

## THE PASTOR'S MESSAGE

## BETHLEHEM'S MANGER IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY

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Luke 11:15 . . . "Let us go even unto Bethlehem . . ."

Again we are about to commemorate what has been called the greatest event in all human history—the birth of our Lord. But in studying the life and ministry of Jesus we ought not to put one event above another; we must consider his earthly career as a whole. In so doing we can more accurately appraise the significance of His birth. It is in the light of what followed—the ministry of Jesus so wonderful in word and deed, his atoning death on Calvary, His glorious resurrection, and His spiritual return at Pentecost—that we may go to Bethlehem by faith today, and sing a more triumphant song than the angels sang. True, they were willing and joyous visitants, but they were singing about something we better understand than they. For we have been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus, which is something Peter says, "Angels desire to look into."

Yes, the light from that upper room, the light from the empty tomb, that changed the Cross of Christ from a symbol of crime and shame into a symbol of holiness and victory, shines clear down to Bethlehem's manger today. This gives Christmas its true meaning. It makes it a time for more joyous and heartfelt worship and devotion than the humble shepherds could give. Thank God for the shepherds, so humble and lowly, so obedient to the heavenly vision! But they had feeble apprehension of what it was all about. They had the faith to sense that something wonderful had taken place, when the angel choir came down, and the light shone around and the angel spake. They had faith to believe and feel something wonderful was to come. Thank God we today have all the light of fulfilled prophecy and history. We have the realization in our own hearts, if we are saved and sanctified, of Christ's glorious redemptive power. We have a faith which cannot be localized or limited by space or time. We can sing with the angels on the hills, travel with the shepherds as they leave their flocks and come seeking the Christ Child; we can greet the wisemen as they bring their treasure trove, and we can pour out at the "Infant Jesus'" feet greater treasures than gold, or frankincense or myrrh—even the full devotion of our hearts, into which Christ has been born, yea, where he has been crowned the Lord of Light and Glory!

Bethlehem's manger was indeed the fulfillment of prophecy that began when it was declared that the "seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head." The psalmist tuned his harp to this key when he sang "His name shall endure forever: His name shall be continued as long as the sun, and men shall be blessed in Him: All nations shall call Him blessed." How exultant became Isaiah as he seemed to stand in the presence of Christ at all stages of his career. His birth, His ministry, his ignominious death, His resurrection, and ever-expanding Kingdom kindled all the fire and eloquence of that marvelous personality. Daniel saw him as the "Desire of nations," and even the minor prophets were full of the Messianic hope.

But for long the tongue of the prophet had been silent in Israel. Four hundred years seems a long time to us. During those centuries Israel was a pawn in the conflict of nations. First Chaldea, then Persia, then came the Greek supremacy. Under the Maccabees there was an insurrection. For one hundred and twenty years Israel was free. Then came the Roman conquest that crushed the chosen people to the earth.

We have space but to faintly describe the condition of the world when God again broke through, first by sending John the Baptist as a second Elijah and then in the birth of Jesus. The Imperial glory of ancient Rome was on the wane. The northern tribes she had conquered had learned the art of war, and were driving their captors back. Slavery, licentiousness and absolute atheism were rampant. All faith in the gods had been lost. Under the cruel power of Rome, the Jews suffered the greatest humiliation. Taxation swallowed up the people's earnings. There was a wail of despair in the land. Yea, in all lands. Even outside of Israel there was the expectation of some great event that would change the course of history and ameliorate human suffering. It was then the fullness of time had come and God sent forth his son to redeem the world, to prove that the weakness of God is stronger than men, and the foolishness of God is wiser than men. This event split the ages in twain; it kindled faith and hope in the hearts of the oppressed in a message of emancipation, in a message that put a divine stamp on human personality and lifted the lowly and the oppressed to a place of power and rulership. It sanctified womanhood and childhood, and family life, to make possible all those blessed influences that radiate and flow from a Christian home. Yea, for an explanation of all that is bright, beautiful, sweet and holy, we must go even unto Bethlehem and see in that little babe all the potentialities that have become realities for millions of souls today.

I cannot take a pessimistic view of this old world even with all the horrors of war that now prevail in many lands. Bethlehem's manger compels me still to "believe to see the goodness of the Lord in this land of the living." I asked a brother who had just preached a sermon on the awfulness of "the times," if he had ever read Church history? Especially of the conditions that prevailed in Wesley's day? He said "no." After taking into consideration the coldness of the church, and the awful sin that abounds, I believe we must admit that Christ's Kingdom has made marvellous progress. There were multiplied millions in China, India, Africa, who were enshrouded in awful heathenism, and the rest of the world was little better when Christ was born. And when Wesley was born scarcely a ray of Gospel light had penetrated the countries named above. Today there are millions in India who would die rather than give up their faith in Jesus. Africa, so long called "the land of night," has seen a great light. Ethiopia is indeed stretching out her hands to God. Multitudes in that land will soon be singing Christmas carols and reading the story of heaven coming down to earth in the choir that sang of peace on earth, goodwill toward men. Truly He brought peace to Africa, for only a hundred years ago England was exploiting her poor benighted peoples for the sake of gold. Surely the slave trade was the "sum of all villainies." Its horrors were indescribable. But

from Cairo to the Cape, Christian negroes will turn in faith to Bethlehem's manger to commemorate the faith of Him who came to be their emancipation.

It is sad to think that so many in so-called Christian lands, and who call themselves Christians, are so grossly sensual, so carnally minded, that they fail to see this spiritual meaning of Bethlehem's manger, and the child that was born there in the long ago. But we can thank God for the multitudes who have found in Him who was born there, their joy and song, the One Who makes life really worth living. Carols and Christmas messages will be borne on the air to millions who are fighting on land and sea and in the air, that will comfort their hearts and make them brave to do their part in this awful conflict.

As the leaders of four great nations have met together in deliberation, and have pledged their respective nations to fight for the liberation of the oppressed, and protection of the rights of weaker nations, we see here the expression of a Christian ideal. Nothing like this was dreamed of among strong nations before Jesus came. The hopes and fears of all the years center there. He who was born at Bethlehem was the Lord of life and glory. He is not only to be the one before whom every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. He is King and Lord today in the hearts of millions who will commemorate His birth with joy and song. May we all see in Him the Lord of Christmas Day:

Heaven overflowed with music at the lowly manger birth.

Heavenly choirs sang the chorus: Peace, good will to men on earth.

From the mystic far-off ages, through the corridors of time

Comes today the heavenly music with a melody sublime.

In the background of this music hear Israel's undertone—

Lion of the tribe of Judah: King upon a royal throne;

Yea, the psalmist, priest and prophet sang through ages dark and long;

Hear we now the grand crescendo in the angel's Christmas song.

Cease **your** striving, men of passion. Cease your revelry and mirth;

Hear again the angels' message: God has come to men on earth.

Let your hearts join in this chorus; let your tongue this mystery tell:

Glory in the highest glory! God has come with man to dwell!

Tune your harps to this note glorious. Let this theme your songs inspire:

Bethlehem's mystery and glory—fulness of the world's desire—

Let not Things shut out the vision. Let not Things your hearts enthrall;

Let your heart now be His cradle. Crown Him as the Lord of all.

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## CIRCUMSPECTLY

"Circumspect" is made up of two Latin words, "circum," meaning round, and "specio" meaning to look. That makes us read, "See that ye walk, looking around, not as foolish but as wise."