

Reason for hope

Is Jesus really at work in this world?



I should explain this picture first. It's a painting by John D. Shaw of an actual event that happened five days before Christmas in 1943. The plane on the left is a B17 Flying Fortress piloted by an American, Charlie Brown, on his first bombing mission over Germany. The plane on the right is a Messerschmidt 109 piloted by a German flying ace, Franz Stigler, who'd already shot down 28 planes, including two that same day. Below is what was left of the B17's tail.



Much of the tail had been blown off, along with an engine lost, before the plane even dropped its bombs. The nose was also blown off, another engine quit and a third engine was damaged. The plane was so crippled it fell behind the rest of the squadron on the way home, and was left on its own, which is when the Luftwaffe fighters arrived, outnumbering it 15 to 1.

Most of the B17's guns were knocked out of action, and there wasn't a foot on the entire plane that didn't have a hole in it. Mortally wounded it spun out of control and headed for the ground and was left for dead by the fighters. But somehow it pulled out of the dive just above the tree tops and limped off at 2,000 feet above the ground, headed for England, but completely helpless. And that's when Franz Stigler, refueling his Messerschmidt on the ground at the time, noticed the crippled bomber and took off after it, sensing an easy kill.

As he approached the bomber from behind he'd never seen a B17 so badly damaged that was still able to fly. But that's when he saw the tail gunner, who was bleeding so badly that blood was running down his gun barrels, and Stigler simply couldn't shoot. Instead he flew up to the right side of the bomber, close to the cockpit. Charlie Brown in the cockpit looked up to see his worst nightmare on his right wing, and then to his astonishment he watched the fighter move over to his left wing and it stayed there, escorting the bomber safely out of Germany and part way over the North Sea. With England now in the bomber's sight, Stigler waved, saluted and flew off. It was these pictures and this story that set me on my course today....

It began with a question: "C'mon, how can we really offer hope to people in this world when so many bad things are happening?" - a point also brought out in John Lennon's ***So this is Christmas (War is over)*** - where the sentiment of Christmas is mixed with obvious and dreadful reality...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN4Uu0OImTg> (Lyrics below...)

So this is Christmas, and what have you done
Another year over, and a new one just begun
And so this is Christmas - I hope you have fun
The near and the dear one, the old and the young
A very Merry Christmas, and a happy new year
Let's hope it's a good one, without any fear
And so this is Christmas, for weak and for strong
For rich and the poor ones, the world is so wrong
And so happy Christmas, for black and for white
For yellow and red ones, let's stop all the fight

A very Merry Christmas, and a happy new year
Let's hope it's a good one, without any fear
And so this is Christmas, and what have we done
Another year over, a new one just begun
And so happy Christmas, we hope you have fun
The near and the dear one, the old and the young
A very Merry Christmas, and a happy new year
Let's hope it's a good one, without any fear
War is over, if you want it
War is over now"

Imagine playing that video on TV every Christmas as relentlessly as 'Frosty the Snowman' and 'It's a wonderful life' to people all tucked up in their safety and comfort, enjoying their seasonal binge of buying and stuffing their stomachs, and all having a jolly nice time together as families, and wishing each other a 'Merry Christmas' in a spirit of love and peace. I imagine them crying out, "Please, for just a few hours each year, can we put the horrors of the world aside and think about the good things of life that give us hope, and a reason to **keep** being hopeful, **despite what we see daily?**"

Well why not? But where does that kind of hope come from?

It comes from the **story of Israel** and the Jews, and a **promise** God made to them in **Jeremiah 33:14-16**, that "The days are coming when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety."

It's not surprising, then, that the national anthem of present-day Israel is **Hatikvah** (HA/teek/va), which means "**The Hope**" ...

The music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7mgM3qPR4w> (stop at .24 seconds)

The words: "**As long as the Jewish spirit is yearning deep in the heart with eyes turned toward the East, looking toward Zion, then our hope, the two-thousand-year-old hope, will not be lost - to be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem.**"

And for the last 2,000 years the Jews have never lost sight of that hope, despite the horrors they've experienced. They are the most remarkable example of hope on the planet. They are God's best witness to the **source** of hope too, a point we Christians fully support whenever we sing that mournful but hopeful carol all about ISRAEL: **O come, O Come, Emmanuel**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzW_PmW-LzE (stop at 2.41)

(Lyrics below – the short version)

O come, O come, Emmanuel and
Ransom captive **Israel** that mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee O **Israel**

O come thou Rod of Jesse free thine own from Satan's tyranny
From depths of hell thy people save and give them victory o'er the grave
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee O **Israel**

Notice how willing we Christians are to belt out a carol that's crying out for Emmanuel to come and rescue ISRAEL. And when we sing, "From depths of hell thy people save," we don't mean save **us** from hell, we mean save Israel. And we're telling Israel to rejoice, because Emmanuel will come **to them**.

But why is it so important to us Christians that Emmanuel rescues and saves Israel? Because, as Peter announced in **Acts 3:25-26**, "you (Jews) are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, '**Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.**' When God raised up his servant, he sent him FIRST TO YOU (Jews) to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."

