

The Joy Set Before Jesus

*“Looking unto
Jesus the author
and finisher of our
faith; who for the
joy that was set
before him endured
the cross, despising
the shame, and is
set down at the
right hand of the
throne of God.”
—Hebrews 12:2*

THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

is a time each year when many among mankind renew their hope for “peace” on earth, and “good will toward men.” It is also a time when people contemplate the words of the angel, spoken to the shepherds: “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.”

(Luke 2:10-14) For most, however, such thoughts do not translate into an assurance that peace, good will, or great joy will ever come “to all people.”

It may surprise many that Jesus himself had such joy, and also confident assurance, that peace on earth and good will among mankind would come in due time. It was, in fact, this anticipated “joy that was set before him,” as our opening text states, which enabled the Master to endure the cross, “despising the shame.” This joy which Jesus had is the focus of our consideration in the ensuing

pages, as we review some of the wonderful divine provisions and blessings in store for God's human creation.

JOY—A WORTHY GOAL

To be joyful is a worthy goal for all of God's intelligent creatures, for it is the normal state of those who seek to be obedient to him. The human race has suffered much and been generally unhappy because of sin and its effects. It was inevitable that Jesus should suffer—not for his own sin, because he had none—but on account of the sin of others. He endured suffering, Paul says, because of the “contradiction of sinners” which was leveled against him.—Heb. 7:26; 12:3

From the time of his baptism in Jordan, when he entered into a covenant with his Heavenly Father to do all that was written of him in the “volume of the book,” Jesus knew that he was to take the sinner's place in death. (Heb. 10:7) He knew, therefore, that the way before him was a difficult one, beset by many trials, and leading eventually to death. The assurance, however, of his Father's guidance and strength in every time of need was a constant source of joy to the Master, and this was a joy which he handed down to his disciples.

JESUS' PREHUMAN EXISTENCE

The question naturally arises as to when the joy which enabled Jesus to endure the cross, and which will in due time “be to all people,” was “set before him.” The Scriptures are not explicit concerning the degree of information the Heavenly Father gave to his beloved Son during his prehuman existence with regard to the purpose of his future earthly mission.

Sincere students of the Bible have believed that the conversation recorded in Isaiah 6:8 was not just between Isaiah and Jehovah, but because of the use of the word “us,” it also included God’s dear Son, as in the creation account of man recorded in Genesis 1:26. Hence the question concerning the terrible results of sin, and as to who would be the emissary to assist in eliminating it upon the earth, the Son replied, “Here am I; send me.”

We know that Jesus’ coming to earth was wholly voluntary. He had supreme love for the Heavenly Father, and was completely dedicated to the doing of his will. He had absolute confidence that his Father’s will for him would be just and righteous. This would have been sufficient incentive for the Son of God to make “himself of no reputation,” and to take upon himself “the form of a servant.”—Phil. 2:7

THE RECORDED PROMISES

We cannot be sure of things which are not clearly revealed in the Scriptures, but we can know and rejoice in those which are. There are many recorded promises which the Heavenly Father made to Jesus. He undoubtedly knew about and rejoiced in these, especially after “the heavens were opened unto him” at the time of his baptism and receiving of the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 3:16) There are Scriptures which indicate that even before this, Jesus began to sense the divine purpose in his birth, and that he was the special object of his Father’s care.

In a prophecy of the cruel suffering which was inflicted upon Jesus while he was hanging on the cross, he is foretold as saying to his Father, “Thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst

make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts." (Ps. 22:9) This indicates that, at an early age, Jesus was beginning to sense his special relationship to God.

On his visit to the Temple when he was twelve years of age, in explanation to his parents Jesus said, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49, *New King James Version*) This question indicates that even then he knew to some extent the fact that he had a special, divine mission to perform. The account tells us that after this he became subject to his parents until he was thirty years of age. (Luke 2:51; 3:23) Apparently by his questioning the doctors of the Law he learned that he could not properly begin a priestly work for God until he was thirty.

It was after the Holy Spirit came upon the Master that he was able to grasp the full import of his mission, and it was then that he understood and appreciated the precious promises of his Father which set before him the joy which would follow his faithful sacrificial work. The Apostle Peter, in telling us about the prophetic testimony of the "sufferings of Christ," says that the prophets wrote also about "the glory that should follow."—I Pet. 1:11

ISAIAH'S RECORD

One of the outstanding promises in this regard, which must have meant much to Jesus, is recorded in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. The first nine verses of the chapter are prophetic of the "sufferings of Christ," while the last three pertain to the "glory that should follow." What a joy the information contained in these verses must have been to Jesus!

