

GOD'S LITTLE SIGN

By Paul Penno Jr.

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Luke 2:12¹

Many, many times since that night two thousand years ago has the story of Christ's birth been repeated, yet—"The old, old story is ever new." Everybody is familiar with every detail, yet no thoughtful, reverent person can ever read it without learning something. It is so full of instruction.

After a few years into our marriage we were ready to start a family. We prayed that the Lord might bless us with a baby. It was not to be for quite a long time. In our estimation ten years was a long time, but with God that is a wink of the eyelash. When God chooses to give life it is a joyous miracle to be recognized. We were so excited and thrilled after ten years together that God would grant His favor to us of all His many children. We remember every little detail along the way of this pregnancy and the beautiful experience of childbirth. Such a happy time of bonding as a family was ours that we shall ever be grateful to the Lord. Of ourselves we are unfruitful, but He brings life to those who are weak.

When the angel said to Mary that she should bring forth a son, even Jesus, she asked, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" It was not a question of unbelief; she did not doubt but that it would be done, but she wished to know how it was to be

¹ 125, 124

brought about, so that she might know what was expected of her in the matter. The angel replied, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Here again we find ourselves on common ground with Mary. Jesus said to His disciples, including us, "Behold I send the promise of My Father upon you" (Luke 24:49). This was the promise to pour out His Spirit upon all flesh. The Spirit is the power of the Highest, and Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem for it, or until they were endued with power from on high. He tells us also that God will give the Holy Spirit to as many as ask Him. Luke 11:13.

The Holy Ghost came on Mary with power, in order that she might bring forth Jesus. The Spirit comes upon us in order that its fruit may be seen in us, namely, "Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Gal. 5:22, 23). The power by which all these graces are to be developed, and their opposites repressed, is the power by which Jesus was born of the virgin Mary.

But what could she do to bring the event about, or to help it along?—Just nothing, but submit. She could not do anything to bring it about, but she could have stopped it altogether, by not being willing to submit. Her part was willingly to yield to the power.

Notice that this power by which Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, and by which Christ is to be formed in us the hope of glory, is the same power by which

the work of creation was wrought. “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light; and there was light” (Gen. 1:1-3).

The creation was effected by the Spirit and word of God. By that same power was Christ begotten of the virgin. Mary said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to Thy word” (Luke 1:38). All she had to do was to be willing for the word of the Lord to accomplish its purpose, and to be fulfilled. So with us; yielding to the word of God, will result in its truths being brought forth in our lives. Whoever yields without reserve to every word that he finds in the Bible, being perfectly willing that every precept and requirement shall be fulfilled in him, will have wrought in him a work equal to that of creating the heavens and the earth.

Roaring Camp was the meanest, toughest Mining Town in all the West. There were more murders and thefts than any other place around. Roaring Camp was inhabited entirely by men ... except for one woman who made her living in the only way she knew how. Her name was Cherokee Sal.

Eventually, Cherokee Sal became pregnant and gave birth to baby. She died in childbirth, and no one knew who the father might be. The men put the baby girl in a box with some old rags under her. Somehow that just didn't seem right, so one of the men rode 80 miles to buy a Rosewood Cradle. When they put the rags and the baby in the beautiful new cradle, the rags just didn't look right. So another man rode to Sacramento and purchased some silk and lacy blankets. They men

lined the Rosewood Cradle with silk and tucked the new blanket around the little baby girl. But then someone noticed that the floor under the cradle looked dirty.

The next thing you knew, a few of those big, tough men got down on their hands and knees and scrubbed the floor until it was spotless. Of course, then the walls and the ceiling, and the dirty windows looked awful. So they washed down the walls and the ceiling, and they even hung some clean white curtains on the windows.

Things were beginning to look a lot better. But they soon realized they had to give up their carousing and fighting. After all, the baby needed a lot of sleep, and babies can't sleep during a brawl. Besides all that, the baby didn't like angry voices or frowning faces. So the men started smiling and talking in pleasant, cheerful tones. And, since babies shouldn't be left alone, they set the cradle by the entrance of the Mine and one of the men stayed next to her while the others worked.

