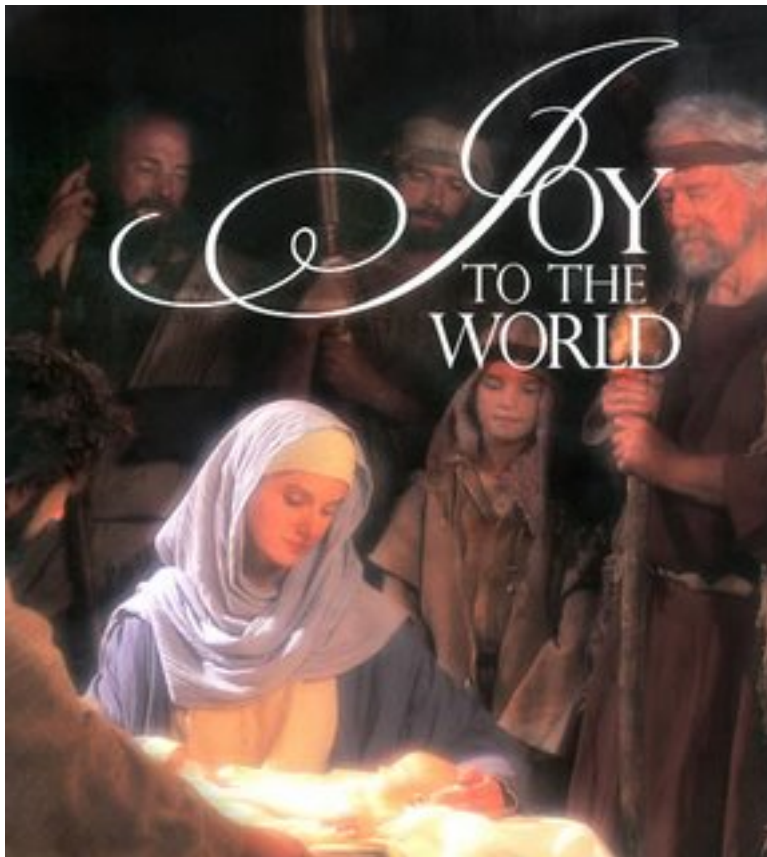


**Joy to the World
(Isaac Watts 1719)**



A Theological Reflection by Tami Jelinek

I have been contemplating this familiar Christmas hymn from the fulfilled perspective. Many preterists are ready to point out that futurists, who effectually deny the present reign of Christ by their eschatology, are contradicting themselves when they sing these words. However, some of these same preterists are inconsistent themselves in how they view some of the references in this hymn. This will become increasingly apparent as we look at the prophetic passages to which the following words make allusion, and appreciate them in their grammatical, historical contexts. Regardless of what the hymn's author intended or understood regarding the fulfillment of these prophecies; "Joy to the World!" can have a new significance for us, who see that the Kingdom has truly come, and Christ is truly reigning now.

**Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her king;**

Zechariah 9:9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.

Matthew's gospel confirms that this prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt just days before his crucifixion. I, like many of you, was taught in Sunday school that while this "triumphal entry" did indeed announce Christ as King, "the earth" at that time did not "receive her king." They crucified Him instead. And this meant that the establishment of His Kingdom on earth had to be postponed, and has remained postponed for two thousand years and counting. But look at the context of Zechariah's prophecy:

Zechariah 9:9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass. 10 And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off: and he shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth. 11 As for thee also, by the blood of thy covenant I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water.

Notice first that the King comes bringing salvation. And now notice that He also brings peace: peace between Israel and heathen nations. We recognize this peace as fulfilled by the gospel:

Ephesians 2:14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; 15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; 16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: 17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. 18 For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. 19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God;

Notice furthermore that it is "the blood of thy covenant" (thy covenant = Israel's covenant, which is Jesus Christ according to Isaiah 49:8; therefore, "the blood of thy covenant" = the blood of Jesus Christ) which accomplishes salvation and peace on earth; and furthermore, the freeing of Israel's prisoners from "the pit wherein is no water." No water = no life. It is by Christ's blood that Israel received her hope: the resurrection of the dead, which of course occurred at the end of the age. So, contrary to the common futurist teaching that the crucifixion of Christ *postponed* His Kingdom, it was His shed blood which was necessary to bring it to fruition. And Zechariah's prophecy places all of these elements--salvation, peace, and resurrection--in this same historical context.

