

God's Plan for Peace and Good Will

***“Suddenly there
was with the angel
a multitude of the
heavenly host
praising God, and
saying, Glory to
God in the highest,
and on earth
peace, good will
toward men.”
—Luke 2:13,14***

IN VIEW OF THE TWENTY centuries of failure to establish peace on earth, as spoken of in our theme text, we might conclude that the angels' message has no vital meaning for us today. We believe such is not the case, but that many have not understood the manner in which God planned for the promise of the angels to be fulfilled. The world in general has assumed that peace was to be established through the instrumentality of various governmental, economic, social, and religious systems established by fallen man. God's plan, however, calls for the establishment of a new world order to accomplish this, with a government in the hands—on the “shoulder”—of “The Prince of Peace.”—Isa. 9:6

This prophecy relating to the birth of Jesus foretold that “Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.” (vs. 7) However, Jesus did not expect that “peace on earth” would be the immediate result of his ministry, nor of the ministry of his disciples. Jesus said to his disciples, “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.”—Matt. 10:34

This does not mean that Jesus considered himself to be a promoter of strife and war, for he was not. The context reveals that the strife Jesus mentioned would be within one’s own family, and among friends and associates. He said, “I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.”—Matt. 10:35-39

From this it is clear that the strife engendered by Jesus would be due to the unacceptableness of his teachings and way of life to those not specially drawn to him by his Heavenly Father. His own disciples, loyal to his teachings, standing for them and proclaiming them, would arouse the enmity of the world around them. They would be opposed and misrepresented by many—perhaps those formerly their friends, close associates, or even various

members of their own families. Thus the disciples of Christ were to find that often their greatest foes would be those of their “own household,” even as he plainly stated would be the case.

In this respect, we notice the experience of Jesus himself, “for neither did his brethren believe in him.” (John 7:5) The whole nation of Israel were the brethren of Jesus. He presented himself and came to “his own, and his own received him not.” (chap. 1:11) Not only did Jesus’ own people reject him, but under the leadership of their religious leaders they persecuted and finally killed him. Jesus explained to his disciples that they could not expect to receive any different treatment. He said, “The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?”—Matt. 10:24,25

In view of Jesus’ own experience in being put to death, and the fact that his followers should not expect to receive more favorable treatment than he, it is evident that he did not expect the immediate establishment of his kingdom authority and power throughout the earth. Instead, the way of the disciples was to be the way of the cross—the way of persecution and finally of death. This does not mean the abandonment of kingdom hopes by Jesus, nor by his footstep followers. It is simply that the kingdom of Messiah, and the consequent “peace on earth” which it would bring, was to come later. The promise is that if we “suffer [with Christ], we shall also reign with him.”—II Tim. 2:12

NOT OF THIS WORLD

The enemies of Jesus, powerless themselves to impose the death sentence, hailed Jesus before Pilate and accused him of claiming to be a king. If this were true, Pilate, under Roman law, would be obliged to order the Master's crucifixion. However, Pilate was not satisfied that Jesus' enemies were telling the truth, so he asked Jesus, "Art thou the King of the Jews?" To this Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence."—John 18:33,36

In this statement by Jesus, it is the Greek word *kosmos* that is translated "world." The word *kosmos* means order or arrangement. Jesus was explaining that his kingdom, or government, was not to stem from the efforts of men, as were the kingdoms of this present order—*kosmos*. The "world" referred to by Jesus began with the drying up of the Flood, and in the more than two thousand years from then until his First Advent, the sword had been depended upon to establish and maintain governmental authority. This had been true to a large extent even in the case of Israel, for the possession and control of Canaan had been accomplished by Israel's army.

No doubt Pilate was well acquainted with the history of the great empires which had preceded Rome, such as Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. He would know that each of these rose to their positions of power through their military might. He knew that this was also true of Rome. So when Jesus stated that his kingdom was not of this

world, and explained that if it were, then would his soldiers fight, Pilate knew that here was a case quite outside of his jurisdiction.

