

Good News In Bethlehem

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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We've heard this week that Sir Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Galactic, is promoting sub-orbital space travel on a commercial level on the newly designed SpaceShipTwo, unveiled last Monday amidst much celebration. It will be lofted by the mothership WhiteKnightTwo, to an elevation of 50,000 feet, where the smaller vessel will separate and be rocket blasted higher into the atmosphere.

For the "starting price" of a mere \$200,000, one can purchase a ticket to take this "trip of a lifetime," lasting 2 ½ hours. Passengers will fly to about 70,000 feet and experience about 6 minutes of weightlessness, in which they can unbuckle themselves from their seats and float about in the cabin. Some 300 clients have paid for or made a deposit on a ticket, with another 80,000 indicating that they "had an interest in" the flight. When I searched for information, my computer registered about 3,900,000 sites.

The Bible presents another idea. Jesus will give you a real opportunity of a lifetime. Not a "suborbital" flight, but a trip that will reach past the stars into heaven itself. Not for 2 ½ hours, but a lifetime that will never end. How much does it cost? you might ask. It must be much more than \$200,000? Actually, it costs you nothing, except that you give your heart to Him. He already paid for it; it cost Him His life!

This came about because the arch deceiver, Lucifer, the fallen angel who became the rebel Satan, succeeded in tempting our first parents, Adam and Eve to disobey God's express commandment. They ate of the fruit of the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, of which God had said, "You shall not eat of it, or you will surely die." In a response that must have shocked the devil as much as it encouraged Adam and Eve, God said, "I will take your sin upon Myself. I will bear your guilt, your penalty, your death."

But for that to happen, God would have to become a member of the human race and live as we do. He would have to take upon Himself human nature with all its liabilities and be tempted by the devil. He would have to live a perfect life and not sin, even one time. He would have to die for our sins in a way that goes beyond

what humanity has so far experienced in death. It would be the sinner's ultimate death; the penalty for sin; the complete separation from the Father.

This, Jesus agreed to do. In fact, He was pleased to do it, because by so doing He would reveal the character of God's eternal and boundless love. He agreed to do it although He knew many would not accept His offer of life. He agreed to do it although He knew that the very people He came to save would put Him on a cross. Such is God's love! "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16. I'm sorry, Mr. Branson, but your SpaceShipTwo project doesn't come close!

The world had reached a low ebb of morality when Jesus came to this earth. The world into which Jesus was born was truly amoral. People struggle with appetite today, but so far we have not seen restaurants with vomitoriums attached, as the Romans had back then. A darkness such as is described in Genesis 1 covered the planet. Light was about to shine. The angels were about to sing. Jesus, the Creator God, was about to be born into the human family to bring salvation. "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.'" Matthew 2:1, 2.

Who were these "wise men"? By the way, the Bible doesn't tell us how many of them there were; the supposition that there were three is an assumption made because gifts of three types are described; gold, frankincense and myrrh. Nor does the Scripture identify them by name. The names that have been ascribed to them are without biblical basis. Who were they? They were members of a priestly caste living, as we are told, in the East. They were descendants of the "magi" of whom Daniel was a member, indeed he was "chief of the magi." We know that Daniel lived in Babylonia and Persia more than five centuries before Jesus was born.

These wise men were students of the skies who had seen something in the heavens with which they were unacquainted. A celestial body, brilliant in luminosity, which they couldn't identify had attracted their attention. Like Moses and the burning bush, God used the tool of curiosity to gain their attention. The wise men knew something of the promise of a coming Messiah. Daniel's vision (of chapter 9) heralding the coming of Messiah the Prince, given to him while he was a captive in Persia, would have been available to them. Some 14 centuries before Christ's birth, Balaam, also one from the "East" proclaimed the coming of the Promised One. "I

see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a *Star* shall come out of Jacob; a *Scepter* shall rise out of Israel.” Numbers 24:17. With the word “star” they connected the heavenly spectacle; from the word “scepter” they grasped the concept of the Kingship of the Messiah.

The prophecy given by Daniel led the wise men to believe that the time was near when the Messiah was to come and the appearance of the unexplainable body of light in the heavens garnered their interest. The Holy Spirit spoke to their minds and directed their feet toward the light. This what the Spirit always does, even to you and me, if we will listen.

But why solicit people from far away when the Jews were right there? Satan had been hard at work, deceiving the minds of the leaders and people of Judea. He well knew that the prophecies indicated the “time was at hand.” He darkened the minds of the leaders, inspiring them to be selective in their study, focusing only on those prophecies which foretold the eventual grand climax of all things, when Jesus will return in glory the second time. The rabbis and scribes of Jesus day taught that the Messiah would come and in triumph put down the hated Romans; He would champion the cause of their nation and cause it to rise as a reflection of former excellence.

