

THE END TIMES

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The True Significance of Jesus' Birth

For four thousand years and more the promises of God, clothed in more or less of obscurity, had been given to mankind, intimating that ultimately the great curse of sin and death, which had come upon the world through father Adam's disobedience, would be rolled away, and instead of a curse would come a blessing with life-giving refreshment. And then, by a miracle, came the voice of the angels when they broke forth in a heavenly strain, singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Luke 2:14

ANGELS' SONG

It is worthy of notice that the announcement of the Savior's birth was not made to an assembled world, in whose most vital interest he had come; nor even to assembled Israel, the chosen people of God; nor yet to all of those who with devout hearts had long been looking for the hope of Israel. But it was made to only a few shepherds who were watching their flocks by night. The grand truth was one to be received by faith; and it was sent through humble, but trustworthy, human agents who were the honored instruments in God's hands.

The tidings were of redemption, restitution and everlasting life for all who will accept this blessing on the terms on which it is offered; namely, faith in Christ as the Redeemer, and full repentance from sin, which of necessity implies the forsaking of sin and the cultivation of righteousness. Christ was born to be a Savior by subsequently giving his life a ransom for all. These good tidings — this miracle of divine goodness and mercy to fallen and doomed men—met a marvelously cold and indifferent reception. The world in general, though apprised of the fact and its import, manifested no faith nor interest in it, while it is written that he came unto his own people (the Jews), and they received him not. But the jubilant heavenly hosts and the humble shepherds, were capable of appreciating what fallen men could not appreciate, and will not until their blind eyes are opened and their deaf ears unstopped.



FEAR NOT!

First a single angel appeared to the shepherds and allayed their fears, saying, "Fear not; behold I bring you good tidings." (Luke 2:10) It is for the true children of God today, as it was for the angels at that time, to assure the world that God is better than all their fears — that God so loved the world as to redeem them from the just sentence of death, the curse that came upon all as inheritors of Adam's disobedience and sentence.

"Good tidings" is another translation of our word "gospel." How beautiful is the thought that the gospel is really and truly good tidings, not just to some people, but to *all*. But, how sad, the misrepresentations of God's plan, under which so many of his professed people, misrepresent his character and his Word, and apply the term "gospel" to their various messages from the dark ages, teaching eternal torment as the final end for the majority of the world. Let us get away from

this false thought and get the truth that the gospel is *good tidings*. The angel elaborated, saying that his message was good tidings of great joy, which should be unto *all people*.

THE PROPHECY OF PEACE AND GOOD WILL

It was after the giving of the message of good tidings of great joy that a host of angels appeared to the shepherds, saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men." This refrain was a prophecy. It is not yet true, but will be fulfilled in every particular in God's due time, which we believe is now near, even at the door. Not yet does God receive glory in the highest, not yet is there peace amongst men. Quite to the contrary. God's name is blasphemed, not only by those who in jest take the divine name in vain, and not merely by the heathen who worship devils and think they are gods, but even by Christian people, God's name is blasphemed every day. Blasphemy is any dishonorable misrepresentation of another. Picturing the God of love, mercy and truth as the originator of the eternal torment of the great mass of his

creatures is a misrepresentation of the divine character. But the Lord had mercy upon all because they did it ignorantly. And we also should have compassion upon others who still ignorantly misrepresent our God. Our energies should be continually bent to their assistance, that the eyes of their understanding might open to perceive the lengths, breadths, heights and depths of the love of God which passeth understanding.

Thank God, his plan is wider and more grand than anything we had ever conceived. This gospel prophecy is not merely to be good tidings to the comparatively few that now have ears to hear, but in God's due time it is to be good tidings of great joy to *all*. As every member of Adam's race shared in his fall and in the curse of death which came upon him as a result, so every member of the race was included in the great redemptive sacrifice which our Lord Jesus offered and which was finished at Calvary. God's plan in Christ, as it is being worked out and shall ultimately be accomplished, will indeed mean great joy for all. These good tidings were given at the very moment of our Lord's birth, because he was the one through whom all the glorious things of the divine purpose shall ultimately be accomplished.

