

Born to Give Light to Those Who Sit in Darkness

Readings: Isaiah 9:1-7; Luke 1:68-79 (text)

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In the fullness of time, God began executing the drama of the end of the Old Testament age. The birth of Jesus was that time, and there were four main characters: Zechariah the priest and Elizabeth his wife; and Joseph the carpenter and Mary his betrothed wife.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were both advanced in years and beyond childbearing, but they had no child. On that one day that he was chosen to minister at the Temple, Zechariah was visited by the angel Gabriel who announced to him that their prayer for a child has been heard by God. Elizabeth would bear a son! He shall be called John, and he will come *“to make ready for the Lord a people prepared,”* a forerunner of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Although he was a righteous man, Zechariah doubted God's promise as he requested for a sign, *“How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”* So God silenced his tongue. Six months later, Mary her young cousin, who was also with child, visited her. The six-month-old John in the womb leaped in reaction to Mary's visit, which is taken to mean that even in the womb, the Spirit-filled infant John already recognized his newly-conceived Lord and Savior!

After John was born, God loosened Zechariah's tongue, and as he was filled with the Spirit, he burst into a song of praise to God beginning in verse 68, *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.”* This visiting and redeeming his people is the theme that brackets Zechariah's song, as he repeats it in verse 78, *“Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high.”*

Thus, God's visitation of Zechariah is a revelation of his merciful oversight and watching over redemption of God's covenant people, which he now is accomplishing in the birth of two men: John, the older man, who will prepare the way of Jesus, the younger man.

In the last two verses of his song (78-79), Zechariah shifts his focus from his own son to the Messiah of whom his son is a messenger. Why would God, after 400 years of silence, suddenly come and visit his people? Zechariah says it is

because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:78-79).

God has mercy on his people. He never forgets his covenant promises to Abraham and David. In the fullness of time, he would send the One who would save his people from sin. The heart of God towards his people is tender and merciful.

God's mercy and compassion towards his people come from within his very Being, his very essence and nature. In his mercy, he could not forget his people's longing and groaning, and their slavery to Satan, sin and death. How did he accomplish such tender mercy?

By sending his *"Sunrise... from on high."* Here, Zechariah uses several metaphors which refer to the Messiah as the Light. The word "sunrise" is also translated sometimes as "rising sun," "dayspring" or "dawn." Jesus is this Sun, Dayspring, or Light. This is why the apostle John declares that Jesus is *"the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world"* (John 1:4-5, 9). The Old Testament prophets referred to him also in the same way:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined (Isa 9:2).

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising (Isa 60:1-3).

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings (Mal 4:2).

Even the false prophet Balaam saw from afar this Light whom the prophets of old spoke about, *"a star shall come out of Jacob"* (Num 24:17). All the way to the last chapter of Scripture, Christ is called *"the bright morning star"* (Rev 22:16). The words of the great Christmas hymn, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" are based on the Scripture texts above:

*Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Ris'n with healing in His wings.*

These are also the same metaphors that Paul uses to describe the state of believers before and after salvation: darkness and light. He describes unbelievers as those who *"are darkened in their understanding"* (Eph 4:18). And, *"for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light"* (Eph 5:8). Since we are now children of light, we are to live as such, *"The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light"* (Rom 13:12).

Jesus declared, *"I am the Light of the world,"* but how is he the Light? Jesus declared, *"I am the Light of the world,"* but how is he the Light? Although he has been given a "horn" of great power and authority, Christ the Messiah and the Dayspring is also God's Suffering Servant, as Jesus himself declared, *"the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Isa 49:3; Matt 20:28). This is an integral part of God's covenant promises to our forefathers: the redemption of all his people from sin, both Jews and Gentiles, a multitude of Abraham's children. All of them will receive the promised eternal inheritance through the death of Christ, the mediator of the new covenant (Heb 9:15). This is how God will bless all the families of the earth through Abraham.

As a result of our salvation, Christ will guide our feet (Isa 42:6-7) through his holy Word, *"a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"* (Psa 119:105). What is our guide in our life? Is it the wisdom

of the world or the wisdom of God's Word? When his Word is our guide, Christ will lead us into the way of peace, because he is the Prince of Peace, and his government is a government of peace, justice and righteousness (Isa 9:7). It is those who preach the Word of God who *"brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation"* (Isa 52:7). Then at last, in our heavenly home, all nations will walk by the light of God's glory (Rev 21:23-24).

Jesus becomes our Light when we live as children of Light through God's Word, and become light and salt for the world to see.

Beloved friends, as you begin celebrating Christmas this year, consider John, who was a herald for Christ, preaching repentance and giving knowledge of salvation to the people in the forgiveness of their sins. Most of all, he pointed them to the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Since you have been redeemed by the Savior, you too are heralds of Christ, having the beautiful feet of those who bring the good news of peace, happiness and salvation to your family and friends by your words and deeds of holiness and righteousness.

Consider Jesus – the Sunrise, Dayspring and Dawn – who shines light to a dark and hopeless world by visiting and redeeming his people from Satan's kingdom of sin and death. John preached repentance and forgiveness, but Christ accomplished all salvation. He came down from heaven to be born in human flesh and blood, fulfilled all righteousness in his life and death, and rose from the grave for our justification and new life. Amen.