

GOD'S LITTLE SIGN¹

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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.

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 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 Zion 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.

¹ Luke 2:12.

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 large 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.

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 brought about, so that she might know what was expected of her in the matter. The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit 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 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 Spirit 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.

The prophet Isaiah belongs in a class by himself. Not only has he written the longest book in the Bible (66 chapters), he is our biblical Poet Laureate. And not only that, the Holy Spirit employed him to portray Christ in prophecy in the most intimate way.

We meet Jesus personally in Isaiah. The words the poet chose in chapter 53, for example, are heart-stopping. Of inspired writers of all time, Isaiah stands at the pinnacle.

But it is in his chapters 7 and 9 Isaiah confronts us with a most profound revelation of Jesus as a Baby. Not only is Jesus born of a virgin (yes, Matthew was right to quote “young woman” in 7:14 as “a virgin”), but the Baby’s name is “God with us.” The only Baby in all eternity to be both divine and human is given to “*us*” for all eternity. “Unto *us* a child is born.” All you inhabitants of other worlds who have never fallen, stand back; all you holy, sinless angels, stand back; Jesus is *ours*. We fallen, sinful mortals, *we* have Him. The Son of God! And we have Him forever.

Just knowing and believing this kills sin at its roots. (If you are still a slave to sin, you don’t yet believe it.)

But Isa. 9:6 details an almost unbelievable truth about this Baby. Says the precious Scripture: “Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder” (Isa. 9:6, 7).

Even in His infancy, as soon as He was born, the “government” of the universe was laid upon His shoulders—baby shoulders. From His first breath as Mary’s Child He was set to fight in a war—the great controversy with the Enemy, Satan. If as a child, He were to “choose” the “evil” and “refuse” the “good” (as every other baby in all time has done; see 7:15; Rom. 3:23), He would have marred

His record and “the government” of the universe would have fallen.

The plan of salvation was laid upon a Child. He couldn’t be allowed to wait until what we say is “the age of accountability.” He was “accountable” from His first breath. And He wasn’t programmed to do flawlessly: He did so from human choice—“He knew to refuse the evil, and choose the good” (7:15).

Stand back, all human beings: your salvation as well as that of the throne of God was on the shoulders of a Baby.

Christ has saved us! This is the best Good News you’ll ever hear. Christ’s taking a sinful nature is not equivalent to participation in sin. Sin has to do with the will, a volitional exercise, however unconscious or embryonic it may be. And Christ refused “decidedly” to sin in any form, in feeling, in thought, in purpose, in imagination, in fantasy, in word, in deed.

His mother was not a sinless woman, for she confessed that she was a sinner in need of a Saviour (Luke 1:47). The Immaculate Conception theory is not biblical. But Mary was unusual in one respect: *she had unusual faith to believe*. That’s why “all generations” call her “blessed.”

Christ’s being conceived of the Holy Spirit did not lessen His complete identity with us through His sinful mother, or ameliorate the power of the temptations to sin that we know; but it did provide Him with a power greater than any *unconverted* human being has to resist the impulse or temptation

to sin that has swept us all into its power. And we can have that same power by faith.

It was demonstrated in Christ's complete victory over sin in His flesh which was identical to ours, for "He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in His flesh the enmity." "You that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight" (Eph. 2:14, 15; Col. 1:22).

While Christ grew to what we call the age of accountability, He laid aside all divine prerogatives and fought the battle as we must fight it—by faith alone. He grew into a perfect identity with the human family until it could be said that God "hath made Him to be sin who knew no sin." Stronger and fiercer became the temptations that assailed Him; and He met them in increasing agony of conflict. Thus His righteousness was not static or "natural," innate, or "exempt" from our struggle. It was dynamic, the result of conflict with the enemy more terrible than imaginable.

The fact that this victory began in His infancy, yes, even in His prenatal state, is not to be wondered at. Before He knew "to refuse the evil, and choose the good," the Virgin's Son in some way "condemned sin in the flesh," for He was "Immanuel, which is being interpreted, God with us" (Isa. 7:14-16; Rom. 8:3). If He were in any way excused from that infantile confrontation with the temptation to sin, He

could not be our Saviour, for He could not then be our perfect Substitute or Example. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder."

Was it on an Infant's shoulder that the "government" lay? Yes; the government of earth and heaven lay on a Baby's "shoulder," and had He sinned even once as an infant through a temper tantrum or a selfish manifestation of disposition, the "government" would have crashed, and the plan of redemption would have failed. Even as "a child" "His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). We tread softly here on holy ground.

But never could it be said that "the government shall be upon His shoulder" had He been exempt or excused from the problem that "the government" faced—the problem of sin taking residence in fallen, sinful human flesh. The Child was "born unto us" especially that He might solve the problem of sin and redeem us from the penalty and power of sin. For this reason He was sent "in the likeness of sinful flesh," yes, even from the moment of His conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

Our problem is not our babyhood. For all of us those days are gone forever. The great issue now to be settled is not how we can relive our prenatal or babyhood days, or change our heredity. No need to cry about the past. To blame others or ourselves for our past is futile. Christ is a Saviour who meets us where we are at this moment, and saves to the uttermost.

What will we do from now on with “so great salvation”? For all of us, this is Good News not to be trifled with.

Says the precious Scripture: “Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given” (Isa. 9:6, 7). The Father *gave* the Son “unto us,” not merely *lent* Him to us.

