

“Good Tidings of Great Joy”

Introduction:

Let us turn to Luke 2 and read again this familiar account of the birth of the Savior. Beginning with verse one we read:

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. ³So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

⁴Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

¹⁵So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. ¹⁸And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

General peaceful conditions existed in the world during “those days” when our Savior was born. His birth took place “in the days of **Caesar Augustus**”, who ruled the Roman Empire from 30 B.C. to A.D. 14. We read that **Cyrenius** was the governor of the Roman province of Syria which included the region of Palestine. During these times the ***Pax Romana***, that is, the peace of Rome, provided security and a measure of prosperity for Roman citizens, but even non Roman citizens benefited in a measure from “the peace of Rome.”

The emperor had ordered a census. The census was a registration with view to taxation. Each family was to register itself in its ancestral hometown. When we consider this edict, we might perceive cruelty on the part of oppressors who require unreasonable demands of their citizens. But it was probably an accommodation to the Jews to be registered in their hometowns, to be identified with their ancestors and the inheritance which was theirs. It reveals a degree of Roman toleration toward the Jews to have them registered in this fashion.

Joseph’s ancestral home was Bethlehem (v. 4), meaning “house of bread.” It was the ancient city of King David, from whom Joseph’s lineage descended. This couple traveled a long distance, about 90 miles

from their current home in Nazareth of Galilee. Mary traveled with Joseph. There is some question as to whether she would have been required to travel to register. Joseph could perhaps have registered her without her attendance. Perhaps it reflects Joseph desiring to shield her from the shame and ridicule that some of their home town had toward her, for Joseph and Mary it must have become known that they had married after the onset of her pregnancy. It was doubtless a difficult journey for Mary, but the Lord sustained her. It was necessary that this baby be born in Bethlehem in accordance with the Old Testament prophecy of Micah 5:2,

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. (Micah 5:2)¹

We see displayed in these details of the census God's sovereign control over His creation. The timing and the circumstances betray the providence of God, which is God working behind the scenes, shaping and controlling events in order to fulfill His will. Caesar thought to tax the world, but in reality God had purposed to have His Son born in Bethlehem and to have his genealogy to David officially recognized and recorded. Therefore, the *decree of Caesar* went out, thereby accomplishing the *decree of God* concerning His Son. As one once wrote,

Princes are but puppets in His hands. He removes kings and sets up kings. And so, we see the Hand of God controlling the events to accomplish His purposes.

In **verses 6 and 7** we read that the term of Mary's pregnancy was completed and so she gave birth to her first-born son. And having had found no better suitable place for Him, His parents laid Him in a manger, the feed box of an animal. Mary wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, strips of cloth wrapped about the body of the new born to restrict His movements and keep Him warm. This was consistent with the manner in which the poor cared for their newborn babies.

Although Joseph must have had relatives in Bethlehem, apparently none afforded them a place. Perhaps the relatives already were occupied with guests and there was no room. But could not room be found for this woman in this condition? Perhaps they were purposely refused a place because Mary's condition was generally thought due to immorality, or perhaps Joseph did not feel bold enough to approach his relatives; after all, she was about to bear a child, but she had not had a husband long enough to justify a legitimate birth. Joseph and Mary were married months before, but it was a hasty kind of arrangement. It must have been obvious to all that the betrothal period had been shortened due to her pregnancy. Mary's reputation could not have been a good one in the eyes of Joseph's family. This was probably a stigma Mary retained much of her life. For later even our Lord was subtly accused of being born illegitimately. The Pharisees are recorded as having said in John 8:41, "**We** be not born of fornication." The point of verse 6 is this: these few verses strike us with the starkness of the event, and the poverty of the couple, and the loneliness and seeming abandonment of this couple by all others about them.

Now in **verses 8 and 9** the scene changes abruptly. Luke shifts from the manger scene to nearby fields where shepherds were grazing their flocks. An angel appears to the shepherds resulting in them being terribly frightened. But the words out of the angel's mouth were a cause of great rejoicing, not great fear. The shepherds were fearful, for they were but mortals and it was believed that a vision of heaven or of angels would bring death to mortals. They were from the presence of God, and no one can see God in His fulness and live.² But the angel's appearance was the harbinger of hope to them, not a sign of their impending death; the angel was bearing good news.

