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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

A New Beginning

By Bruce Burgess

Someone asked me what we are planning for Advent. I told them about the Hanging of the Greens, and the Four Sunday's of Advent, and the Christmas Eve candle light service. Then, it occurred to me, this is not the real question. The real question is: What is Advent planning for us?! After all, what were the Shepherds planning for Advent? They weren't expecting a Messiah. They were busy minding their sheep. What were Mary and Joseph planning for Advent? They weren't expecting a baby. They were still planning for their wedding. What were Zechariah and Elizabeth planning for Advent?

The first Christmas story was not planned by Zechariah and Elizabeth; nor by Mary and Joseph; nor the by the Shepherds. Neither was it planned by Herod, king of Judea. Nor even by great Caesar Augustus back in Rome.

The architect of Christmas is God alone. He controls the flow of history. It is God who brings his plans to completion according to his methods and his timetable. Do not ask, "What are we planning for Advent?" Rather, "What is Advent

planning for us?" Or better, "What is the Lord of Advent planning for us?"

Will God again send his Son as a baby in a manger? No. This is not what the Bible teaches. When Jesus comes again, he will be a ruler, king and judge. The world, as we know it today, will come to an end. But, as we again journey through the extraordinary Christmas story, is it possible that the Lord of Advent has something new for us? Is it possible that he plans to reveal Jesus to us as never before?

Remember the larger context of Luke's gospel. We have moved from the Old Testament to the New. There is a gap of about 400 years between the writing of the last book of the Old Testament, and the birth of Christ.

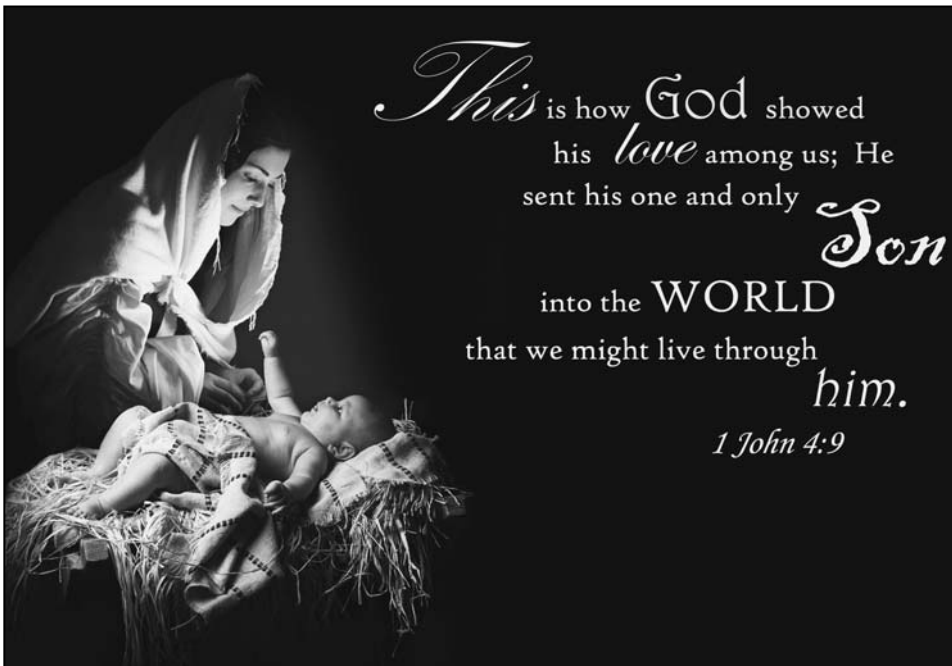
At the end of the Old Testament period, Israel is controlled by the most powerful empire of the time, the Persian Empire. At the beginning of the New Testament period, Israel is controlled by Rome. There has been an incredible power shift from East to West. Think of the changes in culture and language that come with such a shift.

But why a 400 year gap in the salvation story? We know that towards the end of that period a tremendous sense of anticipation was building. People were expecting the Messiah at any moment. Many fake Messiah's took advantage of this mood to push their own agendas. It was not a complete surprise that Jesus arrived on the scene in *those* days.

Why not a 300 year gap, or a 500 year gap? Why, on that afternoon did the Angel, Gabriel, come to Zechariah the priest and set in motion the most exciting and momentous events this planet has ever witnessed?

We could say that this is the mystery and wonder of Advent. We human beings do not control the timetable of God's salvation. It is all of God; all of grace. He is Sovereign Lord. God brings his plan to

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This is how God showed
his *love* among us; He
sent his one and only *Son*
into the **WORLD**
that we might live through
him.

1 John 4:9

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace” (Micah 5:4, 5).

‘He will be their peace.’ With such words the prophet Micah nurtured Israel’s long-cherished hope for a Davidic king who would lead the people back to their appointed role as a nation of priests, and so realize the kingdom of God on earth. The first Christians applied Micah’s prophecy to Jesus, believing him to be the Messianic Son of David, the Prince of Peace.

