

## GOOD WILL TO MEN

Evan A. Fry, Radio Minister  
 Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ  
 of Latter Day Saints  
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SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:6-14

And so it was that while they were there, the days were accomplished that Mary should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was none to give room for them in the inns. And there were in the same country, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, an angel of the Lord appeared unto them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were sore afraid. But the angel said unto them, 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 Savior, who is Christ, the Lord. And this is the way you shall find the babe; he is wrapped in swaddling clothes, and is lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men.

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Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . . behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is the child that is born, the Messiah of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him.

All over Christendom people have gathered this Sunday morning before Christmas to pay homage to the Babe in the manger, and to pray again for the coming of his reign of peace. Again in church and in family circle we shall hear Luke's story of the shepherds and the angels, and Matthew's story of the wise men who came from the east to worship him, We shall perhaps hear again in song and sermon the promise given of him by Isaiah: "For unto us a child is born; unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there is no end...."

Thus far in the history of the world, the prophetic song of the angels and the promise of Isaiah have seemingly not been fulfilled. Wars still plague us, as they have done for century after century; the only difference is that now wars are many times more potent and efficient in their destructiveness, and far more universal in their effects, than they were in Isaiah's day or in the day when the shepherds heard the song of the angels. As the Prince of Peace was born, the angels sang a song of peace on earth, good will to men, but the world still has no peace. Was Isaiah wrong? Were the angels mistaken as they sang over Judean hills to the humble shepherds below? Is Jesus a failure? Are men without hope? No; Isaiah and the angels were right. Christ is not a failure. He is still the Prince of Peace. His reign of peace is increasing, and shall increase without end until men beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

The trouble is, at least in part, that men have sought a peace which they supposed would come through some magic formula, mysteriously, providentially, suddenly. We have sought a peace in which all our enemies shall be forced to quit fighting us, but in which we shall be free to continue business as usual; a

peace which will keep others from bothering us as we continue in our age-old sins, without repentance, without sacrifice, without effort. If Jesus would just do that for us, there would be countless millions of the peoples of earth who would gladly build him a church or make a substantial cash offering out of their prosperity, so that they could be let alone to enjoy themselves in sin and idleness and selfishness and lust and greed as before.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, is not going to do it all. Neither will he coerce unwilling subjects. He has shown men the way of peace; he leaves it with them whether or not they will follow the ways of peace. The world today is still following the ways of strife and discord and hatred and war, and wondering why Jesus does not establish his reign of peace so that no one will make war any more.

Peace is more than a cessation of hostility and fighting -- more than an armed truce. At this moment we have peace in Korea, but two armies two ideologies are poised, suspiciously watching each other, mistrusting each other, hating each other, and waiting for someone to make a move that will be the excuse for further war. This is not peace. Even more certainly, it is not the kind of peace Jesus came to bring to the world. The peace which Jesus came to bring is more than a cessation of war after both sides are exhausted. It is dynamic, constructive, satisfying, complete. It is the peace that passeth all understanding: It is peace without, but it is also peace within.

It would be a mistake to say that Jesus came to bring only an inward peace -- a peace that could calmly pursue its way in the face of persecution, torture, or death -- a peace that would be oblivious and unconcerned about the strife and warfare and suffering without. Jesus is concerned about peace between nations and peoples; for there can be no peace in the fullest sense for the individual until there is peace in the nation and in the world in which he dwells. But the reverse is also true. There can be no peace between nations and peoples until all the individuals of the nations are at peace with themselves -- until there is peace within. Primary, of first importance, is the peace within. No man who is fighting himself, who is at war with his own conscience and his own better nature, no man who secretly despises himself for his sins, no man who knows within his heart of hearts that he is completely unworthy to stand in the presence of a God who despises sin even though he loves the sinner, can get along with his neighbors. He will find a thousand and one causes for strife and belligerence; and his neighbors will find even more cause to resist and hate and despise him. The writer of Proverbs gives the opposite to this picture: "When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him."

Peace, therefore, begins within. It cannot be imposed from without by superior might and power or armed force. Peace is a matter of the spirit. The peace of nations begins with you and with me -- with the individual -- who can will to accept or not to accept the peace which Christ offers to sinful, rebellious, troubled hearts. When the angels sang "Peace on earth, good will to men," they did not mean that Jesus was going to stop force with force. I prefer rather to think that the angels were using the word "peace" in the sense that it is used so often in the Old Testament-- in the sense that it was used by Isaiah. The Hebrew word "shamah" which is usually translated peace, carries with it not the idea of cessation of combat, but the meaning of soundness, wholeness, perfect health of mind and body and spirit, wealth in the old sense of wealth, or good weal, prosperity and well-being, welfare. The ancient Jews saluted each other with this word. Jesus often said, "Peace be unto you," or "My peace I leave with you," with the same meaning. He instructed the apostles to say "Peace to this house."