¹ This Old Testament reference to the birth of Jesus Christ testifies of His deity as well as His human nature. He would be born in Bethlehem, but His "goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." The Messiah is eternal God.

² Exodus 33:20; Judges 13:21, 22.

Now let me stress to you the importance of these words in **verses 8 and 9**. *First*, by showing you that this is the emphasis of the entire passage, and then *secondly*, by considering the substance of their meaning.

We have the introduction to our episode in verses 1-5, in which basic elements of time are given and the characters are identified for us by Luke. Then verses 6-9 we have the immediate setting described for the major emphasis of the entire episode containing the birth of the Lord Jesus. A new time frame is given in verse 6--the time for the child to be born. A new location is identified--in the fields. New characters are introduced, the shepherds, the angel, who is then joined by a multitude of angels. And so, in vs. 1-5 the basic information is provided, in vs. 6-9, the stage is set for the announcement of the angel, which is the main emphasis of the passage. All details of the episode point to the announcement of the angel recorded in verses 10 through 12, which is accentuated by the angels in verses 13 and 14. The angelic declarations of verses 10-14 are the central emphasis of the passage. And so, although the *record* of Jesus' birth is in verse 7, the primary emphasis of the passage is the *meaning* of the birth and its circumstances to the shepherds in the fields as declared by the angels.

And so, let us consider the message, first as to its *substance* and then as to *whom* it is given.

I. The initial message of the angel to the shepherds

The angel announced to the frightened shepherds,

Fear Not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger."

The angel first told the shepherds that there was no reason for them to fear God. Why? Because unto them was born a Savior, Christ the Lord. Let us consider precisely the announcement of the angel.

A. The shepherds were not to fear for unto them was born "a SAVIOR, Who is Christ the Lord."

They were fearful for they were sinners, but it was for this very purpose that this child was born into the world. He would be the *Savior* to sinners. This baby was born not so that they would be condemned, but that they might escape condemnation. This one was born into the world for the purpose to deliver sinners from their sin and from God's just punishment upon sinners.

Do we fear God due to our sin? We need not if we humbly come to our Savior to pardon and deliver us from that which defiles and condemns us. This is cause for great joy, is it not? God stooped down that He might pick you up. He became a Savior to do for you what you could not do for yourself. And so His coming into the world was not to condemn man but to save him from a fate that he had brought upon himself.

B. The shepherds were not to fear for unto them was born "a Savior, Who is CHRIST the Lord."

Jesus is the *Christ*, that is, the Anointed One, the Messiah. This means that He was called and equipped by God His Father to secure the redemption of His people. The name, Christ, means anointed. It depicts God's calling and equipping of Jesus of Nazareth to accomplish God's work of salvation in you, if you come to Him. This indeed is a cause of great joy. You have no power to make yourself acceptable before God, nor does anyone other than this Man have this ability. Jesus is the Christ, the One anointed, that is, appointed by the Father and equipped by the Holy Spirit to obtain the sinner's salvation.

Now more specifically, the term "Christ" speaks of our Lord being anointed to His three-fold office, and each office is necessary for our salvation. First, we were in need of Christ as a *Prophet* to reveal God to us and our sinful and condemned standing before Him. Second, we were in need of a *Priest* to intercede with God on our behalf and make sacrifice for our sin. And third, we were in need of a *King* to subdue sin within us, to lead us, and preserve us to His heavenly Kingdom. God the Father anointed our Lord Jesus to perform

this three-fold function on our behalf. In Him alone were all of these duties entrusted and He alone was equipped to execute them.

In the Old Testament there were examples of men endowed with two of these three offices. We read of kings who were also prophets, such as David. The Old Testament records of a king who was also a priest—Melchizedec. There was also a priestly prophet—Samuel. But only our Lord Jesus was anointed with the oil of gladness above His fellows to possess this three-fold office to execute on our behalf. Thus He is to us our **Priest**: having sacrificed Himself on our behalf and He lives to apply the benefits of His sacrifice to us. He is to us our **Prophet** Who declares and reveals the will of God to us--He is our Teacher. And He is our **King** Who delivers us, leads us, protects us, and provides for us. And so He *is* all that we need. As the little children's catechism stated, which we have cited before:

Question: Why do you need Christ as a Prophet?

