

MATTHEW 2:16-18
DRAMATIC EVENTS IN AN OUT-OF-THE-WAY PLACE:
SLAUGHTERING THE INNOCENT

“Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

‘A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.’”¹

“Whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, ‘Violence and destruction!’
For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
If I say, ‘I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,’
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.”

[JEREMIAH 20:8, 9]

Jeremiah protested his appointment as a prophet. Much as was true for Jeremiah, so I find myself disturbed at what the Lord commands me to say. I want to be positive, to be uplifting, but I cannot. It is as though I hear the Prophet Amos assert:

“The lion has roared;
who will not fear?
The Lord GOD has spoken;
who can but prophesy?”

[AMOS 3:8]

Christmas has become a family celebration within western culture. This is a time when families look forward to being together. Families gather for a sumptuous meal and to reveal love for one another through exchanging gifts. Grandmas will be busy in kitchens preparing the feasts and grandpas are plotting how to spoil their grandchildren. Dads and moms have been busy for weeks buying gifts, putting the Christmas tree in place and decorating the house in bright, holiday colours. Christmas will be a special time once again as family ties are strengthened and traditions hoary with the patina of love of family will be practised once more.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

In the midst of the seasonal joy, we often hear sincere expressions of concern that there are people within our society who will be forgotten despite the holiday festivities. Prisoners will be overlooked, even by their families. Homeless individuals, some living on the streets through unimaginable and unexpected reversals of fortune, will have nowhere to go for Christmas. These neglected individuals will be forgotten in their unending struggle to find warmth in the midst of another cold winter day. Others who have become estranged from family will be forgotten.

Underlying the gaiety of the holiday is an inescapable sense of sorrow—sorrow that is intense, even if transient. The thought persists that some individuals will have no family with whom they can share the day. It is often forgotten, or perhaps our neglect is deliberate, that one result of the birth of the Christ was deep sorrow; it was a time when some families were rent apart in the most horrible way imaginable. Unimaginable grief attended the first Christmas for some families.

How could the birth of the Christ child, the Son of God appointed to bring salvation to all who will receive that divine gift, be the cause of such sorrow? Many have forgotten that the presence of the Christ is divisive. Jesus stunned His disciples one day when He sternly warned, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” [MATTHEW 10:34-39].

Apparently, His warning was not embraced any more readily than it is embraced now. Jesus would be compelled to iterate this worrisome warning again when He would warn, “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” [LUKE 12:51-53].

Remember, the angels message as recorded in the English Standard Version was,

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.”

[LUKE 2:14]

I am well aware that older translations of the Bible spoke of peace and good will toward men. However, the Greek underlying our English translations doesn’t support the concept of universal peace and divine good will. The peace of God is promised to those with whom God is pleased.

God, through Isaiah, promises, “Peace, peace, to the far and to the near” [ISAIAH 57:19]; and yet, God is quite emphatic in warning, “‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked’” [ISAIAH 57:21]. Underscore the thought in your mind—despite the lighted streets and decorated houses, the wicked have no peace with God. Neither have they the prospect of peace with Him since they have shoved the thought of Him far from their minds.

Peace with God is promised only to those individuals who turn to Christ the Lord in faith. According to the Word of God, “We have been justified by faith”; and, therefore, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” [ROMANS 5:1].

Christ's peace, the peace that is promised to all with whom God is pleased, comes through union with His Body, which is the congregation of the faithful. This is emphasised when Paul writes, "Therefore, God's chosen ones, holy and loved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, accepting one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a complaint against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Above all, put on love—the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of the Messiah, to which you were also called in one body, control your hearts. Be thankful. Let the message about the Messiah dwell richly among you, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him"² [COLOSSIANS 3:12-17, HCSB]. The Messiah's peace is evident when it is present in one's life; and His peace controls our lives when we walk in love with those whom He has called and received in the Faith.

To emphasise the point, look at Paul's instruction to the Congregation in Philippi. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" [PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7].

The peace of God is His divine gift to those who know Him. It is not knowing about God that brings peace; it is knowing God that brings peace. Mere religion will never give peace with God. It is only when one is twice-born that this divine gift rests on an individual's life. Moreover, those who are born from above are responsible to cultivate that peace through walking in love with the people of God, honouring Him through effective service and a loving relationship with His people in the congregation of the faithful.

