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The Light of Christmas

By Charles McCracken

Maybe it's a reminder that I'm getting older, but the anticipation of winter doesn't hold the same appeal that it did even a decade ago. I don't mind shoveling snow or bundling up for the cold, but the shorter daylight hours are a different matter. For one thing, when my wife and I take our evening walk, it's already dark.

A few nights ago we passed a home that had been recently decorated for Christmas. It's amazing how light can impact the long, dreary nights of winter. It was a bitterly cold night, but for a moment the bleak landscape was transformed by the presence of a few twinkling lights.

On the way home, we reflected on the words of the prophet Isaiah pointing to the dawning of a bright new world:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined (Is. 9:1-2).

More than seven centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, Isaiah spoke to the inhabitants of Judah. It was a time of political turmoil. Against this backdrop, Isaiah's message was like a light piercing centuries of gloom and despair bringing comfort and joy not only to Israel, but ultimately the entire world.



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Message of Comfort

Despite the trying times associated with God's judgment, Israel will be pardoned in the future and enjoy blessing during the Messianic Kingdom. As Isaiah turned his attention to Israel's future glory, he repeats God's message to the beleaguered nation, *Comfort, yes, comfort My people! Says your God.* (Is. 40:1). Using verbs in the prophetic perfect tense, Isaiah describes future events as being so certain, it is as though they had already happened. He prophesied,

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Is 9:6).

It is worth noting that the phrases "a Child is born" and "a Son is given" are not simply two ways of saying the same thing. The two phrases are significant in describing the unique nature of the Messiah. The first emphasizes His virgin birth as a human baby and descendant of the Davidic dynasty. The second communicates His deity as the Son of God whose existence did not begin in Bethlehem; He has always



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existed as the second person of the Godhead. The apostle Paul explains, *but when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son. . . (Gal. 4:4).*

Seven hundred years earlier, Isaiah prophesied, *Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (Is. 7:14).* The fact that this child was born is verified by the New Testament and history. When the angel appeared to Joseph to announce that his betrothed wife would be the mother of Messiah, Matthew connects the event to Isaiah's prophecy saying,

So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel", which is translated "God with us" (Mt. 1:23; Is. 7:14).

On the night of Jesus' nativity, angels appeared to shepherds in fields near Bethlehem. One announced, *For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord (Lk. 2:11).* Micah the prophet foretold that Messiah would be born in the environs of Bethlehem, the ancestral home of King David (Mic. 4:8; 5:2). And, it was in Bethlehem the Child was born.

Forty-one days later, Joseph and Mary brought Him to the temple where Simeon met them. He is described as a man who was, *just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel (Lk. 1:25).* Taking baby Jesus in his arms, he rejoiced, *Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace...for my eyes have seen Your salvation (Lk. 2:29).* While a compelling confirmation that Old Testament prophecy had been fulfilled concerning the birth of the Messiah, it is also a definitive message of comfort extended to all people.

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6



But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to be the children of God, to those who believe in His name. John 1:12

*Merry Christmas
and
Wishes for God's Best in 2011*

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Message of Joy

Isaiah mentions joy more than two dozen times in relation to the Messianic Kingdom, which is not merely a relative state of happiness or an era of comparatively good times. This still future period of human history will be characterized by unbridled joy. In this context, Isaiah describes the dawning of the Messianic Age saying,

You [God] have multiplied the nation and increased its joy; they rejoice before You according to the joy of harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil (Is. 9:3).

Harvest was a traditional time of joy in Israel. Months spent working in the fields culminated in the harvest followed by great celebration. This new age will be characterized by prosperity after millennia of deprivation and toil.

