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## So close and yet so far Zacharias, Elisabeth, Chief Priests and Scribes



Part 21 (041219am)

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This summer as we glided along the interstate highways, crossing the Appalachian Mountains I noticed a sign that said:

*"Continental Divide:*

*A raindrop falling on this side will flow to the Gulf of Mexico, one falling on the other side will flow to the Atlantic."*

As I drove on, a very sobering feeling settled over my heart and mind.

Two raindrops can fall just inches apart, and yet arrive at two vastly different destinations. Hydrology teaches us that there are continental divides, separators that determine destinations.

The Christmas story contains the picture of two raindrops. Two sets of people, so close in their family upbringing, so close in education, so close in environment, so close in every day life—yet so far apart in destiny. Beware of getting so close in every way--**but your heart**, to Christ. Beware of being **acquainted with Christ** but never **knowing Him**.

How close can you get to Jesus and still be too far away? That is what the religious leaders of Christ's day demonstrate to us this Christmas. So close they were, and yet so far away they remained. It is possible to be as close as them, and yet miss all that Christ and Christmas have to offer.

Matthew 2 introduced us the chief priests and scribes, we'll come back to them. Luke 1 will introduce us to a priest and his wife. How about it? Are you looking for Jesus this Christmas? Or is this Christmas flying by so fast you will miss what God is offering you? Everyone who was looking for Jesus to come enjoyed His arrival. As we examine their lives we can often see ourselves. Who are you going to be like this Christmas—it is your choice you know. Open with me to Luke 1.5-6 and meet these two saints Zacharias and Elisabeth.

If you think your week is busy, imagine this man's life. Zacharias was one of 24,000 priests who served 2 weeks each year by rotation—and Luke 1 picks up in that whirlwind week. As an aged man, it was a supreme honor given once in a lifetime to serve at the altar of incense. This was a high honor that was permitted to a priest but once in a lifetime. The incense was offered daily before the morning sacrifice at about 9 AM, and after the evening sacrifice, about 3 PM in the afternoon. It was probably the evening offering that was assigned to Zacharias.

If you look closely you may notice that God often speaks to His people and calls them while they are busy doing their daily tasks. Moses and David were called from caring for sheep; Gideon was called while threshing wheat; Peter and his partners were called while mending nets; and Paul as he was on a business trip out of town. It is hard to steer a car that is not moving. When we get to work doing what we were called to do -- God starts to direct us.

So it was on this day in June of 6/7 BC, while placing fresh incense upon the altar before the great curtain of the Holy of Holies towering 60 feet into the air above – that Gabriel appeared to Zacharias with a message from God. After four hundred years – God's silence was broken. God had remembered His oath.

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God breaks through after 400 years of silence. Chronologically Dr. Luke begins the New Testament. He goes back to the birth of John the Baptist, to where the angel Gabriel appeared to John's father as he served in the temple. John's parents were Zacharias and Elisabeth. Zacharias means "God remembers," and Elisabeth means "His oath." Together their names mean, "God remembers His oath." When did God take an oath?

**Psalm 89:34-37** records God's oath: "My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven. Selah."

God swore an oath to David that one of his descendants would have an eternal reign. Christ is that descendant. "God remembers His oath!" God is ready to break through into human history after 400 years of silence. Notice that the Scripture tells us both Zacharias and Elisabeth were righteous. That is, they were right. How were they right? They recognized they were sinners and brought the necessary sacrifices.

So there they are, two obscure people from 20 plus centuries ago. Known only to us from the pages of Scripture. Other than these few verses in Luke, little is known about Elisabeth. But this we should always remember -

- *Elisabeth sang the first song of the New Testament (Luke 1:42-45).*
- *Elisabeth was the first person filled with the Spirit (Luke 1:41) in the New Testament.* By the way the 1st Spirit filled family is this family. Elisabeth, John (Luke 1:15), and Zacharias (Luke 1:67) were each described as filled with the Spirit of God.
- *Elisabeth was the first recorded example of a New Testament woman of faith, even when her husband Zacharias was not.* He was struck dumb because of his unbelief, but Elisabeth was not. She believed God (Luke 1:24-25).
- *Elisabeth was the godly older woman who encourages Mary (Luke 1:45).* Mary was a young woman with so many challenges as an unwed mother in the Jewish culture. Elisabeth was an older woman who had walked with God for many years, who assures Mary that God would bring to pass all that He had revealed to her. In that time and place, how Mary needed the loving encouragement that Elisabeth gave.

Next we hasten to Zacharias, though just one of 24,000 priests who served at the Temple 2 weeks per year, God was looking for him--it is he who meets Gabriel. After he hears the good news of his son of promise - John the Baptist, he waits in muted silence for his unbelief. After 40 weeks of waiting (and studying God's Word) John is born and his dad sings.

What was ZACHARIAS doing while he had no voice? He spent the time set aside, handicapped as it were, studying God's Word! If you are incapacitated, crippled, handicapped, out of circulation, laid aside, out of work, and so on - you can waste the time or turn it to gold. The choice is yours!

The song that Zechariah sings summarizes the ministry of John pointing to Jesus. The song introduces the Coming One - Jesus, and explains why He came. Please stand with me as we listen to the song known throughout the ages as "The Benedictus of Zacharias" in Luke 1.67-79:

**Luke 1:67-79** *Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: 68 "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people, 69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David, 70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who have been since the world began, 71 That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us, 72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, 73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham: 74 To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, 75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. 76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, 77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, ( **Only Jesus can remit sins. Acts 10:43 To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.**)" 78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; 79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace."*

By the act of faith, naming John as Gabriel had told him to do (Luke 1:63), God looses Zacharias' tongue and he bursts into a Spirit prompted hymn. If you read these verses closely, they reveal these beautiful pictures of what the coming of Jesus Christ to earth really means.

