

CHRISTMAS PAST – (Christmas, 2007) #1

The public hall was packed to capacity as people waited in excited expectation for Charles' appearance. As he strode confidently across the platform to the podium, the audience broke out in thunderous applause. Week after week, people would fill auditoriums to capacity just for the opportunity of hearing Charles read. For Charles was the most popular author of his day. And his gregarious energy could keep audiences on the edge of their seats, moving them alternately from laughter to tears. As Charles read his latest installment in the Evening Chronicle, the crowd sat quietly in rapt attention. Most average citizens couldn't afford books back in Charles' day. So monthly magazines would publish them a chapter at a time until the entire book was completed. It was icing on the cake to hear the author read his own work. Little did the audience know the deep-seated fear that Charles had inside of him as he read his latest chapter with strong and confident voice. Charles' fear was so terrifying to him that he only spoke of it once during his entire lifetime. It was only after his death that the public became aware of a few month period of time during his 12th year of life and the enduring scars that Charles carried with him. Charles' father had overspent the family income and had come to the place of bankruptcy. Back in the 19th century, a person went to prison if he had debts that he couldn't pay – Charles dad was sentenced to the Marshalsea Debtors Prison. As a 12 year old, the burden of providing for the family was placed upon Charles' young shoulders. So he went to work at Warren's Blacking Warehouse. The filthy, rat-infested factory down by the river was terrifying for Charles. For 12 hours a day, the young man had to tie paper around pots of blacking paste and then glue labels onto them. He was supervised by cruel foremen who were quick to use physical force if Charles didn't jump fast enough to their commands. Even though his miserable situation lasted less than half a year, the impression of those experiences would last a lifetime in the mind of this sensitive lad. Many of Charles' writings would feature children in horrendous conditions or terrifying experiences.

One of the most popular Christmas stories that we often see in many forms during this season of the year is called "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens. One of the major figures in this story is a mean old tightwad named Ebenezer Scrooge who has some terrifying dreams of Christmas Past, Present and Future. Most people living during Dickens' lifetime didn't realize that Scrooge and his terrifying dreams were an outlet for the inner agony of the author reliving his painful past and not daring to look towards an uncertain future.

One of the blessings of God's word is the healing that it can bring to damaged emotions in the past and the confident assurance with which it looks towards the future. The Bible speaks of a God who is in control of history. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the Christmas story. In a world that was filled with chaos and wickedness and despair, God stepped in to change the entire course of human history. During these next few weeks as we prepare our hearts for this special season of the year, we want to look at the real Christmas past, present and future.

As we read the Biblical account given to us by Dr. Luke the Historian, there are 3 characteristics of that Christmas past scene that jump off the page to capture our attention. Notice them with me as I read Luke 2:1-14:

LK 2:1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)³ And everyone went to his own town to register.

LK 2:4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

LK 2:8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great **joy** that will be for all the people.¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

LK 2:13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,
LK 2:14 "**Glory** to God in the highest,
and on earth **peace** to men on whom his favor rests."

There are 3 emotionally packed words that jump out at us as we read Luke's account. These words summarize the powerful message of that initial Christmas event.

First there is Christmas joy.

The initial message of the angels to the shepherds in that Palestinian field quickly turned their mood from fear to joy. "Do not be afraid", the angels began. This was a very important introduction because Jewish tradition associated seeing an angel with death. According to Jewish legends, God used angels to transport the soul of a deceased believer to a place called Abraham's Bosom. Otherwise, angels were not normally seen. So when a person saw an angel, that usually meant that he had just died. The angel was there to transport his soul to his eternal home. This is the reason for almost every angelic message in the Bible beginning with the phrase "Fear not" or "Do not be afraid".

Well, if the angels weren't appearing because the shepherds had just died, why were they there? Why would angels suddenly appear to a group of lowly shepherds tending flocks out on a Bethlehem hillside? The angels answered this question with their next statement – they had come to bring good news of great joy. The good news was that the Messiah had just been born in the town of Bethlehem. Finally a Savior had come to the human race to deliver it from the deadly burden of sin.