Because of their arrogance and pride, the Scriptures which foretold the coming of the Messiah as a suffering Servant, as One Who would give His life as the Lamb without blemish, were hidden from the eyes of these teachers of Scripture. Thus the people who had been inaugurated to receive and proclaim Him, the ones in whose hands had been deposited the oracles of truth were not prepared to accept Him. Their lives were crowded with ambition and greed. Priests concentrated on earthly gain and reward. The spiritual qualities of godliness were absent from their characters and from their teachings.

So God turned to foreigners to come and bow before the infant Jesus. Faithfully they followed the light till it led them to Jerusalem, the city established as the “foundation of peace,” the city which proclaimed the Name of the Lord. When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, in God’s providence the “star” seemed to be obscured and they were led to make inquiry. Surely those in Jerusalem would be aware of this. Surely this topic would be present on every tongue. But when inquiry was made as to the birth of the Messiah, the wise men were surprised to find a general lack of interest and attention on this great subject.

There was one, however, whose ears were tuned to this announcement, but not for a godly reason. King Herod became jealous at the thought that a rival to his throne had been born. “When Herod the king heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” When Herod became “troubled,” there was cause for concern in all Jerusalem; his short temper and violent disposition were well known. The name “Herod” was one which was worn by many in his line. It was like the term “Pharaoh” and “Ben-Hadad” which we studied last week. Our word “hero” is derived from the same root. Of the family tree of Esau (he was an “Idumean,” or “Edomite,” meaning a descendant of Esau), his throne was subject to the authority of Rome. Yet he exercised considerable power and was styled a “king.” As such, the thought that One was born who would challenge his reign “troubled” him greatly. He designed to find out more about this rival and eliminate his competition.

“And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.”’” Matthew 2:4-6. The rabbis correctly recounted the prophecy of Micah. They were acquainted with Scripture. They could quote prophecy. But without the illuminating presence of God’s Spirit to guide them, they were in total darkness. Blinded by their pride and ambition, the Word was of no help to them and they were the “blind leading the blind.”

How important it is to seek God’s truth with an open mind, earnestly desiring that He reveal His truth to us! Our world today is very similar. Bibles are in abundance; more than ever before. Churches proliferate. And yet, true knowledge of God’s plan is meager. Faithful interpretation of His Word is lacking. The vast majority of people have no clue as to what life on this earth is about, what is soon to happen and what the issues are that are at stake.

And yet, God’s way is so simple. “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” Ecclesiastes 12:13. Just as the Jews stumbled at the stumbling block of the Person of Christ, so the professed Christian world today has stumbled at the Law of Christ. They can’t be separated! The Law is a perfect reflection of God’s character, as is Jesus. The Jews put Jesus on the cross. Today Christian pulpits put His law on the cross.

The Bible describes God’s plan in this way: we are sinners, yet He has extended His free grace to save us, made possible because of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

Our response of appreciation is to surrender our wills to Him and allow Him to make us new. Our life in Him is one of joyful obedience to all His commandments, especially the one which identifies the day of worship He designated, the holy and sacred Sabbath day. Soon He is coming in glory to take us to heaven and live with Him. Is this not what the Bible clearly teaches? Who cannot see this?

And yet, today Satan has covered the hearts of people so that selective study is the norm. Those Scriptures which teach God's free grace are cherished, while those which outline our responsibility of obedience are neglected. Should not one who has received God's wonderful gift of salvation honor Him by obeying Him in all things? Where are we taught in the Bible that because of God's grace we are free to disobey Him? Are the Ten Commandments defective? What's wrong with being loyal to Christ? Today again, darkness, spiritual darkness covers the planet.

With their minds being darkened by pride and unbelief, the teachers of the Scriptures in Jesus' day were *incapable of understanding the prophecies*. The Holy Spirit, the One Who enlightens our minds with respect to Bible truth, is given "to those who obey Him." Acts 5:32. Thus, because their minds were not in tune with God, they were unable to discern the truths of prophecy.

This is what we see today as well. The prophecies of the Bible are misunderstood and misapplied. Instead of the clear teaching of Christ's returning the second time in glory so that "every eye" shall see Him, as it says in Revelation 1:7, a secret rapture is taught by many. Ignoring the larger body of teaching of Scripture, as to how our Savior will return, a whole line of teaching is based on a few passages, which are themselves fully capable of being understood in a way that is consistent with the larger body of teaching.

The first prerequisite to arriving at spiritual truth is to have the guidance of God's Spirit. "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; *nor can he know them*, because they are spiritually discerned," advised Paul. I Corinthians 2:14. We could say, "Things of the Spirit (that is, the Scriptures and the prophecies which they contain) are discerned by those who have the Spirit." Without the Spirit, such knowledge is out of reach. This was the condition of the hearts of those who taught religion in Judea. For all their outward show of piety; the loud street prayers, the Scripture boxes on their foreheads, the Bible references on their forearms, their hearts were not regenerated by His Spirit, and thus they could not gain a correct interpretation of the prophecies.