We're singing a song about God's love for Israel and the Jews, because this is **where the hope of the whole world begins**; it's in Emmanuel rescuing and saving ISRAEL from the depths of ITS hell, its captivity, its suffering, its lonely exile, its grave and its tyranny under Satan. Hope begins with the realization that God sent a **Jewish** Saviour to rescue "the lost house of **Israel**," because it's through THEIR offspring that all peoples on earth will be blessed, and through Israel that God saves the world (Isaiah 49:3, 6). No wonder Simeon's eyes lit up when he saw Mary walk into the Temple with Jesus in her arms and he knew who it was, as we see and hear in this song: **Now that I've held him in my arms** by Michael Card...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBZiPRPogn0> (lyrics below...)

Old man in the temple, waiting in the court
Waiting for **the answer to a promise**
And all at once he sees them, in the morning sunshine
A couple come and carry in a baby.

(Chorus) Now that I've held him in my arms
My life can come to an end
Let your servant now depart in peace
I've seen your salvation
He's the **Light of the Gentiles**
And the glory of his people Israel

Mary and the baby come
And in her hand five shekels
The price to redeem her baby boy
The baby softly cooing nestled in her arm

Simeon takes the boy and starts to sing:
Now's the time to take him in your arms
Your life will never come to an end
He's the only way that you'll find peace
He'll give you salvation
He's the **Light of the Gentiles**
And the glory of his people Israel

Here was the source of hope for Simeon: It was “the answer to a promise” in **Isaiah 42:6-7** that “I (God) will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.” And when Jesus later read this same promise from Isaiah 61:1-2 he made it clear that the ‘**you**’ in Isaiah 42 was **him**. The hope for Jew and Gentile alike, then, would be **these promises being answered IN HIM**.

It’s these promises, therefore, that we focus on, and how Emmanuel fulfilled them on behalf of the Jews, because **there’s** our picture of what he has now **extended to us Gentiles** too.

And there are three promises mentioned: 1) The blind will see, 2) Prisoners will be set free, and 3) Darkness will be turned to light. So -

Did Emmanuel make those promises happen for the Jews? Did the blind see? Did the prison walls that were enclosing and suffocating them come tumbling down? Did they see glimpses of light in their darkness? Were they being turned from wrong to right and from evil to goodness? Did they feel refreshed and free of guilt despite the mess they'd made of their calling? And did they see the world through different glasses, as good news, not bad?

Yes. Thousands of Jews eagerly followed Jesus wherever he went. Blind and helplessly crippled people were healed, madmen were released from their demons, prophecies came to light that even the great prophets of old and angels had been in the dark about, people sought baptism to bury their sins and start afresh, they heard Jesus say their sins were forgiven, and many believed that Jesus had come to raise up Israel again to be the great nation God promised they'd be. Everything was changing, and for the better. It was all good news.

It's what they could see in Emmanuel, therefore, that gave them hope, as we see in this clip from a video on John Chapter 9, ***when Jesus heals a man who's been blind all his life***. And note how Jesus even treated the man's blindness as **good news**, because it would shine a light on what God was up to...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHBo7ka3YZQ> (press **cc** for closed captions, and stop at 3.37)

The blind man could see. The walls of his restricted world suddenly expanded. The darkness he'd only seen since birth was now filled with light - exactly what Isaiah and Simeon had promised Emmanuel would do for people. So Emmanuel fulfilled Isaiah's promises for the **Jews**, all right, but did he do the same for us **Gentiles** too?

Yes he did, by recruiting Paul and telling him in **Acts 26:15-18**, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

Note that it's the **same three things** Jesus did for his fellow Jews - opening eyes, freeing them, and turning darkness into light. The question then is:

Are those three things happening to **us Gentiles too**, then? And are they visible today like they were in Jesus' day, as proof that Simeon was right and Jesus really is the Emmanuel fulfilling Isaiah's prophecies?

It was in my search for an answer to that question that I discovered the story of those two planes we saw at the beginning, and this **video of the two men involved in it** (which requires some stopping and forwarding to shorten it)...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EkmyoG83Q>

(stop at .49 seconds. Forward to 3.58. End at 6.13)

Something remarkable happened in the sky that day, when a deadly killer couldn't kill, and instead put his own life on the line for his enemy. Something opened his eyes, turned him from the darkness of hatred to the light of love, and from the power of Satan that made men kill each other, to God who made men to love each other.

Charlie the American pilot didn't report the incident either, in case it got back to Germany and Stigler would be shot, but both men never forgot what happened, because a bond of deep love had formed that day, and when they met forty-seven years later it was as brothers.

