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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

CALL HIS NAME JESUS

By Ron Allen

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

Mary and Joseph could have chosen many other names for the child that was to be born. But it was not a matter of indifference to God. Why? Because his name was to be a permanent testament to his missionary task. The English word ‘Jesus’ comes from the Greek version of the Hebrew word, *Joshua* or *Yeshua*. It means ‘Yahweh is salvation.’

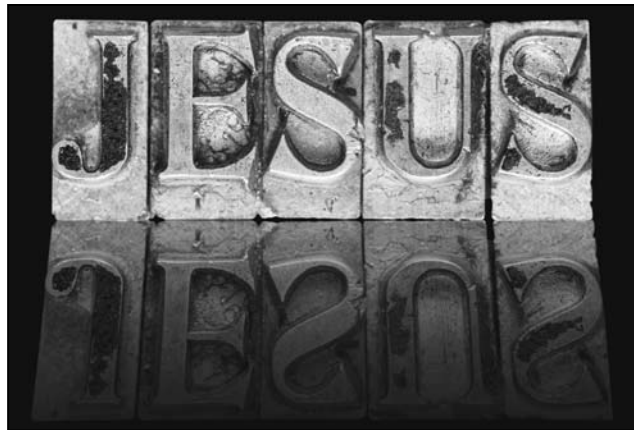
The naming of the Christ child was a prophecy of his life work. He would be a Savior. Tingles must have traveled up and down the spines of the young couple when the Angel of the Lord told them to call their child Jesus. It is true that there were hundreds—perhaps thousands—of children with that name. But the fact was that every mother and father hoped that Israel’s Savior would spring from their family. Every Joshua was a symbol of the nation’s hopes.

In the world of Christ’s time, *salvation* conveyed the idea of God dynamically rescuing people from peril. It also meant the sustaining of persons in conditions free from want. It carried a natural meaning opposite to that of oppression. To be saved was to be brought out into the open; into unconstricted circumstances in which human life could flourish in freedom.

In the Old Testament, a Savior was one who was stronger than an oppressor. The book of Judges is a book of Saviors. Every time Israel was oppressed, God sent a Samson, a Gideon or someone like them to deliver them. Joseph and Mary may have wondered if their Joshua would turn out like any of the famous Joshua in the past. Perhaps he would emulate the feats of Joshua who led Israel across Jordan, into Canaan and “caused Israel to serve the Lord all his days.”

There was another Joshua; the one mentioned in Ezra and Zechariah. He was a priest who led Israel back to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity where he rebuilt the altar of the Lord. Perhaps their Joshua would be like him.

Yet another Joshua was the author of the book Hosea. His real name was Hosea, a variant of Joshua. He was a prophet to Israel during a particularly corrupt and rebellious period of her history. His life was filled with pain. His lovely wife was an adulterer. He spent his days looking for her, following her around, begging her to come home. He even bought her back from her paramour to whom she has sold herself. I wonder if Mary and Joseph thought their Joshua would be like that one.



The angel of the Lord was specific. Jesus was to be so named because he would save from *sin*. In the history that we inhabit, hardly anyone thinks that sin is something to be saved from. Imagine a politician electioneering on a promise to rid society of sin. He would not be voted in. In our pragmatic age, the world’s problems have other names: poverty, famine, disease, climate change, war, pollution. If we must have salvation, let it be from these ills. That would be a

salvation that we could understand!

He will save his people from *their* sins. Our world wants a Messiah, but not one that will tamper with our inner lives. But that is precisely the kind of deliverer announced to Mary and her husband: a Savior who would take aim at something more sinister; something deep in the psyche that is the creative source of every human malfunction, every aberration, and every evil.

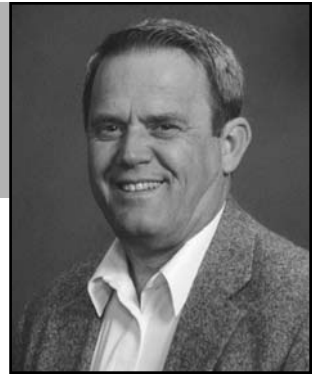
Christmas re-tells the sober truth that we need to be saved from ourselves. There is dislocation, hate, envy, cruelty, and violence in the center of our being. The reason for mass

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CHRIST ALONE • GRACE ALONE • FAITH ALONE • SCRIPTURE ALONE

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3).

The first chapters of Genesis deal with universal things: the world, man, woman, evil, suffering, death, and the nations. A swift transition occurs with the beginning of chapter twelve. Just one man now occupies the stage. Whereas chapter eleven ended in a scene of chaos with the future of humanity in doubt, now, in one person, all peoples of earth are destined for blessing. The widening gulf between God and human beings will not go unanswered. No matter how numerous Earth’s populations become (Genesis 15:5), God will not abandon them. The blessedness that God has in store for them will be carried, for the time being, in one man—Abraham.

