

A Message of Peace and Joy

Last week we studied from the *Book of Malachi* the prophecy regarding the Messiah to come, Jesus Christ, Who was the Messenger of the Covenant. As the Messenger of the Covenant, the message He brought was one of peace and joy.

Jewish Messianic expectation was founded upon the promises of the prophets. Many passages could be cited, but one of the clearest indications of when the Messiah would come was found in the *Book of Daniel*.

37. "You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of Heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory; 38. and wherever the children of men dwell, or the beasts of the field and the birds of the heaven, He has given them into your hand, and has made you ruler over them all you are this head of gold. 39. But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours; then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the Earth. 40. And the fourth kingdom shall be as strong as iron, inasmuch as iron breaks in pieces and shatters all things; and like iron that crushes, that kingdom will break in pieces and crush all the others.

41. "Whereas you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; yet the strength of the iron shall be in it, just as you saw the iron mixed with ceramic clay. 42. And as the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly fragile. 43. As you saw iron mixed with ceramic clay, they will mingle with the seed of men; but they will not adhere to one another, just as iron does not mix with clay. 44. And in the days of these kings the God of Heaven will set up a Kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the Kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. 45. Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure." (Daniel 2:37-45 [NKJV])

The ancient Jewish rabbis knew of the promise in the second chapter of Daniel and understood it to mean that the Messiah must come during the Roman Empire. Numerous passages from the Talmud, the Midrash (rabbinic commentary), and the Zohar (rabbinic mysticism) refer to the Messiah's triumph over Rome. Sometimes they cryptically alluded to Rome as "Edom" or "the wicked kingdom," so as to not bring the wrath of the Roman government upon themselves. One passage, after commenting on the dominion of the empires of Persia and Greece over Israel, mentions Rome and adds:

“. . . the world is to exist six thousand years; the first two thousand years are to be void; the next two thousand years are the period of the Torah, and the following two thousand years are the period of the Messiah. Though our many iniquities all these years have been lost [and the Messiah is not yet].”
(*Babylonian Talmud* - Mas. Avodah Zarah 8b-9a and Sanhedrin 97a-b).

How interesting! The rabbis realized the time for the coming of the Messiah was already overdue at the time of their writing! As they struggled to account for that they felt the only explanation they could come up with for the delay was that Israel had sinned, so the promises of God were on hold. But perhaps they should have stopped to think that their conceptions of the promised King and the promised Kingdom were grossly inadequate, for God, indeed, kept His word, and the promised Messiah, the Messenger of the covenant, the King of kings and Lord of lords, came right on schedule.

It was a time of darkness for the Jewish people because the royal throne of David had lost all power. Romans ruled the country. Herod, an Edomite, was the vassal king of the land. It was a time in which the nations expected salvation from the Roman Emperor. It was Caesar Augustus that ruled the empire. Augustus is mentioned in Scripture only once, and that is here in Luke 2. Yet nearly every serious reader of Scripture knows him from this account. In 31 BC Augustus became the successor of Julius Caesar. He was the man the world was waiting for. In the years prior to his reign, there were many wars, and nations were weary of these countless battles. But Augustus was able to put an end to all these wars and he established peace throughout his empire. Commerce and trade blossomed once again. There was a degree of prosperity. The people called Augustus the prince of peace, the *soter*, the savior of the world. Under his rule the world entered a new era of prosperity and progress.

To assist Augustus in governing this vast empire, he initiated a census, to be taken once every 5 years. Here in Luke 2 we read of such a census, in which people had to go to their ancestral towns and villages and submit their name, age, income, possessions and the place where they lived.

It was at that time that God sent His Son into this world to be the Savior of sinners. In fact, it was the perfect time for God to act. As the Apostle Paul puts it in Galatians 4:4-5 [NKJV], **4. *But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5. to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.***

It was the perfect time for God to send His Son, and so it was, indeed, an occasion of great joy, so much so that even an angel from Heaven proclaimed to those lowly shepherds: ***“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.”***

When were these good tidings given? They were given in the night in which the Lord Jesus was born. But in reality these good tidings have sounded across this world throughout the centuries because these good tidings were the message of God's grace for sinners in and through His Son. God came to man with offers and promises of grace. That started actually in way back in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. After the fall God came to man and asked Adam, "Where are you?" Then God gave promises of the Seed of the woman Who was to come to deliver His people from their sins. Ever since that first Divine announcement, the promise of life and salvation has come often to weak sinful men.

Prophets announced His coming. Salvation was given to the poor and needy and to the helpless. Abraham was unable to secure salvation and he could not give himself a child. But God gave an outcome with a promise that in his Seed all generations of the Earth would be blessed.

Think of the Israel in Egypt unable to deliver themselves, but God intervened. Then so many times afterwards the Lord provided salvation to Israel. Through the Red Sea, 40 years in the wilderness, and then in the Promised Land, God delivered them first through Moses and then through Joshua. Countless times Israel should have perished because of sins but every time again the Lord came with His proclamation of deliverance for Israel and this all prefigured the coming salvation of the Lord. Kings were blessed. Simple people were blessed and even most unworthy people were privileged to hear these good tidings of great joy. Even Ahab heard salvation pronounced to him in a war with Benhadad. This was all to draw to the real salvation which lies only in God.

Throughout the ages there is a continual line of God's proclamation of salvation. That line is still being let down in this world. It went to its height in the night when Jesus was born and shepherds heard the actual factual birth proclamation of the Savior. The ultimate height was when the work was finished on the cross and the Lord Jesus died and arose from the grave. Then the actual payment was given and later the Holy Spirit would come down and draw in the nations to Christ. This precious salvation was carried on into the world and the gospel, the good tidings, was preached in every nation and they are still being preached. We, too, may hear this proclamation of salvation and life in and through Christ. There is salvation in none other than in Jesus Christ.