Let every heart prepare Him room,

Many of us may appreciate this image from gospel presentations of our childhood. As the story is often told, Jesus is knocking at our heart's door, as He does for everyone in the world, and each one of us simply needs to open the door and let Him in. I am also reminded of a little devotional book I read as a teenager entitled "My Heart, Christ's Home." It was a little parable about a man who over a period of time invited Jesus, already his savior, into different "rooms" of his life, until finally all the doors, even those to the "hidden closets," were open and every space of the "house" was surrendered and became the dwelling place of Christ. The standout problem of this parable was that the habitation by God of this man's life was brought about by the will of the man, rather than by the power of God. When we hear the words, "let every heart prepare Him room," we should be reminded that it is Christ who has prepared all of the rooms, or dwelling places, in His Father's house, and made them fit for His habitation. Jesus said to His disciples before His crucifixion:

John 14:2 In my Father's house are many mansions (Gr. *Mone*: dwellings, or abodes) if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

Now we are the many *mone* in the Father's house, built together into a holy temple:

Ephesians 2:20...built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; 21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: 22 In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

Revelation 21:3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

**And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.**

Isaiah 44:23 Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel.

Isaiah 49:13 Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the LORD hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted.

Regardless of what Isaac Watts meant by "heaven and nature" singing (perhaps he was making reference to angelic heavenly hosts pictured by artists' renderings of the nativity, and anthropomorphically portraying inanimate objects of nature breaking forth into

song); when the Bible speaks of “the heavens” singing and rejoicing, it is always in reference to God’s people praising Him for His salvation. Now when I sing this familiar refrain, I am reminded of the visions of Isaiah, who understood that to be redeemed and comforted by the Lord was to be in heaven; and also of the psalms of David, who wrote, “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handywork,” and who understood that all of God’s creation is with purpose to turn the minds of His people to the glory of His New Creation.

**Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.**

Here again, Watts seems to be employing anthropomorphism when he speaks of things like fields, rocks, and hills repeating the “sounding joy.” Of course we should be reminded of what some of these things symbolize in Scripture. For example, in the fields of God’s Kingdom, we, His people, are trees of righteousness:

Isaiah 55:12 For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Isaiah 61:3 To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

Today, we offer songs of praise and thanksgiving to a victorious, reigning Savior. We experience the joy of forgiveness because we know that our redemption is completely fulfilled. I am also reminded of this prophecy, fulfilled by the righteous judgment of the Gospel:

Isaiah 40:3 Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: 5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

The haughty “mountains” of self-righteous, pharisaical Israel would be brought low, while the humble “valleys” of her contrite ones would be exalted. Thereby, hills and plains together “sounded the joy” of the reigning Savior. And Luke declares that this was being fulfilled at the time of Christ, beginning with the sign of John the Baptist, and that “all flesh would see the salvation of God” in the judgment which was about to occur (Luke 3:4f).

**No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.**

It is here that we will notice the most profound inconsistency among preterists. The song proclaims that where Christ's blessings flow, sin and sorrow are no more. Furthermore, as perplexing as this may seem to some, the song truthfully and biblically proclaims that where Christ's blessings flow, thorns no longer infest the ground. It certainly seems that Watts appreciates the common context of sins and sorrows and thorns in the ground. He sees them both as part of the same curse. And there is no denying that the curse referenced here is that which is recorded in Genesis:

Genesis 3:17 And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; 18 Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; 19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Most preterists will agree of course that the curse of the ground is a covenantal reference to toiling in futility and sorrow under the law. Sorrow is certainly understood as the guilt and shame old covenant believers experienced as the result of their unforgiven sin. They longed for the day when their tears would be wiped away, and their sins forgiven:

Isaiah 25:7 And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. 8 He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. 9 And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Furthermore, Isaiah describes the New Heavens and the New Earth, the New Creation, or the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, in terms of reversing the curse of the ground with this obvious reference to Genesis 3:

Isaiah 65:21 And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. 22 They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. 23 They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them.