Why did God choose this group to be the first recipients of the angelic announcement? Some have proposed a likely theory that these shepherds were those who were in charge of raising the temple sheep. The town of Bethlehem is just 5 miles south of Jerusalem. In Jerusalem the great temple of God stood on Mount Moriah. When one entered the eastern gate to the temple area, he was immediately struck by a large bronze altar standing 30 feet square and 15 feet high. This altar was as wide as the foundation of the temple building itself. Twice a day, animals were offered on this bronze altar at 9:00 in the morning and 3:00 in the afternoon. In addition to these morning and evening sacrifices, the altar was always open for business for any person who desired to make atonement for some sin committed or dedicate himself for some purpose to God or just express his love for God in a fellowship offering. In addition to all of these sacrifices, 3 times a year every Jewish man 20 years old and older was to make a pilgrimage to the temple in order to observe the feasts of the Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Part of the ceremony in observing these feasts involved offering sacrifices on the altar. Every animal offered on this altar had to be pre-approved by a priest. Only animals that were without blemish could be acceptable to a holy and righteous God. Now all of these animals would have to come from somewhere. So there were special shepherds who were hired to raise sacrificial animals to be used in temple service. These animals could be observed as they were growing up so that they would be sure to meet the specific qualifications required. Some of these animals were used for the morning and evening sacrifices. Some of these animals were sold to pilgrims who journeyed from distant places for their worship. We know that Bethlehem was the place where these temple animals were raised. So it is certainly possible that these shepherds to whom the angels first appeared with the message of the Messiah's birth were those who had been commissioned to care for the animals that were eventually destined to become sacrifices on the temple altar.

Just think of the thrill that it must have been for shepherds who were very aware of the sacrificial procedures, who were raising animals for just such a purpose, to receive the message that the complete and final sacrifice for sin, the one whom every animal sacrifice only pictured, had finally been born. What a joyous announcement!

The true message of Christmas is that a Savior has been born to redeem the human race, the Messiah that the Old Testament prophets predicted. Because the Son of God was born into this world, and because of the sacrifice that He willingly provided on the cross of Calvary, each of us can know forgiveness from our sins. This truly is a message of great joy.

But there is another theme in that first Christmas announcement – Glory. After the solo angel finished his message, a great company of the heavenly beings joined in proclaiming “Glory to God in the highest.”

Glory means honor or praise or reputation. It comes from the Greek root that means to have an opinion. When applied to God, Glory means the greatest possible praise or reputation, the highest opinion that it is possible for the human mind to conceive.

One of the great blessings of Christmas is the added revelation that it provided to the human race with regards to God. Up until that first Christmas, we only had words on parchments to describe who God was. Now this was good and we certainly are thankful for them. The Old Testament Scriptures revealed God as our creator. It told us that God was a holy and righteous and loving and merciful being. It gave illustrations of God's working that revealed His character to us. But there is only so much that words can express. Language, by its very nature, is limited in its scope.

We have a saying – “a picture is worth a thousand words.” A person can describe a beautiful sunset for ten minutes and not reveal its glories as much as a color photograph can accomplish in just a few seconds. Well, Christmas represents God's picture of Himself to man. “God became flesh and dwelt among us.” God took upon Himself a human body so that He could live with the human race. God's love could now be seen in human actions; God's holiness could now be observed in a human lifestyle; God's truth could now be understood through human teaching. The end result was God receiving greater glory. For the more we know about God, the greater opinion we can have of Him, the greater praise and glory He receives from us.

We have another saying that has become very popular in our country. “What Would Jesus Do?” It is common to see people wearing colorful wristbands with WWJD inscribed on them. Others have WWJD bumper stickers or pins. And it is a good thing to stop and consider what Jesus would likely do in a situation before acting ourselves. But I sometimes think that there is a more basic question that we should be asking – WDJD – “What Did Jesus Do?” For you see, God became a man and dwelt among us so that we could observe what God would do in a variety of situations just like those that we experience every day. Jesus faced almost every type of life situation that we commonly experience. He felt the pressures and stresses of life; He knew both joy and sorrow; He handled conflict with others; He endured the routine; He became tired; He was tempted in every way that we are according to the Bible. So rather than hypothesize what Jesus would do and face the risk of rationalizing some action that we secretly desire, it might be more profitably for us to consider what Jesus did do in a situation that is similar to the one that we are facing and pattern our response after His.

God became a man and dwelt among us – this is the message of Christmas. The incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ brought great glory to God because it revealed much more about the Godhead than could have ever been revealed in mere words on parchment.

But there is one more final theme that we must consider - that is Christmas peace.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

Now there are at least 2 ways that the Lord Jesus Christ's coming to this earth made peace possible. First, when God became a man it made reconciliation possible between members of the human race and their creator. So each of us can know peace with God because Jesus Christ the Savior came to this earth. Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:1,2:

RO 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

The angelic announcement as interpreted by the Apostle Paul's message here certainly indicates that God has offered peace on earth in the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ came so that he might die on the cross of Calvary so that people individually could be reconciled from a state of enmity into a state of peace with God once again. We come into peace with God as we receive the gift of His son bringing salvation to us. As we acknowledge our need for redemption, and as we recognize that Jesus Christ came to earth and died for our sins, and as we accept the Lord Jesus into our lives to be our personal savior, then we are born again into the family of God and we come into a position of being at peace with God. But we must accept God's offer of reconciliation to us.

