

ISAIAH 9:6

A CHILD IS BORN, A SON IS GIVEN

“To us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”¹

Can any text be more intimately associated with Christmas than the text now before us? When he wrote “The Messiah,” George Frideric Handel drew heavily upon this passage of the Word. Anyone who has attended a presentation of that extraordinary oratorio will have heard the words of this text sung during that presentation. The promise of Christ’s birth and His reign is integral to the message of Christmas.

Many people—especially if they should be untaught or if they are unknowledgeable concerning the Faith—are surprised to discover that the Old Testament provides Christmas texts. However, Christians who are conversant with the Word know that the Faith is firmly grounded on teachings delivered first under the Old Covenant. Though no command to celebrate the birth of the Christ is ever issued, there is nevertheless recognition that His birth was foretold and that His advent was anticipated throughout the Jewish populace.

The necessity for the Messiah’s first advent is rooted in the human condition. Death reigns over the race because of the sin of our first father. However, in mercy God promised a Saviour even as He pronounced judgement on the creation as result of Adam’s rebellion. The promise of a Saviour was iterated throughout the Old Testament as God progressively narrowed the uncertainty shrouding the advent of His Son. The date of Messiah’s coming, the place of His birth, the conditions prevailing in the world when He would be revealed and especially the necessity for His coming were all foretold in Scripture.

Isaiah, as was true of other prophets of the Old Covenant, spoke of the incarnation. Though some supposed scholars have dismissed the importance of Isaiah’s prophecy, the court prophet did speak pointedly of the purpose of the Messiah’s advent. The purpose of Messiah’s coming, the reason the Anointed One would be born, is detailed in the words of our text—“to us a child is born, to us a son is given.”

To Us, A Child Is Born — The key to understanding this passage is revealed through Isaiah’s use of the prepositional phrase, “to us.” Consider the language the prophet used when delivering the comforting promise. “For a child is born *to us*, a son is given *to us*” [literal translation]. The prophecy promises that a child is to be born, and the recipient of this blessing is “us.” The prophecy also promises that a son is to be given; again the recipient of this blessing is “us.” Some collective entity is designated as beneficiary of the divine promise. Whatever else may be implied or meant by the words God delivered through the prophet, it is apparent that some collective group is the intended recipient of the promise. In order to assign benefit for the words of the prophecy, we must discover the recipient of the prophecy.

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Perhaps the prophet intends Israel to be the recipient of God's grace. This possibility cannot be discounted. Israel is God's chosen people. The Messiah was to come through Israel. Through Israel, we who are Gentiles are to be blessed as Scripture makes clear. In **GENESIS 9:27** we discover an enigmatic promise delivered by Noah after one of his sons had mocked him because he was drunk.

“May God enlarge Japheth,
and let him dwell in the tents of Shem.”

Japheth is the progenitor of the Indo-European peoples—non-Semitic races we speak of as “white.” Ham was progenitor of the Asian and African races and Canaan was the son of Ham. According to Noah's prophetic word, these lineages would be indebted to the Semites for some boon. That blessing is the revelation of the Faith we have received—blessing given through the Semitic peoples and propagated through European peoples to all the earth.

In **GENESIS 12:3**, the promise of God to Abraham is that all the families of the earth shall be blessed through him. The Apostle Paul picks up this theme when he informs us of the role of the Jewish people in bringing the message of life to us. He writes of them that, “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen” [**ROMANS 9:4, 5**]. Amen, indeed!

Thus, we cannot dismiss the possibility that Isaiah may have been speaking of Israel as the intended beneficiary resulting from the child's birth and from the giving of a son. Nevertheless, I am quite certain that the divine promise cannot be restricted to one nation, though that one nation figures prominently in the divine plan of God. I am confident that the promise is given to all mankind—if we are willing to receive the gift proffered.

The reason for my confidence lies in the Word of God. Paul continues writing in Romans with this explanation. “It is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” [**ROMANS 9:6-8**].

As he considers a variety of Scriptures and the multiple implications of what has been written, the Apostle concludes with this word, “What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith” [**ROMANS 9:30**]. God's righteousness is offered to Gentiles through the child who is born and through the son who is given.

