

GOOD NEWS

CHRISTMAS/NEW YEAR 1988/9

Australia





Our cover: "Country Visitors, Christmas 1874." *Australian Sketcher* 26.12.1874, p. 148. Courtesy, National Library of Australia.

Editorial

"Oddballs"

It was a once-a-year occasion but our cover artist thought they were fair game for a laugh.

Targets of his mirth include not only the country folk but the elderly, the aborigines and the orientals.

Ironically, it was people such as these who were first drawn to the Christmas Child: rustic shepherds, foreigners from the East and geriatrics such as Hannah and Simeon. Jesus' own parents were pitifully poor.

Special season's greetings to all such.

Rob Cooper
Paul Porter

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There Were Shepherds Keeping Watch

Luke 2:8

Desmond Ford

Every aspect of the Bethlehem nativity is a facet of the gospel jewel, a reflection of Christ himself. With every new Christmas we are enabled to behold more and more of his glory as we contemplate the scenes which made angels marvel and bow in adoration.

Bethlehem, the famed city of David, means "the house of bread." As of old, here at Bethlehem the true Bread of Life came down in the stillness of the night. He was anointed with the dew of heaven, for "God gave not the Spirit by measure unto him." The ancient manna was white, and prefigured the purity of the Bread which was to come. It was round, reminding us of the perfection of the Messiah, unbroken and unmarred by any defect. It was sweet and nourishing, as our Lord is to the souls of believers.

There was no room at the inn, for the inn pictures the noisy concourse of this world intent on the things of the flesh. But in the resting place of God's humblest creatures there was room for the Son of God. Only clean animals were kept in the manger, those used in sacrificial worship. They pointed to the only Man apart from Eden's Adam who reflected absolute purity and who alone was fit to be a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Joseph, the husband, tenderly caring for Mary, his spouse, reminds us that Christ is the great "house-band" who cherishes his bride, the church, and girds about the whole family of

God by his love, power, and wisdom. Mary's unquestioning surrender to the Holy Spirit, her willingness to endure shame and obloquy prefigured these same characteristics in her son.

The Shepherds

But have you thought about the shepherds, who on the slopes of the little village were watching their flocks that memorable night? To them it was told that the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd of all God's sheep, was born that night to them as to all mankind. "Unto you is born... in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:11). It was the humble shepherds who heard the heavenly choirs singing joyously of glory and peace, rather than the mighty ones of the capital city Jerusalem.

They had often read David's most famous song — what we call the Shepherd Psalm (Ps 23). They knew David was talking of God who guaranteed that his sheep would not want, and who provided green pastures of nourishment and rest. Often they had echoed David's confidence in the Heavenly Shepherd who led in the paths of righteousness even through the valley of death, and who provided not only the necessities of the table but also the added refreshment of anointing even in the presence of life's enemies.

In the hearts of these simple Judean shepherds was the glorious confidence that the

Heavenly Shepherd had bestowed everlasting goodness (righteousness) and mercy for all the days of this life, and as well an everlasting habitation "in the house of the Lord forever." What they did *not* know was the secret of how a just and holy God could deal thus with guilty men and yet maintain his own government and equity. In the fullness of time that secret would be revealed at Bethlehem and Calvary. These hillside shepherds of Bethlehem also point to Jesus. The One born that night was to declare himself the Good Shepherd who would give his life for the sheep. During his ministry Christ alluded to the prophecy of Zechariah who foretold that One who was God's equal would be smitten. "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, said the Lord of hosts: smite the shepherd..." (Zec 13:7). Not only Zechariah but also Ezekiel (ch 34) and Isaiah (ch 40) pictured the coming Messiah as a good shepherd — one who would seek out his flock which had been scattered and feed and lead them. Isaiah promised that he would "gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young" (Is 40:10,11).

Seven Shepherds

Seven individual shepherds are mentioned in the Bible. These seven shepherds are Abel, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Christ, and "the idol



shepherd" of Zechariah 11:16, 17 — a reference to the Antichrist. The other six shepherds are often seen as types of Christ, the Good Shepherd. We learn of the tragic fate of the Messiah Shepherd from Abel who was murdered by his brother. Christ's loving care for the lost sheep is prefigured in the life of Jacob (see Gn 30:31; 31:28-40). The abundance of bread ("enough and to spare" Lk 15:17) is pictured in the life of Joseph who provided for his people through long years of drought (Gn 37:2). It is written of Moses, the fourth shepherd, that he watered, protected and guided the sheep. The book of Hebrews (3:2-6) tells us that the work of Moses and his fidelity prefigured that of Christ. As for David, the fifth individual shepherd presented in the Old Testament, he stands out as a beacon because he gladly risked his life for his

sheep (see 1 Sam 17:34-36). But in contrast to David and in even greater contrast to Christ, the idol shepherd ("worthless" RSV) does not care for the perishing or seek the wandering or heal the maimed, or nourish the sound, but "devours the flesh of the fat ones" and "deserts the flock" (Zec 11:16,17).

So this Christmastide when you see the shepherds of Bethlehem on your greeting cards or elsewhere remember that they too testify of the One then born who would not only be the sacrificial lamb, but also the Caring Shepherd. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus said that he was the door to the sheepfold (Jn 10:7). If *anyone* enters by that door and nestles in the arms of that Shepherd he will carry him back to the fold of God. □

Desmond Ford is founder of GNCM

Another Year Older And Deeper In Debt

Gordon Moyes

I remember a hit song of my last years of high school, which we sang in a symbolic protest against the amount of homework we had to do. It spoke of men working on the chain gang in a mine:

"You load sixteen tons, and what do yer get? Another year older and deeper in debt. Lordy, don't ya call me cause I can't go; I owe my soul to the company store."

If you learn from the Bible how to cope with debt and with death, then your New Year will be a year of triumph, not of tragedy. Consider what the Bible teaches on both issues:

Live Without Fear of Debt

In 1985 2,700 Australians lost their homes and assets by becoming bankrupt as a consequence of personal debt incurred by their inability to control domestic spending and the undisciplined use of credit cards. They had spent too much money they did not own, lost goods by repossession and paid high interest payments crippling their family life. 1,879 businesses also became bankrupt.

