

THE JOY OF THE ANGELS AT THE LORD'S BIRTH

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Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

These words of the angel were truly good tidings of great joy for all people. Although neither the shepherds nor anyone else in the world really understood the importance of what was begun that night, the angels did, and they had been unceasingly awaiting this event for centuries. They knew why there was cause for great rejoicing. The promised Messiah, the Savior and Redeemer of humankind, had finally been born. And the immense joy of the heavens was wonderfully depicted before the shepherds. Suddenly with the angel who had spoken to them, there was a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14).

Why were the angels so joyful? We can hear the nearly uncontrollable excitement in the voice of the angel that spoke to the shepherds. And we can imagine the shiver of wonder that must have filled the shepherds as they heard the resounding sound of the angelic multitudes praising God. What was the source of the angels' joy? What did the birth of the Lord on earth mean to them?

The angels had known that the Lord would be born on earth ever since the first hint of evil had appeared in humankind. At the moment that the first of the Lord's people began to turn away from innocently following Him, the angels could foresee in a general way what would happen. With the human mind working the way that it did, and does, the angels could foresee that the power of evil, once begun, would gradually increase (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4687:2). With horror they recognized that eventually the human race would turn so far away from the Lord that it would no longer know anything true nor be able to do anything good. They recognized that the human race would turn completely away from the Lord's life and His blessings, and they knew that when a complete separation took place, the world and the human race would be destroyed.

Yet, at the time of the first hint of evil, the Lord immediately foretold in prophecy that He would be born to save all people. By prophecies given to people on earth, both they and the angels knew that the Lord would make His advent. He would come as the Word made flesh, as a light to the world. He would let His infinite soul fill a natural body. He would allow a mind to form within the workings of a natural brain—one precisely like yours and mine. He would learn the stories and laws of the Old Testament just like a child today can learn them. Then He would do something that no finite mortal could do. He would slowly reveal to that natural mind and to the universal spiritual world the infinite life within revealed truth. The Lord took revealed truth and showed its hidden glory. This is the essential function of the process that we know as the glorification. The Lord

showed the infinite wisdom and the infinite love that had been hidden by the darkness of evil and the obscurity of finite thought. The Lord Jesus Christ gave a power to revealed truth that is the salvation of all who seek to follow it—to all who follow revealed truth while seeking to serve their fellow human beings. The Lord became the Word made flesh so that we might behold His glory, so that we might have the light that will give us life.

All this lay in the distant future when the Lord's birth was first prophesied. Yet the prophecies themselves had great power. They were reassuring words, but they were also something more. Indeed, faith in the promise of these prophecies, faith in the Lord who was to come, effected conjunction between God and people (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2034). This faith gave life and blessings to people. It sustained humankind till the Lord's birth actually occurred.

Over and over again, the Lord renewed the promise of His coming. But much time passed, and the promise of the Messiah was nearly forgotten. A few held onto their hope and waited, looking daily for the Lord to come. Wise men, far distant from Judea, watched the night sky looking for the sign that the Messiah had been born. When they saw the star of wonder, they journeyed to bring gifts to the young infant. An old man in Jerusalem also waited for the Savior. When Simeon saw the infant Jesus and held Him in his arms, from a contented heart he spoke the remarkable words, "Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared before the face of all people: A light to give light to the gentiles and the glory of Your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32).

Simeon certainly understood something of the meaning of the Lord's birth. Yet almost no one else in the world did. But the angels knew what the advent meant. The prophecies of the Lord's coming had been essential for the angels, too. We are taught that if the process of the Lord's glorification had not been shown to the angels, through the internal sense of the Word, and also in the rites of the Jewish Church, the Lord would have been obliged to come into the world immediately after the fall of the first church, the Most Ancient Church (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2523:1). For the angels, the Old Testament served as a detailed prophecy of even the smallest aspects of Jesus' life. From the Old Testament the angels knew the actual thoughts and perceptions of His whole life in the world.

This prophecy sustained hope with the angels. It held in check their fears when they saw the growing power of evil. Their concern was not just a general distress over a mere matter of principle, or the battle of evil against good in an abstract form. They were concerned with the salvation of each individual soul. For the possibility of anyone getting to heaven was greatly endangered. The angels were keenly aware of the state of the church with the human race. We (human beings) provide a foundation for them. When the church is weak and ignorant, the foundation is threatened. We are told of the sadness of angels when the church is misled by false ideas and motivated by evil. The heavens are dependent on the church on earth. If the church should completely fail, the heavens that are presently associated with us would have to be transferred to "rest" on other earths, and life on this earth would cease.

However, the concern of the angels was not for their own welfare. Their concern was for the happiness of others. They seek above all else to bring happiness to others. We read that “to save a soul from hell, the angels would regard death as nothing, nay if it were possible, they would undergo hell for that soul” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2077:2). The angels suffered with and for those who wandered in spiritual darkness. They mourned over the sadness that filled the lives of so many people. They waited, yet could do little to make life better for all who suffered. They waited, praying and hoping. They knew that the darkness and suffering would end when Jesus Christ, the Savior and Redeemer, came in glory. So it was that when the Lord was born, the angels rejoiced. And with joy they brought the news to a small group of shepherds who were in the fields that first Christmas night, watching over their flocks.

Yet the angels knew that the Lord’s birth was only the beginning. Jesus would grow from infancy to adult life. He would undergo continual battles against the mind-numbing power of evil. His battles would continue to the final trial of the cross. The completion of His work would come as He rose from the tomb on the first Easter. He rose not merely as Jesus, but as the infinite God, Jesus Christ our Lord appearing in flesh and blood.

On the first Christmas, the angels knew that much had to occur before humankind was truly safe from unavoidable hell. But after centuries of waiting, hoping and praying for this event, it had now begun. In the words of the angel, the birth of the Lord was indeed good news of great joy for all people.

When we consider the Lord’s birth, we too can be joyful. If the Lord had not come, we would not be alive today. If the Lord had not bowed the heavens and come down, nothing could save us from damnation. It is valuable for us to come to acknowledge this truth.

The true spirit of Christmas is shown in the joy of the angels. Their joy was not because they directly benefited from the advent. The nature of angelic love is to feel another’s joy as its own. The joy of the angels was for all humankind. They recognized the significance of the advent for the lives of so many people.

We can form some idea of the angels’ joy if we think of what the Lord’s coming means to all those whom we love. As the angels had fears and concerns before the first advent, we too can worry about loved ones. It is not always easy to watch them learn and grow,. Perhaps we worry that they are making bad choices and that we cannot prevent this without taking away their essential freedom. It is then that we need to remember the Lord’s coming. Because the Lord was born into the world, He is able to be very near to our loved ones, to teach and lead them with His infinite wisdom and infinite love. He has come for them, to lead them to receive as much of the joy of heaven as they possibly can. Perhaps we can realize with joy that things are not as hopeless as they sometimes seem. Yes, we need to remember to help our loved ones as prudently as we can, but we can be encouraged by the thought that an infinite and loving God is near and also working unceasingly with them. And, as we see their joy when they do what is good and right, we can feel something of this joy as our own and give thanks to the Lord.

The sense of another's joy is magnified many times with the angels. This is the happiness with which the angels celebrated the birth of the Lord. They were rejoicing at the Lord's expression of His love and mercy to all of us. If we can enter into this joy of the angels, we will sense something of the true spirit of Christmas. When this delight fills our hearts, we may echo the words of the angelic chorus, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-2,9-11; Luke 2:1-20; *Arcana Coelestia* 2523