

Let There Be Light

Christmas Cousins-Part 4

Luke 1:78-79 & John 11-34

Got this card in the mail – it's from a cat – her picture is on the front cover – and it reads, "Meowy Christmas." Meowy Christmas" . . . I now have proof that cat's can't spell – I knew that before, I just didn't have proof.

Inside the card is a note to me that says, "We know how much you cherish the music of Christmas." And then I opened the card.

I just wanted to end the year for all you cat people out there – I want you to take note – I have just allowed cats to sing in church. It probably won't happen again.

I do cherish the music of Christmas, though, don't you? And every year around here it just seems to get better and richer and fuller. The orchestra and all the choirs and leaders under the direction of Gary Hallquist have done a phenomenal job this season, haven't they?

Today we take our last look at these Christmas cousins we've been studying this December – cousins Elizabeth and Mary, and their miracle babies whose ministries will intertwine briefly yet very significantly. The ministry of their sons, John and Jesus, will change the world forever.

Both of their births are surrounded with music. In fact, when Jesus Christ is born the sky will light up with angels who sing that the Savior has just been born.

It was the custom of Middle Eastern couples to hire musicians to come and play as they celebrated the birth of their firstborn. And their wealth determined the number of musicians.

Joseph and Mary are a long way from home – huddled in a hollowed out cavern where she's just delivered our Deliverer.

They don't know any musicians in town . . . and they couldn't hire them if they did – but that's okay . . . God the Father sends His own choir – He's got deep pockets – the choir is a million or so strong and they light up the Bethlehem sky and sing of the birth of God the Son, just delivered in flesh and blood from the womb of the virgin Mary.

The Messiah has been born.

And Luke records for us in chapter 2 and verse 13 that, "*Suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,*"

You might notice it says they were 'saying', it doesn't say they were singing.

That word translated *saying* in this text was rarely used in the New Testament. It is the word, aineo. And it's used many times in the Greek Old Testament to translate the Hebrew word, hallel – which is the first part of the Hebrew word hallelujah.

Hallel, or hallelujah was most often related to the Hebrew form of praise in poetry and in musical lyrics.

When Luke writes – *and this is what they were saying* – he effectively means, I believe – here are the lyrics to their chanting song – *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.*

Since our focus has been on the birth of the Savior's forerunner – the prophet John, I want to shift your attention to the lyrics of another song. It was sung 6 months earlier.

Only this time it was a solo, sung by an old priest who is no doubt overwhelmed with just as much joy as any angel.

Let me invite your attention back to Luke's gospel and chapter 1.

Six months before the angels sing in the sky above Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus Christ, several miles away, in the farm cottage of a priest and his wife now in their 80's, the music is about to begin.

Elizabeth has just delivered their son – and according to Gabriel's message from God – they named him John.

Even though he'll be nicknamed later on, John the Baptist – or John the Baptizer – John – which means *the grace of God* will grow up to introduce Jesus Christ who is the embodiment of grace:

The instrument of grace
The means of grace
The bridge of grace allowing man to reconcile with God

We beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

And now the old priest holds up his miracle baby boy, John, and with his tongue now loosed he begins to chant his own prophetic poem.

A Priest and a Prophecy

The lyrics to this prophetic chant begin in ***verse 68 and run through verse 79.***

I've divided Zacharias' Christmas hymn into 4 stanzas.

- The first stanza is about the salvation of Israel.
- The second stanza is about the sovereignty of God.
- The third stanza is about the son of Zacharias and
- The fourth stanza is about the Sunrise from Heaven.

For the sake of time I'm gonna follow Baptist tradition and not have us look at all four stanzas.

I feel sorry for all the hymn writers who wrote more than a first and last stanza.

I do want you to look at stanza number 3 which focuses on the future ministry of John the Baptist – notice ***verse 76. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways.***

What a powerful expression – you're gonna speak on behalf of the sovereign Lord – in fact, you're gonna be His front man – His advance man – he's gonna prepare the way before Him.

This idea goes all the way back to ancient days without any paved roads. One Bible historian talked about the fact that most roads were simply tracks across fields. As you entered a town, the ground could be nothing more than a muddy mess where the wheels of carts would often mire down and get stuck. But if a king were to travel to visit a town, a road leading into and through the town would be built out of stone or wood – and smoothed out for the royal chariot or carriage – so that the traveling wouldn't be unduly rough, and the wheels wouldn't get swamped in the mire.¹

John is going to announce to the nation – and to the world – your King is coming. Royalty is on His way.

Make ready the road of repentance. Prepare a highway, unobstructed and ready – so that the King can ride that highway directly into your heart.

John the Baptist was into construction – he was all about building a highway for the King of Heaven.

Zacharias introduces us to the King with a wonderful expression – notice in his last stanza at ***verse 78 where he says, "Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us to shine upon those who sit in darkness."***

It's one thing to be stuck in the mud – it's another thing to be stuck in the mud in the middle of the night, surrounded by darkness and you don't have any matches and you forgot to put batteries in your flashlight.