Though he was to be cut off from the land of the living, with none to declare his generation, Jehovah promised, "He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand."—Isa. 53:10

Jesus no doubt understood that "his seed," or offspring, mentioned in this promise would be the restored world of mankind. This was an unselfish joy set before him, the holy pleasure of bringing back the sinful and fallen race to life. It was the same joy as expressed to the shepherds by the angel on the night of his birth in Bethlehem, a joy "which shall be to all people." To achieve this glorious outcome, it would be necessary for Jesus' days to be "prolonged." Thus, while he was to die as man's Redeemer, and so be "cut off out of the land of the living," his death would not be permanent, for he was to live again and be privileged to give life to others. Though it "pleased the LORD to bruise him," because this was an essential part of the redemptive work, Jehovah's "pleasure," as revealed in his plan to bless all the families of the earth, was to "prosper" in his Son's hand.—Isa. 53:8,10

Jesus' soul did indeed "travail" as he endured the many sufferings associated with his earthly ministry. What comfort it must have been to him to realize that it was not in vain, that wonderful results would accrue from his suffering, with which he would be wholly "satisfied." (vs. 11) What great satisfaction there will be in seeing the entire human race restored to perfection and life! What a marvelous joy was this that God set before his beloved Son in order that he might have strength to endure the cross.

Continuing in verse 11 of Isaiah's prophecy, Jesus was to be that "righteous servant" who would "justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities." How this knowledge also must have strengthened him to endure the cross and despise the shame. Could any temporary shame which might be heaped upon him by the "contradiction of sinners" be compared with that immeasurable joy of providing to all mankind an opportunity for everlasting life upon the earth, when the "dead, small and great, stand before God?"—Rev. 20:12

"A PORTION WITH THE GREAT"

In the last verse of Isaiah 53 is another inspiring promise to Jesus. Here the Father says that because of his Son's faithfulness, "Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great." The "great" referred to here is Jehovah himself. The Scriptures indicate that after Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit he was able to remember his prehuman life with the Heavenly Father. This is shown in his prayer, "O Father, glorify thou me ... with the glory which I had with thee before the world was."—John 17:5

Jesus knew what it meant to be associated with his Father, and the joy of being in his presence. The promise that he would again be given "a portion with the great" would mean more to him than any of us are able to appreciate. Here was a joy set before him that was indeed "unspeakable and full of glory."—I Pet. 1:8

Psalms 22 is another prophecy of the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. Verses 7 and 8 are descriptive of the ridicule and scorn which were hurled at the Master at that time: "All

they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on the LORD that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him." These words were fulfilled by the chief priests, who mocked Jesus, saying, "He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God." (Matt. 27:43) As Jesus hung suffering and dying on the cross, another incident occurred which is mentioned in the 22nd Psalm: "They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture." (vs. 18) Jesus, with his perfect and clear spiritual discernment, could not help but notice these fulfillments of the prophecy.—Matt. 27:35

This prophecy of David in Psalm 22, however, is not exclusively concerned with Jesus' suffering and death, for it also set before him a wonderful vision of the joy which enabled him to endure the cross. Verse 22 reads, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee." The Apostle Paul quotes this, and indicates that the "brethren" referred to are the body members of the Christ. This means that as Jesus hung on the cross he was encouraged by the prospect of having these brethren associated with him in glory. Paul's comment is: "It became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee."—Heb. 2:10-12

A PROMISED KINGDOM

In the psalmist's prophecy Jesus also saw the kingdom blessings coming to mankind: "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee. For the kingdom is the LORD'S: and he is the governor among the nations." (Ps. 22:27,28) What a joy this was to set before Jesus while hanging on the cross—the joy of seeing all mankind "turn unto the LORD." It is another key part of the "good tidings of great joy" spoken of by the angel at the time of Jesus' birth. Paul tells us that, through Christ, God was "reconciling the world unto himself," and as Jesus was dying at Calvary, he realized that his death was a vital part of this work of reconciliation.—II Cor. 5:19

Jesus realized that the kingdom would be necessary in this work of turning the people back to God. This prophecy gave him the strength to reply to the thief when he requested, "Jesus! remember me, whensoever thou shalt come into thy kingdom," to which the Master replied, "Verily, I say unto thee this day: With me, shalt thou be in Paradise." (Luke 23:42,43, *Rotherham Emphasized Bible*) Then, as David prophesied, "all the ends of the world" will turn back to God.

Perhaps all the thief knew about Jesus' coming kingdom was from reading the inscription at the top of the cross, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews," which indicated the "crime" for which he was being crucified. (Matt. 27:37) However, Jesus knew more than this. He recognized that although he was then being killed by his enemies, the kingdom promises of his Father were sure. Jesus knew that Satan

would not be the prince of the world forever, and that in his Father's due time all the ends of the world would be given the opportunity, under just and righteous conditions, to turn unto God. How Jesus must have rejoiced in such a glorious prospect!

“IN THEE DO I PUT MY TRUST”

Psalm 16 is another prophecy which applied to Jesus during the time of his earthly ministry, during which he was laying down his life as the Redeemer of the world. It is similar to Psalm 22 in that it forecasts both the suffering and future joy of Jesus. The larger portion of Psalm 22, however, describes his suffering, and only a few verses tell of the joy; whereas Psalm 16 makes only an incidental mention of the suffering, while most of the prophecy depicts Jesus' great trust in his Father, and his sure hope of the glorious outcome.

