

If you've had any association with the Bible at all just the mention of the word "Pharisee" has all kinds of negative connotations. According to the words of Jesus himself these members of Israel's most strict religious group were "hypocrites," "blind leaders of the blind," and "nicely painted tombstones" covering graves filled with corruption and decay!

There's good reason for our negative impression of the Pharisees. But interestingly, the Pharisees weren't all bad. In fact, in some areas they were men to be admired.

MR DeHaan II in his article "The Pharisee in Me" lists 5 aspects of what he calls "the bright side of the Pharisees."

1. Men of Separation. The word "pharisee" actually comes from a Hebrew word which means "separate." From their origin about 100 BC the Pharisees were committed to living clean, godly lives. They resisted the corrupting influence of the pagan society that had pulled many Jews away from their faith.
 2. Men of the Book. They would have put everyone of us in this room to shame by their knowledge of the Bible. Each community of Pharisees had its own expert in the law of Moses, a scribe who was trained to interpret the Word of God. They recognized the authority of the Bible and took it seriously.
 3. Men of the People. We have the impression that they were a group of religionists who didn't really represent the people of their day. Actually, they were mostly business men and tradesmen of their community. Some were priests and members of the ruling body, but they weren't in the ministry.
- Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees were closer to the common people. They had broad support from the man on the street.
4. Men of Tradition. Now, there's a bad side to tradition, but there's also a positive side. Their commitment to tradition shows their willingness to hold their line for the wisdom of the generations that handled the Scriptures before them. They had historical roots that kept them in line.
 5. Men of Detail. There's a lot of people in Christianity today that don't care about details. But when it comes to understanding the Bible we can't start throwing out whatever doesn't seem important or doesn't fit with our culture. God's Word is either to be accepted in its totality or not at all. They accepted the Scriptures in their totality.

The Pharisees were representative of the most knowledgeable, committed, Jewish people of their day.

But, now turn with me in your Bibles to Luke Chapter 2 - page 991

Read Luke 2:1-7

Luke explains the account of the birth of Jesus by giving a report of the conditions into which God's Son was born, and the human reasons for those conditions. These first 7 verses are very "secular" in appearance. There is no mention of the hand of God, nor of any particular "spiritual" activity. In fact, the section ends with almost a note of human tragedy.

Think of it, the Son of God, covered with rags and placed in a cattle feeding trough! How inappropriate, we might protest. How tragic! This might be if we didn't have the "other side of the news," which is found in verses 8-20. The very circumstances which seem to pathetic, so sad, are those which prove to be most significant.

Read Luke 2:8-12

Actually, the most astonishing event in all of human history has just taken place. This was an event that was foretold by the Jewish prophets. The heartbeat of every Jewish person at this time was to look for Messiah.

The birth of this child was the focal point in history. We even mark our calendar by the birth of this child. Every time we write a date we're giving testimony to the importance of the birth of Jesus Christ.

But now notice who gets the message announced to them personally. Who receives an angelic entourage proclaiming the birth of the long awaited redeemer?

Not the people you expect. Instead of that announcement being given to the best known, most respected, popular religious leaders of the day - the angel came to a band of shepherds.

In Jesus' day shepherds were as far down the Palestinian social ladder from Pharisees as you could get. They were actually the lowest of the low. They shared the same status as tax collectors and dung sweepers.

Now, if you've had any association with the Bible at all the word "shepherds" has all kinds of positive connotations. But just, like Pharisees are negative to us but positive

to the people of Jesus day, so shepherds are positive to us but were negative to the people of Jesus day.

The first shepherds mentioned in the Bible was Abel in Genesis 4. Abel, a son of Adam and Eve, was a keeper of sheep. His brother Cain was a tiller of the ground. Cain kills Abel - so early on you can see there was "animosity between farmers and shepherds."

From the time of Adam and Eve down through the period of the patriarchs shepherding was a respected occupation. Originally the Jews were nomadic people. They lived in tents and wandered tending herds and flocks. Everyone, whether a sheik or a slave, was a shepherd. In Genesis 30 & 37 we read about the wealthy sons of Isaac and Jacob tending flocks.

Moses father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of midian, employed his daughters as shepherdesses.

When Israel migrated down into Egypt at about 1700 BC the Jews encountered an entirely different lifestyle.

The Egyptians were agricultural people.

They weren't nomads, they didn't travel and live in tents and so they took to farming in the fertile Nile valleys. As farmers, they despised shepherding. Sheep and goats tramped and ate the crops and took up valuable farmland for grazing.

Egyptian art forms and historical records portray shepherds negatively. The Arabs who were the enemies of the Egyptians were shepherds. And the Egyptian hatred climaxed when a group called the "hyksos" or "shepherd kings," took over lower Egypt.

The Egyptians considered sheep worthless for food and unacceptable for sacrifice.

Now the Israelites were in Egypt how long? 400 years. Something happened in those 400 years. They grew accustomed to a settled lifestyle, stopped living as nomads, and picked up the Egyptians prejudice against the shepherds.