Isaiah described the nation Israel as a people walking in darkness.

Try to walk in pitch black darkness and you're gonna stumble and fall and hit your knee and your head.

Not only Israel, but the entire world is described in scripture as shrouded in darkness – owned by the kingdom of darkness – blinded by the god of this world (***2 Corinthians 4:4.***)

But all that is about to change – the sunrise is on the way.

- Jesus Christ will be described as the light of the world – ***John 8:12;***
- the gospel will be described as a gospel of light – ***2 Corinthians 4:6;***
- those who believe will become children of the light – ***Ephesians 5:8;***

- the believer will be commanded to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light – **Romans 13:12**;
- those who trust in Christ will have been rescued from the darkness and brought out into a marvelous light – **I Peter 2:9**

Jesus Christ said in ***John 8:12 – I am the light of the world – whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.***

And that's just the beginning, by the way –

- you're not only children of light –
- wearing the armor of light –
- walking in the path of light –
- heading for a kingdom of light –
- but you're going to one day personally ***shine with the light of the noonday sun in the kingdom of your Father – Matthew 13:43.***

John the Baptist is announcing what Malachi had prophesied 400 hundred years earlier before the darkness of judgment and the silence of God fell upon the nation and the world.

But there's a day coming . . . soon . . . when John will break the silence – he will announce, "The sun is about to rise – get your hearts paved and ready . . . get ready for the Lord of Light . . . get ready for the Sunrise to ride like a chariot into your heart and life."

Verse 79, He's going to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death . . . to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Get ready . . . the sunrise is on His way.

With that prophetic song from Zacharias, nothing more is heard for some 30 years . . . until John appears, preaching in the wilderness – and I want you to hear what he has to say.

A Preacher and a Prophet

Turn to the next Gospel account by John – John chapter 1.

By the way, John the Gospel writer is a different person than John the Baptist.

John the Gospel writer is one of the disciples of Jesus – among the inner circle of Christ's closest disciples – Peter, James and John.

John will live a long time – in fact, he'll live longer than any other Apostle. He'll write the Gospel of John; the letters we call, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John and then he'll write the last book of the Bible – the Book of Revelation.

John the Baptizer will die young. Not long after beginning his ministry, he'll be put into prison by Herod and then beheaded at the request of Herod's wife. She was infuriated with this prophet from the wilderness because he had dared to refer to her marriage to Herod as adultery – which it was.

She wanted to get rid of him.

The religious leaders were happy to see him go because he had also confronted their sin. They wanted to silence him.

They wanted to be left alone with their religious rituals and ceremonies – they were comfortable with the darkness!

Like our world today says to the gospel of Jesus Christ – "Don't shine that light in our direction . . . it hurts our eyes . . . turn off the light . . . we're not interested in the daylight, we're more interested in the nighttime – leave us alone in the dark!"

More than 500 years ago, in the small village of Ferrara, Italy, a baby boy was born. He also would grow up to bravely confront his religious world. He would later be called the forerunner of the Reformation.

In his classic work, *The History of the Christian Church*, Philip Schaff wrote that Savonarola lived in the dark times when the church was characterized by corruption and wickedness among the religious leaders, the papacy, the priesthood and the entire clergy.

The offices of bishop and cardinal were sold to the highest bidder; immorality of all kinds was prevalent in monasteries and convents; openly displayed in local congregations without discipline or shame. The church, Schaff wrote, had become a den of vice and iniquity.

This so burdened the young priest that he spoke with fiery eloquence against these practices and for 8 years he preached in Florence Italy, pleading for purity and reformation.

He refused to mix and mingle with officials of the church and was resented by the clergy. One morning, interrupting his devotions, church leaders broke into his monastery, dragged him through the streets and locked him in a dungeon where he was finally executed.

But that wasn't the end of his testimony. You see, Savonarola was the forerunner of the coming Reformation when enough people would rise up in protest against the corruption of the church – and eventually splinter off in a dozen fragments of light.

These protesters – or protestants as they were called, we pronounce them, Protestants – have now for the last 500 years of church history followed the early convictions of the Reformation – and at the center of them, the conviction that reads – in Latin – sola scriptura – which means, the church will now follow the authority of the scriptures alone.

It is the word of God alone.

I found it interesting and ironic that when the day of Savonarola's trial arrived, the church was so determined to silence him that one of the pope's commissioners wrote on his behalf, and I quote, "Put Savonarola to death, even if he is another John the Baptist."

They hanged him, set on fire his remains and threw his ashes into the river.ⁱⁱ

So they put to death the forerunner of the Reformation just as 1500 years earlier, the religious leaders will rejoice over the death of the forerunner of the Redeemer.

And for the most part, the brief ministry and message of John the Baptizer will be ignored.

The religious leaders will respond to the light of John's message by shutting their blinds, taping up their windows and closing their curtains.

We want to be left alone in the dark.