If your life is facing the problem of handling debt, should you not seek advice from the best financial counselor you can find?

Who is the best financial advisor available? Consider this:



- * prominent national leader from well-known family;
- * personally managed a national project employing 153,000 workers at a cost of \$4 billion
- * led his government to its great international commercial power;
- * built a worldwide financial empire and reputation for enterprise;
- * received high-ranking officials from many countries who came to him for advice and counsel;
- * author of many books on a variety of subjects including finance, family life and philosophy.

If you could get his personal advice on your financial matters, wouldn't you consider it worthwhile? His name is Solomon, King of Israel, son of David.

Where can you find his advice? It is available for you free of charge in the Book of Proverbs read daily by Jewish businessmen who believe it to be the finest source of financial wisdom. Recently I read again the book of Proverbs. Here are some of his rules for handling personal finances:

Learn from the experiences of others. "Listen to what is wise and try to understand it. Yes, beg for knowledge and plead for insight. 2:2. Someone who will not learn will be poor and disgraced. 12:18. Get all the advice you can and you will succeed; without it you will fail." 15:22.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. "My teaching will give you a long and prosperous life. 3:2. Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know. 3:5. Honour the Lord by making Him an offering from the best you produce." 3:9.

Help your neighbour with generosity. "Whenever you possibly can do good for those who need it. Never tell your neighbour to wait until tomorrow if you can help him now. Don't plan anything that will hurt your neighbour for he lives beside you trusting you. 3:27-29. Be generous and you will be prosperous. Help others and you will be helped. 11:25. When you give to the poor it is like lending to the Lord, and the Lord will pay you back. 19:17. Give to the poor and you will never be in need. 28:27.

Look ahead with confidence. "Be careful how you think for your life is shaped by your thoughts. Never say anything that is not true. Have nothing to do with lies and misleading words. Look straight ahead with honest confidence; don't hang your head in shame. Plan carefully what you do, and whatever you do will turn out right. Avoid evil and walk straight ahead. Don't go one step off the right way. 4:23-27. If you have to choose between a good reputation and great wealth, choose a good reputation." 2:1.

Do not guarantee other people's debts. Especially members of your own family who incur debts in your name. "Have you promised to be responsible for someone else's debts? Have you been caught by your own words, trapped by your own promises? Well then, you are in that man's power. But this is how to get out of it: hurry to him and beg him to release you. Don't let yourself go to sleep or even stop to rest. Get out of the trap like a bird or a deer escaping a hunter. 6:1-5. If you promise to pay a stranger's debt, you will regret it. You are better off if you don't get involved. Only a man with no sense would be responsible for someone else's debts." 17:18.

Work hard and save what you earn. "Being lazy will make you poor but hard work will make you rich. 10:4. It is better to be an ordinary man working for a living than to play the part of a great man and go hungry. If you are lazy you will never get what you are after, but if you work hard, you will get a fortune. 12:9,27. The more easily you get your wealth, the sooner you will lose it. The harder it is to earn, the more you will have. 12:11. Indulging in luxuries, wine and rich food will never make you wealthy. 21:17. Wise people live in wealth and luxury but stupid people spend their money as fast as they get it." 23:7.

Live safe and secure because of your honesty. "Honest people are safe and secure,

but the dishonest will be caught. 10:9. The Lord hates people who use dishonest scales. Your riches will do you no good on the day you face death, but honesty can save your life. Honesty makes a good man's life easier, but a wicked man will cause his own downfall. Righteousness rescues an honest man but someone who cannot be trusted is trapped in his own greed. 11:1,4-7. If you try to make a profit dishonestly, you will get your family into trouble. 15:27. It is better to have a little, honestly earned, than to have a large income gained dishonestly. 16:8. Better to eat a dry crust of bread with peace of mind than to have a banquet in a house full of trouble." 17:1.

Spend your money carefully avoiding borrowing. "Stupid people spend their money as fast as they get it. 21:20. Poor people are the rich man's slaves. Borrow money and you are the lender's slave." 22:7.

Are not these words able to guide your life? If you obeyed them how could you end the year older and deeper in debt? The Bible's teaching is practical and sound, even on modern financial matters.

Live Without Fear of Death

Not long ago saw a triumphant funeral service in Melbourne of the famous Australian singer, Suzanne Steele. Suzanne had died from cancer, but her recent life was a triumphant one, when she discovered the secret of living without the consequences of death. She became a born again Christian who trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ.

She told us at our Easter program two years ago, and on "Turn Round Australia" that as a child she had been neglected, sexually abused, raped by her stepfather and made to

go hungry until she ran away from home aged 14. She became a maid in London and while working, her beautiful voice was discovered. Two years later, at 16, she made her singing debut with the Old Vic. Company at Covent Garden with Sir Robert Helpmann in "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Stage and television, opera and musicals, overseas and here in Australia took her to stardom. But her personal life was in disarray. Her second marriage broke up. Debts took all of her assets. Her only security, her house, was to be sold. She faced bankruptcy. She became depressed and could take no more. She was growing older and deeper in debt.

Taking a large overdose of tablets she lapsed into a coma, and was close to death when a friend called in unexpectedly, found her unconscious and called an ambulance. Brought back to life, she just had to face her situation. Suzanne Steele groped out for God, and found Him near.

Her whole life changed. God's grace overflowed into her life. She found the strength to cope. She shared with me, "I haven't been depressed or tearful or self-pitying since I gave my heart to the Lord, and that is the truth. It changed me absolutely. I used to be like an old truck driver. I was awful. I used to swear and blaspheme. But now I am a different person."

But the hard years were taking their toll. She discovered she had terminal cancer. She determined she would fight the disease. "I decided I was not prepared to die. I changed my diet. I told myself the cancer had come because of my earlier stress, and it would go with my new peace." Two years ago the cancer in her lungs was so bad that doctors told her she had less than

a week to live. She continued to sing to God's glory and God gave her renewed strength. Earlier this year she sang to 8,000 in Melbourne and to 10,000 people in Sydney's Entertainment Centre. Although a Protestant, the Roman Catholic Church asked her to sing at the Papal Mass in the Melbourne Cricket Ground before 120,000 people gathered to hear Pope John Paul.