In the *Gospel of Luke* we have recorded some of the most beautiful words ever penned, and they revolve around the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Luke 2:1-20 [NKJV] says,

1. And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. 3. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. 4. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called

Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5. to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with Child.

6. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. 7. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

8. Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. 10. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord."

12. "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." 13. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 14. "Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, good will toward men!"

15. So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into Heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." 16. And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. 17. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. 18. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

20. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Peace and joy as predominant themes of the Christmas tradition are not accidental. In Luke 1, Mary, who was expecting Jesus, visited her cousin Elizabeth, who was with child with John the Immerser. Upon greeting Mary, Elizabeth exclaimed in a loud voice, **"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the Fruit of your womb! For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy."** (Luke 1:42; 44 [NKJV]) A bit later, Mary herself proclaimed, **46. "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47. and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."** (Luke 1:46-47 [NKJV]) And as we read earlier from Luke 2, the night Jesus was born, an angel appeared to shepherds and announced, **"I bring you good tidings of great joy**

which will be to all people." Later, having seen the Child, the shepherds returned to their flocks rejoicing.

This scriptural emphasis on joy at the birth of the Savior is also true of peace to follow. Consider the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 9:6 [NKJV]: **"For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."** There is also Zechariah's prophecy repeated in Luke 1:79 [NKJV] that Jesus would be born **"to guide our feet into the way of peace."** Furthermore, we have something else the angels proclaimed to the shepherds in Luke 2:14 [RSV]: **"Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, good will toward men!"**

Peace and joy. That these qualities are repeatedly emphasized in the prophecies of the Bible and narratives of the birth of the Lord should tell us something. Peace and joy are at the heart of Jesus' incarnation. Jesus was born to bring peace and joy!

But let us be honest about this. As observed and celebrated by most, can Christmas really be described as a season of peace or joy? Consider yourself and those you know. Is what passes for our celebration of Christmas characterized by an overwhelming sense of peace and joy? I do not want to paint everyone with the same brush. Maybe your experience of the season involves a wonderful sense of God's peace and joy. Maybe you know people who are renewed in peace and joy every Christmas. My observation would be this is the exception, not the rule. I actually hear people talk about dreading the Christmas holiday! I hear people say they cannot wait until Christmas is over. People do not dread that which brings deep, abiding peace. They do not anxiously await the end of that which inspires exultant joy. For far too many, the experience of Christmas is not one of peace, but of endless noise, activity, disruption, discord, tension, frustration and unrest. No wonder some approach the season with dread. For far too many, Christmas is not a time of joy, but rather a vague sense of emptiness, unhappiness, disillusionment, perhaps even despair and depression. No wonder some cannot wait for Christmas to be over. I apologize for the negative tone, but I believe what I am saying is descriptive of much of Christmas as experienced by our society, maybe even by some of us.

What joy the angel must have had in proclaiming these God glorifying works! That is what the angel proclaimed to shepherds. The angel proclaimed, **10. "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord."**

God had opened the heavens. He had entered our domain. He came into our world. He came to deliver us from sin. He came to save from the curse of sin. He came to deliver us from all the effects of sin. Sin is the great cause of guilt,

misery, suffering and damnation. The Son of God came into this world to save His people from their sins. No wonder that the angel said: ***“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.”***

Many times we speak of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But how often do you stop and consider just what the word gospel means? It literally means good news! And that was what the angel announced to the shepherds: the good news of the birth of the Savior! And that should bring great joy to all men everywhere!

This gospel tells us that God delights in mercy. He invites sinners to come to Him to be saved. Sinners need not be afraid when they flee to God through Christ Jesus. What makes men afraid of God? Is it not their sin? Well, then here is joy upon joy, for not only did God come among us as a Man, but He came in order to save man from his sin, to save man from all that separated him from God.

There are sinners who think they have sinned too much. What grief one can feel when such sinners stay away from Christ! They are afraid to come back to God. They think the Lord will not receive them and that there is no mercy for such sinners as they are, but Jesus came ***“to seek and to save that which was lost.”*** (Luke 19:10 [NKJV]). If He does not save, He was born in vain, for the object of His birth was the salvation of sinners. If He would not save then His mission for coming to this Earth has missed its aim.

Therefore, the Christmas message shows us that there is salvation for sinners. You who are miserable and lost, if there would be news coming to you this morning, that an angel had come to save you, there might be some comfort in that. You would be surprised and moved that an angel took some special thought towards you. But an angel would not be able to save you. No angel can pay for your sins. But now it is not an angel that has come, but it is God Himself, God in human flesh has come. That is a far better message, what rich comfort and abounding grace lies in that gospel of Jesus Christ! God Himself has come. The Infinite, the Almighty, has stooped from the highest Heaven that He may pick you up, you lost and undone in a quagmire of sin. Is there not comfort and is there not joy for you in this gospel, this good news, of Jesus Christ?

The true Light of the world came and dwelt with His people. He came to die for our sins and to conquer death so that we can receive the adoption as sons. He came that all the peoples of the Earth might experience freedom from spiritual oppression and liberation from the dominion of sin and death. As Daniel prophesied, Rome indeed fell to the power of the gospel, in spite of Roman persecution. And nothing can stop the gospel going forward today. Today we may celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. This gospel may also sound in our ears. It is a cause for great humility. We must see God's sovereign grace and mercy in causing us to hear in our day these same tidings, and experience true peace and joy in our own lives.