

PEACE ON EARTH

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When Heaven was looking for someone who was prepared to welcome the birth of the long-awaited Messiah, no one among the priests or rulers seemed the least bit interested. So far as they were concerned, if the Messiah should never come, they were content so long as their “economy” was good and Emperor Caesar Augustus kept the peace. When Joseph and Mary were in the manger in Bethlehem and Jesus was born, the angel was about to go back to Heaven with the shameful news that no human being on earth cared. But that would have been tragic! It is true that human beings are sinful and selfish and alienated from God, but there have always been some whose hearts were in tune with Heaven. (It’s that way today, also.)

Then the angel found the poor shepherds camping out in the fields by night, talking together under the starlight about God’s promises to send the Messiah and praying, “Lord, send Him! We need Him!” The angel was so happy! “And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke 2:10).

He could not contain his pent-up joy but told them that the Saviour of the world was born in Bethlehem and they should go and see him for themselves. They would be welcome! So they said to each other, “Let’s go! We must see this great sight!” and they did not walk, they ran to the town of

Bethlehem, and found Jesus, the world’s Saviour, lying in a donkey’s feed-box.

What “good tidings” could bring so much “joy” to “all people”? The angels understood. The lone angel was joined by a multitude of the heavenly host singing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14).

Ah, the long-looked-for day had really come. The promise was to be fulfilled. The innocent Lamb of God was about to be slain. He was already lying a helpless babe, in the manger at Bethlehem! What could be weaker than a helpless babe, made still more helpless by being bound in swaddling clothes? Jesus Christ was born a helpless infant, and was wrapped in swaddling clothes, in which even a man would be helpless, and laid in a manger. He was a perfect picture of human helplessness and foolishness.

Nothing on earth has less wisdom than a little babe; and a newborn baby presents the most perfect picture of helplessness that can be found. No other creature is so utterly helpless. Even so it was with the babe in the manger in Bethlehem. Yet it was “Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.” That is a sign to us. Of what is it a sign?—It is a sign that the strength of God is made perfect in weakness.

“Glory to God in the highest” was sung by the angels, and echoed in the hearts of the shepherds; for was not that the best news that could ever come to a fallen world? Man was to be redeemed from the power of Satan and from his cords of sin!

Do you wonder that the shepherds left their sheep and went with haste to Bethlehem? We read that they stopped not until they had found Mary and Joseph, and had seen with their own eyes, their *Saviour*, the Creator of heaven and earth,—“lying in a manger!” And they returned glorifying and praising God and telling everyone they saw of the glad, glad news which the angel brought.

Jesus was sent on a mission by His Father to bring “peace” on earth. His peace is given to “all people”. It is God who declares the peace to His enemies. Paul writes, “For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 5:10). God reconciled His enemies by the death of His Son. He has given the atonement to every man, woman, and child.

The word atonement, in the strictest sense of the word, means to be in harmony with God. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Because of Christ our legal substitute, God is not charging our sins against us. He gives the reconciliation, the atonement, to all.

Wesley spoke of prevenient grace by which he meant God’s favorable disposition towards sinners in offering them forgiveness and salvation *if* they believe. In other words, salvation is not effective until one believes, making faith a human work initiating the process.

However, the good tidings is that God forgives us, His enemies, before we ask Him. This is His love in

Christ’s death on our behalf. He died the equivalent of the second death for the joy of knowing that the whole world would not have to face it because He effectively gives them all eternal life.

And the proof of this life is that we are alive today. We as sinners deserve one thing, and one thing only which we have earned, and that is the grave. But God doesn’t give us what we deserve. He gives us a life filled with blessings of food, family, a secure place to live, reasonable good will from society, protection from evil powers which would wipe us away. God’s forgiveness is so much more effective before we believe than the idea of prevenient grace.

The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Sinners should be dead, but we aren’t. Why? Christ has given a legal justification of life which protects them from Satan’s execution of their death sentence. “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life” (Romans 5:18). If the free gift were given only to the class who believe in Jesus, then it wouldn’t be a free gift. God’s favor would be discriminatory toward only those who believe. If justification of life is a free gift, then to be non-discriminatory, it must be given to “all men.”

Justification of life is an effective gift for all without qualification. Hence it is the *agape* of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Legal justification creates faith in the sinner’s heart which it is his to exercise or hinder. To make no choice is to frustrate the grace of God. However, appreciating this love

involves the crucifixion of self with Christ; and an ever-growing, and deepening life-long repentance. The Christian lives and breathes the principle of the cross.

When we see this gift of love it melts our sin-hardened hearts. Then we experience the atonement. Our hearts are won to God. This is faith. God's love creates faith which is ours to exercise by the power of choice. And if we do not resist His love we will be drawn all the way, day by day, moment by moment, into a deepening experience of repentance and crucifixion of self with Christ. There is not end of faith which works by love in obedience to all God's commandments. The soul experiences the atonement with God.

Forgiveness is not an arbitrary thing imparted by the Lord, but it is the natural consequence of a certain condition. That condition is simply faith in the goodness and kindness of the Lord, who has given Himself for the sins of the whole world. So when those who sat at table with the Lord, murmured because He said to the woman, "Thy sins are forgiven," and said within themselves, "Who is this that even forgiveth sins?" Jesus said again to the woman, "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace." The life of love that forgives has been freely poured out, so that it envelopes the whole world, and every sinner has his destiny in his own hands. If he believes in the free gift, and accepts it, he is saved: his faith saves him. If he does not believe, or does not appreciate the gift, because he does not feel that he stands in need of it, his sin necessarily remains upon him, and God is clear of

all responsibility for the destruction which must inevitably follow.

Jesus said to the woman who was a sinner, but who had no bodily ailment, exactly what He said to the poor woman who was at the point of death, and who also came in contact with Him. "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace." Luke 8:48, R.V., margin. The process was just the same in the one case as in the other. In both cases it was the life of the Lord that saved. The same life that forgives iniquities also heals diseases, so that the more we come to know the power and fullness of the forgiveness which God bestows in Christ, the more will our health be renewed. And this is but the natural result of a specific cause, namely, recognition of the life of Christ, and the coming more and more into harmony with it. God has sent Jesus, who is our peace, to proclaim peace to all men, to those who are far off as well as to those who are near. Receive this peace, which is but the justification by faith, and the Spirit of God will shed abroad in your heart the love of God, which will reveal itself in tenderness toward the poor and sinful. This love, which brightens the way of others, makes its possessor a sharer of "the unsearchable riches of Christ," and of the everlasting joy of the Lord.

In Ernest Gordon's *Miracle on the River Kwai*, the Scottish soldiers, forced by their Japanese captors to labor on a jungle railroad, had degenerated to barbarous behavior, but one afternoon something happened. A shovel was missing. The officer in charge became enraged. He demanded that the missing shovel be produced, or else. When nobody

in the squadron budged, the officer got his gun and threatened to kill them all on the spot. It was obvious the officer meant what he had said. Then, finally, one man stepped forward. The officer put away his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the man to death. When it was over, the survivors picked up the bloody corpse and carried it with them to the second tool check. This time, no shovel was missing. Indeed, there had been a miscount at the first check point. The word spread like wildfire through the whole camp. An innocent man had been willing to die to save the others! The incident had a profound effect. The men began to treat each other like brothers. When the victorious Allies swept in, the survivors, human skeletons, lined up in front of their captors (and instead of attacking their captors) insisted: "No more hatred. No more killing. Now what we need is forgiveness." Sacrificial love has transforming power.