She summed all her strength. A police car drove her out onto the arena to the stage. She sang "The Holy City". It was the greatest performance of her life. She was "happy and serene and longing to be with Jesus." She died in peace a few weeks later.

At the funeral the Victorian State Opera Company sang "O Rejoice that the Lord is Risen" and my friend Robert Colman sang "Because He Lives." Robert said that after "Suzanne gave her life to Jesus she was able to make music out of misery and a song out of sorrow."

That's the difference Jesus makes. With Him you can face the consequences of death, good and bad, with peace and serenity, knowing that you will come face to face with God and enjoy His presence forever. Nothing except the grace of God can enable that, and nothing except faith in the Lord Jesus can make that possible.

You are facing another year. Will it be "another year older and deeper in debt"? Or will you take the Bible seriously and change your habits according to the teachings of the world's most famous financier and manage that debt? Will you take the Bible seriously and face death serenely because of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? □

Gordon Moyes is Superintendent of the Wesley Central Mission, Sydney, NSW.

Almost everyone in Australia knows about the welfare work of The Smith Family. But where does the name come from?

The Beginning of it

It began on the Parramatta Road in 1922. The afternoon was sultry; the season was near Christmas and the five business men in the motor car were a little tired of their trip and looking forward to getting home.

They had exhausted the usual topics of conversation. They had discussed last week's cricket, and the weather, and the iniquity of the Government, and the badness of business, and there seemed to be very little else left to say anything about, when the jovial fellow in the corner remarked suddenly:

"My word, you should see the monkey I got for my youngsters for Christmas. It's a bonzer!"

Now, since everybody in the car was a responsible business man full of the seriousness of life, it was quite natural that this auspicious opening of an important subject should set every tongue going. It seemed that everybody aboard had been investing or planning to invest in the machinery of Christmas delight. So the talk which had subsided flared up again.

The merits of stick-climbing monkeys were canvassed against the benefits of Meccano. The new tricycle, which was to be sneaked into the house on padded wheels during the later hours of Christmas Eve, competed with the elephant who rolled his eyes. The present merged itself into the past and brought up a train of reminiscences about time's changes and the Christmas adventures of other days when everybody present was a boy; but the discussion being cut short by arrival at the "Wool-



pack," where it was proposed that the company should modestly fortify themselves to face the traffic on the road into the city and wash away the dust of Baulkham Hills, the jovial man who had started the conversation summed up:

"Ah well!" said he, "it's a great thing to be a kid in these times. You may be hard up when you grow infirm and creaky like us old crocks, but there isn't a kid who hasn't got something to look forward to at Christmas!"

"I wonder?" said the driver solemnly.

"Wonder what?" asked the jovial man.

"Whether every kid has a good time at Christmas," replied the driver.

"Don't talk through your hat, man!" said the Jovial One. "I'll bet you there isn't a youngster in the blessed country who doesn't get a Christmas-box and have a little bit of plum pudding."

"I doubt it," retorted the driver — an argumentative cuss like all his ilk.

"Oh, rats!" shouted his opponent. "I bet you can't find anybody in this country who isn't looked after, you old pessimist. What are you boys having?"

"Well, what about trying?" asked the Driver.

The upshot of it all was that the Jovial Man, within two or three days, was feeling devoutly glad that he had agreed to join a committee of investigation instead of putting money on his opinion.

It was found, at once, that there was no difficulty in discovering not only small boys and girls, but large numbers of families to whom Christmas was only a name. There were institutions full of orphans who had never seen Santa Claus, for the simple reason that the funds with which they were supplied did not run to such luxuries. There was a place where the best the matron could do for fifty or sixty mites was to marshal them and lead in carol singing. There was another where the soft-hearted staff simulated the bounty of St. Nicholas by changing some of their own meagre shillings into pennies and dropping them down the chimney to be scrambled for by their charges.

"Something will have to be done about this!" muttered the Jovial Man when he heard the facts. And surely enough, something was done.

On Christmas Eve, 1922, half a dozen shamefaced males might have been seen getting out of a motor car at a Home for mentally deficient boys at

Carlingford. Behind was another motor car loaded down with parcels. In front was the hall of the home in which, seated on forms, were forty small boys. The Jovial Man was present, quite unrecognisable as Santa Claus. The remainder of the party were bunched together with the look of people who were saying to themselves: "Now, why did we let ourselves in for a thing like this?"

Like most of those kind-hearted people who do good in this world, they were painfully shy and self-conscious, and the spectacle of those forty small, stolid boys, washed and brushed and sitting open-mouthed, with a cynical look of disbelief on their faces, was not reassuring.

If there was some sign of animation among them as Santa walked grandly up the aisle, none of the visitors noticed it. What they saw before them most specifically was the open space which they were to occupy. It was even more exposed than the aisle, and all of them, during their progress, were experiencing something of the "gooseflesh sensation" that usually afflicts malefactors on their way to the scaffold.

They reached their place of prominence and looked down.

Santa Claus ranged himself with the matron, feeling for the moment very foolish in his robes and quite convinced that every small boy in that hall was suppressing his giggles at so ridiculous a sight.

He looked round the hall at

that sea of uncompromising faces, and suddenly he saw a very small and very spindly youngster leave his seat in the back row. Having a thorough knowledge of the psychology of small boys, especially those who sit in back rows, he was naturally convinced that this one boded no good to him, and he felt himself breaking out into a cold perspiration.

Here that young monster came, sneaking up the aisle, his whole face speaking tension, his movements wary. Every step which he took made our potential Santa Claus more anxious. What was his little game?

He crept closer and closer.

He reached the platform. He put out his hand. He touched Santa Claus.

He let out a resounding whoop of glee which was echoed through the hall. The youngsters rose as one man and shrieked with delight. They stood up. They jumped on the forms. They yelled, and they yelled again, so that the visitors themselves felt inclined to yell with them.

Then it all came out. The small, creeping boy, a pathetic little figure whom experience had long since made into a sceptic, had been bent merely on discovering whether Santa Claus was real and not a myth. People who gave away something for nothing were completely outside his experience. But having once satisfied himself that he was actually face to face with the old man of the reindeer sleigh, his joy knew

no bounds. He positively howled with delight, and, what with the noise and the cheering, the visitors completely forgot their self-consciousness and the party went with a swing.