By the time the Jews came to the promised land (around 1400 B.C.) only the Reubenites and the Gadites were still heavily involved in shepherding and they chose to stay on the other side of the Jordan and not go into the land because they thought it was better for raising flocks where they were.

Dennis Baly in the book "The Geography of the Bible" states that after settling in Palestine, "there was a strong swing over and shepherding ceased to hold the prominent position in the thinking of the people."

As the Jews got farmland of their own they got away from the raising of flocks which they had been forced to begin to take up in the wilderness and got back to the farming they learned in Egypt. Shepherding in Israel became a menial vocation of the laboring class. A far cry from what it originally was.

Around 1000 B.C. David's emergence as king temporarily raised the shepherd's image. The fact that a shepherd was at the bottom of the barrel made David's appointment by God as King all the more striking. (significant because in some ways David is a picture of Christ.)

II Samuel 7:8 *"Thus says the LORD of hosts: "I took you from the sheepfold, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people, over Israel."*

God was just showing His grace by taking someone so low and placing them in a position of such authority. But ultimately shepherding not only lost its widespread appeal but it became socially unacceptable.

A strong prejudice developed in Israel. In Kittle's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament it says "shepherds were despised in every day life." In general they were considered second class and untrustworthy.

Rabbis banned pasturing sheep and goats in Israel except on dessert plains.

One passage of the Mishnah (Jewish oral tradition finally written down in the 2nd century AD) - the Jewish writers said "no one should ever feel obligated to rescue a shepherd who has fallen into a pit." (The guy's worthless anyway.) Shepherds couldn't even be admitted as witnesses in court in Israel, to buy wool, milk or a kid from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property. Almost like cattle rustling in the old west.

The Book "Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus" says "The rabbis asked with amazement how in view of the despicable nature of shepherds, one can explain why God was called "my Shepherd" in the 23rd Psalm.

There was a strick cast system in Israel that was maintained by the religious leaders. The Pharisees and Sadducees were at the top - the shepherds and common fold were

at the bottom. And while it is true that many of the shepherders deserved their reputation, many others were just victims of the prejudice of the day.

Into this social context of religious prejudice and class snobbery comes God's Son. Christ the Lord is born and the announcement is made to some anonymous shepherds.

Warren Wiersbe writes "The Messiah Came To Be Both the Good Shepherd and The Lamb of God Sacrifice for the World. Perhaps these shepherds were caring for their flocks that would provide sacrifices for the temple services. It was fitting that the good news about God's shepherds and lamb be given first to humble shepherds."

The shepherds in Israel were despised while the Pharisees were respected, but God chose to reveal the birth of His Son to the lowly shepherds.

1Co 1:27 *But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty;*

To these humble shepherds an angel of the Lord appears. After Gabriel's announcements to Mary and Joseph and Zacharias I would imagine this is Gabriel too.

He appears in the night sky in a blaze of glory. These shepherds are tough guys. They're used to living out in the wilderness and defending their flocks from wild animals. But what they saw that night was no figment of their imagination. They were terrified.

Luke says "*the glory of the Lord shown around them.*" For the first time in centuries, the glory of God returned to earth. And the angel said in verse 10 "Don't be afraid because I have good news. "I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people."

The four words English words *I bring you good tidings* are the translation of one Greek verb: ευαγγελιζω It's where we get our English word, "evangelize." It's used 55 times in the New Testament. Look how its used by Luke: **Turn & Read 4:18, 7:22, 9:6 and 20:1**

See literally the angel says "I preach the gospel to you. It's a gospel of great joy and it's for all people."

That message rings all throughout the Word of God. **Galatians 3:8, 9 Pg. 1121**

The Good news didn't start when Jesus came, but Jesus Christ is the basis for the good news.

From the promise to Adam and Eve that the seed of the woman would come, to Abraham's faith in God, to the Old Testament sacrifices. Everything proclaimed the gospel.

Today we look back on the sacrifice of Christ. Before the cross believers knew that God was their salvation. The way of forgiveness and eternal life has always been by faith. The object of faith has always been God and the basis has always been the sacrifice of Christ.

Now at this point the shepherds might not have understood the full implication of this announcement but this is what they were hearing:

The good news, the gospel, involves a Savior. The Good news wasn't that God had sent a soldier, a judge, or a reformer.

The good news was that he sent a Savior and the Savior would be for all people. Not for a limited number of people. Not just for Israel.

The amazing message of John 3:16 is *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

So even though God had used Jewish prophets to write Jewish Scripture to announce a Jewish Messiah who would be born in Israel and present himself as a king, the ultimate result of his impending death and resurrection would extend to all people. All are sinners and all need a Savior.

