

PEACE OR A SWORD?

In his account of the advent narrative Luke records the herald of angels declaring the birth of Jesus as *"Peace!"* to all men. *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"* -Lk.2:14. This pronouncement of Jesus' birth and His identity as Israel's Deliverer and Messiah (Lk.2:11) served as the joyous commencement of generations of prophetic hope for Abraham's descendants -and ultimately for the whole world!

Puzzlingly though, years later Jesus Himself is quoted as saying something seemingly quite antithetical to the angel's glorious trumpet. *"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword."* -Mt.10:34. If one were to continue reading on through to verse 39 the text is even more troubling as Jesus claims to come and divide even household relationships -sons against fathers and daughters against mothers. Even more striking still are Jesus' words recorded in Luke 12:51-54. Here is a portion of that text. *"I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished! Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division."* (Lk.12:51-52). What can all of this mean?

Let's turn the pages forward a bit for some insight. *"Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you...because you did not know the time of your visitation."* -Lk.19:41-44. Here Jesus laments over the reality that while He Himself is her peace Israel had rejected *the way of peace*, that is, the way in which God desired to bring peace. The peace that the gospel promises in Christ can only come when we walk in agreement with the way in which the gospel says it must come. There is no ultimate peace for an individual, city, or nation apart from agreement with the leadership of Jesus.

Peering into the world of current events, growing cries for peace and unity can be heard from nearly every strata of society -local and global. Here in the United States our nation seeks peace and unity, or perhaps uniformity, politically, socially and philosophically. Our cries echo an innate desire that there would indeed be peace on earth and goodwill to all men. The challenge for the Christian is that loyalty to Jesus' word and ways will not allow for the generic and shallow expression of such things as imagined through a lens of so-called tolerance and inclusivism. Sadly, apart from God, mankind has always sought its own path toward self-governance, self-sufficiency and self-glorification -to its demise.

"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you." -Jn.14:27 The world offers its peace in the wake of compromise. For the Christian worldwide, peaceful terms are set in exchange for loyalty to a national ideology, a religious tradition, or a cultural value system for example. Unity comes with a price and for the Christian we have been united with Christ and with one another by His Spirit. We have not been nor can we ever be united with the systems of this world which will surely end one day. By systems, we mean the framework of values and policies that push forward the human agenda apart from the tender love and leadership of God.

When Jesus promises peace, it is always for those who side with Heaven. *"I do not pray for [My disciples] alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word."* (Jn.17:20) The gospel of peace (Eph.6:15) is the vehicle of truth that renders the human heart laid bare. The truth of His word exposes us. It both causes and allows us to choose what God considers excellent -though not everyone will choose wisely. *"Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child [Jesus] is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."* -Lk.2:34-35

The path to peace is a narrow one. Peace has terms -God's terms. Nations rise and nations fall, but does America know what makes for its ultimate peace? Does the church in America know what makes for its peace today? Would we recognize and respond rightly to a day of visitation? Only by the grace of God can this happen. But be encouraged, because *"He who calls you is faithful who will also do it."* (1 Thess.5:24). God is committed to the maturity His people.

"And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."