JESUS, A MAN OF SORROWS — Throughout the centuries, multiple artists have portrayed the Master as handsome, winsome, attractive. There is no comfort in such imaginative views when we consult Scripture. Teaching His disciples concerning the purpose of His coming to earth, Jesus said, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself" [JOHN 12:32]. The words are deliberate. It is only when He was lifted up that men were drawn to the Christ. Until He gave His life as a sacrifice, there was nothing to draw us to Him.

Isaiah provided an unflattering view of the Messiah when he wrote:

"He grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

[ISAIAH 53:2, 3]

² **The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version** (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2009)

Isaiah gives readers a rather blunt description of Messiah; the description is not in the least flattering—no form or majesty, no beauty, so homely that men would hide their faces from him, on physical appearance alone, Messiah would be despised.

In short, Messiah would possess no attributes that would cause anyone to esteem Him. Jesus the Messiah was born, not to draw men to Himself because of flawless, glowing skin, nor because He possessed a muscular physique, nor even because of His gleaming smile or His perfect enunciation of the Aramaic tongue; Jesus draws men to Himself because He offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice for sinful man. The Messiah was born to give Himself in sacrifice. Perhaps contemporary churchgoers need to be reminded of this fact.

We live in a day in which we look for heroes rather than looking for men of character. We choose our heroes because they are handsome, virile, powerful, forceful, eloquent and persuasive in their speech. The plain man can never be our hero; we want heroes that look like heroes. Perhaps it has always been this way. Writing the Church of God in Corinth, the Apostle to the Gentiles reflected what many said of him. “They say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account’” [2 CORINTHIANS 10:9, 10].

Later, in that missive, Paul wrote, “I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things” [2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-6].

This congregation, a church that had been blessed with the Apostle’s ministry when they were first set on the path to honouring Christ, had decided that he was not handsome enough, that his speech was uninspiring, that he wasn’t the real thing. Therefore, the Apostle had to assert, “I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing” [2 CORINTHIANS 12:11].

We don’t live in the past; so, though we can learn from the past, we cannot return to the past. In an earlier day, our culture was less visual, more reasoned in our choices of which voices we would heed. It does appear that for our contemporaries it is the most dulcet voice, the most saccharine tones, the most seductive pledges that beguile us. At other times, we are drawn to the most insistent or raucous voices that we adjudge to be strongest. We hear people promise great things, and though we know they are lying we listen because the promises voiced meet our expectations. Thus, like the children of Hamelin we are mesmerised to follow the Piper even as he leads us to what is surely our demise.

That this condition prevails in society at large is tragic enough; however, this selfsame dreadful condition has invaded the hallowed precincts of the churches of our Lord. The Bereans were commended because they examined the Scriptures to see if the truths the Apostles taught were in fact true [see ACTS 17:10-12]. The philosophy prevailing among professed Christians today appears more akin to the attitude of Israel during the latter days of the Judges [see JUDGES 21:25]. We have adopted a cafeteria approach to doctrine—I’ll have a little of that truth; I’ll avoid this truth because it is difficult to hold; here is a truth I can really hold to; but, there is a truth that is unpopular. Thus, we fill our lives with an eclectic gemish that ultimately changes nothing.

This past week, I reviewed a survey conducted by Ligonier Ministries.³ The response of those surveyed to the questions was particularly disturbing. In general, professed evangelicals among the churches have adopted a laissez faire attitude toward what should be foundational truth for any Christian. Ignorant of the exclusive nature of the Faith, majorities imagine they attain heaven through their own efforts. Though majorities affirm their belief that God is the Author of Scripture, they simultaneously hold that science discredits the claims of Christianity. What we believe about God effects how we live. Therefore, majorities among the churches no longer believe that abortion is a sin or that sex outside of traditional marriage is sinful. It is becoming apparent that among the churches, declaring wicked acts to be sin is verboten.

If the birth of the Son of God was to provide a sacrifice for sinful man, then modern religious attitudes declare that His death was meaningless. If sin no longer is sinful, then why should it be necessary for God to become a man just so He could give His life as a sacrifice? Not only did the Christ come to earth to present His life as a sacrifice, but His presence brought sorrow and grief to many at His birth. Tear-stained faces resulted from His presence even as a baby. Herod, enraged at the thought of anyone who would be identified as a king, ordered the execution of all children two and under living in the environs of Bethlehem.

Tragically, churches today react much as did the professed people of God to the presence of the Christ in that ancient day. We want a god we can take out for a brief time on a Sunday morning and ignore the remainder of the week. This god will make us feel good about ourselves because we are religious and not condemned like other people. We would be deeply offended if this god attempted to change us into His image. There will be time enough for such transformative work after this god has fulfilled the responsibility we assigned to take us to Paradise.