Jesus, indeed, was a king. Being further questioned on this matter, he said to Pilate, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." (John 18:37) Pilate did not know what Jesus meant by "the truth," but he had been convinced that this man, so hated by the Jews who wanted him put to death, had no intention of using military power to overthrow the Roman government. He said to Jesus' accusers, "I find in him no fault at all."—vs. 38

"WILT THOU AT THIS TIME?"

Jesus' own disciples did not then understand why they were not permitted to defend him and prevent his crucifixion. Even after their Master was raised from the dead, and they had enjoyed a number of precious visits with him, they were still wondering about his kingdom, and the position they hoped to have in that kingdom. On the last of his appearances, they asked Jesus, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?"—Acts 1:6

We cannot be sure what the disciples had in mind when they asked this question. Shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus had related a parable in which he represented himself as a certain nobleman who went into a far country to receive a kingdom, and to return. (Luke 19:11,12) The disciples knew that Jesus had left them for a time. They may have thought that death was that "far country" to which

he had gone, and that now he had returned. Thus, they asked the question, “Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?”

It was natural that the disciples should associate the kingdom hope with the restoration of Israel’s independence as a nation. They were familiar with the promise which God made to David concerning his throne that it was to be an everlasting kingdom. (II Sam. 7:16) This kingdom was “overturned” in the days of their last king, Zedekiah. (Ezek. 21:25-27) However, Isaiah’s prophecy of Jesus’ birth gave assurance that he, as “The Prince of Peace,” would reestablish it. The prophecy reads, “Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever.”—Isa. 9:7

In the announcement to Mary, the angel said, “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.”—Luke 1:28-33

The disciples of Jesus also knew of this declaration to Mary by the angel. In accepting and following

Jesus as the Messiah, they would naturally expect him to reestablish a government in Jerusalem and, as they mentioned to Jesus, “restore again the kingdom to Israel.” Jesus did not explain to his disciples that the restored kingdom of David would be vastly superior to the original and typical kingdom. He simply said at the time that it was not for them to know “the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.”—Acts 1:7

The Messianic cause, however, was far from dead. There was a great work to be done in connection with it. Jesus explained to his disciples that they were to wait in Jerusalem until they received the power of the Holy Spirit. They were to become his witnesses “both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” (vs. 8) Having given them this commission, Jesus left his disciples, and returned to the heavenly courts, the “far country” to which his earlier parable referred. Not until the due time for his return was he to exercise governmental authority in the earth.

THE WORK OF THIS AGE

Jesus’ commission to his disciples just before leaving them was in reality a brief outline of the work during this Gospel Age. This was to be a preparatory work for the kingdom. The proclamation of the Gospel by the disciples of Jesus would serve to gather from all nations a “little flock” consisting of those who would be willing to suffer and to die with him, that they might live and reign with him in his kingdom.

Neither Jesus nor his apostles ever gave any indication that dedicated believers were to participate

in the fallen human governments of this world. Nevertheless, soon after the apostles fell asleep in death, much of Christianity began to lose perspective as to the present work to be done by the followers of Christ. They came to believe that it was their task to convert the world by their preaching, including the use of the powers of civil government to do so. By this means, they thought to establish the foretold “peace on earth.” Since this effort was not authorized by the Lord, and therefore not blessed by him, it failed, as clearly testified by the events of the past twenty centuries.

Even today, sincere men and women still look to the governments of their respective countries to establish peace. For this reason, they do what they can to influence lawmakers to establish what they consider to be just laws. They condemn governmental actions with which they do not agree, and praise those which they believe will contribute to righteousness and peace. As fresh leaders appear on the scene, many profess the cherished hope of “peace on earth,” even though the close of each decade, and each century, finds the nations of earth at greater odds with one another than ever before. Thus the “falling away” from “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3), continues to blight and darken the viewpoints of most Christians.