In John's Gospel, chapter 1 and verse 6 we're told, notice, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify about the Light so that all might believe through him. 8. He was not the light, but he came to testify about the Light. 9. There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. 10. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.

There are three reactions to the preaching of John the Baptizer.

1. This is the first one – The Light was not recognized.

The world did not know Him – literally, the world did not recognize Him.

The nation had been waiting for the Messiah for 400 years – but it couldn't be the son of a carpenter, introduced to us by his cousin.

What is this, a little family scheme to gain some notoriety? You and your cousins work this all out ahead of time?

The nation is waiting for the anointed one and they're pretty confident that when He comes, He isn't gonna look like Jesus and He certainly isn't gonna be represented and introduced by a man who looks like John the Baptizer with his wild hair and camel hair robe and unlettered credentials.

Little wonder that Jesus Christ was unrecognized and ultimately crucified by a nation that did not realize who He was.

Frankly, we would have done the same thing. We would have taken one look at Him and said. "I don't know what God looks like, but when He comes, He certainly won't land in a stable and end up on a cross."

Isaiah added the words: *"He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief . . . He was despised and we did not esteem Him."*

In other words, no one considered Him to be anyone special or important.

They didn't recognize the Light.

2. The second response follows the first – They didn't receive the light.

The Apostle John writes further in *verse 11. He came to His own – literally, His own domain – and those who were His own did not receive Him.*

The nation of Israel officially rejected the Sunrise, prophesied hundreds of years earlier. The angelic visitations were ignored.

The testimony of Zacharias to the priests that an angel had visited him in the holy place was written off as delusional. The surprise pregnancy of his 80 year old wife was written off as coincidental.

From the angels to the shepherds to the virgin to Magi and on and on – the evidences of the grace of God that pointed to the Sunrise were overwhelming.

But the grace of God was not received.

Can you imagine an entire nation rejecting the message of the gospel after so many evidences of the grace of God?

Just look around! This is the most obvious season to answer that question.

Look the word Christmas up in the dictionary – if it hasn't been rewritten yet – and it will say, "Christmas – colon – the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ."

And in our nation, it is anything but that.

Our nation wants the lights of Christmas, just don't mention the light of Christ.

We want to celebrate the season; we just don't want to mention the Savior.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this weekend the world will miss the meaning of Christmas and they will miss it on purpose.

But there is a third reaction to the Sunrise.

3. There are those who will respond to the Light.

Notice verse 12. But (note that – But!) as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.

What does it mean to believe in His name?

In the ancient world, a name was more than something that went well with the last name or followed family tradition. A name was a reflection of the person bearing it. Old and New Testament saints named their children with names they hoped would characterize their children's lives.

Gabriel told Joseph and Mary to name their newborn son Jesus – because it meant exactly what He would become – Redeemer, Deliverer, Savior.

To believe in His name means you believe in all that His name represents – His character, His person, His atonement, His Redemption, His sacrifice, His deity.

Believe in the One many thought was nothing more than a deluded carpenter – a misguided teacher – and no wonder.

One poet put the incarnation in these words,
... No pomp. No pageantry.

No flash. No fanfare.

God slipped unpretentiously into the lake of humanity

With barely a ripple of notice.

But in His wake a quiet greatness

Moved in concentric circles

Touching everyone He met;

A fisherman, weathered and worn;

A woman, Samaritan and shameful,

A man, thirty-eight years lame.

[But then look] a rolled-up pallet,

An empty water pot

Nets hung out to dry

Forever left behind

For Him

Who was full of grace and truth;

For Him,

Whose brimming glory

Spilled into their empty lives.

Where there was meaningless labor,

He gave mission.

Where there was hurt,

He gave healing.

Where there was thirst for forgiveness,

He gave living water.

Deity was never so winsome

As when the Light of the World

Touched these dimly burning wicks,

And gave them a reason to shine.

Ibid. p. 92

. . . as the sunlight at the breaking of the dawn.

"Let there be light" did not cease to sound from the mouth of God with the first creation. It continues to this day as the glorious light of the gospel shines upon those who sit in darkness – those who stumble in the night.

And for those who believe – they become new creations.

"Let there be light" – is your testimony and mine.

- it is the gospel of light we believe;
- it is the Savior of light we follow;
- it is the armor of light we wear;
- and it is the color of the clothing we will wear in that final creation where we will shine as the sun in the kingdom of our Father.

And why? Because the Sunrise has come. The Son of God came where we are . . . so that we might go to where He belongs.ⁱⁱⁱ

. . . in his heavenly kingdom of everlasting life and never ending light.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/25/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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i Merrill Tenney, quoted by Charles R. Swindoll, Exalting Christ the Son of God: A Study of John 1 – 5 (Insight for Living, 1987), p. 19

ii Philip Schaff, quoted in Charles R. Swindoll, Exalting Christ the Son of God, p. 16

iii Ivor Powell, John's Wonderful Gospel (Kregel Publications, 1962), p. 32