“Preserve me, O God,” the opening verse reads, “for in thee do I put my trust.” (Ps. 16:1) Jesus knew that his mission as a human being was to die. He said concerning himself, “My flesh ... I will give for the life of the world.” (John 6:51) Jesus was confident that this would not mean eternal death. It was in full assurance that he prayed, as prophesied by David, “Preserve me, O God.” His confidence stemmed from his determination to be faithful and fully obedient to his Father, and to him alone. “Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another god: their drink offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips.”—Ps. 16:4

Jesus knew that the secret of true and lasting joy was in loving devotion to his Heavenly Father. Any course that might “hasten after another god”

could lead only to sorrow and ruin. In continuing the prayer he emphasized this, saying, “The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.” (vss. 5,6) Jesus understood that his “cup” of experience was given to him by God, so in the Garden of Gethsemane he said to Peter, “Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?”—John 18:11

Why should he not drink this cup, Jesus reasoned, when such a glorious inheritance awaited him, and ultimately great joy would come “to all people!” This jubilant prospect, and the fact that even while drinking the cup of suffering his Father was with him to sustain and help, meant to the Master that his “lines,” the path marked out for him by God, had indeed fallen in “pleasant places,” made so by the “goodly heritage” which had been set before him.

“I have set the LORD always before me,” the prayer continues, “because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope.” (Ps. 16:8,9) The Hebrew word in verse 8 which is translated “before” means literally “counterpart.” Jesus made the Heavenly Father his counterpart, therefore, he was not alone during his earthly experience of laying down his life.

Having his Heavenly Father as his helper, Jesus was confident of victory, and could say, “I shall not be moved.” He freely acknowledged to his disciples that by himself he could do nothing. (John 5:19,30; 8:28) His words were those which the Father gave him to speak, and the works which he performed

were likewise those of his Father. He recognized that God was at his right hand at all times, and that he could be depended upon. "I knew that thou hearest me always," Jesus confidently prayed. (John 11:42) This being true, Jesus felt secure, assured that he could not be moved away from this blessed position of favor with his God.

This made the Master's heart glad despite the bitter enmity of his adversaries, and as he said, "My glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope." It was a hope based upon the many promises by which his Father provided this wonderful "joy that was set before him." He knew that he was to die for the sins of the world, but his God, who was at his right hand, had given him a sustaining hope of joy to come.

How completely the Master trusted in his Heavenly Father: "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption." (Ps. 16:10) Jesus understood that he was to give up his life, his "soul," in death. This was essential in order that he might take the sinner's place. However, he was not to be left in "hell" [Hebrew: *sheol*], the condition of death. This he knew because a great joy had been set before him by his Father. It would be the joy of returning to his Father's actual presence and partaking of his glory, and the great added joy of dispensing kingdom blessings, in due time, to all mankind, those for whom he would die.

"FULNESS OF JOY"

Concerning this joy, the last verse of Psalm 16 represents Jesus praying, "Thou wilt shew me the

path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore.” (vs. 11) Jesus saw that by being in his Father’s presence, and sharing his glory, all the other wonderful things which had been promised would follow as a natural sequence of events. This position with the Father would make possible the kingdom, and its promised blessings, provided by his sacrificial death on the cross. What “fulness of joy” this brought to the Master!

The Apostle Paul may well have had this very prophecy in mind when he wrote concerning Jesus, quoting again our opening text, “Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb. 12:2) Indeed, the prophet had written, speaking for Jesus, that at the Father’s “right hand there are pleasures forevermore,” and in his actual presence is “fulness of joy.”

This joy, set before the Master so definitely by the many wonderful promises of his Father, enabled him to endure. Paul tells us that we are to “consider him” who endured so much suffering, “lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.” (Heb. 12:3) We cannot properly consider Jesus without recalling the provisions which his Father made to give him strength to endure. We should also realize that the same joy has been set before us, so that we also may be able to “endure unto the end.”—Matt. 24:13

In the promise God made to Jesus, “Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great,” he also said concerning us, that Jesus would “divide the spoil with the strong.” (Isa. 53:12) We are associate heirs with him in this blessed promise. (Rom. 8:16,17)

After Jesus was resurrected and exalted to the right hand of God, he declared, “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.” (Rev. 3:21) Jesus was given his promised place at the right hand of the throne of God, where there are pleasures forevermore, and where there is fulness of joy. We also can be confident that our joint inheritance with Jesus is assured, and will soon become a reality, if we are faithful, even unto death.—Rev. 2:10

May this joy thus set before all the followers of the Master encourage us to greater diligence in doing his will, greater faithfulness in his service, and more joyfully to lay down our lives in sacrifice. If faithful, we will share his glory and the kingdom work of blessing all the families of the earth, which will finally fulfill those words of the angel, repeated each year during the Christmas season: “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord!”—Luke 2:10,11 ■