The shepherds were afraid when the glory of the Lord shone around them. Why is God's glory scary? Always in the Bible we have this pattern of God's glory being so bright and pure that it produces sheer terror in those who experience it. Why? Because we are immediately faced with the awful truth of our own evil and inadequate lives. God's glory is a light and a mirror which shows us up for what we are. Romans 3:23 says, *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"*

Maybe you think this doesn't apply to you. Maybe you're like the boastful young man who claimed, "my family can trace its ancestry back to England, to William the

Conqueror." A friend said, "I suppose next you'll be telling us that your ancestors were in the Ark with Noah?" "Certainly not!" he answered, "My people had a boat of their own."

Do you think you have your own boat of escape, by your own goodness, to make the shore of heaven? None of us do. We're all in the same boat. The angel says it is good news for all the people, because all the people need a savior from sin. That includes you, no matter how good you think you are.

When Gabriel's proclamation was finished he was suddenly joined by other angels.

Read vs. 13 - 14

We sing about the songs of the angels and the angels singing in our Christmas carols. It doesn't say anything about angels singing but it does tell us what they say: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

It seems strange, doesn't it, to hear those words when there really hasn't been peace on earth. I read one article that said in recorded history there is less than 8% of time when the world was at peace. And even then there was certainly unrest among families and among individuals.

What did the angels mean, peace and goodwill?

They meant this: a peace that was dependent upon receiving the Savior whom God had sent into the world. Unfortunately, for the most part, as Isaiah the prophet wrote: *'He is despised and rejected of men.'*

Why is the world in such a deplorable condition? The answer isn't found in politics or economics. It is found in the Prince of Peace. Politics has its place. Economics has its importance. But they don't change people's hearts.

It's only when people find the peace of God in Jesus Christ and begin to give glory to God in the highest that we'll ever see real peace.

God's provision of salvation was for all people. And in this age of grace the invitation is still being extended. *"Whosoever will may come."* *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved."*

Shepherds in Israel were despised while Pharisees were respected. But the angels announced the birth of Christ to shepherds, not Pharisees or kings.

God's provision of salvation was for all people. It's usually the self-righteous and powerful that have the most difficulty seeing their need of a savior. But when the message of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, it always brings glory to God.

Read vs. 15 & 16

I want you to notice something here: They didn't say "let us go now to Bethlehem and see *if* this thing has come to pass." They basically said "if God said it *we know* its true, let's go." They said, "let us see this thing that *has come* to pass."

They were persuaded before they saw. Do yo have that kind of confidence in God's Word?

They they came with haste to find Jesus.

One man called this "the 1st Christmas rush." How different from the Christmas rush and push we see today!

They came with haste and they found Mary & Joseph and the babe lying in a manger.

There is a common Greek word for "found" εὕρισκω, that's used about 100 times in the New Testament. Here the word has a preposition in the front it's ἀνεύρισκω (only used twice in the New Testament) and it means this: "found after a diligent search."

Here's what I picture happening. The shepherd's were on a scavenger hunt. The clues they were given were:

- 1) There was a newborn baby.
- 2) The baby was a boy.
- 3) He was to be found in a cattle feeding trough wrapped in strips of cloth.

Can you imagine these shepherds going from door to door in the middle of the night looking for this child?

We don't know how many people lived in Bethlehem at this time (It's a town of about 10,000 today), but the city was packed with people because of the census. There were

lots of animal feeding troughs because of the large number of animals. I could imagine that if you were looking down on the city from a distance that you would see the whole place progressively lit up as the shepherds went door to door.

What a scene that must have been. These tough, burly shepherds, "There is a baby in this town and He is the Messiah. We know because God sent angels to tell us!"

Then look what they did - **Read 17 - 20.**

What examples to us these guys are!

- They received the message by faith that God sent.
- They responded with immediate obedience.
- After they found the baby they told the good news to others.
- Then they went back to their responsibilities praising God.

What an ironic twist. Shepherds were not permitted to testify in court, but God used some humble shepherds to be the first human witnesses that prophecy has been fulfilled and the Messiah had been born.

"And all who heard it marveled"

The message of Jesus Christ brings glory to God because it's a message of God's faithfulness to His promises.

Pharisees were respected in Israel. They had a lot going for them. Unfortunately they allowed it to become an outward show with no inner reality.

Shepherds were despised. But God chose them to carry on the work of the angels: to proclaim the good news and to glorify God.

Today no one would want to claim to be a Pharisee. But the shepherds concept is woven all through out life of Christ in the New Testament.

Every pastor is a shepherd. In fact, the word translated "pastor" in the New Testament is the Greek word meaning "shepherd."

Jesus is called the Good Shepherd. He is the one who leaves the 90 and 9 and goes after the little lost lamb. No other illustration so vividly portrays His tender care and guiding hand.

God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise . . . that no flesh should glory in His presence. He that glories, let him glory in the Lord.

Where do you stand before God this morning? In defiant self-righteousness or in humble and willing obedience.

God doesn't do things our way. He does them His way. Have you come His way?

His way is a way of salvation and forgiveness and eternal life. His way is the way of faith in the virgin born Son of God. His way is a way of Good News.