

THE AUSTRALIAN ANABAPTIST

God's solid foundation stands firm. 2 Tim. 2-19

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Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel,
but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in
the house.

Matthew 5:15

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For A Conservative Anabaptist Perspective

From The Editor's Desk

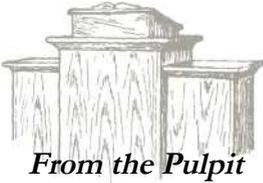
THE JOY OF TEMPTATIONS.

This seems rather a contradictory statement even though in our daily walk with God we can and do face temptations but I wonder how many of us count it all joy when we fall into these temptations? Yes that's what it says in James 1 but as we read on we start to realise that these temptations are part of our growth in faith in Jesus Christ so that we may be perfect and entire wanting nothing, James 1:2-4.

In 2 Peter 2:9 we have the encouraging words that the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations and this tells us that we do not have to rely on our own willpower but rather we can call on God in prayer to deliver us, that's the first step and the 2nd step then of course is up to us to obey the direction that God gives us in overcoming a particular temptation and when we do we have those comforting words in James 1:12 that we will be blessed through our enduring and overcoming temptations it says: Blessed *is* the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him.

We also need to be aware that temptations can come whether we are in prosperous or adverse circumstances. Matthew Henry has this to say: "Christianity teaches men to be joyful under troubles: such exercises are sent from God's love; and trials in the way of duty will brighten our graces now, and our crown at last. Let us take care, in times of trial, that patience, and not passion, is set to work in us: whatever is said or done, let patience have the saying and doing of it. When the work of patience is complete, it will furnish all that is necessary for our Christian race and warfare. We should not pray so much for the removal of affliction, as for wisdom to make a right use of it. And who does not want wisdom to guide him under trials, both in regulating his own spirit, and in managing his affairs?"

In this month's edition there are some short articles entitled "*Be Of Good Cheer, The Race That All Must Win, Our Important Commitment To God and Staying Close To The Shepherd*" all of which point to us playing an active role in being a disciple of Jesus Christ and as we consider that aspect of faith we would also have to acknowledge that along the way of holiness there are many temptations that would draw us away if we do not seek God's help who will make a way to escape. 1 Corinthians 10:13. J.v.l



From the Pulpit

"Behold, a Virgin Shall . . . Bear a Son"
From a message by Brother Merle Ruth

With these divinely inspired words, recorded in Isaiah 7:14 the prophet described the sign that God promised to the house of David. The acclamation with which he began his announcement was indeed fitting: "Behold!" For a virgin to bear a son was an unheard of happening.

But, praise God, it is no longer an unheard of happening. "When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman" (Galatians 4:4). The seemingly incredible occurred. Furthermore, the given sign signified an event of enormous significance. So significant was that event that it became the pivot point around which all history revolves. On the far side of that birth the dates are prefaced BC and after AD.

Briefly told, here is the story. About seven hundred years after the promise, "the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin . . . and the virgin's name was Mary" Luke 1:26-27. Significantly, Gabriel's message to Mary began with the same exclamation that the prophet had employed. "Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS" Luke 1:31.

Joseph, the man to whom Mary was espoused, received a similar visit. To him the angel said, "Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost" Matthew 1:20. The inspired recorder of this account then adds this explanatory note: "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet" Matthew 1:22.

In due time, Mary "brought forth her firstborn son" Luke 2:7. And the courts of heaven rang with joyful worship, Hebrews 1:6. Out on the Judean hills, a heaven-sent angel appeared to a group of lowly shepherds. To them he announced the greatest news ever published. "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" Luke 2:10-11.

Yes, our Lord was born. Like everyone else, He had a birthday. But, like no one else, His birth did not mark His beginning. He was alive before He was born! In later life, He made this astounding claim: “Before Abraham was, I am” John 8:58.

A virgin for a mother? That’s right. The sign came to pass. And because it occurred in this way, the birth of our Lord is commonly referred to as the virgin birth.

It is proper, however, to employ also the expression virgin conception. A careful reading of the accounts of the Nativity leaves the impression that the miraculous element was in the conception. The angel answered Mary’s perplexity with this reply: “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” Luke 1:35. It is generally assumed that the growth and birth that followed the conception was normal. If this assumption is correct, it would be proper to say that Christ was supernaturally conceived yet naturally born.

But there is also justification for the expression *virgin birth*. Because conception did not occur in the normal way, Mary’s virginity remained intact and she remained a virgin until Jesus was born. Matthew, in his account, went out of the way to clarify this fact. “Joseph knew her not till she had brought forth firstborn son” Matthew 1:25. So, to accurately tell the whole story, we need to employ both expressions — *virgin conception* and *virgin birth*. Or, we can simply state it thus: Jesus miraculously conceived by the Holy Ghost born of a virgin.