Let me get a bit more specific by looking at the Christmas season in this day. For all the gaiety, I see little in popular culture to remind us what this is a holiday—and I remind you that holiday is but an elision of holy day. Christmas is composed of two words—“Christ” and “mass.” Christmas is also an elision meaning “Christ’s Mass.” The reference is not exclusively to a Catholic or an Anglican service of worship; rather, the reference is to the purpose of the holiday (Holy Day) to worship the Christ!

While Christians become quite agitated over the world’s effort to remove Christ from Christmas, there is little concern about removing the worship from Christmas. Consequently, many churches will cancel services of worship on this holiday because families will want to be together. What happened to the worship?

It is possible to go the entire season without thinking of Christ, the commercialisation of the season is that pronounced. What a shame that for many people the only biblical passage they will hear recited will be if they happen to watch “A Charlie Brown Christmas!”

Again, it is but a tacit acknowledgement that the Christ who was born of a virgin is a man of sorrows; Jesus is the forgotten guest of honour at His own celebration. Churches seem intent on joining with secular society to ensure lots of gaiety without the inconvenience of actually worshipping. Attending a church related function this past week, I was deeply grieved to listen to children presenting a celebration of Christmas by singing and hopping around the stage in a frenetic attempt to dance to “Jingle Bell Rock” and “Feliz Navidad” while the leaders closed the programme with a sappy rendition of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” I assure you that no pagans were offended by the programme. However, throughout I found myself asking, “Where is the Honoured Guest? Where is Christ in all this?”

³ The State of Theology, <https://thestateoftheology.com/>, accessed 16 December 2016

It is not enough for a pastor or for any professed Christian to say that the Name of the Christ was mentioned a few times throughout the programme. It is foolish in the extreme for any Christian to claim to have offered up a perfunctory prayer before beginning his or her celebration. Let's be honest enough to admit that the celebrations of "Christ's Mass" for most part are designed for our own pleasure and not to present worship to the Son of God.

Years ago, the southern evangelist, Vance Havner, decried the growing number of "Christian" entertainers who were singing in the cabarets and bars, noting that many justified what they did by arguing that they always concluded their performances with a Christian song. He correctly observed that singing "I'd Rather Have Jesus Than Silver or Gold" as the final song did not make the performance Christian. He then wryly commented that we would soon have Christian pickpockets. While they are lifting a wallet with one hand they will be placing a tract in an opposite pocket with the other hand.

What is true of the attitude of the churches toward the Christmas season is being revealed increasingly toward moral issues that define this day late in the Age of Grace. Let me touch on just a couple of issues that define this day. First, let me point to the slaughter of the innocent in this day. Politicians are prepared to push the necessity of killing the young "in utero" despite the knowledge that they are taking human life. The incongruity of their effort is seen in their refusal to agree that capital punishment should lie under the purview of government. I'm going out on a limb to suggest that we may well witness murdering the recently born in our day. Whether we will see a law permitting a parent to kill a child within the first eight days or within the first three months will be immaterial. There is no difference in killing a child after that little one has transited the birth canal or whether the child is killed near term while still in the womb.

We should tremble when we realise that God holds those who slaughter His little ones to account. Though the words were recorded in the Old Testament, they apply to us even in this day. God condemned His ancient people because they "filled [the Valley of the Son of Hinnom] with the blood of innocents" and because they "built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal" [see **JEREMIAH 19:3-6**]. If that was not sufficiently abhorrent, God charged, "They built the high places of Baal in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech" [**JEREMIAH 32:35**]. The LORD God calls such acts an abomination. Is it not an abomination that we sacrifice our children to the god of pleasure or self-centred existence?

God, speaking through Ezekiel says that the sons and daughters which Israel bore were borne to Him. He identifies these little ones as His children; it was His gifts that were sacrificed [see **EZEKIEL 16:20, 21**]. His ancient people imagined that they could exalt their own convenience and still worship the LORD God, but they were wrong. God said they were defiled through their actions of sacrificing their children; and their exaltation of self would bring devastation on them [see **EZEKIEL 20:26**]. God warned His ancient people [see **EZEKIEL 23:36-39**], and I must believe the warning applies to us in this day.

I am watching with dismay as the churches of this day are being changed through pressure from the world. A decade ago only a very few churches and denominations that had long since departed from the Faith argued for positions that reflected the thinking of the world. It is becoming apparent that positions that were anathema then have become acceptable now. Christians and Christian thinkers wandered off into the weeds and have lost their way when it comes to suitability for pastoral leadership. First, the Word of God was set aside as authoritative and accurate in order to permit women to assume eldership.

