

Spiritual Practices for Thriving Life

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★Write down one new insight you received today...

★Thinking...

- What does it mean to my life that God announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds?
- Why does God deliver His news to people occupied with daily life like shepherds?
- What does it mean that God changes people but not their circumstances?

★Applying...

- Reframe how you identify. Do not think about yourself as one who *is* your occupation, but one who performs it. Think about yourself as a child of God.
- In your current circumstances, identify some service God has privileged you to perform in His name.
- Pay attention to how you perform that service. Use that as the measure of success this week.

★Praying...

- Father, thank you for the gift of your Son born for me. For saving me from my fears and failings. For choosing me to serve in your name as an heir to your Kingdom. Grant me the sensitivity to know how to serve, the power to serve well, the humility to serve for you.



Daybreak

Luke 2:8-20 – In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an agent of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

1) Finally...

Christmas morning, children are eager for daybreak and the celebration to come. They dream of the promise that Santa will have

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given gifts for which they long waited. Today is finally the day! Many will wake before light and wait until the appointed time their parents have set. We, too, are supposed to cling fiercely to the promises our Heavenly Father has made in anticipation of that glorious day.

♦**Did I make the cut?** There are children that may not be so eager for daybreak on Christmas. Assured that Santa is keeping a list of the deserving and checking it twice, how many wonder if they are on the naughty list? What misery must come with the anticipation of a glorious day for everyone else. God's promises far surpass Santa's in both their majesty and inclusion. All who "confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9)," will be saved. So it is that to "shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night (Luke 2:8)," God sends "an angel of the Lord (v9)," to announce the day of Salvation. In their immediate sense of unworthiness, the angel comforts them, "Do not be afraid (v10)."

♦**I deserve it:** Santa's list suggests that nothing is given from love and generosity. Children must spend the year earning Santa's approval by their words and deeds. As much as modern culture glorifies Santa's kindness, it is no such thing. He is fulfilling his obligation of an unwritten social contract, nothing more. God, however, is fulfilling His promise of grace. His angel says that "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior (v11)." Those who have earned a reward need not be saved from punishment. All creation gives "Glory to God," because He is asserting His unconditional love for humankind, making "peace among those whom he favors (v14)!" Christmas comes from God and God alone.

II) Time to Celebrate...

The celebration begins as the children tear into their gifts, the day coming alive as they begin to laugh and play. Soon, they ask to break free from the adults and join their neighborhood friends. They cannot wait to share their joy in what they received with each other. This is the intended response to Christmas.

♦**Today is special:** In many households, the usual rhythm of breakfast to start the day is disrupted on Christmas. Parents may take time to make a beverage, but the gift opening ceremony takes precedence over all else. The shepherds, who were dutifully "keeping watch over their flock (v8)," decide "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing (v15)." Normal is cast aside as "they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger (v16)." The

promised Gift of God should overwhelm everything else in our hearts and minds.

♦**Playtime:** Once the gifts are opened and hugs of thanks shared, most children burst to find their friends and play with their new toys. The instinctive Truth in this response is that God's love brings us together to amplify His joy. The shepherd's unique personal gift is the pleasure of being first to receive the "good news of great joy for all the people (v10)." They eagerly made use of this gift as "they made known what had been told them about this child (v17)." The complete joy of the gift given to us includes the privilege of sharing it with others.

III) Everything Has Changed...

Great Christmas gifts are life changing. Objects propelling us forward or nudging us in new directions. Instruments harnessing talent, tools unlocking craftsmanship, art opening fresh ideas. Many accomplished people praise those who gifted them such objects. The recipients of God's Gift are granted access to a private, hidden passageway to a new, unbelievable future for which they praise Him.

♦**Just what I hoped for:** Some gifts are anticipated. The aspiring musician who has been asking for an instrument all year hopes and dreams that Christmas will be the day. Hope realized is so sweet. Yes! There is validation that so much more than just the receipt of the gift is possible. Maybe I *am* a musician... While all were "amazed at what the shepherds told them...Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart (v18-19)." I really *am* the one who will nurture and mother the Savior of the world. Whoa! Everything else that once felt important fades into the background as the impossible dream for life comes into focus in a new way.

♦**For me?** Others are total surprise. Perhaps a distant relative gifting an heirloom beyond imagination to the child. An artifact of former glory about which the child knows nothing. The resurrection of family promises long dead. Shepherds, men of lowly status with no upward mobility, are transformed into messengers of God. They return to their station "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen (v20)." What did it mean to their lives that "it had been told to them (v20)?" Perhaps they would continue to shepherd while no longer *being* shepherds. For the rest of their lives, they would tell "what had been told them (v17)," and continue "glorifying and praising God (v20)." They may perform the duties of shepherd, but they *are* messengers and children of the Most High God. Into what has Jesus transformed *your being* this Christmas?