

GOOD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY

By Paul Penno Jr.

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I remember as a child the festive excitement from Thanksgiving on through December to Christmas. Then I remember the let-down feeling that came with December 26—how dreary the future seemed—364 boring days until another Christmas can come again!

It wasn't only that there would be no more presents: we didn't have much that way in those days. It was the joylessness of no more Christmas songs about the birth of Jesus until late next year, no more tellings of the Bethlehem story; we must put the shepherds and the Wise Men away from our focus of attention, the "Star in the East" won't shine again for a year. It was going to be a bleak eleven months. For this child, life revolved around Christmas.

No one in my little circle seemed to know how to tell really what was the "good tidings of great joy" that the angels told the shepherds the night when Jesus was born. The theological definitions were of course in words beyond my childhood grasp—atonement, justification, righteousness by faith, reconciliation; they all of course were over my head. But what I would have loved to hear would have been the story told in simple words how Jesus by His life and death had already given me eternal happiness that would brighten all my 365 days in the year to come; each day would be a better-than-Christmas "in Christ."

I needed to understand the character of the Father and of His Son; there were shadows in the non-Christmas preaching I had heard about the wrath of God and an ever-burning hell. Once my thankfulness for my few Christmas presents wore off, I frankly didn't know what to be thankful for, any more. The somber non-Christmas life I was facing from December 26 on was not very bright.

I suspect that there are still other children as bewildered as I was. Even though we can "put away childish things" (1 Cor. 13:11), I pray that the Lord Jesus may teach me through His Holy Spirit how to tell the pure Good News to children in an intelligible way that will brighten their lives now and forever.

Joyous thanksgiving for the birth of Jesus fills our minds and hearts 365 days a year—not just in the weeks following Thanksgiving. If that Story of stories thrills your soul, you will be wearied by the extreme materialism that permeates our atmosphere this time of year. One wonders, Is Jesus wearied by it? Are there people in Macys or J. C. Penneys or Toys-R-U's who yearn for the absent presence of Jesus? How does He feel talking to the children who sit on Santa's lap? What could He say if He met them in the mall?

Have you ever wondered why Luke surpasses Matthew, Mark, and John in telling the most detailed stories of His birth? Those three were Jewish writers; Luke was a Gentile. He was writing for us, presenting Jesus in a light especially appealing to us "outsiders." He alone tells of the angel's message to the world, "I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to *all* people." He

alone tells of the lowliness of Jesus' birth in a cattle-shed—a priceless encouragement to all of us who live in humble places. Luke alone tells of the Baby being wrapped in “swaddling clothes,” probably the rags Mary was able to scrounge at the last moment. Luke alone tells us several times that Mary was a quiet, shy, maybe retiring sort of lady who was good at keeping still (2:19, 51).

Luke must have gone his Gentile way as a “reporter” from outside and interviewed Mary after Christ's resurrection. He had what we would call a scoop. He tells us of her strange “humiliation” (*tapeinosis*, Greek; 1:48). He leaves us wondering what it was, why she felt drawn so closely to the broken-hearted Hannah of 1 Samuel 1. Mary's poem of praise and thanksgiving (after Gabriel's visit) is patterned after Hannah's praise poem (2:1-10). The two had something in common! Only Luke lets us see this priceless gem.

Luke's heart-burden is to reveal Jesus to us as One so close to us that no one else, not even family or spouse can be closer. Almost everything this season will try to entice you away from Him. (Christmas carols can't take the place of personal prayer.)

The angel told the poor shepherds camping outdoors near Bethlehem, “Do not be afraid, . . . I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to *all* people!” (Luke 2:10).

This caught their attention so that they scrambled off to town to see for themselves. But just what was the substance of the “good tidings”?

After more than 2000 years, we are still arguing about it. There is probably not one church body on earth totally united in their understanding of it.

Some (many!) believe that the “good tidings” is that if we do this or that, then the Savior born in Bethlehem will save us. In other words, it's “good tidings” to those who *do* the right thing, but terror to those who don't. “Has to be!” these people say. “We must tell it faithfully!” They say we are born lost, under condemnation; *we* must do something to get out from under the curse. Jesus has come to show us how, but He hasn't really saved anyone until that person does those right things. Very popular teaching.

But the angel said it's “tidings of great joy . . . to *all* people!” So the angel did not differentiate; and right here is the reason why Christian people worldwide still after more than two millennia can't agree on what the “good tidings” is.

The angel said, “There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (vs. 11). He didn't say, “born to some of you . . .” Years later the Samaritans seem to have gotten the right idea when they said He is “the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

Christianity says “Yes!” In dying for us, Christ took on Himself our curse, our condemnation, and has given “all men” the actual gift of eternal salvation; but many refuse it and throw it away. But the angel's message still goes on.

“Good Tidings of Great Joy . . . to *All* People”

That's how the angel proclaimed the arrival of Jesus to the shepherds of Bethlehem. And that's

the kind of News the Lord wants His church in these last days to tell the world!