This is true also from year to year, which is why the situation at the close of 2013 is, for the most part, disheartening to all except those who understand the plan of God and are being guided by the promises and prophecies of his Holy Word. These know that the promised “peace on earth” was not to be established through human efforts. They

believe what Jesus said to Pilate, that his kingdom was not of this world—this order of things. Thankfully, fallen human systems have nothing to do with its establishment, nor can they delay its coming even for a day.

THROUGH THE RESURRECTION

Jesus' enemies, stirred to action against him by the great Adversary, Satan, doubtless thought that they had made a complete end of him when they succeeded in bringing about his crucifixion. If so, they did not take God's power into consideration, the power which on the "third day" raised earth's eventual and rightful King from the dead. (Acts 10:40) Certainly nothing can interfere with plans which are implemented by such miracle-working power.

To Israelites in a synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia, Paul said concerning Jesus' resurrection, "We declare unto you glad tidings, how that the promise which was made unto the fathers, God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee. And as concerning that he raised him up from the dead, now no more to return to corruption, he said on this wise, I will give you the sure mercies of David."—chap. 13:32-34

When God made his promise to David, assuring him that his kingdom would be a throne which would be established forever, he said, through Nathan the prophet, "My mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee." (II Sam. 7:15) Many of the royal

descendants of David were far from worthy of continuing the Davidic throne, but God extended his mercy to them. Even when Zedekiah, the last of the kings of Judah, was taken prisoner to Babylon, the “throne” was not destroyed, but merely “overturned” until he came whose right it was, and it would be given to him.—Ezek. 21:25-27

The prophecy of Isaiah 9:6,7, and the declaration of the angel to Mary (Luke 1:32), prove that Jesus is the one “whose right it is” to inherit the fulfillment of the promise God made to David. However, Jesus was put to death. He was “cut off out of the land of the living,” and there was none to “declare his generation.” (Isa. 53:8) He had no descendants to inherit the throne which belonged to him. Ordinarily, this would have meant that the promise to David had failed, that Satan had interfered with the outworking of God’s plan, but the angel had said to Mary, “With God nothing shall be impossible.” (Luke 1:37) This was true in connection with Jesus’ birth, and now it was true again in connection with his death, for the power of God raised him from the dead, thus making sure the fulfillment of the promise to David.

This promise, or covenant, is referred to in the Scriptures as “the sure mercies of David.” (Isa. 55:3; Acts 13:34) Jesus, personally, did not need to have mercy extended toward him, for he was sinless, and kept perfectly the righteous laws of God. However, by his own voluntary act he was slain for the sins of others. Strict justice alone did not demand that Jesus be raised from the dead, but divine mercy and love provided his being raised up to “glory and honour and immortality.” (Rom. 2:7)

From this standpoint, Jesus' resurrection was a further manifestation of the exercise of "the sure mercies of David," that there might be a King to sit upon his throne forever.

While God's promises, and the prophecies, emphasize that the Messiah was to be an individual, and point to Jesus as that great future King whom the God of Israel sent, it is also made clear in both the Old and New Testaments that he would have associates. One of these prophecies is Isaiah 55:3: "Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David." This covenant had already been made with David, and here the Lord is saying that those of Israel who came unto him in obedience would be included in this covenant.

The next verses of this prophecy read, "Behold, I have given him [Jesus] for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people. Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the LORD thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee." (vss. 4,5) In the New Testament Jesus, the "leader and commander" mentioned in this prophecy, clarifies its meaning for us. Speaking to Israel shortly before he was crucified, Jesus said, "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."—Matt. 21:43

Peter identifies this new nation, the nation Isaiah said the people of his day knew not. After referring to those who were disobedient and who rejected Jesus, Peter said, "Ye are a chosen generation,

a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises [*Marginal Translation: virtues*] of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.”—I Pet. 2:9,10

It is important to realize that many promises to the Israelites will yet be fulfilled on their behalf. Those, however, which pertained to them, as a nation, being associate rulers with the Messiah in the heavenly phase of his kingdom, were forfeited because of their unfaithfulness and rejection of Jesus. This is why Jesus said that the kingdom—that is, the right to joint-heirship with him as heavenly rulers in the kingdom—would be taken from them and given to another nation. As Peter explains, this new holy nation is made up of a people who in times past were not “a people,” but who are now “the people of God.”

