Christ Is Born

"Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."
—Luke 2:11

More than two thousand years ago this angelic announcement to a group of shepherds watching their flocks by night signaled a crucial step forward in the outworking of God's plan of salvation. The full context of our theme text reads, "The angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And 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. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And 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 2:9-14

The Promise

Previous to this, the coming of a Savior was in the realm of promises, so one of the very important aspects of this message of good news was the fact

that the Savior had now been born. The word "Gospel" means good news. Paul informs us that the Gospel was preached centuries earlier to Abraham when God promised this ancient friend that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. (Gal. 3:8; Gen. 12:3; 22:18) Paul identifies Jesus in this connection as the promised "seed." (Gal. 3:16) It was good news to Abraham that his progeny—Jesus as the seed of promise—would be the means of blessing to all mankind. However, this was good news that was based merely upon a promise. This promise was confirmed by God's oath.—Gen. 22:16-18; Heb. 6:13-17

This same promise was reaffirmed to Isaac and to Jacob. Shortly before his death, when pronouncing blessings upon his twelve sons, Jacob prophesied that out of the loins of his son Judah there would come one who would be called Shiloh, a peaceful one, and that unto him would the "gathering of the people be." (Gen. 49:9,10) This was another promise of the coming of a Savior, or Messiah, one to whom the people would be gathered and through whom they would receive the blessings of peace.

Moses, in his day, also embraced these wonderful promises that the God of Israel would send a great one, a Messiah, to bring deliverance to his people and a blessing to all mankind. Evidently, the mother of Moses, while caring for her child in the court of Pharaoh, told him of the promise to Abraham and what it implied. We read that when he was come to years he "refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, because he preferred being mistreated with God's people to enjoying the pleasures of sin for a short time. He thought that being

insulted for the sake of the Messiah was of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward."—Heb. 11:24-26, *International Standard Version*

The Greek word Christ is the New Testament equivalent of the Hebrew word Messiah. Moses evidently understood God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to mean that he would send a Messiah. He gladly cast in his lot with the people of God to whom these promises had been made. Later, after the Law had been given to Israel at the hand of Moses, he was instructed to say to this people that the Lord would raise up unto them a prophet like unto himself and that all would be called upon to hear and obey that prophet. (Deut. 18:18,19) In the New Testament, this prophecy is applied to Jesus during his thousand year kingdom rule.—Acts 3:20,22,23

Many Prophecies

Isaiah prophesied that "a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (Isa. 7:14) Another of Isaiah's prophecies reads, "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

Isaiah further prophesied concerning the coming Messiah: "There shall come forth a rod out of

the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear [reverence] of the LORD; And shall make him of quick understanding: … and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins."—Isa. 11:1-5

In Daniel 9:25, there is another assurance of the coming of the Messiah. In this prophecy, a time measurement is given indicating when he would come. The prophecy reads, "Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks." At the time Jesus appeared as the Messiah, many were in expectation of him. This expectation was no doubt based, in part at least, upon this prophecy recorded by Daniel.—Luke 3:15

In Micah 5:2, there is a prophecy that identifies the place where the promised one would be born. The text reads, "Thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

These and other promises and prophecies relative to the coming Messiah served as a great inspiration

to the devout of Israel. Yet, the majority of the people did not realize that they would not all be fulfilled at once. They failed to grasp the meaning of certain prophecies that told of the Messiah's suffering and death as the Redeemer of Israel and of the world. They did not know that he would be raised from the dead and return to heaven. They simply had in mind the many assurances of God that a Messiah would come, that Israel and all the families of the earth would be blessed.

The Israelites were well aware that God had promised to send a Messiah. As noted in the foregoing scriptures, many names and titles of this great one were mentioned in the prophecies, including Immanuel and Shiloh. He was the promised seed and a prophet greater than Moses. The Messiah was also to be a "rod out of the stem of Jesse," and a "Branch" was to grow out of his roots. He was to be the "Prince of Peace."

Throughout all the long centuries, Israel waited in hope for the fulfillment of the promised Messianic feature of God's plan. At last, the time came for those promises to begin to be translated into reality, so the angel announced, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Now these promises began to take on substance: Christ, the Messiah, was born.

Nine months earlier Mary had been given the assurance that she was to be the mother of the one who would become the great Messiah and deliverer of Israel and the world. "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 1:30-33

In this announcement by the angel, we are reminded of Isaiah's prophecy quoted earlier in which he foretold that the Messiah would sit "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 kingdom of David had fallen about six hundred years earlier. Because David was so greatly beloved by God, he arranged that the future Messianic kingdom should be looked upon as the rebuilt kingdom of David, a man after God's own heart. (I Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22) Thus Jesus is the greater David, and through his mother he was an actual descendant of David.