SALVATION FORETOLD

The faithful of Israel and surrounding lands seemed to be aware of this promise of the Messiah, the perfect child from the lineage of Abraham, that would bring them all salvation. This promise contained the thought that a holy child would be born, and that in some way, not explained in the promise, this child would bring the blessing the world needed. The expectation was based upon the promise God made to Abraham, saying, *"In thee and in thy Seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed."* (Gen. 28:14) From that time forward Abraham began to look for the promised child. He looked first of all to his own children, and was finally informed that it would not be one of his children directly, but that through their children, at some remote date, this child should be born. From that time onward, all the Israelites were waiting for the birth of the child that should bring the blessing. Every mother amongst the Israelites was very solicitous that she might be the mother of a son rather than a daughter, that perchance she might be the mother of this promised child.

But why was Messiah necessary? Why wait at all for the birth of the child? In no other way could mankind be blessed. It would be impossible to bless mankind except by releasing them from sin and death. Hence, the Scriptures tell us of God's sympathy; that God looked down from His holy habitation, and beheld our sorrow, and heard, figuratively, *"the groaning of the prisoner"*—humanity—all groaning and travailling under this penalty of death. (Psa 102:20) But God's sympathy was manifested; and we read that, *"He looked down and beheld that there was no eye to pity and no arm to save"* and with *"His own arm He brought salvation."* Isa. 59:16 This is what was promised to Abraham — that one should come from his posterity who would be the Savior of the world.



VIRGIN BIRTH: MYTH OR MIRACLE?

Since the entire theory of the Atonement presented in the Scriptures demands that of necessity our Redeemer must be an unblemished male, of our race and yet separate from it, this becomes a very important point before the minds of the Lord's thinking people. How did God accomplish the impossible? *"Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one."* Job 14:4

It is indeed impossible to explain a miracle by scientific facts, but it should not be too difficult for anyone with faith to appreciate the concept of the virgin birth. After all, a God who created the Universe could certainly create the spark life which would bring forth a child from this humble, blessed woman. Those who only see by scientific sight will declare the virgin birth a myth. However, to those who accept the miraculous account, we can apply Scriptural logic which will serve to increase our faith.

First, we must clarify that the virgin birth was only that of Jesus and not his mother, Mary. The "immaculate conception" doctrine claims that Mary was also born of a virgin. It was not necessary for Mary to be "perfect" in order to give birth to a perfect child. Indeed, Mary identified herself of *"low estate."* Luke 1:48

The Divine law declares that a perfect human life having been condemned to death, it would require a

perfect human life to redeem it. Therefore, it was necessary that Jesus should become the *"man Christ Jesus,"* in order *"that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for every man."* (Heb. 2:9) *"For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."* 1 Cor. 15:21-22

The word father has the significance of life-giver. There is no human father who can produce a perfect child, since all have inherited the sin of their father, Adam. Hence it was necessary in this case that God should beget this perfect child by power from on high. We are told that Adam's sin was passed from generation to generation, apparently not through the woman's genetic code, but through the father's. Therefore, God would supply the spark of life, in place of a human father, for Mary to bear a perfect child.

THE GREATEST GIFT

God's gift, through His loving Son, is that ALL be given ample opportunity to learn of Him and be saved. *"For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."* (1 Tim. 2:3-6) This is truly the gift that keeps on giving until, finally, this *"present evil world"* will be transformed into the glorious Kingdom of the Messiah. There, righteousness will be the rule, and peace will be upon the entire earth. Let us, then, rejoice and have our hearts filled with appreciation of the divine love and generosity, which gave us the greatest gift of all, the Messiah who shall soon bless all the families of the earth!

