

## CHRISTMAS HOPE

Christmas 2008, pt.2

In the year 1647, the English Parliament convened to discuss what some considered to be a most serious matter. It was something that they deemed to be a plague that was sweeping the land. Not a physical plague, but they considered it to be a moral degeneration. So speaker after speaker rose to the podium to speak against this practice that they considered to be so evil. *It had started in the dark days of their nation's history*, they accused- perhaps as early as the 13th century. It had degenerated into a frivolous evil that must be eradicated from the country. *Such triviality must be removed by law*, they argued. Such foolishness was not considered consistent with the seriousness of the occasion.

Now the small group who brought forth this matter did not represent the majority of English people- history has demonstrated that fact. And the perspective of history has also shown us that this minority was quite imbalanced in their own world views. But they were so forceful, and their arguments were so strong, and they were so dedicated to their mission, that they actually persuaded the British Parliament to enact a law in their favor. A law that would remain in force until Charles II would become king of England. This law, if it were legal in our nation today, would greatly affect our lives- especially during this time of year. In fact, it would have altered our worship service this morning. For there was a time in British history when it was a criminal act to write or to publish or to even sing a Christmas Carol.

This foolish law that was pressed into existence by a minority of people soon demonstrated itself to be inconsistent with the spirit of Christmas. And it was for this very reason that it was revoked shortly after it was passed. True- in a sense, Christmas should be a very solemn time of year. It brings to remembrance the incarnation of the only God-man, Jesus Christ. And Christ's birth must always be viewed in light of his death upon the cross for our sins, for that was the purpose of his coming. But the true Christmas story brings hope and joy into our hearts as well. So it is totally consistent with the Christmas message that we celebrate and rejoice- for the Savior of the world was born. The angels rejoiced, the shepherds rejoiced, the wise men rejoiced, Mary and Joseph rejoiced. The only one who did not rejoice was wicked King Herod, and he

brought his misery upon the innocent families who lost their infants due to his cruel, selfish decree. Of all the songs in our hymnbook, the most consistently upbeat and joyful are our Christmas carols- and this is the way it should be. For the coming of Jesus Christ to this earth has brought us hope.

Last week we saw that the 3 abiding, foundational virtues of faith, hope and love are all interwoven in the Christmas message. The apostle Paul said in 1 Cor. 13:13- "And now these 3 remain: faith, hope, and love." 3 indispensable, eternal, cardinal virtues. And these 3 are seen throughout the Christmas message of the Bible. The Christmas story requires faith from us. We saw that last week. The Christmas story reveals God's love to us. The Lord willing we will look at this next week. And the Christmas story gives hope to us. We would like to focus our attention on the hope that Christmas brings into our lives this week.

In the second chapter of his gospel, doctor Luke gives to us the only gospel record of the actual birth of Jesus Christ. Mark and John do not mention the birth of Jesus Christ at all- and this is consistent with the theme of these books. Each of the gospels presents the Messiah in a different light, from a different angle. Mark presents Jesus as the suffering servant. Nobody really cares much when a servant has a new baby, so Mark just begins his account with Christ's actual ministry- when he began to serve. John presents Jesus as the son of God. God is eternal in his self-existing life- He never had a birth. The divine nature in Jesus Christ never actually was born- it was simply transmitted from the Holy Spirit to the virgin Mary. So it is consistent with John's account to bypass the account of Christ's birth. So Matthew who presents the Messiah as the King of the Jews and Luke who presents Christ as the perfect man are the only 2 who give accounts of the circumstances surrounding his birth. Lineage, proper bloodline is very important to a king. So Matthew is careful to trace his lineage from King David. But Matthew does not actually focus attention on the birth of Jesus Christ itself. He speaks of the vision to Joseph before Christ's birth. Remember, the importance of Joseph for even though he was not the physical father of Jesus, he was the one who gave to Christ the right to rule on David's throne. Both Mary and Joseph were of the line of David. Luke records Mary's genealogy, Matthew Joseph's. But of the 2, Joseph had the right to rule- he was of the kingly line from David. And he could pass that right to rule to Jesus as his adopted son even though Jesus Christ was not of his physical seed. That is why Matthew focuses on the angel's appearance to Joseph, while Luke tells of Gabriel appearing to

Mary. And then Matthew goes on to tell of the visit of the Magi from Persia who came to pay homage to the King of the Jews when Jesus was a toddler- perfectly consistent with his presentation of Jesus as the King of the Jews.