Answer: Because I am ignorant.

Question: Why do you need Christ as a Priest?

Answer: Because I am guilty.

Question: Why do you need Christ as a King?

Answer: Because I am weak and helpless.

Here was a true King who could bring **true peace** between God and His people. He was equipped to do just that—to bring peace to one's soul upon the knowledge that he is at peace with God. No earthly king can bring this kind or degree of peace. As an ancient writer described Caesar:

“While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief and envy. He cannot give peace of heart, for which man yearns more that even more than outward peace.” (Epictetus, d. AD 135)

But our Savior can and does bring peace for all that come unto Him in their needy condition and look to Him in faith.

We see also that...

C. The shepherds were not to fear for unto them was born a Savior, Who is Christ the LORD.

This is extremely significant. In verse 9 we read of an angel of the “Lord.” In verse 15 the shepherds desire to relate the news that the “Lord” had given them through the angel. And then in the angel's message, we have “do not fear, I have news of great joy for born unto you is a Savior, Christ the LORD.” The term, Lord, is a reference to deity, to God Himself. God Himself has been born unto us. We have described to us by the angel the **incarnation**, the union of God and man which can only bring great benefit for you if you are a believer, for **unto you** has this child been born.

Jesus is one with us. You need not fear, child of God, for God is one with you. That gulf that had been so vastly set between the Creator and the fallen human race was bridged in the person of Jesus Christ the Lord. God intends good for you, believer. He has become one with you. He has become so much in union with His own that God the Father regards believers just as He regards His Son. And so, whether Christ circumcised or Christ crucified, the Father regards us as having been in Him.

Whether Christ living or Christ dead
Christ buried or Christ risen,
Christ ascended and Christ enthroned,
God sees you there with Him.

When Christ was nailed to the cross all the elect of God were nailed with Him. Paul could write, “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20). When Christ lay in the grave, His people were there with Him.

When Jesus came forth from the grave, His people came forth with Him. When Jesus Christ ascended and was seated on His Father's throne, His people were enthroned with Him.

And so, why should I fear if I cling to Him? Why should you fear if you are in Him? For though we are sinners still, we may be bold enough to say that we are now seated on the throne of God in union with our Lord Jesus--We are co-heirs with Him, heirs of God;. We do now sit in heavenly places in Christ Jesus our Lord. Certainly this is a cause for great joy.

II. The recipients of the message – the shepherds

Now let us see that though the announcement in one sense appears to be quite general and universal, in another sense it is quite specific and restricted. Christmas cards have been be circulated by many of those who are not the Lord's people with this very passage embossed in gold and glitter.

Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

But to whom is this promise given? To whom do these words apply? We would assert that within the account *this message was intended for these shepherds and on all people like them*. These men were lowly men. They were shepherds. Shepherding was not regarded as a noble profession in Biblical times. In fact shepherds were under a rabbinic ban, not being allowed to participate in the religious observances of the temple, for shepherds were viewed as a lowly people occupying a lowly occupation in isolation. They were regarded as lowly by others and they no doubt viewed themselves similarly.

A. Shepherds were regarded as socially lowly. Shepherding was not viewed as a desirable occupation. The poorest of people would be shepherds. They lived unsettled lives, traveling about with their sheep. They lived apart from most other segments of society. They were regarded as filling an essential role--somebody had to do it--but it was not an important role--anybody could do it. Because they lived about the local communities, but were not involved in the social life of those communities, they were viewed with suspicion. Shepherds were generally regarded as unreliable and thieves.

B. Shepherds were regarded as religiously lowly as well. What we mean by this is that they were excluded from the religious life of the community. The nature of the work prevented shepherds from being regarded as ceremonially clean, as a result they were excluded from religious gatherings and temple ceremony. The occupation itself was despised by the populace. These shepherds must have regarded themselves as others regarded them--lowly, both socially and religiously. How could it be any different?

C. These Shepherds had a uniquely religious occupation. These shepherds although lowly, had a unique responsibility, for it was in the fields of Bethlehem that the sheep were raised and kept that were destined to be the sacrificial sheep offered in the nearby Jerusalem temple. It was the duty of these shepherds to watch over these flocks destined for sacrifice. They were to inspect them continually for their fitness for such a purpose, to be offered as sacrifices before God. Here we see these shepherds, these "inspectors for spotlessness", called upon by God to go and inspect this child lying in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes.