The angel didn't say, "He's come to make an offer of salvation to you," or, "Now there's a possibility of it for all people." No, he had a *bona fide* announcement for "all people" of "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10, 11). The Samaritans later confessed of the grown-up Jesus, "This is indeed . . . the Savior of the *world*" (John 4:42). They surely had heard of John the Baptist's announcement, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the *world*" (John 1:29). It got through to them somehow that Jesus is everybody's Savior.

That means that the threefold message of Revelation 14 is also "good tidings of great joy . . . to all people." For example:

(1) Jesus died your second death that your sins have earned. "For the wages of sin is death." (Rom. 6:23; Rev. 3:11; 20:14).

(2) He "exhausted the penalty" for your sins. None left for you!

(3) He "bore [y]our sins in His own body on the tree, having died to sins" (1 Pet. 2:24).

(4) He "redeemed" you ("I have redeemed thee" Isa. 44:22; "and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood" Rev. 5:9).

(5) He "purchased [you] with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

(6) He has "chosen" and "predestined" you to eternal salvation, and

(7) Made you "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:4-6). Yes, you!

(8) "In Him [you] have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace;" and

(9) "He [makes those riches] abound toward [you] in all wisdom and prudence" (vs. 8); and

(10) The ongoing gift of "the Holy Spirit of promise . . . is the guarantee of [y]our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession" at the coming of Christ (vss. 13, 14). On and on we could go.

Is this News too good? Well, these texts mean what they say. The angel was right—its "good tidings of great joy to *all* people." Aren't there any "conditions"? Yes! The one great condition of John 3:15-19: stop disbelieving and learn how to "believe."

If you are like I am you probably get these notices in the mail of great good news about how many millions of dollars you have won. Then when you read the fine print, you find that there's a condition: your number must turn out to be the winning number. "In the meantime, buy our magazines."

The angel told the shepherds of Bethlehem that he brought "good tidings of great joy . . . to *all* people" (Lk. 2:10, 11). Is his good news like that of *Readers Digest* and Publishers Clearing House, etc.—a huge condition that makes it meaningless to the average person who doesn't know how to meet the conditions?

There is indeed one huge condition to this good news: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John

3:16). But that one great condition doesn't mean that the gift was not given; the Bible plainly says that it was given. There was no condition to the giving; Christ gave Himself to death for us "while we were yet sinners, . . . enemies" (Rom. 5:8, 10). We have to be honest and confess that the gift was unconditional. But the reception of the gift, ah, that is another matter. The reception is up to us. Only by believing can we receive the gift that is already given. If I give you a gift, no strings attached, and then you throw it away, that doesn't change the fact that I gave it to you.

If a rich man gives you a check for \$1000 and you do not cash it, what has he lost? It seems the Bible is clear: "Christ gave Himself for our sins" (Gal. 1:4); an unbeliever's refusal does not cancel the reality of the gift. Failure to grasp this truth weakens our devotion to Him.

I give you a check for a thousand dollars and you have the check in your hands; but in fact you don't even have a dime. The money is still in the bank in my name. You only have an imputed \$1000, worthless to you until you take it to the bank and "cash" it.

But even the paper money is worthless unless it is backed up by what is of monetary value—gold, silver, or platinum. We could say that only that in your possession is value imparted. Until then money anywhere has had only imputed value.

Yes, the angel had no hidden agenda when he told the shepherds, "I bring you good tidings of great joy . . . to all people." He was sincere and honest. Sorry, but most of the Jews rejected the Gift

and threw it away. Let's learn a lesson from them and receive the Gift so freely given to us!

This is shocking to many people, but it is true: God never tells anybody Bad News, only Good News, or if He can't tell you good news, He keeps still. You may object, "Well, didn't He tell King Saul Bad News just before his death?" (1 Sam. 28). No, the one who told Saul the Bad News that discouraged the apostate king and drove him to suicide, was Satan, not God. "Well, didn't God tell Bad News to the people destroyed in the Flood in the time of Noah? Or to King Pharaoh of Egypt? Or to Achan, who was stoned? Or to Korah, Dathan, and Abiram?" (Gen 6; Ex 4-14; Josh 7, etc). I think if you will read the stories carefully you will see that in each instance, God gave those people opportunity to repent; He never wanted to discourage anyone, or drive anyone to suicide. Did Jesus drive Judas Iscariot to suicide? No, not at all; when Judas betrayed Him, He called him "Friend" ("And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come?" Mt. 26:50) but never said another word to him.

When we come to the New Testament, again an angel says to the world, "I bring you good tidings of great joy" (Luke 2:10), and Paul says for all the apostles, "We declare unto you glad tidings" (Acts 13:32), and the last message God will send to the world will be "the everlasting Good News" (Rev 14:6-12).

Since sin came into the world, God has been in the business night and day, with never a holiday, of being a Saviour. That is His relationship to you, as of this moment, even though you may have sinned

grievously. He always has a message of hope for you, and as long as you have ears to hear it, He will declare it to you in some way. Even if you must die, there is a whisper of Good News as you draw your last breath—please repent, He says; believe My love, appreciate My sacrifice for you, My gift of justification, receive My gift of forgiveness, My eternal life that I share with you. You only “sleep in Jesus” until the “morning” of the resurrection. From where you stand at this moment, there is a path of hope, of Good News, for you. Respond to that Good News, believe it.

