

GLAD TIDINGS¹

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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 commercialism 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-Us* 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?

Everyone one has heard about the shepherds' story. Everyone knows they were abiding in the fields near Bethlehem, "keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). Everyone knows that "lo, an angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them." Everyone knows the shepherds were terrified to see such great glory; "they were sore afraid" (v. 9).

Everyone knows the shepherds were given good news. After telling them to "fear not," the angel said, "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" (v. 10-11).

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 what is the "good tidings." 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. It "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. And it's a 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

¹ Luke 2:8-11. 119, 122.

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.

Everyone knows that the angel gave the shepherds a sign: “Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (vs. 12). Everyone knows, too, that the shepherds were greeted by a mighty chorus of angels. “Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men’” (v. 13-14).

Some people even know that the shepherds were the first evangelists. They hurried off to Bethlehem to see this thing that had come to pass. They found the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And after they had seen Jesus, they went into the streets and “made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child” (v. 17). Then they returned to their fields “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them” (v. 20).

The story of the shepherds is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. But why was the birth of Jesus Christ first announced to the shepherds? Why shepherds? What is the significance of the appearance of the angels to the shepherds who watched their flocks by night?

The usual line of explanation goes something like this: Shepherds were among the lowest members of society. They were useful but not influential. God wanted them to be the first to welcome his Son to show that the gift of His Son was for all people,

even for shepherds. It was as if a chorus of angels had appeared to auto mechanics or cab drivers or trash collectors. If the good news is for shepherds, it must be for all of us.

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.

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:

Jesus died your second death that your sins have earned (Rom. 6:23; Rev. 3:11; 20:14).

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

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

He "redeemed" you (Isa. 44:22; Rev. 5:9).

He "purchased [you] with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). Christ will be fully vindicated by them. An infinite price having been paid for their redemption, in the end it will be seen to be worthwhile. An

infinite sacrifice will fully redeem and heal an infinite measure of human sin.

He has "chosen" and "predestined" you to eternal salvation. God has "*elected all men*" to be saved and they will be, unless they interpose a rebellious will to contradict His election. But this greater truth does not encourage one to not cooperate with Him in disobedience. Faith in the Lord's "election" motivates to total harmony with Him and obedience.

If we let the Lord have His way, He will lead us all the way into His eternal kingdom. All the devils in hell cannot keep one out unless he chooses to reject His "election." In restoring to us our freedom of choice, Christ permits us to nullify and defeat God's purpose of love for us.

A writer of great acclaim once penned a little book, *Steps to Christ*. She blew the lid off of legalism; speaking on one page seven times about what the cross of Christ means, she said: "The sinner may resist this love, he may refuse to be drawn to Christ, but if he does not resist, he will be drawn to Jesus."²

Can the Good News be that good—that you have to "resist" Christ, reject Him, in order to be lost? There's the "Armageddon" battlefield it seems, over the teachings of righteousness by faith. "No way!" some contend; to say that you have to resist Him in order to be lost will open the gates of the New Jerusalem and admit hordes who don't deserve to get in. So let's go to the Bible, trusting we can settle the question there:

² *Steps to Christ*, p. 27; Ellen White wrote this astounding statement shortly after 1888.

“I have loved you with everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness I have drawn you” (Jer. 31:3). Speaking of what Paul meant when he said, “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2), the Lord Jesus said: “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself” (John 12:32; that’s the Loud Cry!). Yes, there’s a huge “*if*” there. No superficial preaching will “draw” people to repentance. They’ll go home Sabbath after Sabbath from services in hard-hearted luke-warmness, when they get mixed messages.

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them” (2 Cor. 5:19), but instead “He has borne our . . . transgressions, . . . bruised for our iniquities, . . . the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:4-6). The Father “imputed” our guilt onto Him so that Christ who “knew no sin” was “made to be sin for us” (that’s everybody! 2 Cor. 5:21). In that act on His cross, Christ died “the second death” of “every man” in the world (Heb. 2:9). He did it before any of us were even born, for He is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8).

The logic follows as day follows night: if He has already died your second death, paid the penalty for your sin, the only way you can be lost therefore is to veto what He has done for you.

And there’s the mountain-high problem: your “carnal mind” is “enmity against God” (Rom. 8:7). Hang on to it, and you are wearing out your life in re-crucifying Christ “afresh,” and in your blind selfishness you are putting Him “to open shame”

before the world and before the universe (Heb. 6:6, KJV). What you are doing is so “hard” you are “kicking against the goads,” forcing yourself into premature old age, disabilities and death (Acts 26:14), demonstrating for the final Judgment what you really choose: eternal death. The “hardest” thing in the world for anyone to do is to resist the seeking love of Christ.

Thousands of Seventh-day Adventists who worry about their salvation need to understand this reasonable and common-sense truth of biblical “election.”