D. The point is this: these shepherds probably viewed themselves as excluded from the promises of God. As Jews, they would have *known* of the promises. They knew their history as a nation. Israel's sin as a nation had incurred God's wrath. The nation had repeatedly violated God's laws. The people had disregarded His rule over them. They had forged an existence which was in accord with their own desires rather than according to God's will. And God had judged them severely for it.

And yet even in the nation's rejection by God, God held forth the promise to the nation that He would send a Savior, who would save them from their sins, who would bring full pardon for their sins so that the

full blessing of God would be upon them. And based on God's promise, the nation waited in hope. But these shepherds, must have felt excluded from the hope of participation in God's coming salvation, because they were a lowly and sinful band of men.

God had promised to send a Savior to their nation, Israel. The message of the prophets was known. The Messiah, the Savior, would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David, for the Messiah would be a king as was David. And these shepherds would have been uniquely aware and continually reminded of the promises. As they exercised special oversight and care, sending the sacrificial lambs and sheep to their slaughter, the awareness of their own sin would have been great, and the promises of God must have been vivid to them. These shepherds were lowly men in the eyes of others and lowly in their own eyes. Others regarded them as "sinners." But the shepherds regarded themselves as sinners also. They were vividly aware of their sin and the penalty of sin, which the temple sacrifice of animals taught the people.

It was *to these lowly shepherds*, and *to all kinds of people like them*, that the message of God's salvation came. God sent His angel to speak to these men and ones like them this message:

Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; (even the disenfranchised, those who had formerly no part, the lowly, the humble, the sinners can rejoice) for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger. You will find Him to be as one of you, lowly, humble, and in poverty, he is to be a Savior for you and such as you, "Glory to God on the Highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

He is this kind of Savior to the humble and needy. He signals good things to them. How do you stand? Are you one on whom the favor (grace) of God rests? Do you see your need for a Savior? And is your faith and hope centered in this one in whom God has entrusted the responsibility to save you? We may trust that we are, if we have seen and have confessed our lowly estate and having placed our faith in the Savior of the lowly.

III. The praise and pronouncement of the multitude of the angels

After the angel communicated his message to the shepherds, he was joined by a "multitude" of angelic beings who in a united voice gave great praise to God and a great declaration to this fallen world. Here are verses 13 and 14.

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

These few words of the angels are some of the most often repeated during the holiday season. These words are heard frequently; they are seen frequently. The expression is on many of our Christmas cards. One can read the saying on billboards. It is a frequent statement in the media. The words are taken from Luke 2, but with a different kind of message, one which spoke of *global peace* rather than the peace that God made possible and realized with sinners through the life, death, and work of Jesus Christ. And so, the original intent of the message designed to announce that peace was now available between God and guilty sinners through Jesus Christ, has been transformed into a politically correct statement about the desire to stop war. Let us consider these words in their original context, which was the declaration to some shepherds from a host of angels, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*"

A. What the message does *not* suggest and was *not* meant to convey

1. It does not mean that God intended to cause war to cease between nations. It is not a statement about *world peace*.

There is no word of promise in the Bible that there will be peace in this world between nations this side of the second coming of Jesus Christ. In fact, the opposite of peace is the rule; “wars and rumors of wars” characterize the age.

It is important that we understand this. If the message of the angels was to mean that God intended to bring a general state of world peace between nations *in this age* through the birth of Jesus Christ, then God is shown to have been well intentioned, but quite incapable of bring to pass His intention. It must be concluded that God desired the best, hoped for the best, gave forth His best effort, but His design has been frustrated. The creature checked the Creator. One would conclude rightly that God is impotent. But it has never been God’s purpose in the course of the history of this fallen world to end all warfare. God has never intended that the nations cease to fight between themselves, or else they would have done so.