Consider with me a moment the implications growing out of this sort of definition of the word "peace," which is the kind Jesus came to bring to a troubled world. The man who enjoys the peace of Christ is one who is sound in body, mind, and spirit. He is not beset by a burdening sense of guilt, or crushing self-recrimination. His conscience is clear; he has nothing to fear from God or man. He has faith -- not fear; assurance, not worry. He has found a proper balance between body, mind, and spirit -- not denying the needs of the body to cultivate the spirit or the intellect, not denying the needs of mind and spirit to indulge the body in license. Without guilt or fear or worry, and with a proper balance between body, mind, and spirit, he is much more likely to enjoy good health of body, mind, and spirit. He will not need to consult a psychiatrist to get his emotional life straightened out. He will not need to consult his physician for the relief of the many psychosomatic ills -- actual physical ills caused primarily by the mind and the emotions -- which beset mankind today.

As a man finds this kind of peace, and as the influence of that peace begins to spread to his neighborhood, his state, his nation, and his world, he will find himself at peace with his family, with his neighbors, with his friends, and even with his enemies. With the spreading of this kind of peace there will come freedom from racial and national hatreds and tensions, freedom from physical want, freedom from inequity and inequality, freedom from injustice, freedom from oppression and from exploitation. We repeat: such a peace cannot be forced from without. It must begin within, and work outward. Men who are warring within themselves, against their own better natures, will always be warring among themselves. It is only the men who have found the peace of God within, who have risen above their guilt, their doubts, their fears, their hatreds, their prejudices, their narrowness and bitterness, who can have peace with each other. Peace with God, peace with self, peace with family and neighbor and friend, and peace between nations, are all a part of the same process. We cannot have one without the other. For nearly two thousand years we have been trying to build peace between nations of men who could find no peace within -- and still we have no peace.

God has always desired that men might have this kind of peace. He offers it to us, but he cannot force it upon us, for that would only make us more rebellious, and less peaceful within ourselves. In innumerable ways God has expressed his good will, and invited men to partake of his peace. That good will towards men was expressed in the creation of a beautiful world on which we dwell. That good will has been and is being expressed in the creation of all the practical facilities and natural resources of that world, many of which were planned and accomplished in distant aeons of time, in order that our needs might be served now. Plants and trees, fruits and grains, animals and birds have been provided for our use. Beds of ore have been laid down safely below the surface of the earth. Untold ages of vegetation has been preserved as coal or oil or gas, that in this late day we might enjoy its warmth and power.

God's good will towards man was expressed when he gave him his agency in the very beginning. Contempt, mistrust, doubt of man would have hedged him about with such rigorous laws and supervision that he could not sin. But God loved and trusted man enough to make him free to choose. Man betrayed that trust; he chose evil; he fell. Still God's good will continued to follow after him, promising him a period of probation on earth, promising him a Savior who should come to redeem him from death and to deliver him from the sin of his own choosing, if he would repent of that ancient choice and accept the redemption of love.

The highest expression of God's good will towards men, and of his desire that they might have peace, was the gift of his Only Begotten Son. Through him

our guilt, the weight of our sin, our self-recrimination, our fears and worries can be removed, and remembered no more. "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." By accepting his atonement and his grace completely and fully, and by unreservedly surrendering our lives to the laws of his kingdom, we may find peace not only with God, but between man and man, between Jew and Gentile, between bond and free, between black and white, between capital and labor, between nation and nation.

The complete realization of peace on earth, good will to men, waits on men like you and me -- on the coming of men of good will -- who by acceptance of Christ and obedience to his laws find the peace that passeth understanding -- who exemplify in their lives and their relationships with other men the peace that is within, and who thus invite and encourage all men to live at peace with them and with each other. This kind of peace is increasing. The government of Christ, and the reign of his kingdom, is spreading abroad, even though it is increasingly beset with foes from without, and often betrayed by careless, indifferent, or impatient traitors within.

There can be no peace to the wicked, but the promise of the angel song is still true. Through his Son, God offers to men peace on earth, and the enjoyment of his good will. But that peace can be enjoyed only by men of good will who have found first the peace within before looking for peace without.

May we close with the benediction which Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "Now the Lord of peace himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord be with you all."