Humble Circumstances

From the announcement made to her by the angel Gabriel, Mary knew that she was to be the mother of the promised one. God had permitted her holy child to be born in a stable. While Jesus' birthplace was humble, and his mother was a comparatively unknown person in Israel, his birth was announced by the angels. This was appropriate. God had used angels on many occasions to convey to the ancients his plan to send a Messiah. Now that the time had come to fulfill those promises, it was fitting that both the conception and birth of this great one would also be announced by angels.

The birth of Jesus was a turning point in the outworking of the divine arrangement. It meant

that God's plan had moved out of the promise stage and into the era of performance. Through his New Testament servants, God continued to make promises, but now the central figure both of the Old and New Testament promises and prophecies had come, and his birth in Bethlehem had been announced by the angels.

The shepherds to whom this announcement was made must have been awed, and at the same time made glad. Their first thought was to go to Bethlehem and verify what they had heard. We read, "It came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger."—Luke 2:15,16

The shepherds were thoroughly convinced. "When they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds." (vss. 17,18) The shepherds' desire to tell as many as they could about the good news that had been given to them was natural and praiseworthy. We should have the same desire today. At this time, the Lord's people are privileged to understand God's plan even more fully than did the shepherds. The good tidings of the birth of Jesus, and all that it means in connection with the divine plan and purpose as a whole, should motivate us to do all we can to tell out this message of the Gospel far and wide and by every means at our disposal.—Matt. 24:14; Rom. 10:15; I Cor. 9:16

Not Yet the Messiah

The birth of Jesus was truly important as an advancing step in the plan of God. As a babe, however, he was not the Messiah. The word "Messiah" means anointed, or "the anointed one." The significance of the word derives from the Law given to Israel of anointing kings and priests to office. The anointing was the official designation to office. (Exod. 28:41; I Sam. 9:16,17; 16:13) These pointed forward to the anointing of the Holy Spirit that came upon Jesus at the time of his baptism. (Heb. 1:8,9; Acts 10:38) This anointing also came upon the church at Pentecost.—I John 2:27; II Cor. 1:21,22

At the time of Jesus' baptism, he heard his Heavenly Father speaking to him from heaven, saying, "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22) Jesus' birth was announced by the angels, but as a babe he would not yet know about or appreciate his earthly purpose. At the age of twelve, he was found in the Temple with doctors of the Law endeavoring to learn what he could about his mission. (Luke 2:41-47) It was not until he came to Jordan at the age of thirty, when he dedicated himself to the doing of his Father's will and to then begin the public phase of his ministry, that he received this blessed assurance of his sonship. It was then that he learned that his Heavenly Father was well pleased with him. Now he was the Messiah of promise.

By this time, perhaps the shepherds to whom his birth had been announced had died. Certainly many to whom they had conveyed the good news had passed off the scene. Whatever the reason, no mention is made of an angelic announcement after

Jesus began his ministry. It could well be that God wanted to emphasize that future events—the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus were now the important considerations. Jesus' birth was necessary as the means to that end, but the Heavenly Father does not want us particularly to adore the babe Jesus. Rather, we are to take up our cross daily and follow the anointed Jesus in his steps of suffering and death.—Matt. 16:24; Luke 9:23

God's Gift

The promises pertaining to the coming of the Messiah emphasized that he would be one sent by God. This thought is carried over into the New Testament. In John 3:16, Jesus is referred to as God's gift. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Words are wholly inadequate to describe this gracious and costly gift that our Heavenly Father gave to us and to the whole world of mankind.

Since the first evidence of this gift was manifested in the birth of Jesus, it is appropriate that this feature of God's plan should beget in us the desire unselfishly to give of ourselves. First of all, when we come to know of God's great gift of love for us, we should willingly give our all in consecration to him. He has invited us to give him our hearts. (Prov. 23:26) When we respond to this invitation it means that everything we have, and life itself, is surrendered to him, with the understanding that he can use it in whatever way may be pleasing to him. Such a consecration involves presenting our

bodies as a "living sacrifice," as mentioned by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1.