We understand that these physical elements metaphorically represent the richness of the heavenly country we now inhabit, in which we are fed lavishly by Jesus Christ. Futurists of course view these things as unfulfilled, because they view them as physical. Thorns still infest the physical ground; therefore, the blessings of Christ must not be flowing as the song proclaims. It doesn't stop them from singing the song of course; it just prevents them from believing what they are singing. Where many preterists are inconsistent, is that while they will affirm that the curse of the ground is a covenantal reference, they continue to literalize other elements of the garden story. I have even heard preterists say that the curse on Eve for "increased pain in childbirth" is to be taken literally. But again, Isaiah 65, which preterists know has been fulfilled, has that curse reversed ("nor bring forth in trouble") and Christian women have not been relieved of labor pains. If we are to be consistent, we must not arbitrarily switch back and forth between a literal and a metaphorical reading of the garden story in Genesis. Some preterists may ask, what is the problem with reading it literally? Well, aside from the fact that a literal reading creates grammatical and contextual inconsistencies with the prophets; when pushed to its logical end, a 'physicalized' reading of a story which tells of a spiritual redemption, will conclude with a 'physicalized', and therefore incomplete, redemption. It cannot be overstated that to the degree the Kingdom of Christ is 'physicalized', its beauty and glory is diminished in our eyes, and if in our eyes, then how much more in the eyes of the world? As believers in fulfilled redemption we truly have a message of "Joy to the World." Only the joy of the forgiveness which is ours eternally in Christ puts an end forever to the sorrow of guilt and shame.

He rules the world with truth and grace,

It certainly seems that Isaac Watts understood what the nature of Christ's rule of the world is, and what it is not. It makes me wonder what I once thought about these words, in my formerly futurist mindset. I am sure my perspective had to have contained to at least some degree a deficient, diminished view of His rule. And yet the song proclaims, without reservation or qualification, and seemingly without any permission given to substitute a future tense, that He rules the world. Presently, He rules. He rules the world with truth and grace.

John 1:14 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

John 1:19 For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

Remember that the law was a "taskmaster" (ruler) to bring us to Christ. John contrasts that law to Christ, who is our new law, or new covenant. The prophets foretold a law which would go out from Zion, and that law is Christ:

Isaiah 2:3 And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

**And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,**

Revelation 19:11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. 12 His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. 13 And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. 15 And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron:

The nations prove the glories of His righteousness as people from every nation repent, believe and obey the gospel. Christ our Law, Christ our Covenant, Christ the Word of God, rules the nations with a rod of iron which is the gospel. To obey the Gospel is to submit to the rule of Christ:

Psalm 110: Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth.

Haggai 2:7 And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.

I am struck by the power and authority suggested by the words: He “makes the nations prove.” We only believe by the power of God, and in fact Isaiah declares that it is only by Him that we would even mention His name:

Isaiah 26:13 O LORD our God, other lords beside thee have had dominion over us: but by thee only will we make mention of thy name.

What about those who don't believe, and whom God does not make willing, or cause to mention His name? Do all people in every nation prove the glories of His righteousness? Remember that He rules the world in truth and grace by the gospel. The gospel judges every individual who hears it, as it judges all nations. And again, that judgment is Christ himself:

Isaiah 51:4 Hearken unto me, my people; and give ear unto me, O my nation: for a law shall proceed from me, and I will make my judgment to rest for a light of the people. 5 My righteousness is near; my salvation is gone forth, and mine arms shall judge the people; the isles shall wait upon me, and on mine arm shall they trust. 6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath: for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner: but my salvation shall be for ever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished.

**And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.**

It is interesting to note that whenever the word wonders is used in Scripture, it refers to miraculous external signs, from the signs and wonders Moses performed before the Egyptians, to the signs and wonders with which the apostles impressed the Gentiles in the book of Acts. So the phrase “wonders of His love” doesn’t appear in Scripture, and yet Watts, in the final refrain of his hymn, seems to be saying that His love is the greatest of all wonders. It was His love, in fact, which brought about His rule. Remember the allusion from verse one: “Behold your King, riding upon a colt.” To me there is no more wonderful description of His love than this from Paul:

Philippians 2:1 If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, 2 Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves. 4 Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. 5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: 7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: 8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. 9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: 10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; 11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

May the wonders of His love bring joy to your world this holiday season.

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