Likewise, after the arduous conflict of battle, the spoils were divided. People celebrated with great joy not only because of the reward, but also because the conflict was over. Similarly, the Messianic Kingdom will be a time of great joy because of Messiah's supernatural deliverance of Israel and stunning triumph over its enemies (Is. 9:4). Although we look forward to the Messianic Kingdom, Christians who have put their faith in the Messiah have a sampling of that joy. The apostle John explains, *that which we have seen and heard we declare to you . . . and these things we write to you that your joy may be full (1 Jn. 1:3-4).*

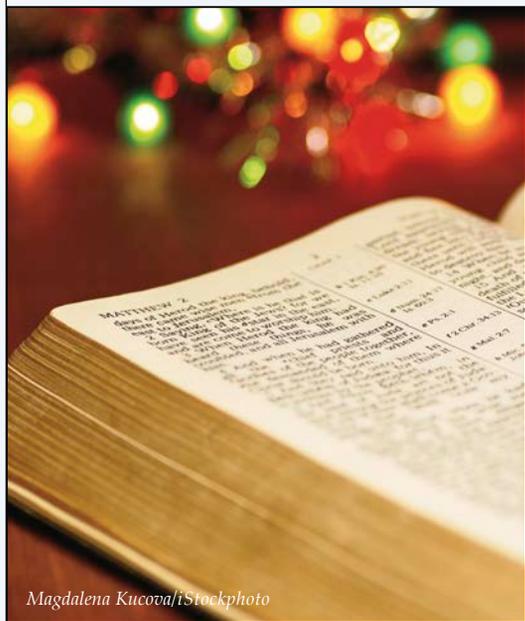
Message of Peace

The Messianic Kingdom will introduce fundamental changes to the world bringing peace and prosperity.

Isaiah declares,

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Is. 11:6-7).

All conflict will be resolved. Jewish people will be brought from every area



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of the planet to live in their ancient homeland (v.11). Israel's enemies will be destroyed. Gentiles will seek the Lord (v.10). All implements of war and conflict will be eradicated. The world will enjoy unprecedented peace under the reign of Messiah. Although the promised Messiah has come, the Messianic Kingdom is still future.

The babe in the manger perfectly fulfilled the Messianic promises made

to Israel, but there was more. Elwood McQuaid summarizes, "the same gracious God who initiated the incarnation for the purpose of bringing Israel's divine Son of David into the world extended grace far beyond man's folly. He gave His King to us all."¹¹

The apostle John records startling words concerning Messiah's entrance into the world: *In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it (Jn. 1:3-5).* Later in His ministry, Jesus declared, *I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life (Jn. 8:12).* The Messianic Kingdom will be a reality, but the fact that Israel did not recognize Messiah means that the peace of the kingdom has been temporarily postponed. On the upside, *as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name (Jn. 1:12).*

The significance of that truth is seen in Jesus' statement to the disciples near the end of His earthly ministry: *Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (Jn. 14:27).* Although the world is not currently experiencing peace on a global scale, individuals are able to realize experientially the, *peace of God, which surpasses all understanding (Phil. 4:7).*

Epilogue

Since the time of Isaiah's prophecy, Babylon captured Judah, and its inhabitants were exiled to various parts of the Babylonian Empire. After seventy years of captivity, Israel returned to the land, but only

as a vassal state of Medo-Persia which was ultimately replaced by the Greek Empire and finally the oppressive Roman Empire. The census issued by Caesar Augustus is an example of the hardship caused by Rome's compulsion to micromanage its provinces, which explains Joseph and Mary's 140 km trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem despite the fact that she was ready to give birth.

Then, on a dark night out on the hills of Bethlehem, an angel appeared to a group of temple shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. He reassured the shepherds, *"Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people (Lk. 2:10).* The sight was as significant as it was spectacular. It was such a monumental event that when the heavenly host joined the angel they jubilantly shouted, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men! (Lk. 2:14).* The first ray of light heralding the dawning of a new world was visible on the horizon of world history. The Messiah has come!

ENDNOTE

¹¹ Elwood McQuaid, "O Come, O Come, Immanuel," *Israel My Glory* 47, no. 6 (1989): <<<http://www.foi.org/ocomeocomeimmanuel>>>.



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