When it was over, when the toys had been distributed into small hands that had never handled a toy before; when the songs had been sung and when heaps of small boys had climbed, shouting, over the entertainers and were at last ripe for bed, the party of businessmen left—no longer shame-faced, but vowing that they had had the time of their lives, and that they would come again next year.

"Who are you people, anyway?" asked the gratified matron, who was facing the Christmas for the first time in her official experience with equanimity and satisfaction.

"Us?" said one of the now exuberant entertainers, startled out of himself for a moment. . . .

"Well, who are we, you fellows?" he asked, turning to his friends. "What's our name?"

"Oh—er—Smith!" said another member.

"That's right!" said the first, with a nervous chuckle. "We're the Smith Family—that's who we are!"

They little knew, as they drove off into a night quiet after the cheerful babble of the hall, how bright a fire they had lighted that evening.□

From *The Smith Family*,
Sydney (1932) pp.5-10

The Smith Family

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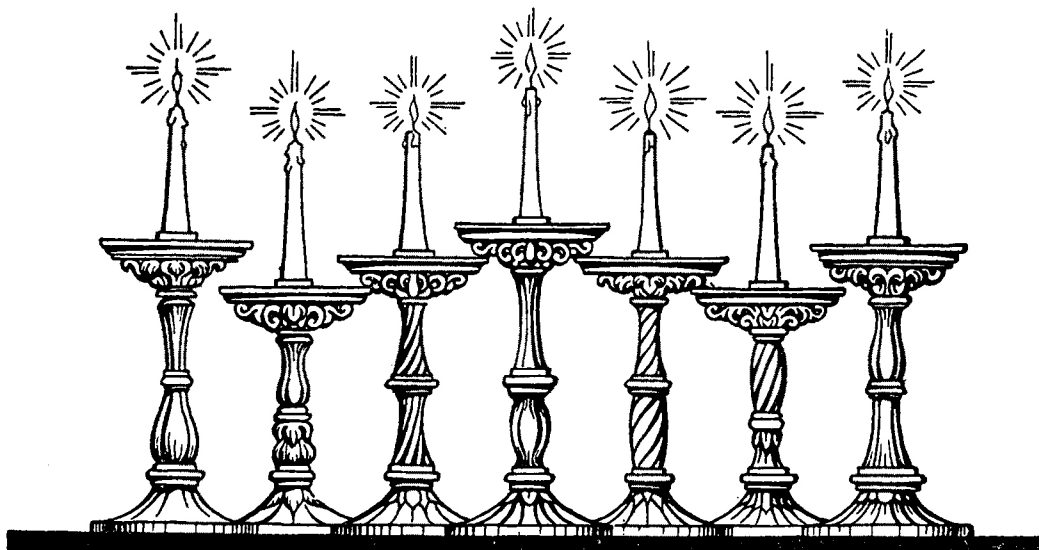
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Interpreting the Apocalypse

Part 2

Desmond Ford



[Commentators frequently suggest detailed and minute fulfilments at specific times. When read a generation or two later; such commentaries are obviously dated and in error]:

Ages ago, when philosophies were both many and conflicting, William of Occam (c.1280-c.1349) proposed that a simple solution to a problem was usually to be preferred to a complex one. This principle — known as *Occam's Razor* — applies also to hermeneutics.

We wish now to apply, in more detail, a concept just stressed. While it may be revolutionary to some, it is nonetheless indispensable to a correct interpretation of Revelation. If the reader takes care to grasp its implications and applies them, many problems in exegesis of the Apocalypse will find a ready solution. *The New Testament emphasis on the imminence of the Parousia*

(second advent of Christ) is an Occam's Razor for the ideological throats of a host of commentators.

The vast majority of interpreters work on the assumption that at least two thousand years of time had necessarily to pass before Christ's promise to return could be fulfilled. The entire New Testament teaches otherwise, but only since the days of Albert Schweitzer has the church begun to understand this fact. Paul the apostle everywhere assumes that the church is on the borders of the eternal world.

Says Roetzel, "It should be noted that references to the parousia appear throughout Paul's letters, and there is little evidence that the expectation of an imminent, though unpredictable Day fades into the background in Paul's later letters."¹ Divine promises and warning are alike conditional. The clear condition for the re-

turn of Christ has always been the fulfilment of the gospel commission (see Mt 13:47-49; 24:14; 28:19,20).

The Disciples Expected Christ's Return in Their Day

The disciples who heard Christ's Olivet sermon expected him to return in their day. How else could the following be understood?

"I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (Mt 24:34). Read also verses 15-16, 20-21, 23, 26, 29-30, 42, 44-47.

Note, it is the *disciples* who are to see the desolating sacrilege which precipitates the last great tribulation (24:15). *They* will hear the deceptive cries (vv.4-5), and then *they* will see the sign of the Son of Man (v.30). He admonishes *them* "when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door" (v.33).

Revelation Expects Christ's Soon Return

It is equally clear that when one of those disciples (John), wrote Revelation — the enlarged edition of the sermon of Matthew 24 — he expected its fulfilment at any moment. Thus he could say in his opening sentence "what must soon take place" (Rev 1:1). At the finish of his book he asserted (quoting his Lord), "the time is near. . . Behold, I am coming soon! . . . Yes, I am coming soon" (Rev 22:10, 12, 20). John meant exactly what he wrote. *All of Revelation is written with the imminent end in mind. It is not the primary purpose of any section of John's book to suggest that long centuries would separate the two advents.* Let any who think otherwise, search and see.

Taking Matthew 24:34 at Face Value

Revelation does indeed follow the pattern of Christ's second advent sermon in Matthew 24. Like that sermon, Revelation has implicit within it the expectation that the end could come upon the generation addressed.

This being the case, the inadequacies of popular schools of interpretation become apparent. These work chiefly on the assumption that the timetable of Revelation necessarily involves centuries, whereas only years were needed.

Commentators frequently suggest detailed and minute fulfillments at specific times. When read a generation or two later, such commentators are obviously dated and in error. For example, the greatest work on historicism, the monumental *Horae Apocalypticae*, was published in the first half of the nineteenth century. Two things impress you when you read it: the prodigious learning of Elliott, and the ir-

relevance of many of his conclusions.

