

THE MOST JOYOUS PERIOD IN WORLD HISTORY

By Paul Penno Jr.
December 22, 2012

I remember as a child the festive excitement from Thanksgiving on through December to Christmas. Then I remember the let-down feeling that came with December 26—how dreary the future seemed—364 boring days until another Christmas can come again!

It wasn't only that there would be no more presents: we didn't have much that way in those days. It was the joylessness of no more Christmas songs about the birth of Jesus until late next year, no more tellings of the Bethlehem story; we must put the shepherds and the Wise Men away from our focus of attention, the "Star in the East" won't shine again for a year. It was going to be a bleak eleven months. For this child, life revolved around Christmas.

No one in my little circle seemed to know how to tell really what was the "good tidings of great joy" that the angels told the shepherds the night when Jesus was born. The theological definitions were of course in words beyond my childhood grasp—atonement, justification, righteousness by faith, reconciliation; they all of course were over my head. But what I would have loved to hear would have been the story told in simple words how Jesus by His life and death had already given me eternal happiness that would brighten all my 365 days in the year to come; each day would be a better-than-

Christmas "in Christ." I needed to understand the character of the Father and of His Son; there were shadows in the non-Christmas preaching I had heard about the wrath of God and an ever-burning hell. Once my thankfulness for my few Christmas presents wore off, I frankly didn't know what to be thankful for, any more. The somber non-Christmas life I was facing from December 26 on was not very bright.

I suspect that there are still other children as bewildered as I was. Even though we can "put away childish things" (1 Cor. 13:11), I pray that the Lord Jesus may teach me through His Holy Spirit how to tell the pure Good News to children in an intelligible way that will brighten their lives now and forever.

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 it. 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. "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. 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 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.

That's how the angel proclaimed to the shepherds of Bethlehem the arrival of Jesus. And that's the kind of News the Lord wants the Seventh-day Adventist Church to give the world!

The angel didn't say, "He's come to *make an offer* to you," or "There's a possibility of salvation for all people." He had a *bona fide* announcement for "all people" of good tidings about "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10, 11).

Perhaps the Samaritans had heard of this angelic announcement when they later confessed of the grown-up Jesus, "This is indeed . . . the *Savior of the world*" (John 4:42). And they surely heard of

John the Baptist's announcement after Jesus' baptism, "The Lamb of God . . . takes away the sin *of the world*" (John 1:29). It got through to them somehow: *He is everybody's Savior*.

That must mean that the stunning announcement of the threefold message of Revelation 14 must also be "good tidings of great joy . . . to all people." Look:

(1) Jesus has already died your punishment that your sins have earned (Rom. 6:23; Rev. 3:11; 20:14).

(2) He has already "exhausted" the penalty for your sins (Isa. 53:6; Heb. 2:9; 1 Cor. 15:3; *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 340; *Amazing Grace*, p. 139).

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

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

(5) He has "purchased [you] with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

(6) He has "chosen" and "predestined" you to eternal salvation (Eph. 1:4, 5).

(7) He has made you "accepted in the Beloved" (vs. 6).

(8) "In Him [you] have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (vs. 7).

(9) "He [makes those riches] to abound toward [you] in all wisdom and prudence" (vs. 8).

(10) 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).

“Good tidings of great joy” indeed! But there’s more:

(11) 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).

(12) 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).

(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).

(14) 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).

(15) 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. “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 we will work hard.” 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).

Verse 12 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.

(16) 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:

(17) 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:

(18) 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).

The 1888 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.¹ Duty indeed becomes a delight, sacrifice a pleasure.

When the Holy Spirit outpouring of the latter rain comes, will it sweep like a tidal wave throughout the church? Let history speak and tell us something:

An example is the birth of Jesus. The coming of Jesus of Nazareth did not do that for the scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem. The great Messiah, the “Desire of all nations,” anticipated throughout the world, came in that humble birth of a Baby in a cowshed.

A handful of “wise men from the East” responded to the call of the Holy Spirit; in Jerusalem here was Anna, a very old woman, who came to see Him (Luke 2:32), and there was old Simeon who was ecstatic with joy at His birth (vss. 25ff.); but beyond them, no one that gets a mention in the Bible.

Apparently the lesson is clear: when the latter rain comes, no one will get a morsel of bread except the hungry ones who are famished for it, and no one will get a drink of water except the desperately thirsty ones. The latter rain may be falling in copious showers of grace all around us and we slip through the grand experience untouched, only to embrace a counterfeit cleverly done up by the

“father of lies.” And then we would collide with the “mark of the beast” test—unprepared.

