

Introduction

Christianity has three primary symbols. Can you tell me what they are? The most visibly demonstrated symbol is the cross. It represents that Jesus died there for the sins of every human being who has lived or will live. The second symbol is the empty tomb. It represents that in time and space, Jesus rose from the dead, as the first fruits of those who will someday also rise from the dead. And finally, the third symbol is the manger. It represents that the spiritual (non-material) God came to earth as a human being, born of a woman. He did so in order that He might die and rise as I just explained them.

It's that last symbol that I'd like to focus on today and the four words in Luke 2:12 that present it to us, **“lying in a manger.”** Let's examine the significance of those words, that is, what they did mean to the shepherds and to Mary and Joseph and what they do mean to us.

To the Shepherds

We begin with the shepherds. Most of us get our perception of the shepherds from Hallmark cards, manger scenes, Christmas plays, and pictures. We imagine them to have been smooth-skinned, soft-talking, gentle young men who quietly tended their flocks.

But nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is they were some of the most unreliable, untrustworthy, and larcenous people in the first century world. They were so disreputable in fact that courts of law excluded them from testifying in trials. Picture a room full of drunken foul-mouthed men making disgusting noises and you have an idea of what the shepherds were like.

Yet, according to verses 8-11 and verse 13, they were the ones to whom Father God chose to announce the birth of **“a Savior”** in Bethlehem. And as verse 12 implies, He also told them to go and find Him, giving them a **“sign”** for doing so. That sign was that He'd be **“lying in a manger.”**

But how was lying in a manger a sign to them? They knew from verse 12 that the Savior would be **“wrapped in cloths.”** We can be sure there were many babies wrapped in cloths in Bethlehem. So how could the shepherds possibly know which One was the Savior? It was that He would be **“lying in a manger.”** Even in the ancient world, a baby lying in a manger would have been an extraordinary thing. A manger was an animal’s feeding trough. No self-respecting mother, except in the direst of circumstances, would have put her baby in one. It was a strange sight, in other words, which was what made it a sign. There was only one baby in a manger that night. And when the shepherds saw Jesus in one, they knew He was the Savior for whom they were looking.

Now, verse 20 records what they did after they came and saw Him. They went back to their lives glorifying and praising God. That was out of character for them and implies what they did that night. They repented of their sins and began to live for God. They were converted, as we say it, and **“lying in a manger”** was a vital part of that.

To Mary and Joseph

But **“lying in a manger”** wasn’t just a sign to the shepherds. It was a sign to Mary and Joseph as well.

We tend to idealize the birth of Jesus. We have a manger scene in our living room that, like most do, elicits warm and cozy feelings from us. It’s a quaint and charming little scene.

But the real scene was anything but that. Verse 7 mentions the Bethlehem inn. This inn was no prize. It was nothing more than a series of crude stalls built inside an enclosure, with a fire pit for cooking. It made Motel 6 look like the Hilton Hotel. But as dismal as it was, Mary and Joseph didn’t even have it. The census decree of Caesar Augustus was a boon for business and the inn was filled to capacity. Mary and Joseph, as a result, ended up in what was probably a cave of some sort that stabled animals. It was a cold, dirty, smelly place. Filthy hay and animal waste littered the floor, which was why they put Jesus in a

feeding trough when He was born. As dirty as it must have been, it was at least cleaner and safer than the alternative, the floor, was.

Those dreadful circumstances were a test of faith. Remember what the angel had told Mary and Joseph in Chapter 1 of Matthew and Luke. They had found favor with God, would give birth to the Savior of the world, and would be blessed forever as a result. But now here they were, in the worst possible circumstances that parents, with a newborn baby, could be in. Exhausted, anxious, and afraid, they must have seriously questioned what the angel had told them.

But then the shepherds came. According to verse 17, they explained to Mary and Joseph who they were and why they were there: **“Angels told us that a Savior, the Messiah, was born in Bethlehem today and gave us a sign to find Him. That sign was that He’d be lying in a manger. Your Son is lying in a manger. That means He’s the Savior and Messiah for whom we’re looking.”** That was precisely what Mary and Joseph needed to hear. It flooded their souls with hope and joy and washed away the doubts they had, I’m sure.

We see then that the words **“lying in a manger”** were just as much for Mary and Joseph’s sake as they were for the shepherds’.

To Us

And they’re for our sakes as well.

Many people misunderstand the meaning and implications of the manger scene. They’ve heard about it and seen it so many times that they’ve become numb to it. They think it’s a quaint tradition, the purpose of which is to make us feel warm and fuzzy inside.

But it’s far more than that. In his book *The Real Spirit of Christmas*, Daniel Schaeffer explains it well: **“The manger scene wasn’t designed to put me in ‘the holiday mood.’ It was intended to shake me to the roots of my soul.”** He’s absolutely right about that. Those four words, **“lying in a manger,”** should shake the very core of us. That’s because of what they teach us. It’s that God humbled

Himself. That is the most poignant statement you will ever hear. God humbled Himself – and boy did he.