Then somebody noticed how ugly the mine entrance was. So they planted some flowers and made a small garden near the cradle. And as they worked, the men looked for shiny little stones that they could show to the baby and watch her gurgle and coo. But when they held the stones down near her, they saw that their hands looked black and dirty. And they didn't want to scare the little baby with their scraggly hair and wild beards. Pretty soon the general store sold out of soap and shaving gear.

The baby changed everything. And that story gives a small picture of the way the Son of God can transform our lives. Has the Bethlehem Baby changed your life?

The story of the Virgin Mary is of intense interest to all who are longing for Jesus to come again, as He promised (John 14:1-3).

She had something in common with that special group, the “144,000” mentioned in Revelation 14:1-5. They “follow the Lamb [the crucified Christ] wherever He goes.” They do not resist or seek to evade the call. She said “yes” to the angel sent from the Father to announce to her the decision to choose her to be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:28-37).

She offered no resistance or unbelief. Here was a call from heaven that totally would change the course of her life from now on; she readily agreed, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

We search long to find a definition of what it means to “believe.” Well, here it is. The old lady Elizabeth used Mary’s ready submission as a definition of faith. She said of Mary, “Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45; the word “blessed” means to be happy).

The “144,000” (obviously a symbolic number), have in the last days replicated Mary’s happy consecration of herself to the Lord; they have done what the angel of great power says to do, “Come out of [Babylon], My people” (Rev. 18:1-4). These people are convicted of truth from God’s word, truth

that their family may not believe, nor their church, nor society in general. They are willing to step out for the sake of Christ and be considered “different” (cf. 1 Peter 2:9 for the word “peculiar”).

The “144,000” maybe for a long lifetime have endured opposition and even persecution from their family, their parents, or even their children. But just as the Virgin Mary was “blessed” (made happy), so this special group enjoy the gift of happiness in their submission of self to “the Lamb.”

When the Holy Spirit speaks to you through the Word, don’t hesitate to respond with an enthusiastic “Yes.” Here I am, the child of God!

“The fullness of time” had come. “And it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled” (Luke 2:1). How little the Roman Emperor thought that he was simply an agent in the Lord’s hands for the fulfillment of prophecy, and that his decree would be remembered only in connection with the birth of a King infinitely greater than he. Some hundreds of years before, it had been prophesied that out of Bethlehem should the Ruler of Israel come; Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, and the time was at hand; doubtless both were expecting the birth of the coming One in their home in Galilee; but “the Scripture cannot be broken,” and so the decree was issued, which brought them to Bethlehem. Who shall say that God did not move the Roman Emperor to issue that decree for the sole purpose of securing the fulfillment of His Word! How often men, bent only on carrying out their own will, have been simply the unconscious agents of

God's will. God works all things after the counsel of His own will.

“And she brought forth her first-born Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger” (Luke 2:7).

“We have an exhortation which comprehends all the injunctions given to the Christian. It is this: ‘Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus.’ To do this as the Bible enjoins, to consider Christ continually and intelligently, *just as He is*, will transform one into a perfect Christian, for ‘by beholding we become changed’” (Heb. 3:1).²

What we have here is a triple-edged truth: (a) Seeing Jesus “just as He is” is seeing Him as taking upon His sinless nature our fallen, sinful nature but living a sinless life. (b) Receiving Him in this way transforms His people into being “perfect,” ready for Christ’s appearing. (c) This great work is accomplished simply by His people “beholding” Him “just as He is.”

Thus in these few words was encapsulated what the church had been waiting for ever since the Midnight Cry of 1844, because in this [1888] message lay the beginning of what the church had been praying God to send—the initial outpouring of the “latter rain.”

