

**"Lying in a Manger"**  
**Luke 2:8-14**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tonight, I'm going to share a few thoughts about four of the most significant words in the Christmas narrative. I just read them to you. They are the last four words in verse 12, *"lying in a manger."* Let's examine what those four words meant to the shepherds and to Mary and Joseph, and what they mean to you and me now.

## **WHAT "LYING IN A MANGER" MEANT TO THE SHEPHERDS**

We start with the shepherds.

Most of us get our perception of the shepherds from Hallmark cards, manger scenes, and Christmas plays. We imagine them to have been smooth-skinned, soft-talking, gentle young men who quietly tended their flocks. That's how we portray them today.

But that isn't what they were and I mean "at all." They were, in reality, some of the most unreliable, untrustworthy, and larcenous of all first century people. They were so disreputable that polite society shunned them like the plague and courts of law wouldn't even allow them to testify in trials. Remember what I said several weeks ago. Picture a room full of beer drinking, foul-mouthed men making disgusting noises and you have some idea of what the shepherds were like.

Yet, God announced the birth of Jesus to them alone. As the text says it, an angel appeared and told them that a Savior had been born in Bethlehem that very day for them. And that it would be a sign for them that He would be *"lying in a manger."* That's how verse 12 says it, *"This will be a sign for you."*

But how was lying in a manger a sign to them? The Christmas narrative itself helps us answer that. Caesar Augustus had ordered everyone to register in their hometowns. So Bethlehem, which was small to begin with, was crowded with people. It had mothers with babies wrapped in cloths galore.

So how could the shepherds possibly know which baby was the One

that the angels had told them to go see? It's that He would be *"lying in a manger."* Even in the ancient world, a baby lying in a manger would have been a highly unusual thing. A manger was nothing more than an animal's feeding trough. No self-respecting mother, except in the most dire of circumstances, would have put her baby in one.

It was a strange sight, in other words, which is what made it a sign. The manger was like a magnet that drew those shepherds irresistibly to it. There was only one baby in a manger that night. So when they saw Jesus in one, they knew He was the baby for whom they were looking. The shepherds came to Jesus not just physically but, as 2:20 implies, spiritually as well and *"lying in a manger"* was a vital part of that.

### **WHAT "LYING IN A MANGER" MEANT TO MARY AND JOSEPH**

But the manger wasn't just a sign to the Shepherds. It was a sign to Mary and Joseph as well. We can never grasp that is until we view the birth scene of Jesus as it really was.

We tend to do the same thing with it that we do with the shepherds. We tend to idealize it. We have a manger scene in our living room that, like most do, elicits warm and cozy feelings. It's such a quaint and charming little scene with the angels, people, and animals involved.

But the real thing was anything but that. It was in fact a terrible ordeal for Mary and Joseph. Verse 7 says that the Bethlehem Inn had a no vacancy sign on it. This Inn itself 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. They ended up in what was probably a cave of some sort that stabled animals. It was a cold, dirty, and smelly place. Filthy hay and rank animal waste most likely littered its floor. That's why they put Jesus in a manger or feeding trough when He was born. As dirty as it must have been, it was at least cleaner and better than the floor was.

Those dreadful circumstances must have tested Mary and Joseph's

faith. Remember what the angels told them 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 because they did. But now here they were, in the worst possible circumstances that a husband and wife, with a brand new baby, could be in. Exhausted, anxious and afraid, they must have harbored serious doubts about what the angels had said.

But then, the shepherds came. They most certainly 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 manger. Your Son is lying in a manger. That means He's the Savior and Messiah we're looking for."* That was exactly what Mary and Joseph needed to hear. Imagine its impact on them. It flooded their souls with joy and washed any of the doubts they had away, I'm sure.

You can see then that those words, *"lying in a manger,"* were just as much for Mary and Joseph as they were for the shepherds.

## **WHAT "LYING IN A MANGER" MEANS TO US**

And they're for us as well. They needed to hear them and so do we.

Many people misunderstand the meaning and implications of the manger scene. They've heard about 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 get us in the Christmas spirit.

But it's far more than that. In his book [The Real Spirit of Christmas](#), Dan Schaeffer explains it well. He writes: *"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 us, should move us, to the very depths of our soul.

That because of what they teach us. God humbled Himself. That is the most poignant statement that you will ever hear. God humbled Himself – and boy did He.

I want you to think about something. God the Son could have entered the world in some other way. He could have chosen royalty or at least aristocrats of some kind, 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 the family members of His parents, not shepherds, to witness His birth. And 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. He did that for at least three reasons.

First, He wants us to love Him. One of the most powerful gestures in human life is a great person humbling himself or herself before us in some way. Imagine the president of the United States or the CEO of General Motors or Billy Graham voluntarily coming and cleaning our house. That act would certainly attract 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, the creator God, left the splendor of heaven and came as a baby lying in a manger – for us. If that doesn't attract us to Him, if it doesn't stir up motions of love for Him, probably nothing will.

There's a second reason that God humbled Himself before us. It's to make it known that He's accessible to us all. Let's face it. None of us are going to get into the Whitehouse any day soon. It's an exceptional thing for common people like us to visit palaces and places of power. But anyone can visit mangers. Kings can. Presidents can. CEO's can. Waitresses can. Pastors can. Janitors can. Children can. Senior citizens can. And so on.

This 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 wants Him, to anyone who decides to follow Him. That includes you and me.

God humbled Himself before us for a third reason – to save us from our sin and sins.

Human beings have a desperate problem. We're sinners who sin. Just look at the world around us, the lives of others around us, and perhaps our own lives as well. All the empirical evidence that we could ever need to prove it is there. Human beings are sinners who sin.

The problem is radical and so is its solution. We can't cure cancer by putting a band-aid on it. Radical problems require radical solutions. There was only one way that God could solve the problem of sin. He had to do the most radical thing that could ever be done in this universe. He Himself had to come to earth as a human being, live a perfect life, die on the cross for our sins, rise from the dead with a resurrection body, and ascend to heaven. So, that's exactly what He did. And it all began with Him lying in a manger. Without the manger there would have been no life, cross, resurrection or ascension.

## **CONCLUSION**

I'd sum up what I've said tonight this way. The manger shows us what the true meaning of Christmas is. Our current culture says it's loving and helping our fellow man. But that isn't it at all, as vital as that may be. The true meaning of Christmas is abandoning ourselves to the God who humbled Himself before us. It's making and carrying out a specific decision. That decision is to be with Jesus in order to learn and do all that He says. It's to arrange all of our affairs around Him and His words. That's the true meaning of Christmas and it flows necessarily from those four simple yet profound words, *"lying in a manger."*