In various types, figures and shadowy promises, the coming of Messiah had been foretold through the ages, especially amongst the Jews, who were the divinely favored and covenanted people, so that at the time of our Lord's birth we read, "*all men were in expectation*" of a coming Messiah. (Luke 3:15) Noted Bible scholar, Doctor Farrar remarks on this: "*We are informed by Tacitus, by Suetonius, and by Josephus, that there prevailed throughout the entire East at this time an intense conviction, derived from ancient prophecies, that ere long a powerful monarch would arise in Judea, and gain dominion over the world.*"

Doubtless this expectation was built upon the interpretation of Daniel's prophecies concerning our Lord's first advent. We here present the prophetic element which links the "*wise men from the east*" with the expectation of the birth of Jesus. It is supposed by most Bible authorities that these "*wise men*" were from Persia. It should be remembered that Daniel was a prince of Persia and intimate with the wise men of that country at the time of his prophecy concerning the coming Messiah. It is easy to see how traditions would be handed down through that channel, and especially that Daniel's prophecy respecting the time of Messiah's birth would be well known to Persia's wise men.

DANIEL'S PROPHECY OF THE "SEVENTY WEEKS"

was given to lead the Nation of Israel to the first advent of Messiah. "*Understand the matter, and consider the vision. Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem, unto Messiah the Prince, shall be seven weeks and threescore and two weeks [7 + 60 + 2 = 69 weeks]; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself. And he [Messiah] shall confirm the covenant with many for one week [the seventieth or last week]. And in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease...*" Dan. 9:23-27

While many prophecies confirm the date of the second coming of Christ, this prophecy alone *marked the date* of the first advent. The "*cut off*" or "*determined*" period of Israel's history here is shown as "*seventy weeks*" from a given starting point. During this period, many great things were to happen: 1.) The city would be rebuilt, including *the walls*, under unfavorable circumstances, 2.) Sin would be blotted out by a reconciliation for iniquity, 3.) Righteousness would be established by the sacrifice of Christ, the "*better sacrifice*," that would cause the sacrifices of the Jewish Law to cease. In this period, the long-looked-for Savior of Israel would come, and sixty-nine weeks were stated to be the measure of time until Messiah's presence. After that, he would be "*cut off, but not for himself.*" There would also remain after Messiah's coming, one week, the last, the seventieth of this promised favor, and in the midst of that week, it was foretold he would cause the traditional sacrifices to cease by "*making his soul an offering for sin.*" Isa. 53:10-12

We must look at this prophecy with the idea in mind that in God's timing, a symbolic day equals a year. (Ezek. 4:6) Thus, 70 weeks x 7 days = 490 days. Using the "*day for a year*" equation,



we get a total period of 490 years. Many writers on this subject have begun counting this 490 year period from the seventh year of Artaxerxes, when a commission was given to Ezra to rebuild the Temple, the Lord's house in Jerusalem. (Ezra 7:7-14) But there was another decree to Nehemiah in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes to rebuild *the walls* of Jerusalem. (Neh. 2:3-8; 6:15; 7:1) And it is from this decree "*to restore and to build Jerusalem*" that this prophecy should be dated. This year was 454 B.C.

The Sixty-ninth symbolic week was to bring Israel to the Messiah. Sixty-nine weeks times seven days equals 483 symbolic days, or 483 years. The year 454 B.C. plus 483 years equals 29 A.D., the year which Messiah was anointed with the Holy Spirit at his baptism in the Jordan River. Yet, the prophecy also states that *after* 69 weeks, Messiah shall be cut off in the midst of the 70th week when he

shall cause the sacrificing under the Law to cease. The middle of a 7-day week equals a period of 3-1/2. When we count 3-1/2 years from Jesus' baptism, we arrive in the Spring of 33 A.D., the date of the death of Christ on the cross. At this point, Messiah announced, "*It is finished,*" and thus, he "*made an end to sin,*" bringing an opportunity to all mankind for atonement from sin and an end of the yearly animal sacrifices under the Law.

FALSE EXPECTATIONS LEAD TO REJECTION

While these Scriptures inform us that at the time of the Lord's birth "*all men were in expectation of him,*" nevertheless we are to remember that all were expecting something totally different from what the Lord presented. They were expecting a personage of high rank, of great influence, of striking and commanding character. But, on the contrary, they found our Lord "*meek and lowly of heart*"— not boastful, not self-obtrusive.