What about the term incarnation? How is related? Very closely. Comparing the two terms, one would need to say that the term *incarnation* stands for a concept larger than that suggested by the term *virgin birth*. The incarnation concept includes the presupposition that the virgin-born Saviour was God before He ever became Jesus of Nazareth. When the Bible asserts that “the Word was made flesh” John 1:14, it means that the eternally pre-existing Messiah took on a human form. Because He became incarnated in a perfectly human body, this humanly incomprehensible transition has come to be known as the Incarnation. The virgin birth was the doorway through which this mystery broke in upon a needy world. Stated very

simply, the virgin birth was the means by which the Incarnation was accomplished.

When looked at in retrospect the very first Messianic prophecy is seen to contain a rather obvious allusion to the virgin birth. The promise recorded in Genesis 3:15 speaks of the “seed of the woman” bruising the head of the serpent. Ordinarily, posterity is referred to as the seed of man. The use of this unusual expression appears to anticipate the virgin birth. Evidently, from the very beginning this detail was an integral part of God’s redemptive plan.

Also, the already-looked-at Isaiah 7 passage has in it a significant not-yet-noted detail. Instead of “a virgin,” the original reads “the virgin.” The definite article “the” indicates that a very specific virgin was in mind. More than likely, here is a reappearance of the “woman” of Genesis 3:15 and pre-appearance of the “Mary” of Luke 1:27.

The Biblical passages that trace the genealogy of Joseph and Mary are likewise remarkable in the way they lend support to the factuality of our Lord’s virgin birth. Moving from Abraham to Christ, Matthew employs repeatedly the clause so-and-so “begat” so-and-so. But when he arrives at Joseph, he carefully avoids the use of that expression. Instead, he puts it this way, “Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus” Matthew 1:16. Moving in the opposite direction, from Christ to Adam, Luke begins thus: “And Jesus . . . being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph” Luke 3:23. The inference is that the truth of the matter was contrary to popular supposition. These writers, as they wrote, were unerringly guided by the Holy Spirit.

Elements of the supernatural did enter the birth of other God-picked men. Long after the usual time of childbearing, Sarah, the long-barren wife of aged Abraham, gave birth to Isaac, the child of promise. The New Testament counterpart to this was the unlikely conception of John the Baptist made possible supernaturally. But in the case of both Isaac and John, the husband was still the biological father. Aside from Jesus, no other person was (*or has ever been*) born without a father.

It has been observed that the virgin birth accounts are of the nature of an affirmation rather than an explanation. No attempt is made to explain why the Godhead chose this particular way to accomplish the Incarnation. Let's be cautious about making statements that imply that God had to do it this way to get His Son into the human stream unconditioned by sin. That He did this is obvious. That He did it the best possible way would be just like God. But to assert that He could have done it in no other way puts a limit on God's ability.

That our Lord's entry into the world occurred in a way contrary to nature is viewed by some as a big obstacle to Christian faith. However, this critical view arises from hearts that are biased against the supernatural. Where there is an open mind, the virgin birth actually commends itself to human reason. Good logic admits that a miracle life demands a miracle origin. If God became man, then you would expect Him to have an unusual entrance into life. And indeed He did.

It is very inconsistent to attempt to identify with the redemption plan and yet reject the miracle of the virgin birth. For as soon as one claims to be a believer in God, he has made room for the biggest miracle of all — the very existence of God!

Those who deny the factuality of the virgin birth need to be reminded of the seriousness of what they are doing. That denial has implications from which it cannot be divorced. If the Biblical record is unreliable on so crucial a matter, what assurance can we have that it is trustworthy in any matter? Really, he who disbelieves the virgin birth puts a question mark over the entire Bible.

Furthermore, consider this. Since God created Adam without the agency of either a father or a mother, why would it be too hard for Him to bring His Son into the world through the agency of only a mother? There is another position. Silence. An occupant of this position might say, "No, I will not deny that it may be factual, but neither will I teach it. Do with it what you please. I have concluded that it is an irrelevant detail that no Christian is required to believe."

But those who make belief in the virgin birth optional — and this is commonly done, even by so-called Christian ministers — have not reckoned with the sinfulness of unbelief. Listen to 1 John 5:10: “He that believeth not God hath made him a liar.” Lest we become guilty of doing that, may our prayer be, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” Mark 9:24.

Merle Ruth Annville, PA

Eastern Mennonite Testimony Vol XXVI; December 1994 p.3



A Saviour Is Born

*But when the fulness of the time was come,
 God sent forth his Son,
 Made of a woman, made under the law.
 Galatians 4:4*

The birth of Jesus Christ was not the birth of an ordinary child or that of a prince, governor, or king of this world but far beyond that, it was the birth of the Saviour of the world. He was to be that Saviour who would save man from the enemy of sin against which he had no power. He was to be a bright and shining light to those who sat in darkness and the shadow of death, from which there was no hope of escape. In this season may we experience a deep understanding of the purpose of the birth of this Holy Child.

Let us read what the Scripture says in the words of the Apostle Luke:

Luke 2:1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

² (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

¹² And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

The message begins with the words, "And it came to pass."

Had God planned this decree for this particular time?