The greatest event since the creation of the world was about to take place, and they knew it not. Is our world any different today? The greatest event since the first coming of Christ is about to unfold and how many are looking for His return? The heads of people are buried in the soil of this life, trying to build modern Babel's; castles in sand. All this will soon end and Jesus will come the second time just as He promised. Are we looking each day for that event and pleading with God to prepare us for it? The world today is at a very low ebb. We're like that poor unfortunate man last Tuesday of East Hills, New York, trapped in a cesspool. Only Jesus can take us out of this predicament.

“Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and search diligently for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.’” Matthew 2:7, 8. Herod's jealousy now took on the cloak of deception and soon the sword of violence. He had no interest in worshiping the Christ Child. His only motive was in putting Jesus to death. Though they were accounted as “wise men,” this motive was not discerned by the Magi. Only God can read the motives and weigh the thoughts. He knew the heart of Herod and could see its ugly condition of sin. But Herod managed to hide his true concerns and put on a mask of piety. Even those with “wisdom” can be fooled by the deceptions of sinners.

Upon departing from Jerusalem, the wise men were delighted to see the star reappear in the heavens and lead them in the direction of the location that Scripture had specified. “When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.” Matthew 2:9. Here's a vital point. Don't miss it! *God's light, the true light, will always lead in the direction His Word indicates.* There was no conflict between the star's leading and what the Bible taught. They both led to Bethlehem. The “sure Word of Prophecy” had delineated Bethlehem as the place of the Messiah's birth, and now the light of the star led in that same direction. If we are following a “light” that is going in a different direction than what the Bible has made clear, it is not light from God. He will never lead in a way contrary to the Scriptures.

Today there are many “lights,” many “paths,” but they are not in conformity with the Bible. This is the Book given by God to mark out our journey. Any other revelation or guidebook which goes contrary to the Scriptures must be rejected. Paul declared, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” Galatians 1:8.

“To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this Word, it is because there is no light in them.” Isaiah 8:20.

“When they saw the star, they *rejoiced with exceedingly great joy*. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him.” Matthew 2:10, 11. Don’t miss this also. Finding Jesus means joy! God intended that Christ’s coming would bring good news to the hearts of men and women. That’s what the angel said to the shepherds, wasn’t it? “Behold, I bring you good tidings of *great joy* which will be to all people. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” Luke 2: 10, 14. Someone said that the word “joy” stood for “nothing” (the letter “o”) between “Jesus” (the letter “J”) and “you” (the letter “y”). J-o-y. Peace in knowing He’s forgiven our sins; hope in knowing He’s coming back; confidence in knowing He’s doing a work in in our lives to prepare us for that day. Christianity should make a difference in a person’s life and bring joy!

Notice that their worship included the presentation of their gifts. Israel of old was instructed that when they came for worship, they should not come empty-handed. Exodus 34:20. Giving to God is a part of genuine worship. It is proper and fitting that we honor the One Who made us and redeemed us. The faithful return of our tithes, 10% of our increase and freewill offerings should be the response of gratitude of every true believer. This Christmas, as you share with others the bounties He has bestowed upon you, do not neglect or forget to give Him a special gift, an offering of thanksgiving. Be like the wise men and bring your gifts and lay them before His feet in humble appreciation. He deserves your very best!

“Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.” Matthew 2:12. The dark secrets of Herod’s heart were not hidden to the One Who knows all. He instructed them to go back another way. *They didn’t go by the road they came*. That’s true of us also. When we meet Jesus, we’re never the same. And that’s true if you’ve been a Christian one week or 50 years. Life, that is, the Christian walk, is one of constant change as He leads us “from glory to glory,” ever closer to the ideal of godliness. If you’re satisfied the way you are; if you resist change, don’t come to Christ, because if you do, He’s going to bring change into your life. Expect it. Anticipate it. Embrace it. Celebrate it. Jesus is making a change in your life in preparation of His coming, and your living with holy angels. Our conversation and demeanor ought to reflect our holy calling. The solemn joy that came to the wise men as they knelt before the crib ought also to be reflected in our lives.

What will Christmas be to you this year? Will it be a rushed ordeal of shopping and gift packaging? Will it be tinsel and colorful wrappings, food and festivities? Will it be merely a time off from work and a time with family and friends? Or will it be a time of joyful and solemn reflection on the greatest Gift of all, the Gift of Jesus Christ Who came into the world to redeem us and save us from sin? Will it be a time of thoughtful contemplation as to how we can be like the wise men of old and give our minds to the study of His Word and following His light; worshiping Him and honoring Him with our gifts? What will Christmas 2009 be for you?