There are many other stories too, that raise our hopes that Emmanuel is very much on the job of opening eyes, freeing people from hate, and replacing darkness with light - like the occasion in World War 1, on the evening before Christmas in 1914, when a remarkable thing happened in the trenches, highlighted in this clip from the movie **O what a Lovely War**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOz9SpWc_yE (stop at 3.35)

There are so many stories of that day, told by German and English soldiers who were there. One of them was Frank Sumpter, who was interviewed when he was over one hundred years old, and here's how he remembered it:

"The Germans started it. They were in the trenches about 80 yards away, with rolls of barbed wire separating us. As Christmas Eve fell, the German troops called across, 'Happy Christmas, Tommy.' We called back, 'Happy Christmas, Happy Noel. Then the Germans signaled to us to come out and we began to move. The Officers called out, 'Get back in the trenches.' But we ignored them. We put our hands through the rolls of barbed wire and shook hands with the German troops. As far as we were concerned there was no hatred between us."

A German soldier remembered a “Frenchman singing a Christmas carol with a marvellous tenor voice. Everyone lay still, listening. Is it our imagination, we thought, or **is it the victory of God’s love over human conflict?**”

What a statement, and there’s a strong hint it really **was** God’s love too, when, “Next morning (on Christmas day),” an English soldier writes, “a most extraordinary thing happened. Some Germans came out and held up their hands and began taking in some of our wounded. The Germans then beckoned to us and a lot of us went over and talked to them and they helped us bury our dead. This lasted the whole morning, and I talked with several of them and I must say they seemed extraordinarily fine men. It seemed too ironical for words. There, the night before we had been having a terrific battle and the morning after, there we were smoking their cigarettes and they smoking ours.”

No one gave the order to fraternize like this. It happened spontaneously all along the front involving at least 100,000 men. There are other stories too: During the early 19th century Peninsula War, British and French soldiers visited each other, shared rations and played cards. During the Crimean War (1854-56), French, British and Russian troops gathered around the same fire to smoke and drink together. In the American Civil War (1880-81), Yankees and Rebels traded coffee and tobacco and peacefully fished from opposite sides of the same rivers. Throughout history, it has been rare for men fighting at close quarters not to extend friendly gestures and establish informal truces with their enemies.

Speaking in the House of Commons in 1930, Sir H. Kingsley Wood, a former major who had served at the front in 1914 stated: “If we had been left to ourselves there would never have been another shot fired.”

What a statement of **hope in Emmanuel the Prince of Peace** that is, that even soldiers trained to kill would happily turn from violence to peace if power-hungry warmongers hadn’t been pulling their strings. It gives us Christians great reason to hope, because even in the heat of battle, where evil at its worst is stirring up hatred and revenge, it doesn’t take much for soldiers to turn from Satan’s influence to the peace being fuelled by Emmanuel. And it’s happened so many times, where soldiers on both sides of a war negotiate their own truces to avoid killing each other, that we have to say Emmanuel is doing what he promised.

In which case - from this quote I found – “We need more people who will follow the path of the Prince of Peace, who instead of guarding peace with violence, lay down their weapons. And instead of participating in a cultural

fantasy of killing our enemies, we pray for them. And instead of being offended by our enemies, we find creative ways to love them.” Which all sounds wonderful - but - somebody has to **start** that ball rolling, just like the Germans started the Christmas truce rolling in 1914.

But that’s exactly what Emmanuel came to do: He began the way of peace, and his disciples now join him in whatever age they live in, because others will follow, just like they did in World War 1. Jesus did say he’d make us fishers of men, meaning people will respond, just as they did in the trenches, to someone standing up and offering the hand of peace. And we have tons of opportunities to do just that, where we can turn a nasty, negative situation into one that opens blind eyes to a better way, frees people from their bitterness and rage, and gives them a glimmer of light and hope in a dark world.

And at heart this is what most people want anyway. Search the Internet and there are tons of sites highlighting *Real life heroes* and *Acts of kindness* and all sorts of people doing brave, unselfish acts on behalf of people and animals - quite spontaneously and without any prompting. In amongst all the suffering going on, therefore, hope keeps springing up as well, that Emmanuel is truly on the job, exactly as the prophets and Simeon predicted.

Going back to the prophets, therefore, is essential, because, as this quote says, “It’s when we divorce Christmas from the voices of the prophets that we halt the alternative way of life they are beckoning us towards. Without the story of Israel as the overarching narrative in which we can place Christmas, we do not see God’s activity in the world. We miss the very point of Christmas: small, mundane and lowly are the revolutionary means by which God works.”

That’s the key to Christmas; it’s reading what the prophets said about Emmanuel and seeing if it really happened to the Jews, and is it still happening among us Gentiles now as well? Can we catch glimpses of Emmanuel’s revolutionary ways being lived in the small things, like little acts of kindness, diffusing anger, seeking to heal offence and broken relationships, and offering the hand of peace? If so, we have reason to hope, the prophets were right, an alternative way of life did begin with Emmanuel and it’s still happening. It explains why we like Christmas so much: it’s our excuse to be nicer, and we grab it. Christmas itself, then, is proof that the prophets were right.

So, yes - to answer the question at the beginning - **there’s a lot in what we see daily that can lead us to hope.**

I'd like to finish with an unusual song, that voices what even non-Christians see in Jesus, and love it, as extra reason to hope that Emmanuel is truly on the job....

The Rebel Jesus - Jackson Browne (*stop at 3:42, or let it drift to the end*)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOAG6cdsbSM>