Let it be emphasized, however, that Elliott's conclusions are no more irrelevant than the conclusions of many other interpreters who lose themselves in the political scene of the first century. Or those imaginative commentators who suggest such wonders for the twentieth century as neither John nor the Holy Spirit ever thought of. Such errors exist chiefly because of the failure to take Matthew 24:34 at face value.

Bible Prophecy Conditional

Did God deceive his church? Did Christ deceive his listeners on the Mount of Olives? No. Bible prophecy, whether promise or warning, is conditional (Jer 18:1-10). It is capable, in Semitic fashion, of setting forth what sounds absolute, while containing implicit contingencies. Furthermore, the New Testament is emphatic that the Christ event brought the end of the world forensically (legally), and that since the cross, the church has been living in the last days.

Was it necessary that there be such a gap between the first and second advents of Christ? Did God intend that once the sins of the world had been removed by the cross that humanity should yet endure the scourge of pain-filled ages? Once Satan had been destroyed by Christ on Calvary (Heb 2:14), did his serpent tail have to writhe and flail in dying agonies for so long?

Did Christ ever set forth a condition vital for his return, which if unfulfilled, would delay the advent? Yes, he did. In Matthew 24:14 he set forth just such a condition: "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world . . . and then the end will come."

What Happened to the Gospel?

What actually happened to the early church, and what has happened since, that our Lord should tarry so long? Humanity's native legalism quickly squashed the gospel of Christ. By the end of the second century, the gospel of grace in its purity was almost totally absent.²

With the loss of the gospel in its completeness, that constraining love which had moved the apostles was also diluted. Into the vacuum came error and sloth. Paul's warnings about apostasy were fulfilled (Acts 20:28-30). The true faith went into eclipse, and has never blossomed since on a worldwide scale.

Christ admonished his would-be followers that unless they loved him more than their own lives, they could not be his disciples. But people cannot love Christ more than life itself unless they are convinced that Christ first loved them to the same extent. Only the gospel brings such a conviction. Thus there can be no triumphant remnant emerge from the final persecution until the gospel of grace has been proclaimed with a loud voice in all the world.

Our Interpretation of Revelation

If all the things we have studied are so, how do they affect our interpretation of Revelation? *The fact that Christ could have returned in John's generation means that John's book sets forth certain basic events only, namely the ones foretold by Christ himself.* Says Berkouwer, "Our difficulties with the New Testament proclamation of the future are not because of its complexity, but because of its simplicity."³

The major themes of Revelation are the Judgment and Second Advent, and the great

tribulation and warning message before the Advent. Therefore the book necessarily concentrates on broad themes, such as witnessing, persecution, reformatory judgments and warnings, the final outpouring of divine wrath prior to the restoration of all things. To search for prediction of specific minor and local events in history is to miss the significance of the whole.

Revelation does not major in minors, and certainly does not intend to be a history book of the ages, describing all the convoluted trauma of advancing centuries. *But the principles implicit in the divine, the human, and the satanic natures, mean that similar causes will ever provoke similar results, and that therefore, the issues which arose on a small scale in the first century (which could then have blossomed into global dimensions), have repeatedly come to the fore throughout church history. John's portrayal of what was meant to take place in his generation has had minor fulfilments through the centuries, but yet awaits its climactic consummation.*

Only the principles here suggested solve the inconsistencies of most traditional exegesis. The present approach makes it possible to see how Revelation had meaning for John's contemporaries, and also for all successive believers throughout the ages and especially for those who soon will witness the great and glorious day of our Lord's appearing (1 Cor 10:11; Rom 15:4). "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20 KJV).□

Footnotes

- ¹ Calvin J. Roetzel, *Judgement in the Community*, P.106.
- ² Norval F. Pease, *By Faith Alone*, p.81; James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, pp.247-49; James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, p.111.
- ³ G.C. Berkouwer, *the Return of Christ*, p.256.

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Santa Travelling Incognito

David Waterworth

It was a call of desperation, they'd called all their friends. Everyone was either out at a party or too busy. So my phone rang in desperation.

They needed a Santa for their party. The presents were stacked under the gum tree. The barbie was running hot. The beer was running cold. Everyone was merry but it wouldn't be a Christmas party without Santa.

Thanks to a couple of pillows, the suit fit. But Christmas time was not the best time to be wearing a bulky suit and two beards. Perspiration trickled down my nose as I Ho-ho-ho'd my way through the 20 or so children.

It was with great relief that I stepped out of that suit and into a cold drink. I rejoined the party, Santa travelling incognito.

The children looked at each other and backed away. Who was that strange man? Sure we recognize the voice, but he looks too different. His beard is black not white.

It was a bit of a shock for me to realize that none of them were prepared to accept Santa looking like this. They weren't even prepared to talk to this stranger.

Did you know that God has a Santa Claus suit?

If he were to come to us in flaming glory we would not just refuse to talk to him and walk away we would be terrified and run. He has to wear a



Santa suit. That way we will listen, talk, and perhaps sit trustingly on his lap. We will take the gifts he has to offer and give him our love.

God comes to us as Jesus of Nazareth. He meets us on dusty roads. he speaks to us in words of comfort and reassurance: "Come to me and rest."

God comes to us in the words of friends and foes alike. Advice we long for and that which we would rather not hear can sometimes be his voice.

God comes to us in quiet moments. These aren't always in quiet times. We can find peace in the midst of turmoil.

It is an art to receive God when he comes in his disguises. The reward is great. Remember he is more anxious to talk with you than you are to talk with him. Keep your eye open for God travelling incognito.□

David Waterworth writes from Brisbane, Queensland.

Jesus: The Light of the World

Noel Mason

*I am the light of the world
(Jn 8:12)*

In Plato's allegory of the cave, men are imagined as dwelling underground with necks and legs fettered so that they cannot look around to see the source of light. They are condemned to see only passing shadows. If an individual is freed of his shackles and forced to confront the source of light he would be dazzled and blinded and might respond by preferring the shadows.