A Savior

When the angel announced to the shepherds that the Messiah was born, he referred to him as a Savior. To the shepherds, this possibly meant no more than being saved from the Roman yoke of bondage under which the nation of Israel was living at the time. To us it implies much more. It means that, through his death as man's Redeemer, Jesus would provide an opportunity of salvation from death for all people. The Heavenly Father knew that in giving his Son for the salvation of mankind, it meant giving him up to suffer and to die. What a costly gift this was. To emulate the Father's love in giving, true Christians must be willing to suffer and to die even as Jesus did. Although our sacrifice does not have the redemptive value that Jesus' death had, our faithfulness will result in the opportunity to participate with him in fulfilling the promise of blessing "all the families of the earth" in his coming kingdom.—Rom. 8:17; II Tim. 2:11,12

After the one angel announced the birth of Jesus, "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) Surely all who love the Lord and rejoice in his great plan of salvation will likewise give glory to God and praise him for the gift of his Son.

We know that the birth of Jesus will yet lead to worldwide peace. Over two thousand years have passed since this glory song of the angels was heard

and still there is no peace on earth. This does not mean that the divine purpose has failed. It simply means that a further preparatory feature of God's great plan has been in the course of development. This feature is the calling out from the world those who are invited to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, serving, suffering, and dying with him, that they might live and reign with him. There is every reason now to believe that this work is nearing completion. This means that soon Messiah's kingdom will bring peace to the nations, and that Jesus will be recognized by the people of all nations as truly "The Prince of Peace."—Isa. 9:6

Jesus also will, in this kingdom, serve as peacemaker between God and the estranged human family. There can be no lasting peace between the nations unless the people are at peace with God. Our first parents chose a course contrary to God's law and brought upon themselves the sentence of death. By heredity, their entire progeny has been born in sin and "shapen in iniquity." (Ps. 51:5) The whole unbelieving world is thus alienated from God and under condemnation to death. Jesus gave himself in death as a substitute for Adam and his race. (Rom. 5:12,19; I Cor. 15:21,22) This opens the way to mankind for a return from death and a reinstatement of the human race into the favor of God to all who are obedient to the righteous laws of Christ's coming kingdom on earth. (Matt. 6:10) This glorious provision will become effective during the Messianic kingdom through the arrangement of the New Covenant, as promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Jesus will then be "The everlasting Father." (Isa. 9:6) That is, he will give everlasting life to all those

who, through belief and obedience, will prove worthy of it. How glorious is this prospect! It will mean the end of sickness, pain, and death. How true was the angel's announcement that the son born to Mary would be a "Savior." As we contemplate the birth of Jesus, we should not overlook this glorious outcome of the divine plan of salvation.—Acts 5:31; I John 4:14

"Good Will Toward Men"

In the song of the angels, they used the expression, "good will toward men." Many who do not know the plan of God for human salvation think of this as meaning good will "among" men. This viewpoint places a great strain upon their faith because they know that there has been no more good will among men since Jesus was born than there was before. They have striven in vain to convert the world to Christ and his teachings, and thus bring about a state of good will among men, believing that to be God's current purpose. We rejoice to realize that only in God's due time, during the Messianic kingdom, the world will be converted. Then the Lord's Spirit will be poured out "upon all flesh." (Joel 2:28) Under its enlightening influence, the people will be led away from selfishness and will learn to love and serve one another.

God's good will toward men was expressed through the birth of his Son, whom he sent into the world to be the Redeemer and Savior of mankind. God's good will was thus expressed toward men because he loved them. Even though the human family was alienated from God through wicked works, he still loved the people. He loved them so

much that he gave his Son to serve as Redeemer and Mediator to restore them to life and to harmony with him.—John 3:16,17; I Tim. 2:5,6; I John 4:9

Jesus' death and resurrection were further evidences of God's good will toward men. The selection of the faithful followers of the Master to share in the kingdom rule with Jesus is also an evidence of God's good will toward the Adamic race. The return of Christ to establish his kingdom likewise manifests God's good will toward the people. Indeed, God's good will is expressed in every detail of his loving plan for the blessing of all the families of the earth. In view of this, how appropriate that we join with the angels in singing, "Glory to God in the Highest!"

It was a marvelous experience for the shepherds to be told by angels that the one whom the God of Israel had been promising for so long had at last been born. It is even more wonderful to be living now and to have the assurance that Christ will soon establish his kingdom through which peace and health and life will be assured to all people. (Rev. 21:4,5) To the distressed and troubled world, it seems incredible that we are living at the threshold of such a golden age of peace, security, health, and life. No doubt many disbelieved the report of the shepherds concerning the birth of the Messiah. Likewise, the people for the most part will ignore our message today. However, it is our privilege to proclaim the good tidings, and in doing so to show our joy and enthusiasm for the message of the angels to the shepherds in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago. May this glorious message always be most precious in our lives. ■