Bearing this in mind we see all the more clearly why he attracted special characters for his disciples, and why he failed to attract the masses: we see that it was by his Father's design that he should attract to himself as disciples the meek and lowly of heart, the reverential, the sincere, and that he should more or less repel the worldly wise, the rulers, and the masses who subsequently crucified him. Let us note, too, that these same principles have persisted throughout this Gospel age and are still operative. The masses may be temporarily influenced, and even say "*Never man spake like this man,*" but the masses will not be attracted, because the Lord does not wish to attract those whose hearts are not in the proper attitude of consecration and faith. Consequently, all down through the Gospel age, those who have been the Lord's followers in the highest and truest sense of the word, "*forsaking all to follow him,*" have been comparatively few, and, as described by the Apostle, "*Not many great, not many wise, not many learned, not many noble according to the course of this world, but the poor of this world, rich in faith*" shall be of those who will bless the world as kings and priests. James 2:5

We trust in Bible prophecies of future events, because of examples of their remarkable fulfillment in the past. The method by which we determine this prophecy in Daniel 9 helps us to calculate and judge prophecies relating to the second advent of Messiah (which will be addressed in *The End Times*, Winter '99 Issue). The work of Messiah's first advent was to die a ransom for Adam and his posterity, and provide an offering for sin. And the work of his second advent will be to bring the blessings to mankind and peace on earth as promised to Abraham.

EDITOR'S NOTES: OBSERVATIONS ON THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

Although the Christmas season should be a time full of joy and optimistic hopes, many people experience seasonal “blues” — a time of self-evaluation, loneliness and anxiety about an uncertain future. How did the “*Good tidings of great joy*” become so obscured with concerns, obligations, traditions and expectations? By looking at the commercialism of today’s Christmas traditions, it might be concluded that too much emphasis is placed on festivities and holiday frenzy rather than on a celebration of God’s gift.

Early Christians regarded the birth of Jesus with heartfelt appreciation for God’s great goodness toward us. However, the story of Jesus’ birth did not become *an event* that organized religion observed as a *festival* until the 4th century. Roman favor was so sweet to the church after so many years of persecution, that they were ready to make religion anything to suit the views of their new half-pagan friend Constantine. The festival date was chosen to coincide with the pagan festivities connected with the winter solstice, and the rationale at the time was probably to win over converts to Christianity by substituting the pagan festivities with Christian meanings. Since 274 AD, under the emperor Aurelian, Rome had celebrated the feast of the “Invincible Sun” on December 25.

It is generally understood among Christian scholars that the true date of Jesus’ birth was around October 1st and that the announcement to Mary was closer to the December date. (To be covered in a future issue.) But, the precise date for paying a tribute of respect to the birth of the King of kings is not significant, and we join with others whose hearts are in the attitude of love and appre-



ciation toward God at this or any time of the year.

During the Middle Ages, the pagan custom of tree worship was popular. Again, Christianity compromised by incorporating existing pagan traditions. Germans adapted the tradition as a “paradise tree” in their homes at Christmas time and decorated it with wafers (emblematic of the Eucharist), and later cookies, candles, and other ornaments. By as early as the 17th century, German settlers had introduced this Christmas tradition into North America.

Today groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses deplore the custom of having Christmas trees, by claiming these become “idols that are worshiped.” We would agree that any item that becomes an idol is to be avoided, but would also recommend that we do not legislate “laws” for our fellow Christians that would presume to judge their motives.

Most of what we see celebrated during the Christmas season is based upon such traditions. Jesus spoke against the people conforming their lives to traditions, not because the traditions themselves were evil, but because they added unnecessary burdens on the people, and caused them to lose sight of God’s goodness. We would not criticize any for their desire to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but we encourage all to place proper emphasis when doing so upon the true cause for which Jesus came into the world — to bear witness to the truth of the “*good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*” Let us resolve then, that this season, we will not allow the frenzy of the world and the traditions of men to darken the great light that our God has graciously given. “*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light...*” Isa. 9:2

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The goal of this report is to encourage others in their studies of the Scriptures and to share the peace and joy we have learned through this same kind of careful study. The articles covered in each edition are the result of cooperative studies of Bible Students worldwide. We encourage you to search diligently for the beautiful plan of salvation found in God’s word; proving all things and holding fast that which is good. II Tim. 2:15

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