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The Christ of Christmas, Part 2

During this time of Advent we are looking at *The Christ of Christmas!* Previously we saw that the Bible describes Him as Emmanuel.¹ Is. 7:14. And from this we saw that to the children of God, Christ is the sign that God is with them; protecting, encouraging, helping, and providing for them!

The Panic of the Lost

For those of a search and rescue team, the sight is shocking. After days of searching for a lost hiker in the mountains they finally come across the body, laying on the ground, in an atmosphere of obvious fear and panic and without any clothing!

Now this scene is not unheard of today. You see, when a lone person gets lost in the mountains, and hope of survival fades panic sets in and all rational thought disappears. And rather than seeking refuge and waiting for help, the frightened hiker falls into a rage which eventually leads to a naked rampage through the forest that eventually ends in collapse due to exhaustion and exposure, and ultimately death.

This testifies to the incredible effect that a sense of “being lost” can produce.

Now if this is true of physical “lostness,” is it any wonder why those who are “spiritually lost” act as they do? To be lost in a dark and cold world without hope of escape or rescue will ultimately lead to a

¹ Compare Isaiah 7:14

spiritually naked rampage through life that eventually ends in death.

And it is against this backdrop that our text that describes Christ as *The Sunrise from on High*. Our text aptly describes our condition: We are lost, without any hope of escape, and without any sign of rescue! And yet, one of the characteristics of the Christ of Christmas is that He is THE LIGHT!

The Setting

Luke 1:5, “**There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea**, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.”

This is Herod the Great who ruled over the Jews from 37 to 4 BC. Though he is well-known for his building projects, he had a very dark side! He was a man pleaser. He bowed to whoever had the power. As such, though he professed the Jewish religion, he built many pagan temples to gain the approval of the masses.

He also was extremely paranoid. He executed his wife and many of his children because he believed they posed a threat to his power. And when he received news from the Magi of the “new born King”, he slaughtered EVERY two year-old Judean child and younger in hopes of killing the Christ.

And so the “days of Herod” were a dark time for the people of God. And yet in the midst of this dark time we read this:

Luke 1:5, “There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, **a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia**: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.”

During the time of David, the priests were organized and divided into twenty-four divisions.² The eighth division was that of Abijah,³ Zacharias' division.

Twice a year and for one week only, each division was charged with the duty of the temple. And part of the duties included offering the early morning and mid-afternoon incense.⁴ Now because there were so many priests, a lot was cast to determine which priest would perform this once-in-a-life-time duty of offering the incense⁵.

Then, as the sacrificed animal burned outside the offering priest brought coals from the altar of burnt offering inside to the holy place, placed them on the altar of incense, and then poured incense over them. As the smoke arose those on the outside knelt in silent prayer⁶ while the offering priest prayed a set prayer for the blessing, peace, and messianic redemption of Israel.

After the offering, the priest emerged from the building and concluded the service with a benediction upon the assembled people.

² Compare 1 Chronicles 24:1-6

³ Compare 1 Chronicles 24:10

⁴ Compare Exodus 30:7

⁵ Compare Luke 1:9

⁶ Compare Luke 1:10

This is where our text places Zacharias, a priest of the order of Abijah!

Luke 1:5, “There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: **and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.**”

From this we learn that Elizabeth was of priestly descent. .Thus, she complimented Zacharias nicely since it was viewed as a great blessing for a priest to marry a woman of priestly descent. We are told that both she and Zacharias were righteous in the sight of God⁷, and yet she was barren.⁸

And with this, the stage is set for verses 8-23 where Zacharias, having poured the incense over the coals and most likely begun his prayer for the Messianic kingdom⁹, receives a visit from an Angel (Gabriel) who heralds the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist.

Now because of Zacharias' unbelief [“I am an old man,” (Luke 1:18)] that he is struck with dumbness until the birth of the child.¹⁰

Here we pick up the story with verse 58-64.

On the eighth day, when the child was presented for circumcision, his name was ascertained, John.¹¹ While this was controversial (children were customarily named after relatives and there was no John in Zacharias' or Elizabeth's family) Zacharias and Elizabeth proved faithful to the Angel's command. And thus, Zacharias' mouth was opened¹² and he began to utter God's praise.

Our text is an example of Zacharias' praise.¹³

Now I want you to notice from this text that Zacharias is taken back NOT at the birth of his son BUT at the working of God in bringing to light the fulfillment of His promise to save His people.¹⁴

The faithful Israelite was one who looked anxiously for the day of the Lord when the Messiah would come to redeem His people! And Simeon and Anna are faithful Israelites.

Luke 2:25, “And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.”

Luke 2:38, “And she [Anna] coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.”

Now these passages illustrate the expectancy that many Jews held for the coming Messiah and the

⁷ Compare Luke 1:6

⁸ Compare Luke 1:7

⁹ Compare Luke 1:13

¹⁰ Compare Luke 1:57

¹¹ Compare Luke 1:58-63

¹² Compare Luke 1:64

¹³ Compare Luke 1:67-79

¹⁴ Compare Luke 1:67-75

“consolation of Israel!” And it is the excitement over the fulfillment of this expectation that compelled Zacharias to give this prophecy in which he details:

- The work of God, vv. 68-75.
- The work of his son, vv. 76-77.
- The work of the Messiah, vv. 78-79.