Let us look back 1700 years to the time of Jacob's death. Jacob called his sons together to tell them what was to befall them in the last days (Genesis 49:1). Then he began at the eldest and prophesied of the things that would come to pass. When speaking to Judah he said, "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be" (v. 10).

Even though Judah was not the firstborn, he had to some extent already been a leader in the family. Jacob, because of a vision of God's divine plan, prophesied that the scepter of rule would be given to the tribe of Judah and would not be taken away until Shiloh, or the Messiah, would come. We see this leadership established as David was anointed by Samuel. A lineage is clearly visible through the time of the kings, but becomes more obscure after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and carried many of the Jews away to Babylon. But even there God had a way to preserve the rule he had established. He used different ways and means to place His people into the

palace and raise them up to high places in government. Daniel was made ruler over the whole province of Babylon. Esther and Mordecai helped to save their people and to keep them from genocide and oppressive taxation. Ezra, in the time of Cyrus king of Persia, led the Jewish people back to the land of Judah and rebuilt Jerusalem.

When Alexander the Great came in 332 B.C. and overcame the Jewish nation, he still left them free of tribute. In the year of 168 B.C. when Antiochus ordered the Jewish worship to cease, the Maccabean revolt led them to a certain freedom until Pompey came from Rome in 63 B.C. and gained control of Jerusalem. Sixty-three years later, when the fullness of time was come, the Jewish nation lost its authority, and the scepter was taken away by the lowly birth of the Son of God, the "Shiloh" that had been promised all those years previously.

It is impressive to see the completeness in which the prophecy was fulfilled and with which God's plan unfolded. Never before in the history of the tribe of Judah had such a decree gone out. Never before had such a tax been placed on this tribe that was to bear the scepter of rule. Truly God had given a King upon whose shoulders the government rested and had taken away the scepter of the rule of Judah.

Joseph and Mary lived in the small village of Nazareth. Because it was so small and unimportant, it is not even mentioned in the Old Testament or by the historian Josephus. Nazareth lay in a valley situated approximately eighty miles north of Bethlehem. Because of Caesar's decree, Joseph and Mary needed to make their way from that low valley in Galilee up to the hills of Judaea. And so it was, that the Saviour was born in Bethlehem, just as it had been prophesied in Micah 5:2: "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel."

How and why did this all come about?

God created man in His own image, pure, undefiled, and filled with His love. He left them one command, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" Genesis 2:17. Through the temptation of the serpent, man fell into disobedience and death. This fall was not just a little stumble with a fast, easy remedy. It was a fall from eternal life to eternal death, from communion with God to a hopeless existence away from God, from peace to war, from rest to complete unrest, from being the crowning of cre-

ation to being doomed to the depths of hell, from the glorious light of God to outer darkness. God said to the woman, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow," (Genesis 3:16), and to the man He said, "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it" (v. 17). Oh, that we could perceive the true depths of the fallen state of man!

It was not just Adam and Eve who fell into this darkness, but it was each and every one of the human race. Among men there was not one found who was pure and could offer any hope or any light to a race lost in darkness. It was as though we all were caught in the depths of a cave with no light. The people must have rejoiced to recall the words of Isaiah, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hash the light shined" (Isa. 9:2). How despairing to think of being made to dwell in the land of the shadow of death with that shadow always all about us. We can feel the joy in seeing in Christ a hope, not only for this life but for the life which is to come. How wonderful to think that to us poor lost mortals is given the unspeakable gift of the Light of the world, with assurance of being raised again from our lost state to sit in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

In Luke 2:25-35 we read of a man named Simeon who was just and devout and waited for the consolation of Israel. Can we imagine what it must have been like to be living under the Law and waiting, longing, and hoping to see that One who was to redeem Israel? The day finally came when Simeon met Joseph and Mary in the temple with a little Babe. Think of taking that little one up in your arms, as he did, and feel the hope, and proclaim, "For mine eyes have seen thy salvation" (Luke 2:30).

During the Christmas season, the world is preoccupied with much decorating, with lights, trees, and ornaments. People flock to shopping centers and spend much money on frivolous gifts. They go to many parties with lightheartedness, and entertainment. All these things only take their minds farther from the true meaning of the birth of the Saviour.

How can we as Christians observe Christmas so God will be pleased and glorified?

How can I have a deeper gratitude for God's gift of His Son?

Is the worldly approach to Christmas gaining an entrance among us?

The true spirit of Christmas can be found only in a child of God. It is not a light, frivolous feeling that needs much activity to keep it alive, but it is a deep inner peace and thankfulness that makes itself known by a true sacri-

fice of self in giving to others. It comes only by a faith that works by love. In this season, may our lives magnify our Lord who so humbly came. May those around us feel the warmth of His peace and love as it radiates forth from us.



THE BIRTH RECORD

In many nations, every live birth is recorded in an official manner. This is for future reference and becomes an important part of a person's identification. One can obtain a birth certificate (often a copy of the original entry of registration) from the registrar's office upon request. In our present-day social and economic system, one's birth record is the anchor of his or her identity; it is of great value.