Some fearing and trembling is appropriate now.

“The high and lofty One who inhabits eternity” is wide awake and is responding to prayers that are arising here and there throughout the world. He “dwells in the high and holy place” but “also [only] with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones” (Isa. 57:15). He pays special attention to the prayers of “him who . . . trembles at My word,” He says (66:2).

All around the world He is doing that today. Things are happening, beneath the surface.

Are you within His little circle?

The world’s great Day of Atonement is the most exciting, the most joyous period of all the thousands of years of world history. Millions from past ages would have given anything just to live one day during this period of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary—what’s happening right now. It’s the time when the great High Priest, humanity’s Savior, prepares the body of His people, His church, to be ready for the climax of the ages—His second coming in glory.

It’s the time when the Bethlehem song of the angels at the birth of Jesus is finally realized: “good tidings of great joy . . . to all people. . . On earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk 2:10-14). The word “atonement” means very simply “at-one-with.” There is nothing mysterious or complicated about it. (To attach the word “eschatological” to it bewilders common people). To be “at-one-with” is to

¹ See E. J. Waggoner, *The Glad Tidings*, pp. 103, 104.

experience the joy of reconciliation, which is sweeter than honey if you have known the pain of alienation.

It's "at-one-ment" first with God, which every human heart in the world craves. We are born in a state of being alienated, separated from Him. "The carnal mind [it's natural!] is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom 8:7). Imagine the life-long misery of being on the outs with God! You look through the windows into God's house and you see the light, the joy and merriment within and feel yourself thrust out into outer darkness. You long to be in on the party, no longer alienated.

The world's Day of Atonement is when the High Priest, the Savior, takes the initiative to bridge that awful gap, to bring you in, to reconcile you. He performed this feat in Himself when on the cross He drank down our bitter cup of alienation, crying, "My God why have You forsaken Me?!" Finally, on this great Day of Atonement, we learn to appreciate what He accomplished for us. We are at last "one" with Him. Simple! Yet profound.

As Christ looks down on the world today, with its debit or credit side, most joy is materialism. This is not deep, lasting peace, and happiness. Real joy is something which eludes most. "Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." Ps 16:11. "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full." John 15:11.

That shows us that by receiving and retaining what Jesus says to us, we receive and retain his joy. Joy comes by believing the words of the Lord. By receiving his words we get fullness of joy—perfect joy.

But that shows us also that He had perfect joy—fullness of joy; for it is His joy that we are to receive. We get fullness of joy through Jesus, simply because His joy is perfect. His cup of joy was full. When was it that He expressed the wish that His perfect joy might remain in His disciples?—The very night when He was betrayed; while He was on the way to the place where He knew that He would be delivered into the hands of cruel men, to be mocked, and beaten, and scourged, and crucified. Ah, that is joy worth having,—a joy that is perfect in distress and affliction, a joy that is perfect in itself, and does not depend on circumstances! It is the possession of such joy, and that alone, that enables one to endure affliction. Jesus, because of the joy that He had continually before Him, and present with Him, "endured the cross, despising the shame." Heb. 12:2.

This joy is found, not in doubting, not in experimenting, but in believing. There are millionaires that would give all their possessions for such joy, that delivers from painful anxiety, when the poorest man can have it by simply taking the words of the Lord and letting them work out their fulfillment in him. How can Christians be otherwise than glad, when they serve a Master who is gladness itself?

But the world does not know that joy. We hear about the swirl of expensive parties going on now, but afterward the inebriates burst into tears. How long shall human hearts be oppressed with empty, vain, frivolity that only mocks the deepest longings for joy?

Christ sympathizes with the needs of human hearts. He cannot have a happy Christmas so long as human hearts are in pain and estrangement from joy in God.

What will make Him happy? For you to share that true joy, that triumph! Share His joy. "Enter thou into the joy of Thy Lord." Not the joy of Christmas frivolity, the joy of material possessions or of surfeiting or drunkenness, but real the joy of victory over sin and evil, the joy of finishing the work of God.

Have you thought of a Christmas gift for Christ? I don't mean a dollar on the tree, but "Master, eat." What did He reply? "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34).

I asked a certain person this week what he would like most for Christmas—"joy of seeing a certain loved one turn to Christ." Jesus would like that too. The joy of seeing all turn to salvation.