

Why Are Some of the Most Familiar Bible Passages So Misunderstood?

Luke 2:1-21

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"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear." - Luke 2:7-9, ESV

I love Luke 2. It has been one of my favorite Bible passages since I was a kid. I remember growing up watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. I still get goosebumps when I watch that with my children and Linus steps forward to tell Charlie Brown what Christmas is really all about by reciting from Luke 2.

And yet, as wonderfully familiar as this passage is, we still misunderstand it. Several errors are commonly made:

1. There was no inn, not as we would understand that term. The word translated "inn" in Luke 2:7 was not a first-century Holiday Inn. There was no "inn-keeper." It likely refers to the room in the house where guests would sleep, which was probably on the floor of the dining area.

2. There was probably no stable either. The reference to a "manger" is a reference to a feeding trough for animals. However, this is probably because animals were frequently brought into the house at night, kept in the back of the main room of the house. Yes, Mary and Joseph and Jesus were sleeping with the animals and Jesus was placed in a manger as a cradle. But it was probably inside the main house and not likely in a stable.

3. The sign given to the shepherds is the main point of the passage, but we miss the sign. The shepherds would have understood the significance of Jesus being "*wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.*" We are given a version of this description of Jesus three times, in verses 7, 12 & 16.

Shepherds in the region near Bethlehem would often be called upon to provide lambs for sacrifice in the Temple. But not all lambs qualified; only spotless lambs could be used. How would shepherds keep a spotless newborn lamb spotless, keep him from hurting or dirtying himself? They would wrap him in swaddling cloths and place him in a manger. Thus the shepherds would have known that the sign for them meant one thing: Here was the spotless lamb of God, come to take away the sin of the world!

Let us rejoice like the shepherds and glorify God for sending us such a Savior!