Consider this. He could have entered the world in some other way. He could have chosen royalty or aristocracy, not commoners, to bear Him. He could have chosen a palace or estate, not a stable, in which to be born. He could have chosen powerful religious, political, or social leaders, not shepherds, to witness His birth. He could have chosen a crib, not a feeding trough, in which to lie.

But He didn't and that's the point. God purposely humbled Himself before us. That's what He did and He doing so teaches us three things.

First, He wants us to love Him. One of the most compelling gestures in human life is a great or powerful person humbling himself or herself before us in some way. Imagine Barak Obama, Bill Gates, or Rick Warren voluntarily coming and cleaning our house for us. That act would certainly draw us to him and if it continued over time, even cause us to love him. But something as extreme as any of those people doing that is nothing compared to what God did. The dominant reality of the universe, perfect and infinite in all things, left the splendor of heaven and came as a baby lying in a manger – for you and for me. If that doesn't draw us to Him and stir up motions of love for Him, probably nothing will.

God humbling Himself teaches us a second thing. He's accessible to us all. Let's face it. None of us are going to the White House any day soon. It's an exceptional thing for common people like us to visit palaces or places of power. But anyone can visit mangers. Presidents can. Kings can. CEO's can. Waitresses can. Janitors can. Dishwashers can, and so on. That reality is so simple that it's easy to miss. But it's profound as well. It shows us that the living God is accessible to anyone who desires Him – to anyone who wants to know and love Him.

There's a third thing God humbling Himself teaches us. He will save us from our sin. The word "**Savior**" in verse 11 implies just that. When I say "**sin**," I mean the self-centered nature with which each of us is born. That nature compels us to harm others or to allow harm to come to

others if doing so helps us. Just examine the soap opera lives of almost everyone around us and you'll know what I mean.

The problem was radical and, therefore, so was its solution. We can't cure cancer by putting a band-aid on it. Radical problems require radical solutions. There was only one way God could solve the problem of sin. He had to do the most radical thing that a perfect and infinite spiritual being could possibly do. He had to become a human being, live a perfect life in a fallen world, die for everyone's sins, rise from the dead, and ascend into heaven. So, that's exactly what He did and it all began with lying in a manger. If there had been no manger (birth), there would have been no life, death, resurrection, and ascension. And if there had been no life, death, resurrection, and ascension, there would be no solution to the problem of sin. We'd be enslaved to our fallen nature now and forever. But there was a manger and thus we don't have to be.

Humble Ourselves

And we won't be – if we humble ourselves. That is our proper response to the reality behind the words **"lying in a manger."** God humbled Himself to save us. We must humble ourselves to be saved.

Let's quickly admit that humility isn't people's normal posture. On the contrary, they're proud, and take charge of their lives because they are. First, they believe they're capable of running them on their own. Second, they do what they believe. They run them on their own. Their motto is, **"I do what I want and I do it in dependence on me."**

Some do want to be in God's good graces, which they attempt to be in by doing Him favors and/or by **"looking good."** I'll never forget the hospital volunteer who explained to me why she was doing what she was doing. **"I'm scoring points with God,"** she said. She wanted to be in charge of her own life and at the same time, be in God's good graces. She attempted to achieve that by doing Him favors and looking good.

But we don't get into God's good graces in either of those ways. Jesus revealed how we do in Matthew 18:3-5, **"Whoever humbles**

himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Let's think for a moment about small children. They're realistic about themselves. They do have their moments of independence and self-will, but generally they grasp that they need the guidance and help of adults to live well, and presume upon them for that help. They really have no other choice and know it. They're humble in other words.

And so must we be. We must be realistic about ourselves. We admit that we're sinful, fragile, and flawed and thus incompetent to run our own lives. Admitting that, we then repent of our sins and put our lives in God's hands. We let Him run them. We learn all that He says and try and train our best to do that. We humble ourselves, in other words, like small children do and let God be God in our lives.

The conversion story of Watergate conspirator and man's man, G. Gordon Liddy, illustrates what I mean. Liddy was a student of Frederick Nietzsche and believed in the absolute supremacy of his own will. He titled his autobiography in fact just that, *Will*. He exuded self-confidence. He was convinced he was competent to run his own life and to impose his will on others and tried. But then the Holy Spirit converted him to Jesus, prompting him to write this: **"Now the hardest thing I have to do every day is try to decide what is God's will, rather than what is my will. What does Jesus want, not what does Gordon want. I have an almost 57-year history of doing what I want, what my will wants, and I have to break out of that habit into trying to do the will of God."** That was a remarkable conversion. G. Gordon Liddy, the man's man, humbled himself like a child – and was saved.

Conclusion

We hear so much talk this time of year about the real meaning of Christmas, which most define as being loving or kind to others. But that isn't it, at all. It is instead that God humbled Himself to save us from our sin. And we must humble ourselves to be saved from it. That's the real meaning of Christmas and the words, **"lying in a manger."**