting to Joseph’s leadership, Mary glorified God. She trusted that the Lord would protect her and her baby on this arduous journey. Mary’s faith moved her to set out with her husband and travel to Bethlehem where she would give birth to her firstborn—a Son who was her Savior and the Savior of the world.

Luke then shifts our attention to the hills overlooking the city of David. The former physician tells us that there were shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks at night. These hard-working men of faith were already glorifying God just by what they were doing. Even though shepherds played an important role in the economy, few people chose this unglamorous occupation. A shepherd’s life wasn’t easy. A shepherd had to be away from his family for long periods. During that time, he had to regularly move his flock to find good pastureland, treat any animal that might be injured, gather the strays, find the lost and protect the flock from wild animals. That’s a lot of hard work! There was another thing that made shepherding unappealing. Certain aspects of the job, such as touching animal waste, fluids from birthing lambs, and carcasses of dead animals, made a shepherd ceremonially unclean. Because they had limited opportunities to purify themselves, shepherds sometimes weren’t allowed to participate in public worship; some were even treated like outcasts. Yet, out of love for their Lord, shepherds willingly made these sacrifices. These shepherds gave glory to God as they watched their flocks and patiently waited for the promised Savior to come.

Then it happened. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared in the sky and the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds. Now, of all the individuals or groups mentioned in Luke's account, it should come as no surprise that the angels gave God glory. That's what angels do. The Bible tells us that God created these Mighty Ones to do his bidding. Sometimes that meant delivering a divine message. Without a doubt, the birth of the Savior had to have been the best message that any angel could ever deliver. The angel spoke these unforgettable words of hope, peace and joy to the shepherds: **"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger"** (Luke 2:10-12).

An entire army of angels then joined the chorus, praising the Lord saying, **"Glory to God in the highest!"** Before concluding his account of the first Christmas, Luke tells us how the shepherds and Mary gave glory to God in other ways. When the angels had left the shepherds, the shepherds said to one another, **"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about"** (v.15). Notice that the shepherds didn't question whether the angel's message was true. In faith, the shepherds immediately went to Bethlehem so that they could see the promised Savior with their own eyes. The shepherds then gave glory to God by telling everyone about all the things they had seen and heard concerning the Christ-child. Mary, on the other hand, glorified God as she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.

So far, we've seen that Mary, Joseph, the angels and the shepherds all gave glory to God. But there's one other person in the Christmas story who gave the most glory to God. Who is it? It's our Savior, Jesus Christ, whose birth we are celebrating tonight! Think about it. Jesus is God Almighty. He is holy and just while also being merciful and compassionate. Jesus deserves all honor, glory and praise in heaven above and on earth below. Yet Jesus willingly set aside his glory when he left his home in heaven and came to live among us. The tiny baby lying in the manger is the Word who became flesh. Jesus humbled himself by becoming a human being, putting himself under the law and keeping the law perfectly in our place. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, was completely obedient to his earthly parents and his heavenly Father his entire life.

There was one more act of obedience left for our Savior to carry out. This one would be the most difficult of all. To save mankind from the consequences of sin, Jesus would have to die. Jesus knew that he would be crucified and his lifeless body laid in a tomb even as his mother was laying him in the manger on the night he was born. Jesus knew he would be forsaken by his own Father as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed. Jesus said, **"Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you"** (John 17:1). Jesus glorified his heavenly Father by giving up his life so that all who believe in him would have eternal life. Jesus set aside his glory with his humble birth in Bethlehem. He took up that glory at his resurrection. Because Jesus glorified his Father by completing the work his Father had sent him to do, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.

Dear friends, tonight is an awesome night in which we give all praise and glory to God for the gift of his Son. Mary, Joseph, the angels and the shepherds all gave glory to God that very first Christmas. We can do no better than to follow their example. We glorify God by obeying his will, by worshipping him, serving him and praising him with our words and actions. We give him glory as we treasure these things in our hearts and as we tell others about Jesus' love. Let's keep giving glory to God by putting him at the top of our "To Do" lists. This Christmas Eve and every day of our lives let's join with the angels and praise God from whom all our blessings flow: **"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests"** (Luke 2:14). Amen.