2. The message does not mean that God intended that Christians would be at peace with everybody. This certainly cannot be so. We know so for at least two solid reasons.

a. The Lord Jesus’ own words

The Lord Jesus Himself declared that the Christian would *never* have peace in this world. He declared, “In the world you shall have *tribulation*” (John 16:33). Also in John 15:18f we read, “If the world hate you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love his own, but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” Here the Lord Jesus clearly declared that His people will be hated by those who are of the world because they belong to Him. A state of hostility exists between the people of God who are truly living for Christ and those who are opposed to Him. The state of hostility breaks out frequently in war.

The “spiritual warfare” even enters the family. Luke 12:51ff reads,

Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

Here we see that it was not even the intention or calling of Jesus Christ to bring peace to families. In fact, His coming into the world would result in family hostility and division.

In another place Jesus told a church that they were going to suffer greatly. He gave a message to the church at Smyrna telling them that they would experience everything except peace. He told them:

Do not fear any of those things that you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev. 2:10).

Rather than peace, these Christians could anticipate things would grow worse than they had previously experienced. Jesus said to them, “Do not fear any of those things that you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days” (cf. 2:10a).

Have you experienced difficulty for being a Christian? Are you weary from living for Christ in a hostile environment? Suppose the Lord told you that He understands your predicament and just how hard it is, but then He said, “Hold on, things are going to become worse.” What would your reaction be? This is what He told this church. The Christian life is not an assurance of ease or peace in this world. You may have the peace of God while you endure difficulty, but you will not escape difficulty for being a Christian. Jesus said these words to His disciples, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

b. The testimony of history and of our own lives

History has borne out the fact that there exists a general hostility for Christians by the world. This has always been the case. And we should not that because we are now living in the 21st century and the world that the potential for hostility toward Christians has lessened. It has been claimed that more Christians have suffered death for their faith in the last 100 years than any other 100-year period of church history.

3. It does not mean that because of the birth of Jesus, now God is at peace with everybody.

The KJV translation of these words are quoted most frequently at Christmas. It reads, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” It is falsely construed from this translation to mean that God was bringing peace to all men without distinction. However, the NIV has rendered the better translation, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.” The RSV translates the verse, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14). Whereas the KJV translation may be construed as God’s good intentions toward all, the NIV and the RSV emphasizes God’s good designs for some. The ones who benefit from Christ’s birth are the ones who are the objects of God’s saving grace and mercy. God never promises peace to those who cling to their sins. Twice in the Old Testament are these words: “*‘There is no peace’*, says the Lord, ‘for the wicked’” (Isa. 48:22, Isa. 57:21).

B. What the Message *does* suggest and *was* meant to convey

The announcement of the angel, “peace on earth” suggests at least three facts. First, the angel’s message suggests that there had been a state of hostility, even warfare, between God and mankind. Secondly, the angel’s message suggests that through the birth of this child, the hostility could/would come to an end and peace could once again be the norm between God and man. And thirdly, the angel’s message declares that this promise is not given to everybody, but the promise is for those whose favor God rests, but for them only. In short, this is a glorious promise that is for many, but not all, for the many on whom the grace of God rests.

To declare or teach from Luke 2:14 that God is at peace with those on whom His favor does not rest, is to proclaim a false message. In the Old Testament we have a repeated description of false prophets. They are false messengers because they gave false announcements about the peace of God toward people. The Old Testament reveals that a false prophet is one who pronounces and assures that the peace of God abides on wicked people. We read in Jeremiah 6:14, “They (the false prophets) have healed also the hurt of the daughter of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace’; when there is no peace.” Again in Jeremiah 8:11, “For they (the false prophets) have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace’; when there is no peace.” And Ezekiel declared, “‘the prophets of Israel which prophesy concerning Jerusalem, and which see visions of peace for her, and there is no peace,’ saith the Lord God” (13:16). It is a false message to declare that God is at peace with all people, when they are still in their sinful rebellion toward Him.