In **ISAIAH 9:1, 2** the Prophet declares, “There will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined.”

The words that follow are directed to us Gentiles. The prophecy is not restricted to the people of Israel, though Israel will be affected greatly as is also true for Gentiles.

Remember, the focus of this portion of the message is that a child is born to us. Now we must identify this child. Why is it important to know that a child is to be born to us? The fact that the prophet speaks of a child born who will benefit all mankind, and especially a child who will in some way bless the Gentiles, implies that this is no ordinary child; rather, this is a child of promise. Earlier in Isaiah's writings, another prophecy was delivered; that prophecy was intended for a craven king. Read the prophecy with me; it is found a few pages back in your Bible. The prophet asserts, "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" [ISAIAH 7:14].

Any reasonable person would conclude that this is a rather astonishing promise. Virgins do not conceive in the normal course of events. Reports of babies born miraculously do surface from time-to-time. As an example, consider British news reports from some years ago that spoke of a self-styled archbishop, one Gilbert Deya, who claimed that infertile women could become pregnant through His prayers. Women, demonstrably infertile, travelled to Kenya where they were said to have given birth in slum clinics. However, DNA tests done on at least one of the children in Britain proved there was no link to the supposed mother. In fact, what was happening was a baby theft ring that was trafficking in stolen babies.² More than twenty babies were taken into custody in Kenya as result of Deya's malfeasance.³ As is inevitably the case, claims of miraculous births can be easily discounted.

Children are not normally identified as "God with us." However, according to the prophecy a child would be born of a virgin and that child would be "God with us"—Immanuel. Indeed, people do occasionally appear claiming to be god among us. The Guru Maharaj Ji claimed to be god in human form, an avatar.⁴ Though claimants to divinity appear with dismaying regularity,⁵ only one managed to demonstrate the validity of His claim through raising the dead after restoring sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He alone conquered death. Only one has brought hope and joy to mankind through forgiveness of sin and the promise of life. That One is Jesus the Messiah—the child promised to all mankind.

To us a child is born, and the purpose of the birth of that child is that He might provide Himself as a sacrifice to take our sin upon Himself and then rise from the dead to bring reconciliation with God. That child must be very God; thus, He alone is worthy of our praise. We celebrate the birth of the Christ child because in Him only do we find hope and joy and peace. We Christians rejoice in the knowledge that God has become man, for it means that we are not left without hope. God has remembered us in our helpless condition. He has sent His own Son to share our condition. In Christ the Lord, God became man.

Those who believe this glorious truth rejoice. Indeed, it is impossible not to rejoice in the knowledge that God has sent His own Son. The birth of Jesus speaks of the love of God for all mankind. The coming of God to share our condition speaks of the esteem for our human condition. Therefore, I urge you to celebrate Christmas and to rejoice in the Saviour's birth.

² See "'Miracle baby' couples fail test," <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3981423.stm>, accessed 28 November 2014

³ Clare Dyer, "Miracle baby was victim of trafficking, judge says," The Guardian, http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,1350374,00.html, accessed 28 November 2014

⁴ See "The Guru Game: Peace which passeth all understanding," Ramparts, July 1973, viewed at <http://www.ex-premie.org/pages/ramparts73.htm>, accessed 28 November 2014

⁵ See "List of people claimed to be Jesus," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_claimed_to_be_Jesus, accessed 28 November 2014

To Us, A SON IS GIVEN — This leads to the second portion in our consideration of this marvellous prophecy. Indeed, a child is born, but the text also states that a Son is given. Christ the Lord was born of a woman, as the Apostle says [see GALATIANS 4:4]. Were we to adopt the theology of liberal Christianity, we could readily say that Jesus was God's gift to mankind simply by His advent. He has showed us the way to live; thus, He is our example. Though this is true, it is actually a lie because it is actually a half-truth.

The Son of God is a gift to mankind in that He has done so much more than merely experience our condition and because He has done so much more than simply show us the way to live in order to please the Father. The Son of God came to earth for one great purpose—to give His life as a sacrifice because of sin so that He might provide redemption for sinful man. Jesus, the Son of God, came to give His life for sinful man.