The visitation of royalty is very important in the life of a king.

Luke alone, who presents Jesus Christ as the perfect Man, gives to us an account of the actual birth of Jesus. And this again is consistent with his purpose- for if Jesus were the perfect man, he naturally would have a physically birth like other humans have. And whereas Matthew in his account presenting Christ as the King of the Jews has the highest of all classes featured, the wealthy, educated, royal Magi coming to pay homage and King Herod becoming involved in the scene by making his wicked decree, Luke presenting Jesus as the perfect man has the most humble, lower class shepherds coming to the manger.

In the account that Luke gives, one cannot help but see the hope of Christmas- for hope is interwoven throughout the story. I would like to direct your attention this morning to but 3 illustrations of the hope that God gave to the human race at that first Christmas which we see in Luke's account of Christ's birth.

1. The first ray of hope is seen in the angel's first words to the Shepherds who were tending their flocks on the hillside of Judea. The angel's words brought hope to them in the midst of a scary world. READ Luke 2:9,10.

<sup>9</sup> *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*

<sup>10</sup> *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.*

Now we can understand this greeting of the angel- *Do not be afraid*- to these shepherds.

\*for one thing, the angelic appearance would be most startling to them. They were out watching their sheep this night like every night. The blanket of darkness had been pulled over their heads tucking them in for the night. The stars probably were twinkling overhead. On most nights, the skies are cloudless in Israel where there is very little rain for the majority of the year. It undoubtedly was quiet- there is nothing like the silence of the night away from the city, out on a country hillside - quiet so pronounced that it sometimes can be deafening.

Then, all of a sudden, there was the appearance of a brilliant light in the heavens. Not just any light, mind you - the Bible says that it was the glory of the Lord. And while they were trying to crack their eyes open thru their hands adjusting to the light that had been turned on in the black darkness, a voice breaking the silence with a boom. Now I have never personally heard an angel speak, and the Bible doesn't tell us what an angel sounds like. I know from the Scriptures that God's voice is very impressive- like the sound of roaring waters. But I don't know exactly what an angel sounds like. But I would guess that an angel's voice might be impressive to the human ear as well. I would guess that not only from human logic, but also from the response of these shepherds. *They were terrified*, the Bible says. And I think we can understand that- for if any of us had the glory of God suddenly shine upon us in the blackness of the night and an angel speak from heaven when we were out camping out in the woods, I think that we might be somewhat unnerved as well.

\*But in order to understand the magnitude of the shepherds' response, we must also remember that Jewish boys had been taught from youth that anyone who saw an angel had immediately died. They were taught that angels were God's transporters sent to carry the departed soul of a deceased human from his earthly body to his eternal resting place. This is the reason for the fear that people experienced throughout the Old Testament when angels appeared to them. They were faced with a supernatural being, and their immediate supposition was that they were about ready to die or had perhaps already died. These shepherds undoubtedly felt that their days here on this earth had come to an end. Death was imminent.

So the angel's first words- *Do not be afraid*- are very appropriate words to the shepherds in this situation. And we can understand why.

But the angel's words also carry great symbolic value as well, for the birth of the Messiah would be God's statement of hope to a scared world. Christ would come to relieve his followers from the fears of life that could so control them.

Jesus came showing us how to be victorious over fear. The author of the book of Hebrews wrote: *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death- that is, the devil- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by*

*the fear of death.* Heb. 2:14,15

Jesus came showing us how to be victorious over fear. He did this in part by his example in living. When you examine Christ's life, you see that he faced almost every kind of fear imaginable.

\*he faced the fear of physical weakness- he went 40 days without food until he reached the point of physical starvation.

\*he faced the fear of the devil- he met the devil face to face on the mount of temptation as well as many other times in his life.

\*he faced the fear of adverse circumstances- he was tossed about in a little boat on the raging sea of Galilee.

\*he faced the fear of public pressure- the Jewish religious leaders continually opposed him, and public opinion turned on him to the point where people were ready and willing to lynch him.

\*and finally, he faced the fear of death. Jesus knew exactly when he was going to die, and how he was going to die, and he walked to his own death, looking it straight in the eye.