Who are the legitimate recipients of the promise of God’s peace? Who are these ones who have legitimate claims to being at peace with God? What characterizes them? First, **they are believers in Jesus Christ.** One day Jesus declared to a woman who believed on Him, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50). To another woman He said, “Daughter, be of good comfort: your faith has made you whole; go in peace” (Luke 8:48). And then the apostle Paul wrote, “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 15:13). Secondly, the ones who are the objects of God’s promise of peace are ones who are no longer in rebellion toward God and His rule over them. Paul described believers of the church at Colossae, “And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death” (Col. 1:21f). And so, the ones who may have the peace of God pronounced as theirs are ones who are no longer estranged and hostile toward the Word of God. They no longer resist God. They no longer ignore

Him, defy Him, or rebel against Him. We hear a great deal about the insurgency in Iraq. These are ones who are resisting and rebelling against the authority that has been established. People all over this world are insurgents against the authority of God. They reject His right to rule over them. They reject His laws. They resist and fight against Him. There is no peace between them and God as long as they continue in their defiant ways. And thirdly, the ones who are the objects of God's promise of peace are ones for whom Christ died, whereby peace with God is obtained and secured.

Those who truly believe on *Jesus Christ as the Savior, Christ the Lord*, have an *objective peace* with God; that is, God is no longer at war with them. A state of peace exists between God and them. Romans 5:1, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have **peace** with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The reason that God is at peace with them is that they have been *reconciled*.

Reconciliation is a word that describes the cessation of hostility between two warring factions, resulting in peace between them. And how does this reconciliation take place? It can only take place when first, their hostility and rebellion ceases and the justice of God toward their crime has been satisfied. God is at war with sinners and has purposed to punish them for their sins because they have violated His laws. Justice is in order. They must answer to the Judge of all the earth. The reason that Christians alone can escape the condemnation of this unbending, inflexible justice, is that Christ Jesus bore their punishment on their behalf, when He died on the cross. And so by Him, through faith in Him, they may be reconciled to God.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to **reconcile** to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making *peace by the blood of his cross*. And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irrefragable before him" (Col. 1:19-21).

But believers in *Jesus Christ as the Savior, Christ the Lord*, also receive from God a *subjective peace*, that is, they are entitled (and they alone), to a sense of well-being, a feeling of peace because they know experientially, based on the Word of God, that they are at peace with God and because they know that He has good designs on them. To them God in Christ gives assurances: "**Peace** I leave with you, my *peace* I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). To believers in Jesus Christ God gives fresh manifestations of this grace of peace, as Paul wrote, "To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called *to be* saints: Grace to you and *peace* from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." We might also consider these verses:

- 1 Cor. 1:3, "Grace be unto you, and *peace*, from God our Father, and [from] the Lord Jesus Christ."
- 2 Cor. 1:2, "Grace be to you and *peace* from God our Father, and [from] the Lord Jesus Christ."
- Gal. 1:3, "Grace be to you and *peace* from God the Father, and [from] our Lord Jesus Christ"
- Eph. 1:2, "Grace be to you, and *peace*, from God our Father, and [from] the Lord Jesus Christ."

None but true believers in the Son of God who was born into the world to die for sinners, may rightly enjoy the peace of God in their souls. The unbeliever deludes himself that things are right between him and God. God is his enemy until he sues for peace through faith in Jesus Christ.

C. Nevertheless, we recognize that the message of the angel does signal an offer of peace to all by a good and gracious God.

God was very gracious to His people Israel in sending them Christ. In sending Him, God was offering them, all of them, peace. Acts 10:36 reads, "The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all)." It was not that God had ceased to have wrath on them, rather in, through, and during the ministry of Jesus Christ, God had inaugurated what we might describe as a temporary cessation of hostility, giving Israel an opportunity to repent and experience His peace. Of course they refused, for the most part. Later the Lord Jesus would say respecting them,

If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your *peace*! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation. (Luke 19:42ff)

God offers similar terms of peace to all men through the gospel. We read of the Lord Jesus expressing this same idea to would-be followers:

Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of *peace*. So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:31ff)

God offers terms of peace to any and all. He says in effect, “Cast down the weapons of your warfare. Cease your rebellion against Me, your Creator and Lawgiver, believe and submit to Jesus Christ the Lord and Savior, and we will be at peace.”

In conclusion, let us be encouraged to use this Christmas season to offer to people the gospel of peace. We should always be ready; we should always have our “feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15). And 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 read,

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. ²⁰Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

Using every means, let us offer peace to all in the gospel, but do not assure peace to any, unless they meet the terms of the gospel--an awareness of personal sin and God's wrath upon sin, repentance from sin toward God, faith in Jesus Christ as the Reconciler, the only one who can bring peace.