It is not known whether the birth of Jesus Christ was recorded officially. Joseph, Christ's presumed father, went to Bethlehem with Mary, his espoused wife, to pay a census tax. There he would have been registered as a citizen, and possibly Mary also (Luke 2:5). But one wonders whether the birth of a Child of Heavenly origin would have been registered in the annals of the earthly realm.

But praise God that the birth of Jesus is recorded! However, it is in a different way than with writing of ink on a given page in a registrar's book. The fact is that the birth of the Saviour is the most recorded birth the world has ever known, barring none. And it is still being confirmed—recorded again and again—and will continue to be so until the end of time. Let us notice the words of the apostle John as to where this record is being kept: "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness [the record] in himself... And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" 1 John 5:10-11.

There it is! The meek and humble believers in the "Word ... made flesh" (John 1:14) have the irrefutable record of His birth in their hearts. They know He was born because He lives in them, just as John says in his first epistle. Here we have the answer to the question posed by the prophet Isaiah, "...who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living" Isaiah 53:8. When the birth record of Jesus Christ is written in the heart, thus giving evidence of His "kind," or generation, even the unre-

generate can know that the gospel is true.

This divine truth is hidden from the wise and arrogant (Matthew 11:25), and from the high and mighty (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). They search in vain for proof of Jesus' birth, because they think in the intellectual mode, not in faith. For this reason, many speak disdainfully of the virgin birth of that One born in a stable in Bethlehem. True Christians, on the other hand, have examined Christ's birth certificate many a time by faith, rejoicing in its meaning and promise.

Christ Jesus "came down from heaven" John 6:38, to live for a time among sinful mankind. Travelers to other nations today must have a valid passport in order to depart from their country and be admitted into another. What comprised the Messiah's credentials with which He left the celestial realm and came to a sin-cursed world?

A passport is a person's home country's testimony to another that says the individual is indeed a citizen of good standing. A certificate establishing one's parentage and attesting to birth in one's native country is needed to obtain a passport. In the case of our Saviour, the prophetic record in God's Word of His deity and Heavenly origin is clear and beautiful. When Jesus came into His ministry, it was made even clearer.

John 3:16 tells us that Christ was "the only begotten Son" of the Father. When Jesus was baptized, "a voice from heaven, [said], This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" Matthew 3:17. On the Mount of Transfiguration, "a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him" Mark 9:7. That was the Heavenly Father speaking both times. Jesus Himself said, "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world" John 16:28. Other words of Jesus that substantiate Him being the Son of the Father are, "I and my Father are one" John 10:30, and, "...the Father is in me, and I in Him" (v. 38). He needed this identity in order to deal with the sin matter.

One must conclude that Christ was begotten of God by way of the Father separating part of Himself and proclaiming that Deity to be His Son. "So also Christ glorified not himself... but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee" (Hebrews 5:5, Psalm 2:7). Thus the Son was of the Father, and the Father was in the Son; they were one God (Mark 12:29). Truly, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" 2 Corinthians 5:19. The sum of all this is that Christ had a Heavenly passport when He came to earth, because He was begotten of the Father.

Jesus' earthly birth was a divine miracle—a virgin conceived through the overshadowing of the Holy Ghost (Isaiah 7:14; Luke 1:31-35). This was incredible, and possibly exposed both Joseph and Mary to scandalous taunts. From one point of view, if one puts himself in the populace's place, it is understandable that they doubted. On the other hand, God has never asked people to believe anything that He had not first foretold by the prophets.

Furthermore, Jesus' claim to being of Heaven was substantiated by many signs and wonders. And His teaching was with power through the witness of the Holy Ghost (John 7:46; Matthew 7:28-29). Today, looking back, we have the clear Biblical record of all this as a firm foundation of our faith. God is never unreasonable in asking one to believe the truth.

In the end, if the world is to be convinced, the preponderant evidence of Christ's birth resides in the believers. The believers are the only Bible that many read. "And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." This can only mean that believers also have been born of God. We are thus made "partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" 2 Peter 1:4. Such a distinct life, which Paul describes as being a "new creature" (2 Corinthians 5:17), is a strong argument that a doubting world must ponder. It is a high calling and great blessing for Christians to keep Jesus' birth record in their lives.

True Christianity is a religion of the heart. All outward actions and professions are worthless unless the heart is right with God. The passage of Proverbs 4:23 is really meaningful: "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." The heart of man is the source of life, and this spring needs to be well protected so its waters are not poisoned.

—*Selected Editorials – Messenger of Truth*



MAKING CHRISTMAS MEMORABLE

As Christmas comes again in 2015, we ponder its significance. Or do we? Are we too busy and stressed to consider the glorious implications of Christ's birth?

A cross section of our congregation responded to a survey of attitudes

and opinions regarding what constitutes a memorable Christmas. Asked what they would wish to eliminate from the celebration of Christmas, two of those polled suggested "busyness" and "Santa Claus." Others added "extravagant gift exchanges" and "excessive youth activities." Pressure to buy gifts for those "who have everything" got triple support.

