

What Are the Odds?

Luke 2:8-20

Probability is a branch of mathematics that measures the likelihood that a given event will occur. It is also known as “odds”.

Insurance companies use probability when determining your rates whether for life, auto or home. An actuary will compile and analyze statistics based on age, gender, the community and region where you live, even the type of car you drive or house you live in to calculate insurance risks and premiums.

Vegas makes big money on playing the odds when it comes to sports. Bookies put odds on the probability that a particular team will beat another team and what the point spread will be in their margin of victory.

Someone has compiled a list of other kinds of odds.

For example,

The likelihood of your being struck by lightning is one in 700,000.

The likelihood of your becoming president is one in 10 million.

The likelihood of your house getting hit by a meteor is one in 180 trillion.

While the probability of you being that one is highly unlikely, you could be that one.

In his book *Science Speaks*, Dr. Peter Stoner applied the principle of probability in the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy centered on Jesus being the Messiah.

A mathematician by the name of David Williams offers the following worth noting about Dr. Stoner’s research.

“The reason why prophecy is an indication of the divine authorship of the Scriptures, and hence a testimony to the trustworthiness of the Message of the Scriptures, is because of the minute probability of fulfillment.

Anyone can make predictions. Having those prophecies fulfilled is vastly different. In fact, the more statements made about the future, and the more the detail, then the less likely the precise fulfillment will occur.

For example, what's the likelihood of a person predicting today the exact city in which the birth of a future leader would take place, well into the 21st century? This is indeed what the prophet Micah did 700 years before the Messiah. Further, what is the likelihood of predicting the precise manner of death that a new, unknown religious leader would experience, a thousand years from now—a manner of death presently unknown, and to remain unknown for hundreds of years? Yet, this is what David did in 1000BC

Again, what is the likelihood of predicting the specific date of the appearance of some great future leader, hundreds of years in advance? This is what Daniel did, 530 years before Christ.

If one were to conceive 50 specific prophecies about a person in the future, whom one would never meet, just what's the likelihood that this person will fulfill all 50 of the predictions? How much less would this likelihood be if 25 of these predictions were about what other people would do to him, and were completely beyond his control?

For example, how does someone "arrange" to be born in a specific family?

How does one "arrange" to be born in a specified city, in which their parents don't actually live? How does one "arrange" their own death—and specifically by crucifixion, with two others, and then "arrange" to have their executioners gamble for His clothing (John 16:19; Psalms 22:18)? How does one "arrange" to be betrayed in advance? How does one "arrange" to have the executioners carry out the regular practice of breaking the legs of the two victims on either side, but not their own? Finally,

how does one "arrange" to be God? How does one escape from a grave and appear to people after having been killed?

Indeed, it may be possible for someone to fake one or two of the Messianic prophecies, but it would be impossible for any one person to arrange and fulfill all of these prophecies.

How true it must be that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, if he had 456 identifying characteristics well in advance, and fulfilled them all! In fact, what does the science of probability make of this?

The science of probability attempts to determine the chance that a given event will occur. The value and accuracy of the science of probability has been well established beyond doubt—for example, insurance rates are fixed according to statistical probabilities.

Professor Emeritus of Science at Westmont College, Peter Stoner, has calculated the probability of one man fulfilling the major prophecies made concerning the Messiah. The estimates were worked out by twelve different classes representing some 600 university students.

The students carefully weighed all the factors, discussed each prophecy at length, and examined the various circumstances which might indicate that men had conspired together to fulfill a particular prophecy. They made their estimates conservative enough so that there was finally unanimous agreement even among the most skeptical students.

However Professor Stoner then took their estimates, and made them even more conservative. He also encouraged other skeptics or scientists to make their own estimates to see if his conclusions were more than fair. Finally, he submitted his figures for review to a committee of the American Scientific Affiliation. Upon examination, they verified that his calculations were dependable and accurate in regard to the scientific material presented (Peter Stoner,

Science Speaks, Chicago: Moody Press, 1969, 4).

For example, concerning Micah 5:2, where it states the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, Stoner and his students determined the average population of BETHLEHEM from the time of Micah to the present; then they divided it by the average population of the earth during the same period.