In John's gospel one response of humanity to Jesus, who is the light of the world, is reminiscent of Plato's fettered cavemen. When confronted with the eternal Word as life and light men are said to have loved darkness rather than light. It is stated that the reason why men loved darkness rather than light was because their deeds were evil (Jn 3:19). For some the life of Jesus brought a pitiless light of judgment, for others a light of salvation.

Jesus as a Light of Judgment

In John 3:17-21 the fundamental principle is stated that Christ came to give life and light and not to judge; but when the light appears, men inevitably judge themselves by their attitude towards it. Throughout the gospel of John men and women are sifted by their response to the light of Jesus.

To illustrate, in chapter 3 Nicodemus comes to interrogate Christ. But the roles are quickly reversed and the interrogator becomes the interrogated. In that nocturnal interview Nicodemus discovers that

he needs to start all over again. Something like a new birth is needed if he wishes to see the kingdom of God (Jn 3:7). He had come to question Christ but in those first few moments of the interview he found Christ probing the deepest recesses of his own heart, challenging him to take his stand and make a new beginning. In the judging light of the presence of Christ he found he could not belong to the cheer group on the sidelines but rather he had to become a participant in the game of life and death itself.

In his book *The Fact of Christ*, P. Carnegie Simpson captured this characteristic of the presence of Christ when he wrote:

We had thought intellectually to examine him; we find he is spiritually examining us. The roles are reversed between us . . . We study Aristotle and are intellectually edified thereby; we study Jesus and are, in the profoundest way, spiritually disturbed . . . We are constrained to take up some inward moral attitude of heart and will in relation to Jesus . . . A man may study Jesus with intellectual impartiality, he cannot do it with moral neutrality . . . We must declare our colours. (pp. 23, 24).

The light that Jesus brings is a disturbing light. His presence and teachings quickly aroused open hostility. His inaugural sermon at Nazareth is recorded for us in Luke 4:16-30. In his sermon Jesus reminded his hometown friends that often in the history of Israel it had been shown that God's grace could not be appropriated by those who thought they had a special claim on God and truth, but that it went out to all those who were eager and receptive

— the stranger and alien. Within seconds their admiration turned to fury and a lynch mob tired to sweep him over a cliff.

After reading John's gospel through and noting how many balk at the moral challenge Jesus presents we are constrained to ask how it is that Jesus is so popular today. What has happened? Has human nature changed? Are we reading him wrongly?

Dorothy Sayers in her book *Man Born To Be King* makes clear what has happened: "Not Judas, not Pilate, not the Pharisees or the Sadducees nor any of the enemies of Jesus were able to make him innocuous. That has been left for more pious hands."

We have done to Jesus what mankind has done to all the great prophets and teachers. After murdering him we have taken over his teachings and declared them official. And in the process we have tamed and domesticated them so that they no longer threaten or challenge us. Official lip service has given the kiss of death to the teachings of Jesus.

There is nothing more depressing than to read the way mankind has responded to the great religious teachers who have tried to shed light upon our path. Once in a few hundred years a man shines a light to illuminate the way. At first we welcome the light. We wonder at the gracious words. We laud and applaud. But our enthusiasm soon dies, because the light has exposed the contrast between what we *are* and what we ought to be. We

see all too clearly that following the light will mean abandoning our pride, our selfishness, our greed and our material possessions. Above all, our security. The contrast becomes too painful and we shout, "Turn off the light, conform or we will disfellowship you or even kill you." And because the men, whose insight is powerful enough to illuminate our path are never cowards we are forced to kill and then to feel that unbearable mixture of remorse and relief as the darkness returns.

I use those plural pronouns "we" and "our" intentionally. Jesus wasn't crucified by the Jewish religious leaders. Gandhi wasn't assassinated by a Hindu religious extremist, Socrates wasn't judicially murdered by the Athenian establishment and the bullet that destroyed Martin Luther King wasn't triggered by the finger of a lone assassin. It was *our* hand that poured the hemlock, that held the hammer and that squeezed the trigger. Like Plato's fettered cavemen we preferred the darkness rather than the light.

Costly Discipleship

We must remember that Jesus will be a judging light all along the way of Christian discipleship. There will never come a time this side of the new world when we will be able to stand comfortably in the light of Jesus. There will often be times when in the glare of his presence we will find our eyes smarting and watering. Jesus likened Christian discipleship to carrying a cross. In his day those carrying a cross were on their way to execution and death. Only in the *light of the cross* can we measure our commitment.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-

1945) was arrested by the Gestapo in April 1943 for his opposition to Hitler's ideology. Two years later on April 9, 1945 he was executed at Flossenbürg on a charge of treason. He experienced the full cost of discipleship. Before his death he wrote a number of books including one with the title, *The Cost of Discipleship*. The book is replete with insights into genuine Christian discipleship:

When we know the cross, we are no longer afraid of the truth.

The only man who has the right to say that he is justified by grace alone, is the man who has left all to follow Christ.

When we refuse to take up our cross and submit to suffering and rejection at the hands of men, we forfeit our fellowship with Christ.

Sometimes we meet Christians who flatter themselves that they are the "remnant" described in the book of Revelation as keeping the commandments of God and trusting in Jesus (Rev 12:17, 14:12). But before we identify too quickly with this obedient "remnant" we ought to realize that John is *not* referring to a group who simply keep the commandments of God in the ease and affluence of our friendly western society. The "remnant" he is referring to is a "remnant" of Christians who keep the commandments of God, who remain obedient to the end *in spite of pain, tribulation and the threat of death*. In context John is describing a Christian minority which remains obedient in the midst of the opposition of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. The remnant John saw will only emerge in the great tribulation yet to come. The Living Bible makes this point clear:

Let this encourage God's people to *endure* patiently every *trial* and *persecution*, for *they are his*

saints who remain firm to the end in obedience to his commands and trust in Jesus (Rev 14:12. Emphasis mine).

Like Bonhoeffer we may have to wait for the hangmen before we discover the real depth of our commitment to Christ, before we will be able to say "I belong to that obedient remnant."

Jesus as Saving Light

If the light of Jesus has the potential to bring judgment and condemnation it has also the potential to transform and inspire. This potential to transform is masterfully illustrated in the story of the healing of the blind man in John 9. To fully appreciate this story we must study it in its context.