Shallowness, which is a lighthearted approach to this sacred time, needs to be eliminated. In order to avoid being negative, we also considered aspects that need strengthening. It is important to give from our hearts, put God first, consider the reality of Christ's birth, and think of others before ourselves. Also, family togetherness is important. The concern about excessive youth activities relates to this. Parents would like their children home for more family activity. Families could carol for neighbors and visit a bit if welcomed in. Families could buy gifts for underprivileged persons instead of each other.

Christmas, all aspects of it, impresses children. Do they learn what is acceptable amid all the hubbub of the season? Are snowmen, Baby Jesus, colored lights, angels, shopping, decorations and gifts all in a jumble in their minds? Looking at our practices, what should we de-emphasize so the truth shines forth? The brothers and sisters polled gave 100 percent support to the thought of eliminating the importance of receiving gifts. Other items included gift lists, parties, decorations, selfishness, and excessive busyness. Ideas were given for properly impressing children and students. Our children will need to have the good old story explained carefully on their level. The more uniquely it is done, the better. How about going out on a starlit night as a family and imagining that this is The Night?

During this season, all childish questions should be answered clearly, such as, "What is wrong with believing in Santa Claus?" Let children memorize Christmas passages. Other positive activities included making gifts for elderly friends, sharing with needy children, and sacrificing something special in order to make someone happy.

Asked to list in order of importance, sharing with the less fortunate, gathering with relatives, sending Christmas greetings, exchanging gifts, and caroling, 99 percent of the respondents decided sharing with the unfortunate was first. That's exactly what I thought until I read, once again, the Story. Then I put caroling first. The very first clue to the Great Event was angels singing praises. Without the Gift, there is no hope for us. Is it not of first importance to praise God for His gift?

Carolers have an awesome and beautiful opportunity to bring the message of hope. Joy to the world! On a silent, holy night, holy voices sweetly sounded through the skies. The beautiful star of Bethlehem shone on while shepherds watched their flocks by night. Soon angels from the realms of glory proclaimed that to us a child of hope is born. And all are invited to come see the child of Bethlehem, away in a manger. He will come into our hearts if there is room. Such a message! Such love! What a sacred trust it is to quietly gather near a home and waken a family with the glorious reminder!

"On earth, peace ..." the angels proclaimed. Pulling up a chair to the family table indicates a bond of closeness that must surely resemble the peace and security found in the family of God. This should never be neglected or taken for granted. Children from secure homes go forth to minister, possibly unknowingly, because of the peace in their hearts.

Gift giving to one another comes last in the Christmas event. It was not done in the original setting. Never could a mortal give a gift of equal value to our Saviour. Not even if we gave our whole selves. However, our gift is a simple thank-you to Jesus for His priceless gift to us.

"Good will ... !" Oh, what a need there is in our strife-torn world.

A sister in the Lord Nebraska



BE OF GOOD CHEER

The disciples of Jesus were men subject to human propensities just as we are. Their faith faltered under test, and they experienced fear, despite the many miracles they witnessed firsthand. This is borne out by the Gospel of Mark's recording of Jesus feeding the multitude and the disciples' subsequent stormy crossing of Galilee (Mark 6:35-52). In this account, the goodness and feeling of Jesus for His followers is highlighted (see the parallel account in Matthew 14:15-33; John 6:5-21)

Before judging the twelve disciples critically for their lack of faith, we should recognize that believers today have an advantage. We have the written record (the Bible) of Jesus' power and goodness, which is indelibly imprinted in our hearts and minds to the point of being beyond question. Saints of twenty centuries have lived and died in peace, believing the rec-

ord, thus confirming its veracity to us. The disciples in Jesus' day struggled to more fully comprehend that this man Jesus, who in every respect was one like them (excepting the sin nature), was actually the Son of God from heaven. Intellectually, this point is not an issue with us today, but how like them we are in other ways!

There was that day, already referred to, when Jesus fed five thousand men (and, no doubt, numbers of women and children) with five loaves and two fish (Mark 6:34-44). The Twelve were helpers in this effort; they participated in a great miracle. What must have been their thoughts when they realized that the few loaves and fish broken by Jesus were endlessly multiplying, perhaps right in their hands? And as a further personal confirmation that this was a great miracle wrought by Jesus they gathered baskets full of fragments. (see Matthew 16:9-10).

When the multitude was dismissed at evening, Jesus commanded the disciples to get in a boat and cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He Himself "departed into a mountain to pray" (v. 46). "And when even(ing) was come, the ship was in the midst of the sea, and he alone on the land. And he saw them toiling in rowing; for the wind was contrary unto them" (vv. 47-48).

We are traversing the Sea of Time, crossing over to the other side, and how often we, too, have encountered contrary winds! Naturally and spiritually, life will test our faith, sooner or later. It must have been a pleasure to cross the Sea of Galilee when the breeze was gently filling the sail and pushing the craft in the right direction. We like the easy sailing, in the spiritual sense. We wish it could be that way always, and sometimes even expect it to be so. But as with the disciples, the contrary winds do come, and there is no recourse but to toil in rowing.