INDIVIDUAL FAITHFULNESS

The expression, “a people,” implies an aggregation of people who are looked upon as belonging together as a unit, such as a nation, or nationality. Peter explains that God’s new Messianic nation was not previously such a group, such a body of people. It could not previously be identified as a nation, but is made up of those who are called of God as individuals and brought together under their “leader and commander,” Jesus, and bound together by the Holy Spirit.

The creating of this new nation to which the kingdom is given is brought about, so far as our

part in the work of the Lord is concerned, by the preaching of the Gospel, in obedience to the commission Jesus gave to his disciples. It is the work of the Lord's people to be witnesses for Jesus by proclaiming the good news of the kingdom that is centered in him. It is God, however, who directs the message into the hearts of those whom he draws to Christ and himself. Those exercised to the point of fully consecrating their lives to do God's will, he invites to follow in the Master's footsteps—to prove their worthiness to be a part of the new nation which will be the instrument of blessing to all mankind.

With the followers of Jesus, even as with him, their worthiness of being rulers in the Messianic kingdom is proved by faithfully laying down their lives in the divine service. Paul was one of these faithful ones, and shortly before his execution in Rome, he wrote, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." (II Tim. 4:7,8) Paul makes it clear that he did not expect to receive his "crown" until the end of the age when the Lord would return to establish his kingdom. He knew also that all who, like himself, followed in the footsteps of Jesus, fighting "the good fight of faith" even unto death, would also at that time be exalted to live and reign with Christ.—I Tim. 6:12; Rev. 2:10; 20:6

Meanwhile, and throughout the entire Gospel Age, these dedicated followers of Jesus, on finishing their sacrificial course, have gone into death. They

could not be reigning kings in the Messianic kingdom unless awakened from the sleep of death. Here again we are reminded that nothing is impossible with God. He is abundantly able to fulfill that wonderful prophecy of Revelation 20:6, that the followers of Jesus will live and reign with him a thousand years.

These, in association with Jesus on the divine plane of life, will then constitute God's ruling family of sons, the "mountain [kingdom] of the LORD'S house" which "shall be established in the top of the mountains," ruling and judging righteously over the peoples of the whole earth. "And all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."—Isa. 2:2-4

The establishment of Messiah's kingdom as portrayed by Isaiah will be accomplished in God's due time. There will be no delay, no tarrying of God's plan. The fact that at the close of 2013 the nations are not beating their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks, does not mean that God's assurance of ultimate peace on earth, as promised to the shepherds over two thousand years ago, has failed. Indeed, the only failure has been man's general lack of understanding

God's great kingdom plan for peace. We rejoice that this lack of understanding does not interfere with the plan itself. Those to whom at this time the "mysteries of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:11), have been revealed have great cause for rejoicing, for they recognize in the world around them clear indications that Messiah's kingdom is at the door. These, instead of being filled with fear, as so many are, lift up their heads with confidence and rejoicing, knowing that their deliverance, and the deliverance of the whole world from sin and death, is near.—Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 21:26-31

These know that soon there will be peace on earth. They know that God's good will toward men, as expressed in the gift of his Son as their Redeemer, will continue to be manifest in the blessings of health and life which will reach all mankind through the agencies of the kingdom. They know also that through the merit of the shed blood of the Redeemer, all who believe and obey the laws of the new kingdom will be restored to harmony with the Creator and be his earthly sons. Thus there will be peace between God and men, which will mean genuine and lasting "peace" and "good will" among men.