How do you think of Christ? As Someone far away in a heaven light-years distant? According to Scripture His nearness to us is clear: (1) His name is Emmanuel, “God with us” (Mt. 1:23), one with the human family, our “elder Brother.” This is not to detract in the least from His divinity, but the full truth is that He has identified with our humanity as well. (2) And that nearness to us is forever; the Gift is *given*, not *lent*. (3) The Son must endure all of our trials and sufferings, our poverty, our pain, our wrestlings with temptations both from without and from within, “yet without sin.” (4) And He must die; the only Person who has ever been born to die (we were born to live!). (5) Not only that, he must die cruelly, unjustly. (6) Not only that, He must die as One hated and rejected—more terrible than mere physical pain. (7) All that, a strong man could possibly endure—but there is one more: He must die under “the curse of God.” He was “made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree” (Gal. 3:13; Dt. 21:22, 23). The death He must die is what the Bible says is the second death.

Christ has conquered Satan, canceled all his curses, taken upon Himself your sin as well as the sins of your ancestors, was “made to be sin for

[you] who knew no sin, that [you] might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). We need not suffer under any “curse” unless we choose to. “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.” How? Because He died on a tree (see Gal. 3:13). His cross was the lightning-rod that attracted the ultimate curse, the total that Satan could invent. Live, then, in the light of that cross!

One wise writer describes it thus: “Christ felt the anguish which the sinner must feel when mercy shall no longer plead for the guilty race” (DA 753). That “anguish” is described in Rev. 20:12-15 as the horror the lost will sense in the final irrevocable judgment. Horror worse than any physical pain could be!

The Son “given to us” must endure all that, for He must become “the propitiation for . . . the sins of the whole world,” “made to be sin for us who knew no sin” (1 John 2:2; 2 Cor. 5:21).

But how could “the government [be] upon His shoulder when He is still a Baby who can’t even hold His bottle yet? What kind of responsibility must this “Child” have even in his infancy? How can He be holy and sinless as a child? Must we give Him an “exemption” from our DNA heredity?

Looking again at Isa 9:6, 7: how could “the government” be “upon the shoulder” of a Baby born in Bethlehem? Every other baby born into this world has followed the fallen Adam in innate selfishness. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” “There is none righteous, no not one,” says Rom 3:23; 10.

If this special Baby also falls into this common land-mine of sin, that will prove that Satan is right in his great campaign against God, for he has always maintained that God is unfair to require human beings to obey His law.

Satan says it's impossible for anyone to be both human and sinless. If the Bethlehem Baby joins all babies and yields to the constant inner urge to be selfish and throws a temper tantrum, He has lost the contest to Satan. (1) The fate of the world is upon the shoulder of this Child! (2) More than this, the fate of that God must eventually step down from His throne, for Satan would have proved that sin is stronger than God. Big business!

More than that, Christ must demonstrate that His victory over Satan is not merely His own personal triumph; He cannot return to heaven and tell the Father, "I conquered Satan Myself personally, but I wasn't able to save the world FROM sin; the best I could achieve was to save people IN their sins." Not good enough!

More than that, the Baby on whose shoulder rests our government must demonstrate that He can save and deliver down-and-outers, drug addicts, alcoholics, addicts. (5) But that is easy—what is *really* difficult is saving the wealthy, ease-loving, pleasure oriented people of Laodicea. It's always harder to save those who don't feel any need.

But that's not all: the Bethlehem Baby must do more than merely save people physically so they can ever heaven; He must reconcile their alienated hearts to God. And that is the most difficult task that

God has ever had in all eternity. He can't force them.

But that's not all: Christ must woo the heart of a Bride-to-be. If any man has ever faced the challenge of winning the heart of a woman so she is willing to say "I do" forever, perhaps he can begin to appreciate the challenge Christ faces regarding His corporate church, "the Lamb's wife"-to-be, who thus far in sacred history has not "made herself ready" for "the marriage of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:6-8). If Jesus at last must fail, all His other triumphs are nothing. What can He do?

That divine cry of dereliction on Christ's cross, ["My God. Why have You forsaken Me?"] is the world's moment of truth. In becoming the Son of man, the Son of God became our second Adam, the new corporate Head of the human race. When the first Adam sinned in Eden, "we" sinned in him, because each of us is "adam"—that is our name. Each of us is his fallen descendant; he could do nothing other than pass on to us his fallen, sinful nature in alienation from his Creator, destined to "perish" eternally.

From Christ's birth in Bethlehem, He lived in the sunshine of oneness with God. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government [of the world and of the universe] shall be upon His shoulder" (Isa. 9:6, KJV). But He took on His sinless nature our sinful nature that He might meet the awful problem of sin in our flesh, sin's last lair; God sent Him "unto us" "in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, [He] condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom.

8:3). As our second Adam, Christ won the awful battle.

But now as Head of the human race He enters into the darkness of hell on His cross, dying our death, doing what in John 3:16 He says He doesn't want us to do—He tastes what it means to “perish.” It's terrible beyond any words. We can't grasp it unless we understand Galatians 3:13: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written [quoting Moses], Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree” (Deut. 21:22, 23, KJV). Thus He was “made to be sin for us who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). For you personally, intimately—not only instead of you but as you—He dies your death. Now in thanks what will you do for Him?