Contrary winds test one's commitment, because one must take up the oars of self-denial and cross bearing. If the memory of previous care and blessing in Christ Jesus is not alive in the heart, one may be tempted to let the boat be driven with the wind at this point.

The Scripture says that from the land Jesus "saw them toiling in rowing." He had gone up into the mountain to pray. But apparently, intermittently, He arose from His knees to check on His beloved disciples' progress. Was that with the usual eyesight of men, or was it with the vision of the all-seeing God? In any way, He was cognizant of their laboring. An intellectual belief will fail to grasp the security inherent in such awareness of

the Son of God of our situation. Nor does a mere historical faith appreciate the beauty of that scene: Jesus kneeling in deep communion with the Father, and yet arising betimes out of fraternal concern for His followers. Only true faith and experience will tell us that He sees our toiling in rowing.

"And about the fourth watch of the night he cometh unto them, walking upon the sea... [and] they all saw him, and were troubled" (vv. 48-50). In fact, they cried out with fear (v. 49). One can glean several treasures of truth from these verses. One is that the Lord will not leave us to struggle alone in our toiling in rowing. He feels for us and will come to us and help us. A second point is that when our hearts are not "full of faith" (Acts 6:5, 8), we do not readily grasp that Jesus, the Creator (John 1:3), can suspend the laws of nature and do the "impossible." Just as He walked on Galilee's waves, He can walk on our stormy sea of trial and test and come to our aid. Again, the disciples' faith was growing little by little, but in this case Mark points out that "they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was [yet] hardened" (v. 52).

In the midst of the storm and fear, "immediately [Jesus] talked with them, and saith unto them, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid" (v. 50). Jesus will not leave His followers in fright. He identifies Himself and talks with them. He is the master of the storm in every way. It is true that, as far as we know, the Lord had never before come to them in this manner. Being in the dead of the night and in rough seas, Jesus' supernatural appearance caused a natural fear in them. So from that perspective, one could say their fears were understandable. But "immediately" Christ made Himself known to them, and His familiar voice quieted those fears.

More than that, "he went up unto them into the ship; and the wind ceased: and they were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure, and wondered" (v. 51). The Gospel of John records that "they willingly received him into the ship: and immediately the ship was at the land whither they went" (John 6:21). Whenever toiling in rowing believers willingly receive Jesus into their heart, they arrive at the Lord's appointed place.

The call of the Holy Spirit today is to "cross over" to a close walk with God, to consecration and dedication to His service. Many recall divine visitations of the past, having collected their own basketful of spiritual provision. May that strengthen our faith now. Jesus is presently interceding in our behalf as we endeavor to obey His command. In this effort, we may meet with contrary winds, and some are expressing a certain fear what the

present revival will entail. But we can know with certainty that when we hear the Lord's voice saying, "Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid," and when He is willingly received into our boat, the storm ceases. May these words of our God comfort and cheer us in times of difficulty: "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" Hebrews 13:5 and Joshua 1:1-5.



THE RACE THAT ALL MUST WIN

The Apostle Paul envisioned an earnest race that is noncompetitive. Its reward is in receiving the approval of God, not the acclaim of men. In this race, striving and exertion relate to steadfastness in the faith of Jesus. It is a race that all must win to gain that heavenly crown. Hear what the writer of the Hebrews epistle says: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

That the object of this race is not to best someone else is obvious; it is to be run with patience, not in a frantic frame of mind. When the Scriptures speak of being patient, or having patience, the meaning is, most usually, unwavering perseverance based on total commitment (James 5:7; Romans 15:4). The Christian's race is a test of faithful endurance in cross bearing and humility, not necessarily one of swiftness, as in prideful profession. "The race is not to the swift" (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Speaking of opposition and the need to stay in the race, Jesus said, "He that endureth to the end shall be saved" (Matthew 10:22). Far too many have entered the race and have dropped out along the way.

The Heaven-proposed object of this race is to win—by successfully crossing the finish line, "looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith." But who of us is not like the boy described in a certain poem, who wanted to win a race by being first across the finish line? In his great effort, he stumbled and fell. He felt all was lost, but his father called from the sideline, "Get up, and win the race!" Arising from the dirt, the boy ran again with all he had, only to fall the second time. Despair and shame seized him, but again his father exhorted, "Get up, and win the race!" The

scene repeated itself the third time, but the lad did "win" the race—he crossed the finish line to the applause of the spectators. So does the Heavenly Father and through the Spirit, exhort us to persevere and win the race.

It is notable that the "great ... cloud of witnesses" the apostle refers to is, likely, the men and women of faith enumerated in the preceding chapter. Having endured by faith, they were now beholding the progress of those embracing the fulfillment of all things, the faith in Christ Jesus. One is afforded a glimpse into a realm that is just beyond the sight of the natural eye. Two thousand years hence, that cloud of witnesses has grown vastly. Albeit just on the other side of the vale, their victory won in finishing the race surely is an incentive for us to rise up and win the race.