I consider 2 CORINTHIANS 5:19-21 to be one of the great Scripture passages pointing to the work of Christ on behalf of fallen man. There, Paul has written, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

I can only marvel whenever I read 2 CORINTHIANS 5:21—"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin." How is it possible that the sinless Son of God would permit Himself to be made sin so that I might enjoy the righteousness of God? The revelation is surely a deep mystery. I doubt that any theologian will ever be able to understand fully the implications of this truth; neither will any preacher exhaust the depths of this truth. Nevertheless, I conclude that Christ's sacrifice because of our sin is the gift to which Isaiah referred.

Some theologians debate the passage obscured in the depths of divine mystery. Was the Son of God made a "sin offering?" There is no question but that the Greek term [*hamartian*] could be translated "sin offering?" According to this view, the Son of God was sinless, and therefore could not become sin on our behalf. Those promoting this view argue that in His death, Jesus fulfilled the type of the guilt offering presented in the Old Testament under the Law, and that it is this fulfillment of a type to which Paul referred. This is unquestionably a popular view of what the Apostle wrote; it is promoted by many fine theologians.

However, I am not convinced by these arguments; I find the concept of "sin offering" to be unsatisfying. The reasons for my refusal to accept the view that the Son of God was a sin offering are severalfold. First, I note that Paul is careful to say that God *made* Christ to be sin for us, instead of saying that He *presented* Him or *offered* Him as sin, which would be a much more precise verb to use if the Apostle meant to say that Jesus was a "sin offering."

Also, as David Garland notes, sin is contrasted to righteousness, and "interpreting the word as 'sin offering' destroys the parallel structure of the sentence:

Christ who knew no sin
God made him sin
We [who are sinners]
Become the righteousness of God."

Garland concludes, "Paul therefore intends to say that Christ is made a sinner."⁶

⁶ David E. Garland, **The New American Commentary: 2 Corinthians, Vol. 29** (Broadman and Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN 1999) 300-1

Though the noun *hamartían* is used to refer to the “sin offering” in the Septuagint [the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures], nowhere in the New Testament is the verb translated as “sin offering.” I also note that Paul uses the identical Greek noun when he states of Christ Jesus that He knew no sin [*hamartían*]. Consistency would demand that we understand the word to convey the same meaning in either instance, especially when we are encountering it in the same sentence. Therefore, I do not find the argument for saying that Paul meant to say that Christ was made a “sin offering” on our behalf to be persuasive.

Other theologians have argued that the Saviour was counted as sinful, though He was not actually made to be sin. Again, it seems to me that the primary genesis of this view lies in their sense of discomfort arising from the thought that the sinless Son of God could be made to be sin. This view states that Christ was treated as a sinner. Though this is true, it fails to explain the parallel passage of **GALATIANS 3:13**. There, Paul says of Christ that He became a curse for us. The interpretation demanded by those wishing to soften the language would have us understand that Christ was treated as though He were cursed; but He actually took our sin upon Himself when He presented Himself as our substitute.

Careful review convinces me that the Spirit of God was precise in His choice of words, conveying accurately and precisely that the Son of God was actually made to be sin in our behalf. The Spirit says that Christ Jesus became like us so that He might taste death for everyone [see **HEBREWS 2:9**]; and because He tasted death for us, Christ the Lord in fact was made to be sin for us. I confess that I understand neither the mechanics nor the motivation for this action; but I am convinced by the Scriptures of this truth. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became sin in our place. We can only marvel at the divine design.

Isaiah’s prophecy concerning the suffering Saviour addresses this same issue. The Prophet writes of Messiah’s sacrifice in **ISAIAH 53:6**.

“We all went astray like sheep;
we all have turned to our own way;
and the LORD has punished Him
for the iniquity of us all.”⁷

The alternate reading of the second strophe of that prophecy is found in the margin; that alternate reading states “The Lord has placed on Him the iniquity of us all.”