Jesus Christ, in his life, faced every kind of fear we can imagine. And he was victorious over these fears, for he did not allow these fears to control the direction or the mood of his life. Christ's coming brought hope to our fears for he died on the cross of Calvary defeating the enemy and death. Those who trust in Jesus Christ have his power to be freed from fears in life.

Every human being has always battled fears when placed in situations beyond his control. But Jesus Christ trusted in his father who is more powerful than any circumstance here on this earth. And so, as we trust in Jesus Christ, we can have the confidence that we have one walking with us who is more powerful than any situation that we will face in life. True- there will be many situations that we will face that will be beyond our control in life. But there is nothing that we can face that is beyond His control.

So Christ's coming brought to us courage - hope in the midst of a scared world. The angel's message was - *do not be afraid.*

2. But in the second place, note with me that Christ's coming brought hope in the midst of a sorrowful world. The angel said to the shepherds- *I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.*

What welcome words these must have been to these lowly shepherds.

\*shepherds were the lowest of all classes in Christ's day. They were normally not land owners, nor were they usually even owners of the flocks. No, these were likely hired hands, hired to sit out and watch sheep. They were unskilled labor, untrained people on a dead end in life. They were generally despised and mistrusted. Shepherds were people who felt that life had passed them by. And to these, the angel brought a message of joy.

I needn't belabor the point that we live in a sorrowful world. Depression, disillusionment, despair abound all around us. Many people are living their lives in war zones today. In the midst of all of the talks of peace, there remain millions who know nothing but war. Those in Iraq and Afghanistan, those in the middle east, those in many countries in Africa. All over the world, people are living without joy, children are being raised in sorrow with no hope. And in those countries that are not continuously being ravaged by physical wars like our own, how many are living in a personal war zone. Spouses at war with one another, families in continuous battle, children being raised on battlefields, morose, depressed, filled with despair and sorrow. And very frankly, this Christmas season is not a welcome season for many. It is a season that seems to accentuate everything that has gone wrong in their lives. It is a season that seems to remind them of all of their pain. It is a season that seems to deepen their sorrow and depression.

Jesus came to bring joy- hope in the midst of a sorrowful world. If we look beyond the externals that are so often presented with the wrappings of this season, and if we see the one of whom this season speaks, we can know hope in a sorrowful world. Jesus Christ is Emmanuel- God with us. God has come to tabernacle with us so that we might never be alone again. While situations in life change and flow, Jesus Christ remains the same, yesterday, today and forever- he can bring ultimate security into our lives. The message of the angel was good news of great joy- joy bringing hope in the midst of a sorrowful world.

3. But finally, the Christmas message brings hope in the midst of a sinful world. And of all the messages of the Christmas season, this is undoubtedly the most important. The angels' message to the shepherds continued by saying, *today in the town of David a **Savior** has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.* 2:11.

When everything else is stripped away, the greatest problem that we all face is a spiritual one. That ultimately is our greatest fear- the consequences of our sin. What is going to happen to me after I die? Is there going to be a day of reckoning, a judgment day when I must account for all of my sins? This is really the greatest unknown for each of us - and this can bring great fear into our lives.

This is ultimately our greatest sorrow as well. Guilt, regret over wrongs committed, feelings of inadequacy- these bring sorrow into our lives. If I would have only done this or that. Why can't I conquer this or that habit? Why can't I be the person that I really want in my heart to be? Guilt brings sorrow into our lives.

Jesus Christ came to settle this spiritual problem once for all.

\*He came born of the virgin Mary without any sin.

\*He lived a perfect life- never once doing that which was wrong. He defeated Satan in every temptation.

\*He committed himself to do the will of God the Father

\*He freely and voluntarily gave his life in payment for our sins.

\*He satisfied God's holy and righteous demands so that the sin question might never again be raised in his sight.

\*Christ brought hope to a sinful world. He came to be the Savior of the world.

We miss the real message of Christmas unless we see its hope.

\*For because the Lord Jesus Christ came, we can have true courage. This brings hope in the midst of a scared world.

\*Because the Lord Jesus Christ came, we can have real joy. This brings hope in the midst of a sorrowful world.

\*Because the Lord Jesus Christ came, we can have forgiveness. This brings hope in the midst of a sinful world.

Are you fearful this morning? Are you sorrowful this morning? Are you heavy with feelings of guilt this morning? Come to Christ. Allow him to fill you with Christmas hope.