The argument for women serving as elders was vigorously promoted through presenting an argument of equality. Churches were accused of being misogynistic if they did not permit women to function as elders. Churches were accused of making women feel excluded if they could not pastor. Thus, emotion was substituted for reason, as is almost always the case for adopting liberal positions. What was lacking in the argument for promoting women as pastors was that equality of worth before God could not be stretched and twisted to include equality of function. Whether they accept the divine charge or not, men are still charged with being godly leaders in the home and women are still proscribed from eldership if what the Apostle wrote has any validity. However much people may inveigh against Him, the Spirit of God has spoken with clarity through the Apostle, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” [1 TIMOTHY 2:12, 13].

Then, because biblical constraints on the sex of pastoral leadership had been removed, openly gay individuals agitated for the right to serve as elders. Gender was becoming the new catch phrase and who was to argue that the sex of an individual could be restricted to man or woman. In fact, according to the new view that now prevails, gender is fluid. Since the churches had already made one concession, it was obviously unreasonable to keep those who were openly homosexual from the pulpit.

Again, feelings prevailed over reason among many of the churches of our Lord. Following a service during which I had had advocated the biblical position that marriage is defined as one man and one woman in a committed covenantal union, a prominent woman from the community who had been present confronted me at the door of the auditorium. She was quite obviously agitated and could not wait to inform me, “My son is homosexual, and he is the nicest boy.” I don’t deny that he may be a very nice boy, but if he acts on his homosexual desires he is in defiance of the clearly revealed will of God. However, a growing number of pastors today would rather allow what God proscribes than face the disapproval of contemporary society.

And now, as pointed out in an earlier message, we are presented with the spectacle of atheists occupying the pulpit of churches and prominent pastors within one particular denomination supporting the right of an atheist to provide leadership.⁴ The argument for maintaining an atheist in the pulpit is that she is effective and likeable!

If the actions of Herod are included in the account of the birth of the Son of God and if those actions are understood to be abhorrent to the Lord God, then how can contemporary Christians who are surrendering positions of righteousness say that these actions are pleasing to the Lord? We are attempting to accomplish the impossible. Let me provide a maxim that will stand you in good stead always—it is never right to do wrong in order to have a chance to do right. Do what is right, even if the stars fall out of heaven.

THE PRESENCE OF THE CHRIST COMPELS EACH ONE TO MAKE A CHOICE — As Herod raged and prepared to slaughter the little ones, God worked to preserve His Son. He sent an angel to warn Joseph to move the family to Egypt immediately. Joseph obeyed, and the life of the child was spared. This raises one of the difficult questions that people often present to preachers. Why did God spare one child and permit perhaps so many as two dozen children to be killed?

⁴ Michael Stark, “Dramatic Events in an Out-of-the-Way Place: A Model for Godly Manhood,” (sermon) 4 December 2016, <http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Matthew-01.18-25-A-Model-for-Godly-Manhood.pdf>

The question has been raised as an objection to the concept of God from earliest days of the church. If God is good (and He is) and if God is omnipotent (and He is) why does He permit evil in the world? Scoffers and those wishing to discredit the Living God often argue that if God is all-powerful, He is not good because He allows tragedy; and if He is good, He is not all-powerful because He cannot stop evil. A prominent rabbi attempted to answer this argument by assuming that God is good but unable to hold back evil.⁵ The book precipitated a number of attempts at reconciling God's power and goodness. The question is not new, however; the Book of Job grapples with this very matter, concluding at last that God is good and God is omnipotent, but we must never ignore His sovereignty.

There are a variety of similar questions in this same vein that can be asked, and are sometimes raised. Why should you be permitted to live in Canada and not in Syria? Why should you have a warm bed in which you will sleep this evening instead of being homeless? Why should you have enough to eat when many in Africa will go to bed hungry? Why should you be allowed to live to care for your family when another who loves her family as much as you love your family should die? Each of these questions, and thousands of other questions that could be asked ponder the problem of God's benevolence and power.

Perhaps we ask the wrong question. Rather than asking God why some experience sorrow while others are spared, perhaps we should be asking why God has shown us mercy. Why did you not die last evening rather than waking to the beauty of a new day? Why did God show you kindness by permitting you to live in a land of plenty instead of living in a land that compels you to labour for just enough to live another day? Why does God show kindness and mercy instead of judging us as we deserve? The answers cannot be given at this time. After all, "We walk by faith, not by sight" [2 CORINTHIANS 5:7]. I have often consoled myself with the knowledge that I serve the God who is too good to needlessly hurt me and too wise to make a mistake. I live in the confidence that He makes no mistake. I also know that the answers to such questions will not be resolved this side of glory.