They concluded that the chance of one man being born in Bethlehem was one in 300,000, (or one in 2.8×10^5 — rounded),

After examining only eight different prophecies (Idem, 106), they conservatively estimated that the chance of one man fulfilling all eight prophecies was one in 10^{17} . (One followed by 17 0s)

To illustrate how large the number 10^{17} is, Stoner gave this illustration :

If you mark one of ten tickets, and place all the tickets in a hat, and thoroughly stir them, and then ask a blindfolded man to draw one, his chance of getting the right ticket is one in ten. Suppose that we take 10^{17} silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They'll cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would've had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote them in their own wisdom (Idem, 106-107).

From these figures, Professor Stoner, concludes the fulfillment of these eight prophecies alone proves that God inspired the writing of the prophecies (Idem, 107)—the likelihood of mere chance is only one in 10^{17} !

Another way of saying this is that any person who minimizes or ignores the significance of the biblical identifying signs concerning the Messiah would be foolish.

But, of course, there are many more than eight prophecies. In another calculation, Stoner used 48 prophecies (Idem, 109) (even though he could have used Edersheim's 456), and arrived at the extremely conservative estimate that the probability of 48 prophecies being fulfilled in one person is the incredible number 10^{157} . In fact, if anybody can find someone, living or dead, other than Jesus, who can fulfill only half of the predictions concerning the Messiah given in the book "Messiah in Both Testaments" by Fred J. Meldau, the Christian Victory Publishing Company is ready to give a ONE thousand dollar reward!

How large is the number one in 10^{157} ? 10^{157} contains 157 zeros! Stoner gives an illustration of this number using electrons. Electrons are very small objects. They're smaller than atoms. It would take 2.5 TIMES 10^{15} of them, laid side by side, to make one inch. Even if we counted 250 of these electrons each minute, and counted day and night, it would still take 19 million years just to count a line of electrons one-inch long (Stoner, op. cit, 109).

Let's go back to our chance of one in 10^{157} . Let's suppose that we're taking this number of electrons, marking one, and thoroughly stirring it into the whole mass, then blindfolding a man and letting him try to find the right one. What chance has he of finding the right one? What kind of a pile will this number of electrons make? They make an inconceivably large volume.

This is the result from considering a mere 48 prophecies. Obviously, the probability that 456 prophecies would be fulfilled in one man by chance is vastly smaller. According to Emile Borel, once one goes past one chance in 10^{50} , the probabilities are so small that it is impossible to think that they

will ever occur (Ankerberg et. al., op. cit., 21).

As Stoner concludes, 'Any man who rejects Christ as the Son of God is rejecting a fact, proved perhaps more absolutely than any other fact in the world (Stoner, op. cit., 112).'

What God said through the prophets in the Old Testament about the Messiah, was not a guess on their part, it was fulfilled in one man – Jesus, whom the angels proclaimed and the shepherds testified. That He should fulfill all the prophecies was essential for Him to be the very Son of God who alone could atone for our sin. If just one prophecy had not been fulfilled by Him, then He is not the Messiah. He couldn't just come close. Close only counts in horseshoes.

Science has proven that there are no two people with the same fingerprints. They are as unique as the person to whom they belong. They are not reused or given to another person after you die.

All these prophecies in the Old Testament about the Christ are His unique fingerprint that point specifically to Him fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

So as we come to our passage in Luke 2, consider the reality of fulfilled prophecy in the one born in the stable and laid in a manger of prickly hay.

The prophecy of Jesus' birth was fulfilled as we see in verse 8 on a peaceful night.

I. IT WAS A PEACEFUL NIGHT – v. 8

Notice the surrounding fields.

A. The Surrounding Fields

One of the wonderful things about growing up at Camp was the quiet nature of where it was located. Between the Huron National forest and a piece of privately owned land Camp is nestled in 22,000

acres of forest. That's over 34 square miles. In the summer when fishing out on the lake you could hear the abundant night life. Crickets and grasshoppers and owls all added to nature's night time chorus. The rhythmic rustle of leaves from the wind provided the percussion. And yes there was the high pitched buzzing of mosquitos. But that didn't detract from the peaceful surroundings.

It was in a field at night that a band of shepherds was watching their sheep listening to the familiar night sounds around them. Looking back at the previous verses we come to understand that they are outside the region of Bethlehem, fulfilling Micah 5:2 prophesying about where the Messiah would be born. While there were babies born before and after in this town, only in this child do we see and hear the proclamation about the birth of a Savior.