But as Abraham’s fortune unfolds, the promise lodged with him seems less and less likely to be fulfilled. Its joyous prospect fades. When he comes to his end and is buried in the Cave of Machpela, his whole life—in view of what God had told him—seems like a sick joke. The tension between God’s promise and what actually happened in Abraham’s history is never far from the surface in his entire narrative. Yet, despite this tension and the intermittent faltering of his faith, his overall obedience to God’s call remains intact. He does not go back to his more pleasing homeland. He stays in the land promised to him; living in it like an interloper beside pagan tribesmen who consider him their inferior.

The church has been correct to see in Abraham a model of faith for God’s people in every era. But the odyssey that saw him cut ties to kith and kin and all things friendly and familiar to follow the word of the Lord into parts unknown, more explicitly mirrors the path of Christ who *“Though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor”*; *“He came to his own and his own did not receive him.”* In the biography of Jesus, Abraham’s long, humiliating descent into apparent oblivion—against the promise—is worked out in shocking parallel. The patriarch’s lonely end at Hebron is a rehearsal for the ignominy

of Calvary and Joseph’s tomb.

Christmas is here, and while the world gives its yearly nod to the Christ child, it is for us who call ourselves by His name to reaffirm our faith in him as the Man to whom all the families of earth must turn for blessedness.

The Bethlehem story marks the point at which the pilgrim journey begins for the son of Mary and Joseph. It will prove to be a costly course; one in which help ceases, and all comforts flee. At last, there is gross shame and utter abandonment. All this happens to the One Man who has given himself over completely to live by the word of God.

When it is all over, and despair seems reasonable, there is resurrection. Then we rejoice to believe that Abraham, and Christ his offspring, have lived the only life worth living; life that is stronger than anything the world can throw at it—even death.



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CHRISTMAS BOY

By Paul Porter

A reporter once asked Prince Charles what it was like to be born into royalty. I remember his answer. He said that it was a very ordinary business, really, to be born a prince. It wasn't the sort of thing where one day, one suddenly sat up, clapped one's hands and shouted, "Hurrah." No. A very ordinary business.

What was it like to be born King of the Jews? By anyone's reckoning, it wasn't much fun. Except for the handful of people who believed in Jesus' virgin birth, it was crystal clear to the rest that the boy was born a bastard.

Little wonder that Mary (so we think) chose to teach him at home rather than send him to school. Certainly the Jews had some good schools. Montessori-like, the teachers handed out honey cakes shaped like the letters of the Hebrew alphabet so the children would ever associate learning with sweetness. Perhaps Jesus missed out on such niceties by staying at home.

And it was probably at home that the thought gradually developed in his young mind that he was born for a mission that would one day cost him his life. An artist has depicted the infant Jesus running with arms outstretched towards his smiling mother, while there on the wall beside him appears his shadow in the shape of a cross.


So much for his childhood. What did the young man teach? Well, in Jesus' day, people thought of God as a huge, invisible king who lived in the sky just above Jerusalem. To be more exact, this God lived right above the real estate of the religious leaders and power merchants of the nation. And because this God was a monarch, it was only proper that you showed (and his public relations offers below) considerable respect. You addressed this God very carefully and formally, like a courtier addressing a king in his palace. But then Jesus came with something that was quite different.

It was deliciously different. Jesus said that although God was king of the universe, he was also your father. And this meant that when you spoke to God, you didn't come groveling like a servant, but you addressed him as one of his sons. You addressed the king as if you were a prince.

Now, when this idea started to gain some ground, it produced a strange effect on the population. People sensed

that Jesus believed in the savable-ness of sinners with extraordinary warmth and hopefulness. Do you remember the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin? Well the main point was that the lost sheep and the lost coin could be found! And then there was the story of the prodigal son. The main point of that story was that the prodigal son could come home! Even the petty crook, Zacchaeus could become a true son of Abraham.

The only problem with Jesus' message was that if it were true, then a lot of pomp and arrogance that went on in the name of religion would overnight become gloriously irrelevant. It is even so today: whenever the message of Jesus is clearly understood by the masses, religious gurus and spiritual manipulators are forced to stand aside.

Hence the political necessity of the cross. The man was clearly dangerous. It was for us he died. He wore a crown of thorns that we might be princes. And so this Christmas season, as we remember the boy of Bethlehem, we remember too the man he became. 




"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us kings and priests to God, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (Revelation 1:5, 6).

