

## **Introduction**

Two years ago Time Magazine researched and determined the most recorded of all Christmas songs, sacred or secular. Guess what the top two are? They are "Silent night" with 733 copyrighted recordings and "Joy to the World" with 391. I'm going to focus on the second of those, explaining both its message and the application of that message to us.

## **Things Are Going to Be Drastically Different**

Ironically, Isaac Watts, the author of "Joy to the World," didn't write it as a Christmas Carol. He published it in 1719 as part of a collection of hymns titled *The Psalms of David* and based it on Psalm 98.

Over the years though, it became associated with Christmas and Luke 2:10 reveals why. This verse records an angel announcing Jesus' birth to the shepherds and the world. Notice the aspect of it he emphasized in doing so, **"I bring you good news of great joy, which will be for all people."** Those words explain why "Joy to the World" became linked with Christmas. Its opening stanza references Jesus' first coming, declaring the **"joy to the world"** it brings.

But it isn't just joy is it. According to verse 14, it's what the angels called **"peace among men"** as well. That's what Jesus' coming brings, the foundational conditions of joy and peace. What that means as a practical matter, to humanity generally and to you and me individually, is this, **"With the coming of Jesus into our world and lives, things are going to be drastically different."** The drastic difference is that sinful persons and lives are going to be made good and right.

The New Testament gives us a detailed picture of what this drastic difference looks like in real life. People don't struggle with coveting. They rejoice that others have or achieve what they do. They don't resent being found out when they're in the wrong. They welcome it. They aren't overwhelmed by the storms of life. They stand confident and strong. They don't need luxurious things to delight. They delight in

simple things. They aren't put out by the shortcomings of others. They bear them with patience and grace. That little sampling illustrates a condition of life. Goodness and rightness, not sin, reliably direct people's psychological and behavioral lives.

So that's the meaning of the angelic announcements in verses 10 and 14. With the coming of Jesus into our world and lives, things are going to be drastically different. The drastic difference is goodness and rightness, not sin, reliably directing people's inner and outer lives.

### **Things Aren't Different**

But why isn't that happening as it should? Something prompts that question of mine. It's the disappointment professing Christians express about their walk with Jesus. Their psychological and behavioral lives are less than they expected them to be.

George Perdikis, founder of the highly popular Christian rock band Newsboys, is a case in point. In 2007, he renounced his Christianity and declared himself an atheist. He explained in a blog last year why he did. He couldn't "**maintain the impossible standards of religion.**" He went on to comment about the current members of Newsboys, "**They should acknowledge that they're struggling as much as anyone else.**" Notice what his comment implies. All Christians are struggling in their walk with Jesus. They're disappointed in Him because things in their psychological and behavioral lives aren't as different as they expected them to be.

### **Things Can Be Different**

So why aren't they? One possible answer is that Jesus is a "**lemon**" as we say it. You all know what a lemon is metaphorically. It's a car or some other consumer good that's defective. There's something wrong with it so that it doesn't do what it's supposed to do. Many people think that about Jesus. He's a lemon.

More specifically, they think He's a phantom or fairy tale like figure

who dwells on the margins of real life, hardly affecting it or us at all. His teachings reflect that. Care about those who sue you. Be anxious for nothing. And so on. His teachings sound good. They inspire and challenge us. But they're out of touch with reality. They don't work in the real world of day-to-day life.

So, Jesus, they conclude, is the problem. He isn't able to produce the kind of person and life that Christians expect – the kind the New Testament describes so vividly and in such detail. The announcements in verses 10 and 14, therefore, are bogus. Even with coming of Jesus into our world and lives, things are going to be the same.

But the problem isn't Jesus. As I've explained before, He is a separate and special kind of reality, totally unique. He is utterly lovely or good and utterly competent or great. So the problem isn't Him. It's something else instead.

An analogy explains what that something else is. A woman bought a new car that was running "**funny**" as she said it. So she took it back to the dealer and complained he had sold her a lemon. After some questioning though, the dealer discovered what was wrong. It had a diesel engine but she was putting regular fuel in it. The problem wasn't the car. It wasn't a lemon. The problem was the woman's interaction with it. It wasn't built to work under the conditions she imposed upon it. She acted inconsistently with its nature. It's like that with Christians whose persons and lives aren't different or aren't becoming different.

Notice a vital detail in verse 14. The coming of Jesus makes things drastically different only for a certain group of people. It's those "**with whom He is well pleased.**" Dallas Willard made a comment that helps us determine more precisely who that is. Referring to our walk with Jesus, He wrote "**It too is not meant to run on just anything you may give it. If it doesn't work at all, or only in fits and starts, that is because we do not give ourselves to it in a way that allows our lives to be taken over by it.**" That's a million dollar insight. It reveals whose persons and lives Jesus makes different. It's those who

give themselves to Him in such a way that He can.

The Bible defines what that way is. First, we make the decision to be with Him in order to become like Him and to learn and do all that He says. Second, we then arrange our day-to-day affairs around carrying out that decision. Like putting leaded fuel in a diesel engine, that response to Jesus is consistent with His nature as utterly good and utterly great. It establishes the necessary condition that allows Him to take over our persons and lives and transform them. They, as a result, become decreasingly governed by sin and increasingly governed by goodness and rightness. Psychologically and behaviorally, things really are different, better. We become what Paul called "**new creatures**" living new lives.

Some years ago, I spoke with a college track coach, a friend of Jesus. I had many coaches in my athletic career. He told me two things though I never heard any coach say. First, he desires that opposing team members perform their best and prays before each meet that they will. Second, he rejoices for them when they do even if his team loses as a result. Things really are different for him, better, in that respect and countless others. They will be for us as well if we do what He did. Act consistently with Jesus' nature. Apprentice ourselves to Him.

## **Conclusion**

So there you have it – the good news that God announced to the shepherds and our world. It's that you and I can have great expectations in Jesus. "**Great expectations**" was a 19<sup>th</sup> century code that meant "**going to inherit money,**" which explains the title of Charles Dickens acclaimed novel *Great Expectations*. But what the coming of Jesus brings is something far more valuable than money. It's joy and peace to the world.