This field was somewhere outside the vicinity of Bethlehem about six miles from Jerusalem. Rabbinical law stated that sheep had to be kept in the wilderness and any sheep found between Jerusalem and Bethlehem could be used as a sacrifice in the Temple.

Somewhere in this quiet countryside setting at night shepherds were in the fields watching their sheep.

B. The Sheep in the Fields

Some speculate that these sheep were destined for the Temple to be sacrifices. Those who make such assumptions state that they symbolize Jesus who would become the sacrificial lamb for our sin. While there is some merit to that it is only speculation as the Gospels are silent.

Animals often know when something is about to change. Farmers will tell you that when a storm is coming in the cows will huddle together and lay down. Trained dogs can sense when someone is about to have a seizure. Some even claim certain animals can tell when an earthquake is happening.

Could these sheep sense that something incredible was about to happen? We'll never know for sure, but there they were in the fields at night along with the shepherds who were watching over them.

C. The Shepherds in the Fields

We are left to speculate about how many there were and whether they were hired to tend sheep for the Temple sacrifices. Did they have their own flocks and only band together at night in a common sheepfold for added protection?

Shepherds were considered social outcasts. Their occupation left them in the fields for a lengthy stretch of time. Consequently the type of work and the duration made them ceremonially unclean, which meant they couldn't go to the Temple. Shepherds were uneducated, unskilled, considered unreliable, and at times dishonest making them an unacceptable witness in court.

Who these shepherds were is unclear, but there they were with their sheep in the fields. It was a peaceful night outside and away from what was taking place in the little town of Bethlehem. Their peaceful night was about to change with some pressing news.

II. IT WAS SOME PRESSING NEWS – vs. 9-12

In verse 9 we read about an angelic presence.

A. An Angelic Presence – v. 9

Left again to speculate we aren't told who this single angelic messenger is, but assume it is Gabriel who seems to be God's messenger. He is the one who visits Zechariah telling him that his wife would have a son. He would be John the Baptist. It's Gabriel who visits Mary to tell her she had been chosen to bear the Christ child. Those Scripture is silent, some scholars believe it was also Gabriel who appeared to Joseph assuring him that the child conceived in Mary was according to God's plan and

that through Jesus would save His people from sin.

This angel having been in the presence of God now stood in the presence of these shepherds. That he was an angel from God is evident by the glory of God that shown around him and the shepherds in the field at night.

Throughout Scripture we see the glory of God's presence revealed in a brilliant light. We often refer to it as the Shekinah glory.

The glory of God first appeared in the Garden of Eden in the very intimate fellowship God had with Adam and Eve before the fall. This glory was removed when they sinned and fellowship was broken.

This glory was revealed at times in the wilderness at the Tabernacle and then later on in the Temple. Moses saw the glory of the Lord on the mountain. But Ezekiel 9 we read that after years of sin against God He removed His glory from Israel and for centuries His glory had remained hidden. But on this night in history, the night Jesus was born, His glory returned once again. The presence of the angel revealed to mankind that the glory of God was returning to them breaking through the spiritual darkness bringing the light of God's redemption promised way back in the Garden through the Savior who had been born.

With the angelic presence came an angelic pronouncement.

B. An Angelic Pronouncement – vs. 10-11

Why had these shepherds been selected to receive the news about the Christ child? Why not the Scribes or Priests? Is it because God was showing His grace to mankind by going to those considered to be society's outcasts? They were the most unlikely people to be told. Was it God's way of showing us that His ways are not our ways? Was it His way of demonstrating that salvation was available even to those who were by man's standard

considered to be ceremonially unclean, that God receives sinful men?

Paul drives home the point of God's selection as he writes to the Corinthians an important reminder about God's means and methods.

I Corinthians 1:26-28 "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are."

That certainly describes the shepherds to whom the angel made his pronouncement. They were an unlikely bunch, but to them the angel was sent. Here out in the quiet place God sent His angel with a message of hope and salvation to the shepherds.

It was a silent night
It was a holy night
All was calm
All was bright

Maybe it is in the quiet places that we are called to listen for the Lord, to listen to the Lord. It is away from the distracting noise that we can best hear the Lord. The Psalmist bids us to "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

Maybe that is in part why the shepherds were chosen to receive this good news. Maybe it was because they, of all people, were the most receptive, ready to hear the Lord speak.

If these shepherds had instead been merchants busy in the public square selling their wares, would they have been so preoccupied with the noise around them that the message about to be proclaimed would have been unnoticed?

