The Birth of a Savior: Tidings of Great Joy

"The angel said unto them, Fear not: for, 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

WHEN THE ANGEL OF THE Lord appeared to the shepherds with the announcement of this most wonderful event, the birth of our Lord Jesus, little did they realize at that time the tremendous impact that his birth would ultimately have upon the whole human creation. It was truly God's greatest gift to his human family, and it will become fully manifest to all in due time, including the multitudes waiting in their graves, as well as to those who are yet unborn.

THE BIRTHPLACE

We marvel at the humble circumstances that surround the birth of this precious Christ child.

"She [Mary] brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7) There is no evidence of complaint by either of our Lord's parents concerning the lowly nature of their accommodations with no place for them at the inn. Perhaps if some of those who were at the inn that night had realized that the newborn infant was the long-promised Messiah, they would have gladly made some changes to provide for a more suitable and comfortable room for the mother and her new baby.

THE SHEPHERDS

We learn from the scriptural account that the Heavenly Father's purpose was to use his angel to make this extraordinary announcement of the birth of his dearly beloved Son, our Lord Jesus, to those humble shepherds who were on watch that night in the Judean hills.

"There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch [*marginal translation*: night-watchers] over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid." (vss. 8,9) No doubt they were overwhelmed by the glorious scene that had appeared before them, but the angel assured them and calmed their fear by saying, "Fear not."—vs. 10

THE "SIGN"

After the angel's announcement to the shepherds, they were promised a "sign" that would enable them to properly identify the newborn child. "This

shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." (vs.12) The word 'sign' points to an indication, or evidence, that pertains to a certain thing. We note that, at Jesus' baptism thirty years later, John was witness to two indications—one visible and one audible—that indicated our Lord's baptism had been accepted by the Heavenly Father. First, he saw the Holy Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting upon Jesus, and then he heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."—Matt. 3:16,17; John 1:32-36

THE HEAVENLY HOST

The heavenly host responded to this most blessed event as a single chorus of voices singing praises to God for his unspeakable gift to mankind. "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) The angels were singing about God's 'good will toward men'—his goodwill and love which was at that time being manifested in the birth of a Redeemer for the world. The expression goodwill toward men has been confused to suggest 'good will among men,' which has not always been true among the human creation since Jesus came into the world. Christian people observe the fact that there is no more goodwill among men now than before Jesus was born, but we are assured that this characteristic of perfection will become a reality under the administration of Christ's kingdom.

In further evidence we read, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) This was the greatest of all gifts, and one that will yet benefit all the peoples of the earth. At a future time, under the administration of the kingdom of Truth and righteousness, the whole world will come to know and sing praises to God.—Acts 17:31

With the birth of a Savior, a turning point had been reached in the outworking of God's plan of redemption and reconciliation. It was a long-range plan for the ultimate recovery of the human family from the sentence of sin and death that had been placed upon them because of disobedience. His plan had moved forward with Jesus as the central figure of both Old and New Testament promises. With that birth, this promise of a Savior had been finally realized.

ISAIAH'S PROPHECY FULFILLED

Many centuries before this blessed event had occurred, the Prophet Isaiah was moved by the Holy Spirit of God to write the familiar and inspiring words that often come to mind during this special holiday season. He wrote, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. 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. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this."—Isa. 9:6,7

This wonderful prophecy outlines some of the important roles earth's new ruler will assume when his kingdom will be established upon his mighty 'shoulder.' Jesus, as the antitypical David, will then assume the several offices of the kingdom that will bring God's purpose of reconciliation to fulfillment. At that time, whosoever accepts him will not perish, but will receive everlasting life as promised.

As the Wonderful Counsellor, our Lord Jesus, together with his faithful bride, will act as a shepherd to lovingly guide and instruct each one of earth's family to walk in the way of Truth and holiness, that they may gain everlasting life here on a perfected earth. Jesus, as a powerful being, will then be known as the 'mighty God' who will establish his kingdom with 'judgment and with justice' for all. Those who strive to obey the just laws of the kingdom then in operation will be assisted and encouraged in the way of holiness.

He will also assume his role as 'everlasting Father' in the great work of restoring humanity to life. As the Heavenly Father is the source of all life, so too will Jesus be given the role of everlasting Father—or life-giver—to the world of mankind. Finally, he will assume the role of 'Prince of Peace' over all the earth, and will ultimately bring about peace between God and man, as well as peace between man and his neighbor.

THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTMAS

Although numerous dates, including December 25th, had been considered during the early centuries

of the Christian era, there was no general consensus of opinion among church leaders before the fifth century to establish a fixed date to celebrate Christmas [ie: the mass of Christ]. It was acknowledged early on that calendars should now be drawn up to reflect our Lord's birth as a turning point in the history of the world, and thus the terms B.C. and A.D. became familiar symbols by which to designate whether an event had occurred before Christ's birth or afterward.

An elaborate cycle of Christmas festivals gradually emerged, around the observance of the special day of nativity, which consisted of Christmas Eve vigils. These became important celebrations of solemnity inasmuch as it was not possible for the church leaders to scripturally determine the precise time of Jesus' birth. They were sure, however, that it had occurred during the night, drawing attention to the passage from Luke's account, "There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." (Luke 2:8) The four Sundays before Christmas were then known as preparation days for the approaching special festival and were called Advent Sundays.

