

DECEMBER 19, 1993

GOD'S GIFT OF THE SAVIOR

I thought it interesting back in October when I was in one of the major discount stores; they had all sorts of promotions for Halloween candies and decorations up in the store and, at the same time, were beginning to promote things for Christmas. I thought this was rather early to be thinking about buying Christmas presents or decorations, but it seems to get earlier every year. This tendency is not really surprising when you learn that nearly 75 percent of all a retailer's business is done during the Christmas Season. Giving gifts, it seems, is what Christmas is all about. Many times we will argue that giving gifts is not what Christmas is all about, we say "Christmas is about the birth of Jesus." Well, it **is** the story of God coming to live with the humanity He had created. However, when we consider that God so loved the world that He **gave** His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life, then we understand that this is the greatest gift the world has ever seen. Putting it in that light makes giving gifts an appropriate commemoration of the event.

It seems that part of the fun of Christmas especially for children (and some adults) is the anticipation of getting a gift. We might wonder whether anyone was expecting or anticipating that God would be giving us a gift of Himself at the time it happened. As it turned out, only a few were really expecting it and anxiously looking for the event although many knew of the hope that Israel had of a Messiah coming one day to save them. The prophecies of old had revealed when and where it was to happen. Daniel (9:25-26) had given information about when, and Micah (5:2) had told where. A few knew that the time was near but most others didn't have a clue. Sort of like today, the time of the Second Coming of the Lord is near: a few know but most don't have a clue. There were a couple of people who knew very well that the time was near.

LUKE 2:4-7 So many things happen and we observe them and think we know what is going on. Things happening in our government and throughout the world such as health care changes, the passage of legislation accepting abortion and homosexual lifestyles,

the prohibition of pray and the reading of the Bible in public functions, the break up of the Soviet Union, the peace accords in the Middle East, and the posturing for war by the North Koreans are just a few significant changes that we see happening. We think we know what is happening, but we probably do not realize what is really taking place as it relates to God's Plan of Salvation for His creation.

In the days of Mary and Joseph, very few people would have thought that the decree from Caesar that all the world was to be taxed had anything to do with the coming of God's Messiah, but it did. God knew that this would happen and was the means by which a peasant girl from Galilee would be in Bethlehem of Judea at the right time for the Messiah to be born. God is never late and He is never early. At the *appointed time*, the right events came together and it happened just as it had been foretold.

As we read the events in this brief account, it is amazing how the Holy Spirit inspired the writer to include so much significant information. Joseph and Mary were from Nazareth (the Messiah was to be known as a Nazarene), Joseph was a direct descendant of David, Mary was his espoused wife (the marriage had not been consummated), and Jesus was her firstborn (the firstborn belong to the Lord, also supportive of the fact she was a virgin).

The humbleness of the place where Jesus was born and the stigma attached to the suspicion that Mary conceived this Child out of wedlock was such that no one can legitimately blame their environment for failure to do what is right. Many of the people involved in violence and crime in our nation today tend to blame the fact that they were born to single mothers and grew up in poverty and that should excuse their life of crime. I don't think any of these folks were born in a stable, they just live as if they belong in one.

LUKE 2:8-9 People had raised sheep in this Judean hill country for centuries. Young David tended sheep on those hills and learned many lessons about how God cares for His people. He saw God as an ideal shepherd in the 23rd Psalm. During David's day, shepherding was a respectable occupation;

however, at the time Jesus was born people looked down on the shepherds as "low-life." They were suspected of being thieves, they were not allowed to give testimony in court and their manner of life made it nearly impossible for them to be ceremonially pure for the religious requirements of the day. But God does not esteem things or people the way man does.

All the world needs a Savior. The rich, the high and mighty don't realize their need because of their pride. The poor, the lowly and the weak do realize their need in their humility. We are told that God resists the proud and exalts the humble. So, it is not surprising that God sent the angelic host to the shepherds in the field rather than to the palaces and temples of the powerful.

LUKE 2:10-14 The angel said "Fear not," and we do not need to be afraid any more. Since we have a Savior, the Lord Almighty, we can stop being afraid. Fear paralyzes, it causes us to miss out on life. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would come to set the captives free. One of the fears from which we can be free is the fear of death and the uncertainty of that situation.

The work of the Savior was such that He redeems our life from destruction and gives us new life that is not subject to the power of sin and death.

How could the shepherds know that what the angel said was true? They were told to go and see for themselves and they would find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. How can we know that the Good News of God's salvation is true. We too are invited to come and see for ourselves by reaching out in simple trust to experience the presence of God being born in us by the power of His Holy Spirit. To know Him and to see the evidence of His presence as we walk with and experience Him. We can't see it without first believing it and we can't really know it without experiencing it. As the Psalmist said, "I had fainted except I had believed to see the presence of God in the land of the living."

The angels knew that God is to be praised for His wonderful gift of Himself to us. When we realize what He has done for us, then the highest praise and adoration we have or can imagine should be offered to our Father God. As we approach life with this as our highest priority, then we find that we must move self out of the "number one" position. As we do that, we will find relationships with others will be greatly improved. If this approach would grow and spread to those around us, then truly there would be peace on earth and good will toward men.

LUKE 2:15-20 Just as the shepherds went to check it out for themselves, every person on earth needs to determine for themselves whether the claims of Jesus Christ are true. There is nothing of any higher priority for anyone.

As we see the magnitude of God's love for us as demonstrated in the Incarnation and in the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, we too can go out glorifying and praising God for all the things that He has done.