"What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). In this race, there are no obstacles so big that they can stop truth. There are no challenges so perplexing but that there is a way through. Neither are there any failings or downfalls but what the Father urges, "Get up, and win the race!" What is sorely needed is the faith and obedience of Abraham, who "after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise" (Hebrews 6:15).'

It cannot be ignored that the Apostle perceived this race as requiring that one be not encumbered with things of self and the flesh. He says, "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us" (Hebrews 12:1). That sounds so absolute and close. One's direction will be clarified if he settles in his heart what he is really living for in life. Are Christ and the church the center of one's life, and all other things peripheral, or are the interests of self central to us and things of salvation on the fringes? In the context of the race portrayed here and the question of what constitutes a weight, one will need to be honest with God and himself.

There might be a difference between weights and besetting sins. A weight, of itself, may not be sinful, but why would one handicap him or herself in this race by carrying along extra baggage? Common sense says that whatever hinders or impedes spiritual progress is a weight. Jesus taught that if our hand or foot or eye should hinder us, it would be better to put it out of the way than to miss the mark (Mark 9:43-48).

The pleasantries, fads, and innovations of our day and greatly increased socializing present a realm were many weights offer themselves. It could be that a goodly number of runners in the Christian race are carrying weights of various sizes and shapes. Thus it is not a wonder that one may

feel he is running reasonably well when, in reality, he is handicapped. The very penchant to compare ourselves among ourselves is a weight (and maybe a besetting sin?). Paul says "we dare not make ourselves of the number" that do this, because it is not wise (2 Corinthians 10:12).

The sin that easily beset the Christians of Hebrew stock was the reverting to keeping aspects of the Law as their merit unto salvation. Paul said they needed to lay that aside if they were to run successfully. Today the Holy Spirit is warning us that to "serve" the Lord without our first love easily besets us (Revelation 2:4-5). Not minimizing the peril of carrying a weight, or weights, the easily besetting sin of leaving one's first love is of gravest consequence.

To finish this "course with joy" (Acts 20:24) will demand our all. Jesus taught this truth in the parable of the merchant man seeking goodly pearls (Matthew 13:45-46). In His conversation with a rich young man, He reiterated the same cost (Matthew 19:16-22). Paul said, "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (Philippians 3:8).



OUR IMPORTANT COMMITMENT TO GOD

When we were converted, we "gave our life to God." This commitment may have precipitated a major life-change that has been an ongoing foundational element of our walk with Christ. Or it may have been a minor one (most likely in our youth) that will need additional bulk and strength added as we mature spiritually. However this event is described or evaluated, it is a distinct beginning in a lifelong experience for all Christians. To be judged as successful, there must be a program of continuous improvement all along the way. Biblical terminology that describes this progress includes new-born, milk consumption, growth, bearing fruit, hand to the plow, maturing, etc.

There is, however, no finely defined commitment that one must reach to attain a future life in God's eternity. The requirement is that we remain in God's grace as we walk the narrow road. This grace is also a major factor in our success in the journey. It is obvious that grace was necessary for our

atonement, redemption, and salvation (of which the final consummation is yet to come), but there is more to the value and function of grace than these points alone.

At our conversion (new birth), we came to God as a sinner. We were thankful for God's forgiveness and His ongoing help, but we are still sinners. None of us can say or imagine that we are anywhere near to perfection, although perfection in Christ Jesus continues to be a day-by-day goal. Because of our carnal, polluted nature, we continue to struggle with sin and failure. Christ's great compassion and His sacrifice throw up a barrier (His grace) between our wretchedness and God, which allows us to approach His throne. When we fail to maintain our striving and begin to take on other interests, the barrier of this grace is frustrated, and we must withdraw further and further from His throne due to the stench of our added baggage. We have fallen, but the great atonement has not failed. The situation can be corrected, but we must see our error, admit our guilt, and repent. This process paints a beautiful picture called Humility, but pride will attempt to hide it all.

One of the most important elements in this entire plan is our ability to recognize our wretchedness (depravity). It is a valuable help in keeping pride at bay, even though pride stands constantly at our side waiting to join in with all our decisions and struggles. Another important element is the realization that only God is righteous. He has defined it, He has full knowledge of it, and only He has it. He is very willing for us to plead His righteousness. But mentally accepting our wretchedness and acknowledging His righteousness is not sufficient, because still there is a work of faith needed to make all of these foundational elements our own. This is commitment.

Commitment means totally accepting God and His sovereignty. This includes recognizing Him as the creator and the source of all we know. It means accepting that He is righteous and knows what is best for us. It means that we accept His Word as the last word, as it was written specifically for us. It means that we admit, to the best of our limited capability, that sin is destructive. It also means that we accept Him as perfect and overall and above all, and that He will always be. Even though we are wretched, polluted with sin, and very lacking in abilities, we can always look to Him for strength and direction.

