

In Galatians 4:4 Paul says, “when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son...” Other translations say, “when the set time” had fully come; or “when the appropriate time” had come. But I think the King James captures the nuance of meaning. The idea of fullness is the idea that events of the world had history bursting at its seams when God—in His perfect timing—sent His Son. The legendary Corrie Ten Boom once said, “God has no problems, only plans.” The sixty-six books of the Bible tell a single story of God’s redemptive plan. For Jesus’ earthly role, it all began in Bethlehem.

Christ’s birth was planned (vv. 4-7). That Joseph was of the family line of David should come as no surprise. The prophets had long told that Messiah would occupy the throne of David, a fact explicitly affirmed by the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:32). That Bethlehem (which literally means “house of bread”) was King David’s birthplace explains why Mary and Joseph traveled there, because Joseph (and perhaps Mary) was a descendant of David. But none of this was by chance. The little town of Bethlehem had been set apart by God for this occasion 700 years before (Micah 5:2). If the birth-place of Jesus was not surprising, the circumstances surrounding His birth might be. A young virgin for a mother, a mere carpenter for a father, torn cloth for a wrapping, and a feed trough for a cradle would not be my idea of appropriate circumstances to welcome the Savior to the world He would redeem and one day rule. But God had it planned out to the tiniest detail. The world had history bursting at its seams...and the fullness of time had come.

Christ’s birth was praised (vv. 8-14). From the highest of God’s creation to the lowliest of men, the arrival of Christ was met with wonder and with praise. The shepherds’ routine-night of staying out among their sheep and counting the stars was anything but routine! Think about the emotions they must have felt: terror at seeing the angel; wonder as they heard the news; amazement at the brilliant display by the host of angels; bewilderment at the description of the Savior. This initial appearance to mere shepherds is surprisingly fitting. David, the shepherd boy who would be king, called the Lord his shepherd in the 23rd Psalm. And Jesus referred to Himself in John 10 as the Good Shepherd who gives His life for His sheep. But more than that, the announcement to the shepherds let the world know that Jesus came for every man. The angels affirmed this in their declaration; they brought “good news of great joy that will be for *all the people*.” The news that caused the angels to sing should certainly move us to praise as well!

Christ’s birth was proclaimed (vv. 15-20). When the angels departed, so did the shepherds! Four activities describe their response. First, there was *action*: The words “let’s go straight” indicate excitement and immediacy. For shepherds to leave their sheep was unheard of. Yet like the fisherman who would leave their nets to follow Christ some thirty years later, that’s exactly what they did. Second, they were *eye-witnesses*. They confirmed the message, not out of skepticism, but out of joyous wonder. They wanted to see this divine spectacle with their own eyes. Who wouldn’t? Third, there was *announcement*. They reported the message to all who would hear. There was no way they would keep this good news a secret. Finally, there was *continuation*. The shepherds returned; presumably to their flocks and their livelihood. But they were *glorifying and praising God*. The words show continuous action. The impact of that incredible night had changed them for good. No doubt these first witnesses to the birth of Christ never stopped sharing “all they had seen and heard, just as they had been told.”