The presence of the Christ in Bethlehem compelled Herod to make a choice. Would he worship this newborn king? Or would he strike out in a rage, vainly fighting against the Living God? The answer is that Herod sought to kill the Son of God. That he would order the death of about two dozen children is not difficult to believe. This wicked man had ordered the execution of his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law and his favourite wife, Mariamme. His three eldest sons were also killed on his orders.⁶ On one occasion, Herod faced an assassination attempt on his life. Ten conspirators and their entire families were slain in retaliation.⁷ He ordered that upon his death, all the Jewish nobility was to be executed to ensure that mourning was genuine! Though this edict was not carried out, it shows the mindset of this vile man. Two dozen or so infants and toddlers was of no consequence to Herod.

Just as Herod was compelled to make a choice by the presence of the Christ whether he would be godly or whether he would continue in unrighteousness, so we are still compelled to make a choice when we become aware of Christ's presence. Will we do what makes us comfortable? Will we fulfil our will rather than seeking to do the will of God? Or will we do the things that honour God, worshipping the Son whom He gave?

⁵ Harold S. Kushner, **When Bad Things Happen to Good People**

⁶ R. T. France, **The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew** (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., Grand Rapids, MI 2007) 84-85

⁷ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, **Antiquities 15:279-283, The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged** (Hendrickson, Peabody, MA 1987)

God is good and God is omnipotent. He sent His Son into the world to give His life that we might live. The presence of the Son of God is evidence of God's love. We read in Scripture, "God so loved the world, that He gave His Only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" [**JOHN 3:16**].

God's offer of life demonstrates His mercy toward fallen mankind. That God has provided a means by which evil men can be redeemed and made holy is evidence of His might and power. The wonder that should grip our hearts and our minds is how holy God can allow evil men to be transformed and called by His Name. We witnessed something of the marvel that seizes the soul of the redeemed when the Apostle writes, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" [**GALATIANS 2:20**].

God's goodness and power are displayed in the redemption of men and women who are ruined by sin. Thus, we read the exclamation of praise that is written in the Ephesian Letter. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love, he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" [**EPHESIANS 1:3-10**].

It is Christmas and a new year rapidly approaches. I am reasonably certain that our world will continue its mad rush toward self-immolation. As this present year moves toward a conclusion and a new year dawns, we will hear of wars and rumours of wars. Jerusalem will continue to be a cup of staggering to all the surrounding peoples. Tensions in the political world will increase and people will be increasingly segregated into tribes within their own nations. We will continue to hear prominent individuals plead for peace and security even as sudden destruction hangs over mankind. These things remind us to straighten up and to raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.

Increasing numbers of professing Christians will find new ways to accommodate the unrighteous demands of this fallen world, as increasing numbers of churches will be infiltrated by the spirit of this age. Churches will continue to conduct services known as worship, but it will often be difficult to determine who or what is worshipped. Growing numbers of churches will pursue peace at the expense of honour and righteousness. Christ is coming again, but the drift of the professed faithful will cause us to ask, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth" [see **LUKE 18:8**]?

All is not dark, however. There will always be some who strive to do the will of God. There will always be some among the churches who seek His face. There will continue to be those who recognise the presence of the Son of God and call others to life in Him. Will we be among those calling the lost to life in the Son of God? Will we be among those who worship Him in Spirit and in truth? We will be found faithful?

God has shown His love in the Person of His Son. Jesus was born to give Himself as a sacrifice because of our helpless condition. This is the message of Christmas. God came near, and His presence compelled mankind to choose whether to receive the love of God or whether they would reject the mercy and goodness of God.

This is the Christmas message: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” [GALATIANS 4:4].

At Christmas, God came near. All mankind was challenged to respond, either receiving the gift that God sent or rejecting that divine gift in order to continue in their broken condition. We may either humbly respond by receiving the life offered in Christ the Lord, or we may continue our futile efforts to make ourselves acceptable to God. We may either worship Him or create our own foolish means of exalting self and doing what makes us feel good about ourselves. Christ has come and we may no longer ignore Him.

This is the promise of God: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, resulting in salvation. Now the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes on Him will not be put to shame,’ for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, since the same Lord of all is rich to all who call on Him. For ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’”⁸ [ROMANS 10:9-13 HCSB]. Amen.

⁸ Op. cit.