The action really begins at the Feast of Tabernacles. One of the distinctive ceremonies of this feast was the illumination of the Women's Court in the Temple. It is said that the illumination of this court was so brilliant that every courtyard was lit up by it. Previously, at the water ceremony Jesus stood up and said in a loud voice: "If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (Jn 7:37, 38).

Now at the ceremony of light he proclaims: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12).

The story of the blind man in chapter 9 is a dramatic enactment of Jesus' proclamation (9:5). It is an instance of light coming into darkness. It is a 'sign' of the triumph of light over darkness. The incident illustrates the thesis of this article for while one man finds the light of Jesus illuminating, the others find it blinding. Ray-

mond Brown sums up succinctly:

The care with which the evangelist has drawn his portraits of increasing insight and hardening blindness is masterful. Three times the former blind man, who is truly gaining knowledge, humbly confesses his ignorance (12, 25, 36). Three times the Pharisaees, who are really plunging deeper into abysmal ignorance of Jesus, make confident statements about what they know of him (16, 24, 29). (*John*, in *The Anchor Bible Commentary*, p.377).

Light for Today

The story speaks to us today. Augustine was right when he wrote "This blind man stands for the human race . . . if the blindness is infidelity, then the illumination is faith . . ." We are all born blind and unless Jesus annoints our eyes we will stumble around like Plato's fettered cavemen.

To his first listeners Jesus' proclamation of himself as the light of the world may have recalled the story of the Exodus wanderings. On her way from a land of slavery to a land of freedom, Israel tasted the thirst-quenching water from the smitten rock and was led through the darkness of the night by a pillar of fire (Ex 13:21). Do we not today, on our journey from the slavery of sin to the freedom of righteousness, need such a guiding light?

Authenticating the Claims of Jesus

Who can deny that Jesus has been a guiding, transforming light down through the centuries? In spite of all the wretched, hypocritical things that professed followers have done in his name, history has authenticated the claim of Jesus to be the light of the world.

In the novel *Dr Zhivago*, by Boris Pasternak, Nikolai Nikolaievich's diary entry describes

the first impact of Jesus on the Roman world. It reads:

Rome was a flea market of borrowed gods and conquered peoples, a bargain basement on two floors, earth and heaven, a mass of filth convoluted in a triple knot as in an intestinal obstruction. Dacians, Herulians, Scythians, Samaritans, Hyperboreans, heavy wheels without spokes, eyes sunk in fat, sodomy, double chins, illiterate emperors, fish fed on the flesh of learned slaves. There were more people in the world than there have ever been since, all crammed into the passages of the Coliseum, and all wretched.

And then, into this tasteless heap of gold and marble, He came, light and clothed in an aura, emphatically human, deliberately provincial, Galilean, and at that moment gods and nations ceased to be and man came into being — man the carpenter, man the plowman, man the shepherd with his flock of sheep at sunset, man who does not sound in the least proud, man thankfully celebrated in all the cradle songs of mothers and in all the picture galleries the world over. (p. 40)

Many of the great artists, poets and musicians have found in Jesus their source of light and inspiration. Michelangelo planned Saint Peter's dome in adoration of Christ. Leonardo da Vinci, one of the most gifted men of the fifteenth century, spent sixteen years of his life painting the "Last Supper". Mozart gave to Christ his incomparable symphonies. Beethoven dedicated to the Lord his colossal musical genius. Tennyson began his "In Memoriam" with the invocation, "Strong Son of God, Immortal Love". As a fitting conclusion for his life he scrawled across an old blotter:

Sunset and evening star
And one clear call for me.
And may there be no moaning at the bar
When I put out to sea . . .
For though from out of our bourn of time and place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to meet my Pilot face to face,
When I have crossed the bar.

Charles Wesley, when in earnest contemplation about his Lord, burst forth into singing:

Jesus, Lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
while the tempest still is high.

Augustus Toplady wrote:

Rock of Ages cleft for me
Let me hide myself in thee.

Renan, the great French skeptic, closed his book *The Life of Jesus* with this statement:

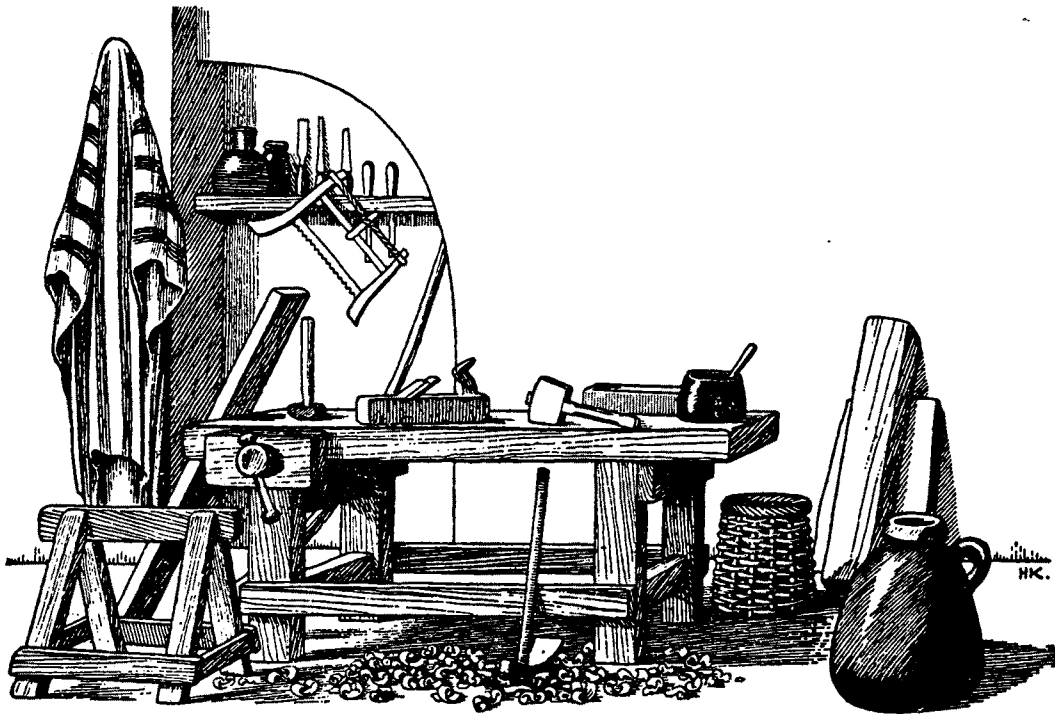
Whatever may be the surprises of the future, Jesus will never be surpassed. His worship will grow young without ceasing. His legend will call forth tears without end. His suffering will melt the noblest hearts and all the ages will proclaim that from the sons of men there is none born greater than He.