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starvations, genocides, and threat of nuclear annihilation is traceable to a disorder of the spirit, a poverty of soul. The line between good and evil runs down the middle of every human heart. The matters which most directly affect the safety and the survival of our race are not material and external. The enemy that threatens is within.

Scripture calls the hidden enemy sin, and the birth of Christ means that God has connected with us at very point of our truest problem. He will save *his people* from their sin. God has laid hold of human beings, not at the place of their goodness,

but at the place of their badness; not at the place of their virtue, but the place of their evil. Sin is theirs, but they are his people. He loves them.

When God sent his Son to us he could have given many things that might have delighted us temporarily. He could have cured cancer or caused all weapons to disintegrate. But he took a longer view. He came to live, die and rise again—for us. In doing so, he touched the nerve center of our trouble. His gift was basic to our eternal well-being. He did the most utilitarian, functional thing that could have been done for us. He saved us—from our sin. 

THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE OF 1914

On December 24, much of the Western Front fell silent as ordinary soldiers made temporary peace with the enemy. This was the remarkable Christmas Truce of 1914.

It is estimated that about 100,000 men, mainly British and German, took part. In fact, the sheer magnitude of the event led many to doubt it ever happened. As late as 1983, one veteran called the event a “latrine rumor.” Today, however, it is often seen as one of the few bright moments amid the slaughter of the ‘Great War’ in which 14 million people were killed.



Preserved Trenches from WWI at Fort de Douaumont near Verdun in France.

The truce broke out spontaneously in many places. Pvt. Albert Moren of the Second Queens Regiment recalled the scene on Christmas Eve near the French village of *La Chapelle d'Armentiers*:

It was a beautiful moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere; about 7 or 8 in the evening there was a lot of commotion in the German trenches and there were these lights—I don't know

what they were. And then they sang *Silent Night*—“*Stille Nacht*.” I shall never forget it. It was one of the highlights of my life.

Rifleman Graham Williams of the Fifth London Rifle Brigade, recalled how the mood spread:

Then suddenly lights began to appear all along the German parapet, which were evidently makeshift Christmas trees, adorned with lighted candles which burned steadily in the still, frosty air. First, the Germans would sing one of their carols, and we would sing one of ours, until we started up “O Come All Ye Faithful” then the Germans joined in singing the same hymn to the Latin words, *Adeste Fideles*. And I thought, well, this is a most extraordinary thing: two nations both singing the same hymn in the middle of a war.

The shared carols inspired Captain Josef Sewald of Germany's 17th Bavarian Regiment to make a bold gesture:

I shouted to our enemies that we didn't wish to shoot and that we make a Christmas truce. I said I would come from my side and we could speak with each other. First there was silence, then I shouted once more, invited them, and the British shouted, “No shooting!” Then a man came out of the trenches and I on my side did the same. And so we came together and we shook hands—a bit cautiously.

When General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, Commander of the British Second Corps heard of the consorting, he was irate:

I have issued the strictest orders that on no account is intercourse to be allowed between opposing troops. To finish this war quickly we must keep up the fighting spirit and do all we can to discourage friendly intercourse.

Captain Charles Stockwell of the Second Royal Welsh Fusiliers recalled how the peace ended early on December 26:

At 8:30 I fired three shots into the air and put up a flag with “Merry Christmas” on it on the parapet. He (a German) put up a sheet with “Thank You” on it and the German Captain appeared on the parapet. We both bowed and saluted and got down into our respective trenches, and he fired two shots into the air, and the war was on again.

-Thomas Vinciguerra.

GOD WITH US

If he was not a man, who was beaten with blows? And if he were not God, who healed the ear that Peter cut off?

If he was not a man, whose face was spat upon? And if he were not God, who breathed the Holy Spirit upon the faces of the apostles?

If he was not a man, who was it stood before Pilate at the judgment seat? And if he were not God, who caused the wife of Pilate to suffer many things in a dream?

If he was not a man, upon whose garments did the soldiers cast lots? And if he were not God, for what reason did the sun grow dark above the cross?

If he was not a man, who was it hung upon a cross? And if he were not God, who moved the earth from its foundations?

If he was not a man, whose hands were pierced by the nails? And if he were not God, how was the veil of the temple rent in two, and the rocks split asunder, and the graves opened?

If he was not a man, who cried out, “my God, my God, why hast thou abandoned me?” And if he were not God, who then hath said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do?”

If he was not a man, who hung with thieves upon a cross? And if he were not God, for what cause did he say, “This day thou shalt be with me in paradise?”

If he was not a man, in whose hand did Thomas feel the wounds of the nails and the lance? And if he were not God, to whom did Thomas cry out saying, “My Lord and my God?”

-St. Ephraem. (306-373).