One of the most unusual decisions in the history of the Supreme Court came in 1833. It involved the Presidential pardon of a man named George Wilson. George Wilson along with James Porter had robbed a stage about a half a mile from the Philadelphia station. Nobody was injured in the robbery, but the men had taken sacks of mail along with the money and jewelry of the passengers, and this made it a federal offense punishable by hanging in this day. Porter and Wilson were apprehended for their crime and brought to trial. Both were found guilty. James Porter was hanged first. George Wilson was to be next. For some reason, President Andrew Jackson then stepped into the picture taking a special interest in Wilson. Perhaps it was because nobody was injured in the robbery - I don't know. But for whatever the reason, President Jackson offered a complete pardon to George Wilson. This forced a court hearing so that the pardon could be presented to Wilson, and then presumably, George Wilson would walk away a free man. But an incredible thing happened, causing the judge's mouth to fall open. When offered the pardon, George Wilson refused to take it. Was it because his partner had already been hanged? Was it simply because of his own guilt? We will never know. But what we do know is that the courts became so confused that it took 3 years to unravel the consequences. Finally, Wilson's case worked its way up to the United States Supreme Court. In the final decision, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall wrote these words, "A pardon is an act of grace, proceeding from the power entrusted with the execution of the laws which exempts the individual on whom it is bestowed from the punishment the law inflicts for the crime that he has committed. A pardon is a deed to

the validity of which delivery is essential and **delivery is not complete without acceptance**. It may then be rejected by the person to whom it is tendered and if it be rejected, we have discovered no power in court to force it on him." Shortly after this decision, George Wilson was hanged to death. He had been pardoned by President Andrew Jackson. But he had chosen to refuse that pardon.

The Christmas story represents God's offer of pardon to mankind. God offered this pardon in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, who came to pay the penalty for sin. But just as Chief Justice Marshall observed, the delivery of a pardon is not complete without acceptance. So then, those who receive God's pardon for their sins, those who give glory to God for his gift of redemption, those are the recipients of His gracious pardon to them and they are reconciled into peace with God. Those who refuse God's offer of pardon, they never do know peace with God.

Certainly, the angelic message of peace on earth indicated the reconciliation that God was initiating through his son, Jesus Christ.

But there is a 2nd kind of peace that was made possible by that Christmas message – that is the possibility of our having inner personal peace and peace with others as well. READ PHIL. 2:1-7

PHP 2:1 If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

PHP 2:5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

PHP 2:6 Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

PHP 2:7 but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

Most people fail to realize that most interpersonal conflict is a result of the fact that individuals are not at peace with themselves. Most people are not happy with themselves, they don't have inner contentment and peace. Because they are not happy with themselves, they project that dissatisfaction out towards others. They become unhappy with their circumstances in life and with others around them. And conflict is the result.

2 women were having trouble getting along with each other in the church at Philippi. Their names were Euodia and Synteche - or as Dr. Ironsides often called them, Euodias and Soon Touchy. Their conflict was so severe that Paul found it necessary to publicly rebuke them in this epistle. But it is interesting that after admonishing them to get along better, he moves to the real heart of interpersonal disagreement.

We are not to allow anxiety and worry to rule in our minds, but as we cast all of our cares upon the Lord in prayer, the peace of God that passes all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Because Jesus Christ came to earth, we not only have the possibility of peace with God in a judicial sense, but we also have the possibility of the peace of God ruling in our hearts. This allows us to be at peace with ourselves. This allows us to be able to get along with one another. This allows for the possibility of true peace on earth; good will towards men.

One of the major problems that is facing the world today is that people are striving for peace on earth without first having the personal inner peace that can only come from a right relationship with God. Many are under the delusion that finding world peace with others will somehow bring them personal inner peace. Without admitting or recognizing God's provision for peace, they are trying to manufacture a superficial peace of human origin. Because there is not inner peace or contentment in the heart, there is not the foundation for a lasting and permanent interpersonal peace with others. So the result is a superficial, apparent peace when situations reach the place where things can't go on without it, but that peace is short-lived because it is not built upon the solid foundation of peace with God and personal inner peace.

The angelic message on that first Christmas was peace on earth to people on whom God's favor rests. If God's favor rests upon you, you will know true peace. We know that God's favor rests upon us if we are in a right relationship with Him, if we have been born again into God's family and know peace with our creator.

The Christmas that was.

*It was a time of joy with the realization that a Savior had been born. Finally, a sacrificial lamb had come who could pay the penalty for the sins of the human race once and for all.

*It was a time of glory as a more completed revelation of God had been made manifest. God sending His one and only Son into this world revealed divine love and grace and mercy in a way that had never been seen before. Now the express image of the invisible God in human form had come to walk upon this earth.

*It was a time of peace as human beings were now able to experience true peace with God, inner personal peace and lasting peace with their fellow man.

*If you experience that peace with God that the Lord Jesus Christ came to give, then you will know an unspeakable joy in your innermost being and you will also give glory to God who made this all possible by sending the Savior into the world.