Thousands of years later, men and women look for peace but know very little of it. Many want peace but make war. People accept with enthusiasm the idea of peace. Nations and societies profess weariness with hatred and war. Is it possible that we wish for a good thing while remaining unwilling to pay the price necessary for its achievement? G.K. Chesterton is renowned for saying that ‘the world thinks Christianity has been tried and found wanting, but the truth is it has been tried and found too difficult.’

“He will be their peace.” It is one thing to accept with enthusiasm, peace as a proposal. The majority agree that humans must learn to love one another much more than they do. Love is principle and a ‘way of being’ modeled by Jesus. He linked it to this over-arching precept: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.”

Love for neighbor is not an ideal that can stand on its own legs. It has no guiding compass unless informed by God’s love. Many love the neighbor as themselves while prospering at the neighbor’s expense. Some love the neighbor even as they covet the neighbor’s property and influence. In short, there is a

species of love for neighbor which does nothing to bless him and nothing at all for world peace.

Jesus told his disciples: “As the father has loved me, so I love you; love one another as I have loved you.” The love of God, realized in the history of Jesus, has power to make peace on earth. Christmas reminds us that peace eludes us while we seek to create peace in ways other than the way of Christ.

When Paul thought on the love of Jesus Christ he saw its depth and uniqueness. He recognized it as the one integrating principle without which all effort and inventive success would be useless. *“If I am eloquent without love, I am a resounding gong. If I am smart with extensive theological expertise and religious understanding, I am nothing without love. If I am the world’s greatest philanthropist, and if I martyr myself for a cause, I gain nothing without love.”*

The way of peace is the way of Christ. The way of Christ is the way of love. The way of Christ’s love is the way of the love of God: the way of the cross.

*Man’s Via Crucis never ends,
Earth’s Calvaries increase.*

The world is full of spears and nails, But where is peace?

Take up the Cross and follow me,

I am the way my son.

Via Crucis, Via Pacis,

Meet, and are one.

-Studdert Kennedy

As we remember Bethlehem again, this Christmas, let each man and women think on this: He will be our peace—but only if we join him on his odyssey of love to Calvary—and beyond!



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completion according to his methods and timetable.

Someone said to me: “I never like to miss a church service.” “Why not?” I asked. “Because, I might miss something special. This might be the day a miracle happens, or a revival breaks out. This might be a day God comes among us with fire and cleansing and healing in his wings.”

What will Advent mean to us this year? Perhaps it will be the year of the great Second Advent; the return of Jesus Christ

in his glory. Then our waiting will be over. But if not that, maybe God will visit his people in a special way. How we *do* need a fresh visitation from our Lord!

Yes, the real question is not: What are we planning for Advent? But, what Advent is planning for us? The celebration of Advent is a great joy. We remember that historic, one-time event—Jesus coming into this world as a baby; the Savior of the whole world.



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Bethlehem

What magic there is in the word Bethlehem. All over the world, wherever Christians celebrate Christmas, this word carries its magic into human hearts. We all interpret it according to its own nationality and temperament and make-up. Just as Leonardo da Vinci painted his picture of "The Last Supper" with an Italian table on which Italian rolls were set for those who should eat, so we picture Bethlehem according to English tradition and custom.

We see a wide hillside on a glittering, frosty night and the moon high in the sky in a setting of fleecy clouds. Shepherds wrapped in heavy mantles and blankets, crouching over a fire, trying to keep warm. Near them, sheep huddled together for warmth in some rude fold open to the sky: then, the angels. The sky filled with their luminous presence; and the shepherds lifting, half-incredulous, wonder-stricken faces upward to see them. Then the majestic voices cry "Glory to God in the



By Leslie Weatherhead

highest, and on earth peace." It is not difficult to picture that.

In the distance is the town of Bethlehem, with the beckoning, soft light of its inn, nestling cozily under the lee of a protecting hill. In the stable, warm and straw-covered, fragrant with hay and with the breath of the mild and patient beasts, a beautiful maiden with her new-born, babe at her breast, and Joseph standing there, rugged, protective, strong. To that scene come three wise men, one at least in rich and royal robes. Kneeling on the straw, they offer their gifts: gold for royalty, frankincense for divinity, myrrh for humanity. What a lovely picture it is.

I think the reader would be quite cross with me if I wrote that Jesus was not born in December at all, and that he was not born in a stable of an inn. No one knows what month it was when Jesus was born. Both April and August have been suggested. Of the two, April is more likely. Shepherds might well be busy throughout the night in the lambing season, but not in December when the hills round Bethlehem are frequently covered with snow. In that month, the sheep would not be out on the hill sides, nor would the shepherds spend the night in the open.

December the twenty-fifth came to be Christmas day because, in the early church, of which so many slaves were members throughout the Roman Empire, that date was the Roman Saturnalia, the feast held to celebrate the end of the winter. Huge fires were lighted and every Roman celebrated the lengthening days and the returning sun. Everybody had a holiday and so the early Christians, with their day's holiday, celebrated the birth of him whose coming into their lives was more welcome than sunshine.