God has made you “accepted in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:4-6). Yes, you! As the second Adam, Christ has entered the corporate stream of fallen sinful humanity, and has lived a life of perfect obedience to God’s law and died as the penalty for our sins. We are “accepted in the Beloved.” He has already reconciled us to God by His blood. He is not our Enemy, but He is our Friend. Christ’s life and death become ours “by faith.”

“In Him [you] have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.” You must not think that this redemption is kept away from you until you do something first—note, the redemption is accomplished through His blood, that is, the blood that was shed at the cross. It was there that our redemption as the human race was accomplished. Whatever happened at the cross applies to you. Your own personal worthiness or unworthiness has nothing to do with it.

“He [makes those riches] abound toward [you] in all wisdom and prudence” (vs. 8).

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.

He doesn't merely start you out and leave you to make it on your own to “maintain” what He has begun: “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

He tells you, “Fear not, for I am with you. . . . I will uphold you with My righteous right hand,” “I will hold your right hand” (Isa. 41:10, 13).

If you know you are a sinner, then He “teaches [you] in the way. The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way” (Psalm 25:8, 9).

If you choose to be, you are in His school—He is your Teacher: “your eyes shall see your teachers. Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left” (Isa. 30:20, 21).

As you grow in believing what He says, you find His “yoke is easy, and [His] burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

Are the “good tidings of great joy” too good? Some will say, Yes, we ought to talk more about what we have to do, not so much about what *He* has done and is doing. They say, “Yes, salvation is by grace through faith, but we do have to work hard.” The truth is that “salvation is by grace through faith” and this faith works by love. There is no end to the good works that the one who has faith will do throughout

his lifetime until Jesus returns, for “it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13).

This text does not tell you to work *for* your own salvation with fear and trembling, but “work *out* your own salvation.” Don't dam up the stream that's flowing through you—let it flow out to others around you, and it will.

Your heart is motivated by the love (*agape*) of Christ so that even the most difficult of all experiences becomes truly “easy”—*self is crucified with Christ*. You identify with Christ in Gethsemane and on His cross. Rightly understood, Paul tells you that when you understand and *appreciate* what it cost the Son of God to save you, you will find it impossible to go on living for self (please see 2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

And that brings up another happy assurance of still more Good News: Your life will bring unutterable joy to others, for “he who believes in [Jesus], as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living waters” (John 7:38). Note: it doesn't say, Try hard, work hard, to help others; it says that as you believe in Him, your heart becomes “a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters” (see Song of Sol. 4:15, the original text that Jesus was quoting).

But there is still more Good News to think about: Your beginning walk with the Lord Jesus is the start of a journey that will lead you at last to His feet where you will hear that most glorious of benedictions—“Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your Lord” (Matt. 25:23).

Is this News too good? Well, look up the texts, and see for yourself what they say. One thing for sure—they 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.”

The Bible idea of righteousness by faith does not in the least encourage spiritual laziness or careless disobedience. It sets the soul free as a bird let out of a cage, to soar into the limitless freedom of a child of God, free to respond to all the promptings of the Holy Spirit.³ Duty indeed becomes a delight, sacrifice a pleasure.

When the Son of God became a little human child, and lived and died on this earth for our sakes, He was showing to angels and to men the depths of shame and sorrow to which He, the Creator and King of all, will go, so that He may help and save any of His creatures who are in trouble, even through their own folly and sin.

So even the angels knew Him better than before when they saw the baby lying in the manger. They saw more of His glory, and sang with deeper gladness songs of praise to God in the highest, to whom belongs “the kingdom and the power and the glory,” because He is the Saviour of all.

But “earth asleep unconscious lies” while all the angels of God are worshipping the babe “with joy unspeakable and full of glory.” How they must have longed to give the message of salvation and to

share their joy with those for whose sake the King of Glory had become a poor babe, that they through His poverty might be rich.

But the children of men are wrapped in slumber. Yet not all: “There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night;” and to these was given the high honor of being the first to hear and carry the good tidings.

The shepherds were perhaps camped about a mile from the inn, and they certainly took off running, leaping the low Judean fences and entering the enclosure wide-eyed and panting. They searched the stalls around the perimeter of the enclosure and quickly found the new mother and her baby among the animals. Immediately they began to announce the good news, telling all who would listen about the angels and this wonderful birth. When they left, they continued glorifying and praising God for all they had experienced.

“And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this Child.”

This glad tidings, this beautiful Gospel message which the angel said should “be to all people” is for each one of you, dear children. “Unto you is born this day a Saviour which is Christ the Lord,”—“Christ in you” to be your King, to save from sin, and to make you pure and holy.

Are you not glad, as the shepherds were when they heard this good news, and will you not, like them, carry the joyful tidings to others, and make

³ E. J. Waggoner, *The Glad Tidings*, pp. 103, 104.

known what God has made known to you about His Holy Child Jesus?