Modern man has been looking for a guiding light, for a clue to the meaning of life and the universe in the atoms and molecules of inorganic matter. But he will search in vain. He is looking in the wrong place, for the ultimate source of our existence is surely not less than personal. Personality, rationality, did not spring from inorganic matter. The secret of the meaning of life can only be found in him who is the light of the world.

As with all the great decisions of life, so with this one. There are only two alternatives. We may like blind Bartimaeus cry out "Jesus, Son of David have mercy upon me;" or like the rich young ruler when confronted with the claims of Christ we may retreat with our great possessions but in sorrow and confusion. In that quite yet awesome moment of decision may God give us grace to continue to make the right choice. To follow the light wherever it may lead. □

Especially for Boys

Paul Porter



Here is an idea for a new Christmas card. It looks like this. We are in Bethlehem, and here are the shepherds, the wise men, the angels, a man and a woman. And their eyes are all wide with excitement as they stare down at something very important lying in a crib. And if you follow the direction of their eyes, you will discover why they are so excited. Because, lying silently in the manger, all wrapped up in paper, is a brand new Hot Shot!

Christmas is a time for thinking about God, but it's nice to think about the toys too, isn't it?

And so I want to talk about two famous boys.

The first boy was called Thomas Edison, and if it weren't for people like him, Christmas wouldn't be half as exciting as it is today.

The second boy didn't have

a surname at all. He was simply called Jesus son of Joseph, and it's his birthday people are celebrating over the Christmas period.

Now, Thomas Edison grew up to become the greatest inventor who ever lived. If you look up at the ceiling, you will notice there is a light. Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. If you go shopping these days, you will hear Christmas music in the big stores. And that is only possible because Thomas Edison invented what later became the tape recorder. He was a very clever person.

When Thomas Edison went to school, people thought he was stupid. He had a large, funny shaped head and asked too many questions. Questions such as these: "How does a hen hatch chickens?" "Why does water put out a fire?" And if he couldn't get the an-

swers he wanted, he would experiment. One day he had a brilliant idea. He chased away a goose that was hatching her eggs and sat on them himself. But of course, he only succeeded in smashing the eggs instead of hatching the chicks.

One day, the school Inspector came and asked Thomas' teacher about the boys. Quietly pointing to Thomas, the teacher murmured: "That boy's addled (rotten). He's not normal like other boys. It's a waste of time letting him go to school." But Thomas had good ears, and he told his mother.

When Mrs Edison heard this, she was furious. She marched to the schoolhouse, dragging her son behind her. "I know what you said to the Inspector about my boy," she shouted. "Well, if anybody here is addled, it's you. My boy has more brains in his lit-

tle finger than you've got in your whole body! And mark my words," she added, thumping her fist on the teacher's desk, "some day the world will hear of him — but never of you!" And with that, she took the boy home. "You won't have to go back there," she told him. "I'm going to do the teaching myself."

And she did. In no time, Tom was finding out all sorts of things by himself. He made collections of insects, pebbles and plants. He feared his brothers and sisters would touch his treasures, so he wrote "POISON" in large letters on the jars where he kept them.

Tom never forgot his mother who believed in him. For the rest of his life his driving ambition was to prove her right.

Now, the second boy was not an inventor like Thomas Edison. If you go shopping, you won't find any Jesus cars or Jesus radios. Jesus is famous not because of his inventions, but because of the way he affected people. You will remember that some shepherds visited Jesus when he was a baby. They were poor people, and later in life, Jesus had lots of poor friends. "One day, God will make you rich," he promised them. And when they stood near Jesus, they felt rich already.

The wise men also visited Jesus at Christmas. But they weren't poor — they were rich and smart. And as he grew up, Jesus knew how to mix with people like that. He had poor friends, rich friends and smart friends. We need them all.

Some people would seek out Jesus when they were feeling ashamed, disgusted with themselves and miserable. And Jesus would talk with them. And when he prayed, it seemed as if God was really listening. They left feeling clean inside. Talking to Jesus was like having a bath. And to know that God has made you clean is worth more than 1,000 light bulbs and 1,000 cassette players.

What was Jesus like as a boy? Nobody knows, but we can use our imagination. Somebody once made a movie showing a group of Roman soldiers galloping into Nazareth. They come to a halt, draw their swords and begin to move from house to house. They are kidnapping young men. After they have galloped away, one of the Jewish fathers who has just lost his eldest son raises his fist to the sky and screams out to God: "How long must we suffer before you do something?" And immediately the movie camera zooms in on a young boy of about ten years. He is peering from the doorway of a carpenter's shop, and he has an intense look on his face.

Now, if I were that boy, I would have gone back into that carpenter's shop and made myself a powerful slingshot. Then I would have practised shooting birds. And if I were brave, I would have used that slingshot to shoot Roman soldiers. But Jesus didn't do that. He was planning something far better.

Imagine sitting in the same classroom as Jesus.

There he is at his desk, and the schoolmaster strides across to him, calls him to his feet and thunders: "What is your father's name, boy, and what does he do for a job?" And Jesus answers: "Joseph, sir. Joseph the carpenter." But under his breath he mutters: "My real father is God, and he's in charge of the universe." And now the schoolmaster is walking back toward the blackboard, tapping the desk tops with his ruler as he goes. "Now, boy, tell the class. What do you plan to be when you grow up?" And Jesus answers: "A carpenter, I suppose, sir. Like my father." But he whispers to himself: "When I grow up, I'm going to be the Saviour of the world. Even if it kills me."

So when you and your family gather around the Christmas tree this December, I want you to think of these two boys. The boy who gave us those brightly coloured light bulbs that flash on your tree, and the other boy who gave us himself. □