The observance of Christmas is not of New Testament origin, and students of the Bible agree that the date chosen by the early scholars cannot be proven by scripture. They suggest that a more appropriate date to mark the birth of our Lord Jesus would be around October 1st. (See Luke 3:1-3 for the account of John, who was born six months earlier). A possible suggestion for the popularity of the December 25th date necessitates counting back nine months from October 1st to the end of the

previous December, as an approximate time when God planted the seed of life in the womb of Jesus' mother, Mary.

A FESTIVE SEASON

Most people in our modern Christian world will agree that the Christmas celebration has become the most anticipated and popular holiday in the entire year. Many remarks are often heard concerning the joyful spirit that is prevalent during the days leading up to Christmas. The holiday season is sometimes the only time during the entire year that some family and friends may stay in touch with one another through the exchange of greeting cards or social gatherings. It is also marked by decorations of all kinds including the bringing of trees into the home for ornamentation and lighting. Christmas Day is anticipated to be a joyful time for families to exchange gifts, and with food and drink, followed by a sumptuous meal. The festive season then continues until a new year is ushered in a week later. Christmas has become a well-established and important annual custom in our western society.

MODERN COMMERCIALISM

The religiously inspired Christmas holiday that was established many centuries ago centered around Jesus and his birth, and in earlier times there was a great deal of attention focused on the sacredness of the event. With the rapidly changing events of our modern world, there is less attention now being focused on the meaning of our Savior's birth.

Christmas has become an increasingly commercialized and artificial event in a mad frenzy to buy

gifts, that often cannot be afforded, to be given to those who may not especially want what they have received. This has generated a rush by retailers and customers alike who begin soon after the Thanksgiving Day holiday ends, to obtain profits and bargains. Many go into debt during this time and are then faced with postholiday depression when the festivities are over and the reality of everyday life returns.

A DATE OF REMEMBRANCE

Although the Scriptures do not teach us to celebrate Jesus' birth, they do, however, clearly instruct us to remember his death. This is because his death accomplished the satisfaction of Divine justice for the sins of the whole world. The reason we call him our Savior is because he paid the price for sin as "a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."—I Tim. 2:5,6

Every year, in either the months of March or April, depending on the Hebrew cycle of the moon, brethren gather together on the scripturally designated evening of the 14th day of Nisan for the purpose of remembering Jesus' death, as he has instructed us to do. In Luke's account of the Lord's Memorial Supper, Jesus teaches us that wine would be used as a symbol to represent his shed blood, and that bread would represent his body which was broken for us. With further instructions, he then invited his disciples, and subsequently us, to partake of these sacred emblems together. "He took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of

me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." (Luke 22:19,20) He invites us to participate each year on the anniversary of this sacred occasion and to observe this simple ceremony in remembrance of him and his sacrificial death.

TIMES OF DISTRESS

The poor, groaning creation seeks ways to divert attention away from the increasing levels of frenzy and stress that mark our day, and they easily get caught up in the spirit of holiday festivities. Eventually, though, they must return to the normal pursuits of everyday life. There is much evidence in the world that we are in the closing years of the present Gospel Age and its social order, as predicted by God's prophets and others. Luke describes our day as a time of great perplexity and distress among nations. "Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken."—Luke 21:25,26

The human family is faced daily with increasing levels of violence, particularly with the continuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that have caused so much human suffering.

Many other parts of the world are also enduring lawlessness and terrorism. Even nature itself seems to be increasingly unpredictable and violent. We recall the recent terrible tsunami in Asia, widespread flooding in Europe, tornados in the central plains states, hurricanes in Florida, and most recently the devastating storm Katrina that struck the gulf coast region of America.

HURRICANE KATRINA

Katrina has been described as the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States. Tens of thousands of people were forced to evacuate the city of New Orleans as storm surges crested over the city's levees. As people made their way to so-called shelters they were forced to wade in deep, filthy water to get there. The living conditions in these places have been described as appalling because of the lack of all necessities of life. This has been met with tremendous outpouring of men and resources, and great sums of money, to help ease the distressful conditions in the once proud city, and bring some kind of order out of near total disaster. Now health officials speak of the flood waters as potential severe hazards to health.

A NEW ERA

The world entered into a new era of its long and convoluted history with the birth of Jesus. The full manifestation of the importance of this great event will not be realized until all men have come to know him. No other person in the history of mankind has ever marked so many and far-reaching changes in the affairs of men, as that of Jesus Christ. His birth created a dividing point in the reckoning of time, and in numerous other ways his influence has surpassed that of all other notables combined.

The angel's prophecy that through him would come peace on earth, however, has yet to be realized, except for a few who have appreciated the blessings of his earthly ministry and have taken up their cross to follow him. (Matt. 16:24) This completes the grand arrangement of universal peace

made available through the redemptive program centered in Christ, and which will ultimately be established between God and men. With universal peace will come blessings of everlasting life to all who strive to walk in the ways of Truth and righteousness under the terms of his kingdom arrangement.

A TOKEN OF GOD'S GOODWILL

We now see and appreciate the everlasting token of God's goodwill toward men with the birth of his Son, Jesus. This was but a preparatory step toward the restoration of all God's earthly children. The saving work of the Redeemer will be manifest to all the obedient through the grand work to be accomplished during his long-promised kingdom that we trust is soon to come.

Let us praise God for the gift of his own Son who came to earth to die for us as our Savior. Joy and everlasting peace will surely manifest itself to the whole groaning creation in due time. ■