In summary, the Apostle, when writing **2 CORINTHIANS 5:21**, was not focused on the human life Jesus lived; rather, he focused on His death. In His death, Jesus became sin. The One who lived a sinless life died a sinner’s death. In His death, Jesus was estranged from the Father, becoming the object of wrath. Jesus was treated as a sinner in His death. Garland notes that the sinless nature of Jesus is protected in the words Paul chooses to use, for he says that it was for our sake that God made the Son to be sin.⁸

Jesus is God’s gift to mankind. He was given in order to present His life as a sacrifice and thus to bear away our sin. The author of the Hebrews letter emphasises this point most strongly. In **HEBREWS 9:27, 28** we read, “Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”

⁷ **Holman Christian Standard Bible** (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2003)

⁸ Garland, op. cit., 301

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It is difficult to deny facts, and the undeniable fact insists that one out of one people still die. The reason for death reigning over the race is sin. Paul asserts that “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” [ROMANS 5:12]. Just as death is a fact, so also the offer of life provided freely through Christ the Lord is a fact. The Son of God was offered once to bear the sins of all mankind. Therefore, we assert now that He is the sole means of life; He is the fullest expression of God’s grace and mercy to fallen mankind. To be spared eternal death, you must accept the offer of grace found in the sacrifice of Christ the Lord.

God’s word compels me to caution all who hear this message or who read the words of this message to heed the final portion of the passage found in Hebrews that was read moments ago. If the first two propositions are demonstrated to be true (namely, “it is appointed for man to die once” and “after this comes judgement”), then it logically follows that the conclusion must likewise be true. Therefore, we may be confident that Christ “will appear a second time.”

We Christians—believers in the Risen Son of God—hold the promise of His momentary return. Thus we live in joyful anticipation. The purpose of our Lord’s second appearing is twofold. Implicit in this text is the knowledge that He is coming again to save all who have received His grace. We believers look forward to His return and to the promised transformation into the His likeness. However, compassion compels me to warn that the Lord Jesus will also bring judgement for all who have rejected His free offer of mercy and grace. As our Lord has clearly stated, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” [JOHN 5:24-29].

The Son, given as a divine sacrifice for sin must shortly become our heavenly Judge if we reject the mercy that He now offers through His death because of our sin. If we reject this divine offer of grace, then of our own volition we accept the penalty for our own sin. If we reject this offer of divine mercy, then we must attempt to stand in our own righteousness; and God has warned that human righteousness is utterly ineffectual to avert condemnation. The Lord warns,

“We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”

[ISAIAH 64:6a]

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul developed a theology of salvation. One of the truly great statements found among apostolic writings is ROMANS 6:23, which states that “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This statement is great because it pointedly contrasts human effort with divine grace. Whenever we toil, imagining that as mere mortals we can in some way impress God, we soon discover that our labours serve only to prove that we are dead and to ensure that we will remain dead. However, God offers the gracious gift of life to all who will receive it. And that life is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Christ the Lord *is* the Son who was given. In Him is life.

Whenever you think of Christmas, I trust that you do indeed think of the child that was born; but I also urge you not to forget the Son who is given. In this text, we discover that God did indeed send His Son; but we must never forget the purpose for the coming of the Son of God. Jesus, the Son of the Living God was born to offer up His life as a ransom for sinful man. Indeed, the Lord Christ came to present Himself as a sin offering, and in doing so God made Him sin because of our fallen condition so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. This is the gift that God has given.

TO US, IF WE WILL RECEIVE HIM — Without the knowledge that God has remembered our broken, fallen condition and that He responded by sending His Son, I am certain that Christmas has no meaning. What does one celebrate if not the belief that God has shared our human condition? Those spiritually stunted individuals who think that they somehow protect an unwary populace through refusing to permit the celebration of Christmas, offering instead vapid, boring, meaningless winter festivals and snow carnivals, surely have never thought through the implications of their foolish actions. Who actually celebrates the cold and the darkness of winter? Who really believes that snow deserves a festival? Were there no cold weather or snow, no one would attempt to invent such climatologic phenomena just to have another celebration. We tolerate celebrations of such meteorological events simply because there is no alternative once the acknowledgement of Christ's birth is censured.