The Name’s Significance

This then leads us to a discussion of the significance of the name, *Sunrise from on High*.

Luke 1:78, “Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the **dayspring from on high**¹⁵ hath visited us.”

As we begin looking at this, note that there is little debate as to the significance of this term. Most agree that it is clearly a reference to Christ, and thus a Messianic title. And yet with this in agreement, much debate has centered on the correct understanding of this word and thus of this text.

Some scholars say that the best translation of this is “shoot from on high.” They base this on the fact that in the Septuagint the word rendered *sunrise* or *dayspring*¹⁶ is rendered most frequently as *shoot*.¹⁷ And in the Old Testament the phrase “shoot from on high” has a strong Messianic flavor.¹⁸ And finally, the rendering of *Sunrise from on high* really has no direct parallel, and thus it is very doubtful that Zacharias would have had this in his mind, so they say.

Other equally gifted scholars (in fact the majority AND all major translations) suggest that the best rendering is *sunrise from on high*. They base this on the fact that the primary definition of the Greek word here is *rising, sunrise, luminary, or star*. Furthermore in Numbers 24:17 Christ is described by the Messianic title, *Star of Jacob*. And finally, Zacharias' prophecy demonstrates a deep awareness of the prophecies of Malachi.¹⁹ And in view of this, Malachi 4:2 is easily seen to be the background for Zacharias' quote here.

Malachi 4:2, “But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun²⁰ of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.”

Now while our passage isn't a direct quote, Malachi 4:2 can be seen as the source for Zacharias' thought.

And so, which is it?

In my mind, each of these positions has merit, and viewed by themselves, each seem equally convincing. And yet, we must be reminded of the most fundamental rule of hermeneutics: a text without a context is a pretext. Before we study other portions of Scripture for the correct interpretation of this passage, we must first consider the immediate context. And when we do this we see that Zacharias' Messiah would thus:

¹⁵ ανατολη anatole

¹⁶ *Dayspring* means *dawn* or *sunrise*

¹⁷ Compare Jeremiah 23:5, and Zechariah 3:8; 6:12

¹⁸ Compare Isaiah 11:1

¹⁹ Compare specifically Malachi 1:17, 76; 3:1; 4:4

²⁰ שמש shemesh or ανατολη anatole in the Septuagint

Luke 1:79, “**To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.**”

This verse is taken from Isaiah 9:1-2. As a metaphor it referred to a party of travelers who having been overtaken by the darkness of a pitch-black night they sit terrified and powerless, knowing that at any moment they could be overwhelmed and killed by wild beasts or enemies. Thus, it indicates a condition of danger, fear, and hopelessness; a pining away, with no sign of help!

The closest word in the English that accurately conveys the thought of this phrase is *despondency*²¹. Now those in a state of despondency have a great need. They need

- Vision — the ability to see.
- The assurance of their safety— Life.
- Joy and gladness.

They need what all these together convey in the Bible as LIGHT.²² As such, the picture of the Messiah that Zacharias has in mind here is that of LIGHT. In the mind of Zacharias, the advent of Christ marked the intrusion of THE Light and thus hope into a very dark and despondent world!

Luke 1:79, “To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, **to guide our feet into the way of peace.**”

The imagery of this is rich. In Christ's day, there were no such things as street lights. And so, if you were lost in the darkness, in a strange and foreign land, you either needed a lantern that was strapped to your leg, thus illumining the path before you²³ or a bright star or moon by which to travel.

And once again, we see that Zacharias' Messiah is that Light. In the mind of Zacharias the effect of Christ's advent was the illumining of the way or path that resulted in peace with God.²⁴(

Now both of these phrases convey quite accurately the thought of Malachi 4:2.

Malachi 4:2, “But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.”

When a calf enters the sunshine after being confined to a small and dark space like a stall, in a state of despondence they skip about! And thus, based on the activities that are associated with the Messiah in this context, the best understanding of *ανατολη* anatole in this passage is “rising” or “sunrise.” Thus Zacharias' reference to the Messiah is a statement that He is the “sunrise from on high,” the One who

- Illumines the path of those in darkness.
- Gives hope to those who dwell in the shadow of death.
- Gives guidance to the blind.
- Gives direction to the lost.
- Gives hope to the despondent.

²¹ Loss of courage or hope, dejection

²² Compare Luke 1:78

²³ Compare Psalm 119:105

²⁴ Compare Luke 1:78

- Gives life to those who are dead even while they live!

Another characteristic of the Christ of Christmas is that He is the Light of the World that fills the dark and empty soul of man and thus illumines the path that leads to peace with God! And so, when we say that Christmas is the celebration of Christ's birth, recognize the meaning of this birth.

Though, our way is difficult and dark, and our path is of such a nature that even though we are children of God we nevertheless are tempted with despondency. We must take courage! For Jesus Christ, the Christ of Christmas, is the "Sunrise from on High!"