We often hear Christians complaining that "fears and doubts" are getting in the way of their journey. Satan's goal is anything that would befuddle us and delay or derail our progress. Improving our commitment is a sure way to counteract these problems. A famous scientist (Pascal, about 1650) once wrote that "all men at some time come to the realization that they are indeed wretched. Some turn away from this revelation and busy themselves with various distractions. Others note that although this is true, the Almighty and Perfect God has called them and found value in them, and they turn with delight to this newfound hope and promise."

Brother Sumner



THANKSGIVING AT CHRISTMAS

How thankful will I be this Christmas? Will I only be too glad when all the gifts have been purchased and wrapped? Or when all the cards have been stuffed in all their envelopes and all the frilly little stickers have been placed at the corners of the flaps for a seal? What are we doing with a holiday that has its roots in idol worship? Admittedly, I enjoy the season, the festivities, the gifts, and the food. Yet recently I've had a bit of a new look at the meaning of the season approaching.

The season at the end of November is, in a way, about being thankful for the things we have accumulated. The season at the end of December, on the other hand, is about being thankful for all that's been done for us. I realize this is a subject open for debate, but I have been inspired to think of Christmas as really being a season of thanksgiving. Place the emphasis on the "giving" motivated by a heart made thankful by all we have received.

"For God so loved..." we read in John. Love is a product of a thankful heart. Is it possible that God loved the human race enough to be thankful for mankind? Absurd thought, I know. But He does love a thankful heart and a cheerful giver. And He knew that someday the human heart would find no deeper level of thankfulness than that of feeling unworthy for the supreme sacrifice that He would make. It is His birth that we profess to be celebrating this season.

"That whosoever believeth on him..." Whether or not we will be thankful for what God has done for us is a choice we make; He leaves that up to us. "Should have everlasting life..." For the hearts that are thankful enough for His gift to give their lives to Him and His will, He is thankful enough to reward with abundant blessings in this life and manifold more in the life hereafter.

Brother Frank



STAYING CLOSE TO THE SHEPHERD *by Deacon John*

Most people who stay close to the Lord are the true Christians who have lived that way throughout their lives. We are all aware that the times we live in behoove us to live close to the Shepherd. In John 10:27, Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." These are beautiful words, but the most difficult part is to follow closely enough that we do hear His voice. A poet reminds us in words of song, "Nearer, my God, to Thee, Nearer to Thee; E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me." This suggests that there is a cross to bear, which again reminds us of the necessity to stay close to the Shepherd.

We will notice that there were those in the Old Testament, men and women, who stayed close to the Lord. God was with them and blessed them. When believers do not stay close to the Shepherd, the result can be tragic. Someone said that the children of Israel could have made the journey from Egypt to Canaan in eleven days, but because of their unbelief, it took them forty years. Of those who left Egypt, everyone who was over twenty years of age died in the wilderness, except Joshua and Caleb.

We all are, also, on a journey through life, some only for a short time. We all must leave this earth life. Then the question is: Did that person live close to the Shepherd? Joshua made the declaration, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" Joshua 24:15.

In the Bible, we read about a man called Abraham. He had a tremendous living faith in God, and when the Lord asked him to, he took his "only" son to slay him for the sacrifice. He obeyed God, which shows a real living faith. We, too, can have that kind of faith, even though we live thousands of years after Abraham. No doubt, he lived close to the Shepherd through-

out his life.

Then we consider Job, who went through a severe test, the kind that everybody would wish to not go through. He lost all his many cattle and sheep. That was one thing, but then all his dear children were killed. After all that happened, Job fell on his face and tore his clothes. Then came the boils that caused him to wish he could die. Job lived so close to the Shepherd that he said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15).

David was another example that we have to marvel at. He lived close to the Shepherd. In the Twenty-Third Psalm, David makes his declaration when he says, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." We can think of him as a young lad who loved the True Shepherd, and that continued on through his life. This should also give courage to young people today. David must have loved the Lord with all his heart, which caused the Lord to say that he was a man after His own heart (Acts 13:22).

We have examples in the New Testament of women who loved the Lord, as well as the different disciples, like Peter, James, and John. Peter said he would die for the Lord. Some, like Zacchaeus, the tax collector, put forth the effort to see Jesus. He wanted to see and be with Jesus, he too wanted to please the true Shepherd. Today, those who desire to be close to the Shepherd will need to put forth an effort; there is no substitute way. The promise is that He will never leave us or forsake us.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians that the mystery of iniquity was working at that time already. He said Satan was working with all power and signs and lying wonders. He continues on, saying that God would send those evil workers strong delusion, and they would believe a lie. All of this is present in our day. This should cause us all to live close to the Shepherd.

It is evident that the parents of children in the time we live in will need to live close to the Shepherd, as well as the rest of us. Parents of children today will need to be very zealous and watchful. Otherwise, their children will be captured by the cunning evil one. It behooves all of us to live close to the Shepherd, ready to live God-fearing lives.

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