I have often pointed out that there are only two religions in the world—true and false. Either we look to God for mercy, confessing our utter dependence upon His grace, or we attempt to make ourselves acceptable to God. It is immaterial whether we smugly walk in our own arrogance or whether we grovel and abase ourselves before some tyrannical demigod, if we are so foolish as to think that we can do something to merit God's commendation, there is no need for grace. The text speaks powerfully of grace. God gives to us His Son because of our helpless condition—that is grace.

Technically, the emphasis of the text is not upon what the child will do when grown up, but rather the emphasis is the very fact of His birth. All that results from His birth—orderliness, advance of God's Kingdom, peace, justice and righteousness—is immediately secured. We are not the focus of Isaiah's words; the Child is the focus. I note that in speaking of the birth of a child, Isaiah points to the Child's ancestry. Thus, we understand that Isaiah emphasises the Child's humanity. However, when he states that this Child is given, Isaiah makes a strong statement of the Child's divine origin. This is no ordinary child, but rather He is presented for a specific purpose—He comes in order that He may be given as a sacrifice for the sin of all mankind. The blood of Jesus' sacrifice stains the pages of the Bible from beginning to the end.

The purpose of His coming is to free us from the sentence of death. The Word of God declares darkly that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" [**ROMANS 3:23**]. In our own strength, we are helpless to change our condition. From birth, each person is dying. The great tragedy for the race is that physical death is but telling evidence that each individual is "dead in the trespasses and sins" [**EPHESIANS 2:1**] that characterise the natural walk. Without some change in our condition, we are "separated from Christ ... having no hope and without God in the world" [**EPHESIANS 2:12**]. Though one may try ever so hard to be "good," to somehow please God and thus to avert the sentence of death, yet such efforts must always fail and we continue under the just condemnation of Holy God. We are born, we walk in our own wilful way, we die and then we face eternal judgement.

The sole exception to this dark story is the individual who is born from above. Most Christians have read the account of Jesus conversation with Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish religious elite. Usually, we begin and end our reading with **JOHN 3:16**. Today, I want us to read beginning with that beautiful verse and continuing on through **JOHN 3:21**.

“God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God” [**JOHN 3:16-21**].

The Son of God was given so that we might be saved. If we are condemned, it is because we choose not to receive the gift of life offered in the Person of the Son of God who was given in our place. If we are condemned, it is because we have refused to believe the message of life—that Jesus died because of our sin and that He was raised from the dead for our justification.

Faith results in a transformed life. We do not live a transformed life in order to be saved, but we who are saved will live a transformed life. It is impossible to live this changed life in our own strength. Therefore, when one is born from above, that one will have rooted within his or her heart the desire to honour God through living a righteous life. The transformed soul will enjoy the power of God to choose that which is right and good and noble; having been born from above, the changed one will now have the Spirit of God living within, receiving new desires and new power to honour God.

This is the reason the Son of God presented Himself as our sacrifice—He gave Himself to redeem us from sin and to give us His life. The life He offers is not simply a style of life that is pleasing to God, though it is truly pleasing to the Father. The life Christ offers is a life changed by His power so that the saved individual actually seeks to glorify God by the way in which he or she lives. This transformation is secured through the sacrifice of the Son of God in the place of sinful man.

The story is told concerning a priest visiting a woman as she was dying. The priest introduced himself, saying that he had come to grant her absolution of sin. “Let me see your hands,” barked the dying woman.

The priest, confused and somewhat embarrassed by this sharp demand, slowly extended his hands for the woman’s inspection. Holding his hands in hers and turning them over to examine them carefully, the woman pushed them away with this retort. “You cannot absolve me of sin. You have no scars on your hands. The only One able to forgive my sins is the One who died and who rose from the dead. You are an impostor.”

I cannot absolve you of sin, but I am pleased to point you to the only Saviour who has tasted death in your place and who now offers forgiveness of sin. He is Christ the Lord. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Of course, as you have heard so often from this pulpit, Paul concludes by quoting the Prophet, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**]. Amen.