-Leslie Weatherhead: *IT HAPPENED IN PALESTINE*, pp. 3-5.



Yes, the thinking goes, if only we can get Christian people and Christian ideas to dominate the political landscape, we will have won the culture war and God will be glorified. It will be good for God and good for all Americans (indeed for the world). For we, being the true people of God, know God's will better than others and, thus, know better than pagans what is good for the nation. Few things can get a conservative Christian gathering as fired up as a message that hammers on topics such as these. The position is exceedingly popular, but as people whose ultimate allegiance is to the kingdom of God and not to any version of the kingdom of the world, we have to ask ourselves very sobering questions. First, since we are called to mimic Jesus, we have to ask: When did Jesus ever act or talk like this? Did Jesus ever suggest by word or example that we should aspire to acquire, let alone take over the power of Caesar? Did Jesus spend any time trying to improve, let alone dominate the government of his day? Did he ever work to pass laws against the sinners he hung out with and ministered to? Did he worry at all about ensuring that his

rights and the religious rights of his followers were protected? We must never forget that the only way we individually or collectively represent the kingdom of God is through loving.

-Gregory Boyd: *THE MYTH OF A CHRISTIAN NATION*, pp. 91-93.



Messiah

By Leon Morris

The Jews looked for the coming of a great One whom they called the Messiah. This is our transliteration of a Hebrew word which means 'anointed.' Translated into Greek it is *Christos*, from which we get 'Christ.' But the idea remains Jewish, not Greek.

In the Old Testament, the king was spoken of as 'the Lord's anointed,' and the priest as the 'anointed priest.' Prophets may also have been anointed (1 Kings 1:16). The significance of anointing appears to have been the consecrating of the person anointed to a particular religious task, perhaps also the endowment with divine grace for the task.

The Messiah, then, was one who was expected to come; in a special way, he would set forward God's purposes. There was more than one concept of Messiah-ship, but it would be true to say that by the first century the Jews had come to look on the Messiah as someone in a special relationship to God. He would usher in the end of the age, when the kingdom of God would be established. Many prophecies of the Scripture were applied to him, and all-in-all, he was of divine stature. As Gregory Dix has said: "The *function* of the Messiah is a divine function. His bringing in the kingdom of the heavens is God's own bringing in of his own kingdom. Once Jesus was accepted as Messiah by Jews, this identification of his own action in history with the action of God himself was inescapable."

'Messiah' so exactly expresses what Jesus was and came to do that we naturally wonder why he did not use this category to characterize his mission. The answer lies in the way it was interpreted by the Jews of his day. For them the Messiah was, in one aspect at least, a political deliverer. They looked to him to lead their armies against the hated Roman overlord, and to establish such a mighty empire as the world had never yet seen, an empire with its capital at Jerusalem, an empire worldwide in its scope, an empire in which God was supreme. Jesus decisively rejected this whole idea. For him the suggestion that he should establish such an empire was nothing less than a temptation of the devil.

Thus, to announce himself as the Messiah would have been to invite misunderstanding. Every Jew who heard the term would be thinking in terms of an eventual rebellion against Rome, and of the glorious consummation when the Jewish Empire would replace the Roman.

At the same time, Jesus did not reject the true concept of Messiah-ship. He knew himself to be the Messiah and on occasion would avow this, as in John's account of his talk with the woman of Samaria, or when Mark reports his words about giving a 'cup of water to drink cause you bear the name of Christ' (Mark 9:41). He raised no objection to the use of the term by Peter, or by Caiaphas (Mark 14:61), though in each case in reply, he used the expression, 'Son of man.'

Of particular importance is the way in which Jesus insisted on the lowly aspect of his Messiah-ship. The temptation narratives at the beginning of his ministry show him rejecting the temptation to use his miraculous powers to make stones into bread, to perform miracles that were merely spectacular, and to set up an earthly kingdom. He discerned the voice of Satan in each of these suggestions. What Messiah-ship meant

for him is clearly brought out in the account of Peter's great confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus had asked the disciples who men thought him to be, and, after various answers, asked them who they thought he was. Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16).

This is the first time any of the disciples had penetrated into the secret of his person, and Jesus attributed it to nothing less than a revelation from God the father (Matthew 16:17). The immediate sequel is important. "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

From that they knew him to be the Messiah (Christ he began to instruct them in the necessity for the passion. So far from Messiah-ship for Jesus meaning the path of eminence and authority and ease, it meant the way of suffering and shame and death. He had come to perform the divine function of seeking and saving the lost (Luke 19:10), and that involved death, the death which would be a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Jesus thought of Messiah-ship as following a lowly path, but this should not mislead us into thinking he thought little of his person. Rather the reverse is the case. Petty human minds might think in terms of earthly empires and material glory. The divine mind of Christ thought in terms of the salvation of men through the way of the cross.

Leon Morris: *THE LORD FROM HEAVEN*, pp. 28-31. 