The popular dogma of the Immaculate Conception taught that when the Virgin Mary was conceived in the womb of her mother, God worked a miracle to

break the genetic DNA line that all other humans have inherited from the fallen Adam. She was virtually therefore a new creation as was mother Eve. Thus, said this popular doctrine, the Virgin Mary could give to her Son Jesus a nature that was different from ours. Jesus in His incarnation took only the sinless nature of Adam before his fall, is the idea. In other words, *Mary and Jesus were not descendants of the fallen Adam as are all humans*; they were especially different. And of course this meant that Jesus could not have been “in all points tempted *like* as we are.” He had to be “exempt” from having the flesh where our temptations arise (see Heb. 4:15; 2:16-18), and thus would be tempted differently if at all. This teaching all but removed Jesus from humanity. Many were misled, for they saw Him in the cathedral windows and assumed they knew Him. The true Christ was hidden from them.

“The [true] gospel of God . . . concern[s] His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the *seed of David* according to the *flesh*” (Rom. 1:1-3). The heavenly angel told Joseph before Jesus’ birth that His name shall be “‘Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us,’” not God far away from us (Matt. 1:23).

We see Jesus revealed in this Bible picture: “What the law [of ten commandments] could not do in that it was weak through the flesh [our fallen, sinful kind], God did by sending His own Son in the *likeness of sinful flesh*, on account of sin: He condemned sin *in the flesh* [ours, fallen, sinful]” (Rom. 8:3).

² E. J. Waggoner, *Christ and His Righteousness*, p. 7; 1890.

The origin of our world's problem with sin was the claim of Satan when he was "Lucifer," the highest angel in heaven, that God is unfair to maintain His law, for nobody can keep it—especially humans who are already sinful by nature (as we all are). After some 4000 years of human history it had turned out that not one human had ever been able to avoid falling into sin. Satan crowed: "See! I'm right! God is unfair!" If Jesus had sidestepped the contest by taking the sinless nature of the unfallen Adam, Satan would forever after have cried "Foul! Unfair!" A soldier with a bulletproof vest is braver than one without.

But Jesus had a job description given Him by the Father: Defeat Satan in humanity; deliver the human race from this captivity of sin. Enter the fray where the problem is. Take on His sinless nature (brought with Him from heaven) the same fallen, sinful flesh that all humans have (they have all succumbed to Satan's onslaughts of temptation). And with no "exemption," and with no "bullet-proof vest," Jesus entered into the same battlefield where we have all lost the struggle. And right there He "condemned," defeated, outlawed, conquered, crushed, trampled on sin where it had taken root in human flesh. In our same flesh He won the great controversy with Satan, opened the gates of heaven for believing, repenting sinners, and rejoiced the hearts of all heaven.

Romans 8:4 tells what will now happen because of His victory: "That the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

That phrase "righteous requirement" is one word in the original, *dikaionata*, which means the righteousness that has its origin in Christ but has been *imparted* to the believing human being. Here again is the cardinal truth of the most precious message: it is possible for human beings *by the faith of Jesus* to overcome sin, to "condemn" it in our fallen flesh, and to be ready *in one generation* for the second coming of Jesus—something no other group has attained in all past history.

But this is not the heresy of "perfectionism." This overcoming victory will not be a work of the flesh, or be motivated by fear or pride, or even a selfish hope of reward. It will be the work of grace which abounds much more than all the sin the devil can invent in these last days.

Hebrews describes how this works: "Inasmuch then as the children [that's we] have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy [Greek, paralyze] him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For indeed He does not give aid to angels [who have a sinless nature], but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham" (Heb. 2:14, 15).

We never dare to suggest that Christ *had* a sinful nature. He *had* a sinless nature; but He "took" on that sinless nature our sinful nature.

Why? "Therefore, in all things He had to be made *like* His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, . . . for in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted,

He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:17-18).