We are left to speculate.

How about you? Are you so preoccupied with the busyness of life's responsibilities, even with things that are good that you have missed Him, that you can't hear Him? If we can make time to fit in all the extra events that surround this time of year make sure you take time to listen and see the glory of God and hear once again the message of salvation wrapped in swaddling clothes.

In the final week before Christmas take time to get away from the fray and quiet your heart and hear once again the message of hope found in the Savior. Ponder again His purpose in coming – to save us from our sins. Thank Him for His indescribable gift. Ensure that what you are celebrating and how you are celebrating the birth of Christ is with the right purpose, that you are not caught up in the commercialization of what should be a most blessed and sacred time. Let's keep in perspective that His incarnation is only part of the picture or fingerprint of the Messiah. His birth does not save. Salvation came 33 years later at the cross when He paid the debt for our sin satisfying the wrath of God. While His birth is miraculous in that God stepped into time and became man, the cross is what completes the angelic message of the Savior who came to save us from our sin.

The news pronounced by the angel was good news of great joy. And notice that this good news is for all people. Not a nationality or particular region of the world or class of people. The good news is for everyone. And though it is not a Christmas hymn it is appropriate to sing

Give the winds a mighty voice:

Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

Let the nations now rejoice:

Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

Shout salvation full and free,

Highest hills and deepest caves;

This our song of victory:

Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

Maybe you picked up on it in verse 11 but the angel doesn't name the child. He only uses titles.

Savior depicts the one who would save from sin.

We know it is Jesus because His name means Savior and that is what the angel said His name should be.

Christ is equivalent to the Old Testament term Messiah or anointed one referring to Him as King. He's the king the Magi came looking for.

Lord speaks of Him as ruler, as sovereign, and of His authority. To call someone Lord indicated submission to that person.

The pronouncement to the shepherds comes with a proclamation by the angel.

C. An Angelic Proclamation – v. 12

So that there is no doubt about who they were to look in the event any other babies were born that night the angel gave them two signs. They are His clothes and His cradle. They didn't need to go door to door. They only needed to look in stables because that was where you would find a manger and in the manger they would find the Christ wrapped in strips of cloth.

The angel's words were more than just an announcement that the Savior had been born. It was an invitation for them to go and search for the child.

The pressing news brings us to a praiseworthy note.

III. IT WAS A PRAISEWORTHY NOTE –

vs. 13-20

There are the praising seraphs, the angels whose joy it is to give praise. Then there are the praising shepherds whose receptive hearts to the message were ready to respond. Unlike the innkeeper who was too preoccupied or indifferent to respond, the shepherds heard and were physically, visibly moved.

Billy Graham has this to say about the inn keeper. “One response was given by the innkeeper when Mary and Joseph wanted to find a room where the Child could be born. The innkeeper was not hostile; he was not opposed to them, but his inn was crowded; his hands were full; his mind was preoccupied. This is the answer that millions are giving today. Like a Bethlehem innkeeper, they cannot find room for Christ. All the accommodations in their hearts are already taken up by other crowding interests. Their response is not atheism. It is not defiance. It is preoccupation and the feeling of being able to get on reasonably well without Christianity.”

Preoccupied, indifferent, skeptical their unwillingness to believe would be just as eternally life altering for them as the experience was for the shepherds, but not in a good way. The evidence is clear that Jesus is the Messiah. Is your response preoccupation or praise?

In the Christmas story we find two groups working that night. There was the inn keeper trying to find accommodations for all the travelers and there were the shepherds watching over their sheep. Both had responsibilities. Maybe the inn keeper would get to Him later, but the preoccupation of the things of the world would choke out any possible interest in the one who came to save him from his sin. He would perhaps live a life of regrets. He is like so many today who are preoccupied, too busy, who one day may get around to hearing and responding, but not likely. The odds are they won't, even though the evidence is clear.

Then there were the shepherds. They were equally as busy. Even though their sheep were bedded down for the night, they still had to take turns watching for any signs of trouble. But unlike the inn keeper, their hearts were willing and receptive to hear and believe the message proclaimed to them that night.

Our passage says they hurried into town and after they had found the child and told Mary and Joseph how it was they came looking for Him, returned not only rejoicing that they had found the child, they went recounting the story about the Christ child to anyone they saw about the news. While it says they were amazed, it doesn't say any went to find out for themselves. In all probability, probably not.