Now brothers and sisters, do you see the significance of this text for you?

You must see that Christ as the "Sunrise from on High" means that depression and despondency need never be a part of the Christian life. Depression occurs when inability meets with unfilled needs, wants, or expectations. The Christian who needs food and covering, and yet is exhausted of working harder than most and yet receiving less than all is liable to fall into depression. The Christian who wants success and has exhausted every means of achieving it is prone to fall into despondency. The Christian who expects an easy life (no complications, no interruptions, no frustrations with relationships) and yet has wearied of working for it is a candidate for despair.

Now brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ as the "light of the world" is the need, the want, the expectation, and the ability for every lost traveler who sits in the despondency of darkness!

2 Peter 1:2-3, "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

See, Jesus Christ is the NEED of every Christian!

Philippians 3:8, "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ."

Jesus Christ is the want of every healthy Christian!

Colossians 1:27, "To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Jesus Christ is the expectation of every Christian!

Philippians 2:12-13, "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

If Christ, as our salvation, is our want, need, and expectation then included in this command to work out our salvation is the charge to rightfully pursue these things! And we do this by Christ. Christ is our

ability!

2 Corinthians 1:20, “For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us.”

And so I say it again, one of the truths we learn from this text is that depression and despondency need never be apart of the Christian life! And yet, if we were honest with ourselves and each other we would find that at times, many of us struggle with depression. We often conclude that depression simply must be a part of the Christian walk and part of the state of living in the state of sin and misery.

And yet our passage says, “No!” to this.

Why Struggle With Depression

This then leads us to an important question: If Christ came to shine upon those who sit in darkness, why do Christians struggle at times with depression?

While there is no amount of darkness that can diminish a light in the least bit, not even the darkness of sin, a light is of little help if it is neglected! In other words, when Peter walked on the water toward Christ he did fine, so long as he kept his focus on Christ! But the moment he forgot Christ and looked at the waves, he fell!

When Moses on the mountain and relied upon the Lord with outstretched arms, the people of God battling the Amalekites in the valley prevailed. But when he grew “weary in doing well” and lowered his arms, a sign of self-sufficiency, the enemy in the valley prevailed!²⁵ (cf. Ex. 17).

Throughout Scripture, prayer is viewed in its most essential form as an expression of dependence upon God. James, speaking of prayer, thus writes this:

James 1:6-8, “But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.”

And finally, Paul commands the Christian:

Galatians 5:16, “This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.”

Galatians 5:25, “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.”

If you have been saved from a life of darkness by the Spirit, walk by/live in dependence upon the Spirit! These passages and more reveal the problem quite well. Though Christ is the Sunrise from on High we struggle at times with despondency because we struggle with PRACTICAL FAITH!

As the Light of the world, Christ shines in and around His people. The problem is that His people many times would rather go it alone then avail themselves of Christ! Now to encourage our dependence upon Christ, I want you to consider the following. First off note that God is sovereign and so in control of all things!

²⁵ Compare Exodus 17

Genesis 50:20, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”

Amos 3:6, “Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?”

Proverbs 21:1, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.”

Brothers and sisters how can we not depend upon God when we come to understand that He is in control of all things?!

Secondly, notice that God has you right where He wants you to be!

2 Corinthians 12:8-10, “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”

Our sovereign God who is in control of all things has ordained all that is in your life! When you come to understand this, it will radically transform you from being a person who wants deliverance from trial to a person who wants to enjoy the grace in God in every trial!

Thirdly, realize that where God wants you to be is poised for greatest Kingdom success!

Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”

Romans 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

In the context of the Kingdom of God, what is our “welfare”? What is our “good”?

I hope you see it! God's plan in and through all things is to make you fit for heaven and work in your life such that you are better able to serve and so enjoy Him.

As a result, our call is to wait upon the Lord.

Isaiah 40:28-31, “Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”

If God is in control of all things and is working all things for His glory and our welfare, then brothers and sisters let us not question but rather let us wait upon Him.

Now this naturally leads to another result: Trust Him to make all things right.

Exodus 14:14, “The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace.”

Truly if we are as God says we are (specifically His children) then we can be confident that in and through all things God is going to work what is best, what is right. As this is true, let us trust Him this day. Let us accept what comes our way as from the hand of a gracious and loving God is accomplishing His good purpose, and so ours!

Follow Him as He leads, even through the valley of the shadow of death.²⁶ After Christ predicted Peter’s martyrdom, we read Peter’s response:

John 21:21-22, “Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.”

I hope you see it! It is not ours to know times and seasons. Rather, ours is to trust the character of God and follow Him whichever way He leads!

In light of all of this, listen to command of Christ to Joshua when he took the reigns of leadership so long ago, it is God's command to us:

Joshua 1:9, “Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.”

May God give us the courage to so follow Him!

About Bethel Presbyterian Church

The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word is published regularly.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon and the these notes can be found at [Sunrise From on High](#). The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on December 24, 2006. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.

²⁶ Compare John 21:21-22