This is the glorious gospel of hope. Ellen White said that “God commanded [it] to be given to the world.”³ It presents a Christ who knows how the sinner is tempted and can save Him from the lowest hell. “We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

THE SHEPHERD OF ISRAEL

It was eminently fitting that the birth of Him who was to be the Shepherd of Israel,—“that great Shepherd of Israel,—“that great Shepherd of the sheep,” (Heb. 13:20),—should be first announced to shepherds in the fields, and that they should be the first to make it known to others. “With the lowly is wisdom” (Prov. 11:2). Of what use would it have been to announce the birth of Christ to the priests and rulers—worldly princes? They would have scoffed at it. “What! that babe in the manger a King! How absurd! What nonsense!” If anybody feels inclined to doubt that the rulers of the Jews would have mocked and scoffed at the idea that the little babe was a King, he has only to glance at the record of Christ’s betrayal and crucifixion. Then they mocked Him because of His weakness, and derided His claim to being King (Matt. 27:39-48). They might have had the honor of announcing the birth of the Saviour, if they would have believed it. God always sends His truth to those who are willing

³ *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 92, 1896; *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, vol. 3, p. 1337.

to receive it. It has always been the case that reformations begin with what are termed the “lower classes.” They formed the bulk of the believers on Christ. The question was asked, “Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on Him?” as though that proved that He could not be true. He was not in fashion. “Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (1 Cor. 1:26). He who despises a doctrine because its adherents are few and poor, would reject Christ for the same reason. “He that despiseth the poor reproacheth his Maker.”

“And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12). Of what should that be a sign?—A sign that a Saviour, Christ the Lord was born. “The Jews require a sign” (1 Cor. 1:22). Well, there they had a sign, and they always had it before them, for the same lowliness was continued through the whole of Christ’s life. What a sign!

Isaiah prophesied of the Coming One “mighty to save;” God had told David that He had “laid help on One that is mighty;” and now as proof that there had “come out of Sion the Deliverer,” the angel tells the shepherds that they will find a little helpless baby, wrapped up in a bundle, and lying in a manger. There He is! that helplessness is the sign. Wonderful! yet even so it was all through His life: “I can of Mine own self do nothing” (John 5:30).

“God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty” (1 Cor. 1:27). He says, “My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Therefore the Apostle Paul said,

“When I am weak, then am I strong.” If that is so, then the weakest ought to be the strongest. Exactly. It is out of weakness that God has established strength, with which He stills the enemy and the avenger (Ps. 13:3). A little babe is the best manifestation of the power of God that overcomes the world. Of God’s people it is said that they “out of weakness were made strong” (Heb. 11:34). The whole of the Gospel is summed up in the acknowledgment that God is Almighty, and that we are absolute helplessness. God is everywhere, upholding all; therefore, as soon as one who has no strength recognizes that fact, the mighty power of God manifests itself.

See how God has removed all possible ground for complaint and discouragement. If He had said, “My strength is made perfect in the power of the ocean, the whirlwind, the tempest, and he who can exhibit the most might, the most endurance, is the one who approaches most nearly to Me,” then we might well have expected many sighs of discouragement. Then the complaint, “Oh, I’m so weak, I know I can never overcome,” might have been in place. But how is it? Why, He has manifested Himself in the lowliest, humblest, poorest, weakest possible form, and has said that there is the perfection of His power. That is the wisdom of God, and the power of God. It is all the power He asks or expects anybody to have. So whenever a person would begin to complain, or to excuse his failure, by saying, “I’m so weak,” he finds his mouth stopped. At the very weakest point anybody can be, there he finds the Lord. God says, “I dwell in the high and holy place,

with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble” (Isa. 57:15).