The world’s great Day of Atonement, which time we’re living in right now, is the most exciting, the most joyous period of all the thousands of years of world history. Millions from past ages would have given anything just to live one day during this period of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary—what’s happening right now? It’s the time when the great High Priest, humanity’s Savior, prepares the body of His people, His church, to be ready for the climax of the ages—His second coming in glory.

It’s the time when the Bethlehem song of the angels at the birth of Jesus is finally realized: “good tidings of great joy . . . to *all* people. . . On earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk. 2:10-14). The word “atonement” means very simply “at-one-with” God in heart. There is nothing mysterious or complicated about it. To be “at-one-with” God is to experience the joy of reconciliation, which is sweeter than honey if you have known the pain of alienation.

It’s “at-one-ment” first with God, which every human heart in the world craves. We are born in a state of being alienated, separated from Him. “The carnal mind [it’s natural!] is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). Imagine the life-long misery of being on the outs with God! You look through the windows into God’s house and you see the light, the joy and merriment within and feel yourself thrust out into outer darkness. You long to be in on the party, no longer alienated.

The world’s Day of Atonement is when the High Priest, the Savior, takes the initiative to bridge that awful gap, to bring you in, to reconcile you. He performed this feat in Himself when on the cross He drank down our bitter cup of alienation, crying, “My God why have You forsaken Me?!” Finally, on this great Day of Atonement, we learn to appreciate what He accomplished for us. We are at last “one” with Him. Simple! Yet profound.

At the moment it’s Christmas and many millions are opening their gifts this morning; but they are materialistic gifts, quite largely.

The Bible speaks of “spiritual gifts,” and they are the ones that are valuable beyond estimate. To covet such gifts is not being sinful, although it is sinful to “covet” material “gifts” selfishly (the last of the ten commandments says “Thou shalt not covet . . .”).

There was a truth written once by E. J. Waggoner that is so obvious that I marvel that I never thought of it. I would like to preach many sermons about it: “The new birth completely supersedes the old. ‘If

any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new. . . .’ He who takes God for the portion of his inheritance [there’s your coveting the best gifts!] has a power working in him for righteousness as much stronger than the power of inherited tendencies to evil, as our heavenly Father is greater than our earthly parents.”

Simple, but simply, profoundly true!

Rejoice in your new heavenly Father! He is infinitely more powerful in lifting you above sin than your earthly father was in passing on to you the condemnation he had received from the fallen Adam. In other words, the righteousness you now receive from your new heavenly Father (you have now chosen to believe in Him!), is stronger than your addiction to evil—of any kind.

It almost takes your breath away. Only the Apostle Paul would have dared say it. “God’s act of grace [the cross] is out of all proportion to Adam’s wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many, its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:15, REB). In other words, what Adam did is miniscule in comparison to what Christ did for “so many” affected by Adam’s transgression. Christ has given to every person born into the world the gift of Calvary where He pronounced the words, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” That gift is effective. We have life now because Jesus died our “wages of sin” which is eternal death. How effective is that?

It enables the Father to draw us to Himself with His *agape* love. God loves His enemies. He seeks to reconcile the hearts of His enemies.

God’s gift of the cross to everyone is not the same as the gift received. One can be the recipient of a gift which they do not appreciate. They do not see its value. They do not appreciate that they are living now because died for them. They do not see what He went through for them. They do not count what it cost Him. He made the decision to die utterly abandoned by His Father from all appearances.

When Joe Simpson climbed the south face of Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes with his partner Simon, on the return trip down, Joe fell through a cornice breaking his leg so that he was not longer capable of climbing. As Simon was lowering him down the face by rope in a blinding snow-storm, Joe went was dropped down an overhang from which there was no return. As Simon was holding onto him for dear life while himself being pulled from his belay position, he made the fateful decision to take a knife and cut the rope, thus effectively dooming his partner who fell into a crevasse.

However, Joe survived the fall and miraculously found a route out of the crevasse onto the glacier below, but with a broken leg unable to walk out. He scratched and clawed his way for miles all alone in his attempt to reach base camp. He went into delirium with the thought of utter abandonment. His prime reason to reach camp was because he didn’t want to die alone. No one wants that. They want to die in someone’s arms.

That's what Jesus did for you. He died alone so that you won't ever have to.

When the angel sang his chorus over the hills of Bethlehem when Christ was born, that was his message: "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, KJV).

(1) It's good news. (2) It brings "great joy." Not a trace of sadness in it! (3) It's for "all people," a blessing universal. (4) It announces a gift that Christ gives to "all people." (5) Paul explains it in Romans 5: he says five times that it is "a free gift" for the same "all who "sinned," reversing that "condemnation" that the fallen Adam brought on the entire human race (vss. 15-18). Deliverance from all addictions!

The true story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is great good news! It will finally be told with "great power" to "lighten the earth with glory," and it will prepare all who believe with all their hearts; it will prepare them for meeting Jesus when He returns (Rev. 14:1-5). That time is now.