The span of Christ’s manifestation in the flesh is from the manger to the cross. In weakness He came, and in weakness He ended His work. “He was crucified through weakness” (2 Cor. 13:4). Nevertheless “He liveth by the power of God,” and that is how we are to live. Christ is coming again; but His coming in the clouds of heaven, “with power and great glory,” will be only the manifestation of the power that lay in the manger and hung on the cross. The “hiding of His power,” is from His side, where once the spear pierced, but where the stream of glory issues (Heb. 3:4, margin). He is King of glory solely because of His humility (Phil. 2:8, 9). He is coming to save His people; but He will save at His second coming only those whom He has already saved at the cross. That manger in Bethlehem is capacious enough to contain all mankind: it contained Divinity. The second coming will be only the complete manifestation of the first. In the manger Christ was the Son of God; but it was the resurrection from the dead with power according to the Spirit of holiness, that demonstrated the fact. When He comes again, it will be for the purpose of showing all men that He really lives.

“Good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke 2:10). What is the joy?—A Saviour!

“Joy to the world! the Lord is come!

Let earth receive her King!

Let every heart prepare Him room;

And heaven and nature sing.”

When Philip went down to Samaria, and preached the Word, so that devils were cast out, and the afflicted were healed, “there was great joy in that city” (Acts 8:8). There is always joy in victory, and God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. God does not wish the world to go bowed down with sorrow. He says, “Look up! Lift up your heads.” Christ, the anointed King, came to proclaim liberty to the captives; “to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness” (Isa. 41:1-3). This joy is “to all people;” then let everybody be glad and rejoice in the great salvation that by the grace of God has appeared to all.

For unto you, is born a Saviour. The message is to you and to everybody else. The Saviour is born to you. “The Word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart;” that thou mayest do it (Rom. 10:8). Somebody says that a child was born to Mary that night. Oh, no; He was born to you. He did not belong to her, but to the world. He is “the Son of man.” He is your Son, and mine. He is our child, and formed within us, He is “the hope of glory.”

The shepherds said one to another, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us” (Luke 2:15). They did not say, Let us go and see if this thing is so. Ah, how very cautious we are when God speaks; we cannot believe until we have tried every test. God comes, making known the most exceeding great and precious promises, such as would make men leap for very joy, and lo, straightway they begin to devise some means to

keep from accepting them. They try every way possible to prove that the promises are only a delusion. Men act toward God’s promises just as a child does toward bitter medicine. One would think, to see how loth men are to take God at His word, that he is announcing some terrible calamity, something to be dreaded, instead of a blessing to be enjoyed. So they hold it off, until when at last they do hesitatingly embrace it, after every possible objection has been removed, half of its sweetness for them is gone. But the shepherds, as soon as they heard the message of God’s great salvation, said, Let us go and see this thing which is come to pass, which God hath made known unto us. There is an example for us. You need not wait to hear the word of the Lord, for it is speaking now. Believe it, and “the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 15:13).

Paul Harvey tells the story about a family on Christmas Eve. This family had a tradition where the Mother and children would go to the Christmas Eve service, and the Father would stay home and read the paper. When the family returns home from church, they would all gather to open up their presents.

The Father was not an evil man, but he just couldn’t believe in the childhood stories anymore of God coming as a baby in a manger. As the family left for church, he opened up the evening paper and began to read by the fireplace.

Suddenly, he heard tapping on the window. It was a bird flying against the glass of his window trying to

get out of the snow into the warmth of his home. The man had compassion on the bird, and he went outside, hoping to bring it in.

As he approached the bird, the bird just flew against the window even harder. Pretty soon, the bird flew into the bushes below the window, half frozen, yet too afraid to be caught by this huge man. The more the man tried to reach for the bird, the more the bird flew frantically into the snow and thorns of the bushes.

After a few minutes in the cold and seeing the bird continue to injure itself, the man yelled out in frustration, "Stupid bird, can't you understand that I'm trying to help?" The man paused and thought, "If only you understood you wouldn't fly away ... if only ... if only I could become a bird, and get you to understand."

Just then, the church bells rang, as they always have on the hour. But when the man heard the bells this time, he fell to his knees and began to cry, saying, "Oh, God, I didn't understand. I didn't understand."

Jesus has come all the way from heaven to where we are so that we might have a Saviour near to us and not afar off. He has come to reconcile us to God. He gives us the atonement from the Father. Be ye reconciled to God.