- **JESUS CAME TO OPEN OUR PRISON DOOR** (v. 68). "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people." We see this in the word *redeem* which means "to set free by paying a price." It referred to the ancient custom of releasing of a prisoner or the liberating of a slave by purchasing them. When Jesus Christ came to earth, He came to bring "deliverance to the captives" (Luke 4:18). Jesus offers His salvation to us who are in bondage to sin and death. We are powerless to set ourselves free; only Jesus the Lamb of God could pay the price necessary for our redemption (Eph. 1:7; 1 Peter 1:18-21).
- **There is NO BONDAGE that His Power cannot break**. Think of all those that Jesus freed: the leper in Mark 1, the demoniac in Mark 5; the palsied man by the pool in John 5; and countless others. In Acts 16 the earthquake shook the jail doors open, and the chains fell off - but they had to get up and walk out!
- **There is NO FEAR that His Presence will not banish**. Matthew 28:20b "and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.
- **There is NO STAIN that is Precious Blood cannot cleanse**. Revelation 1:5b "To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood".
- **There is NO PAST that His Words cannot make new**. John 8:11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."
- **JESUS CAME TO DEFEAT OUR ENEMIES -- OUR ENEMY WAS DEFEATED**: *The winning of a battle* (vv. 69-75). In the Old Testament a horn symbolizes power and victory (1 Kings 22:11; Ps. 89:17, 24). As Zacharias had studied the Scriptures he reflects upon God as He is often pictured in the Old Testament delivering the army of His people as they are about to be taken captive. But when the Lord arises, the enemy is defeated. In the first

word picture, we as captives are set free. In this second word picture our enemy is defeated so that he cannot capture us as prisoners any more. God offers total victory to us His people.

"The word salvation (Luke 1:69, 71) carries the meaning of "health and soundness." No matter what the condition of the captives, their Redeemer brings spiritual soundness. When you trust Jesus Christ as Savior, you are delivered from Satan's power, moved into God's kingdom, redeemed, and forgiven (Col. 1:12-14). Where did the Redeemer come from? He came from the house of David (Luke 1:69), who himself was a great conqueror. God had promised that the Savior would be a Jew (Gen. 12:1-3), from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10), from the family of David (2 Sam. 7:12-16), born in David's city, Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Both Mary (Luke 1:27) and Joseph (Matt. 1:20) belonged to David's line. The coming of the Redeemer was inherent in the covenants God made with His people (Luke 1:72), and it was promised by the prophets (Luke 1:70). Note that the results of this victory are sanctity and service (Luke 1:74-75). He sets us free, not to do our own will, because that would be bondage, but to do His will and enjoy His freedom."

- **No enemy can stand before Him, not Death, not Darkness, not Despair, not Defeat, not Defilement – nothing stands before Him .** Matthew 1:21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." John 8:31-36 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. 32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." 34 Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. 36 Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.
- **JESUS CAME TO PAY OUR DEBTS – BY HIS DEATH OUR DEBT WAS CANCELLED:** (vv. 76-77). *Remission* means "to send away, to dismiss, as a debt." All of us are in debt to God because we have broken His law and failed to live up to His standards (Luke 7:40-50). Furthermore, all of us are spiritually bankrupt, unable to pay our debt. But Jesus came and paid the debt for us (Ps. 103:12; John 1:29). This is the glorious truth of our great salvation through Christ.
- When Jesus JUSTIFIED us, we as sinners stood before God as accused, and were declared righteous by His imputed righteousness.
- When Jesus REDEEMED us, we as sinners stood before God as slaves and were granted freedom by His ransom.
- When Jesus FORGAVE us, we as sinners stood before God as debtors and our debt was forgotten by His payment.
- When Jesus RECONCILED us, we as sinners stood before God as enemies and were made friends by His peace.
- When Jesus ADOPTED us, we as sinners stood before God as strangers and were called sons and daughters by His choice.
- **JESUS CAME TO BRING THE DAWNING OF A NEW DAY – THAT KNOWS NO NIGHT** (vv. 78-79). *Dayspring* means "sunrise." God's Word sees lost people as those sitting in darkness and death, and distress. Christ's birth brought light, life, and peace. Christ's birth was the dawn of a new day because of the tender mercies of God.

Jesus is the only key to the day that knows no night.

He came into a manger one dark night to bear away the sin of the world. He will take your penalty, your debt, your stain, your sin if only you will ask Him.

The story of Christmas is that the Sunrise has come, He is here, open your heart to Him!

The sad lesson of Christmas comes from those who were on the other side of the continental divide from Zacharias and Elisabeth. Now turn back with me to Matthew 2.

the RELIGIOUS LEADERS were not looking for Jesus

**Matthew 2:4-5** And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

So they knew about the texts but failed to notice the significance of this event. They knew it, but didn't care enough to go five miles south of town and experience it. They pointed others to seek out the Savior but never went to worship themselves. Chief priests and religious leaders - knew prophets, not believe prophecy. The immediate reaction of the theologians of Herod's court who knew the Scriptures well—was "in ' Bethlehem". What is amazing is that as they recited these words they showed the terrible condition that though they knew the Scriptures, they did not believe them! What a sad indictment upon these Bible students that they did not even bother to travel the five or six miles to Bethlehem to see their Messiah. God can only be found when we seek Him!

**Deuteronomy 4:29** But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. (NIV)

So who were these Chief Priests and Scribes?

All Jewish **priests** were of the priestly tribe of Levi and, even more particularly, descendants of Aaron, the first high priest. In some ways the priests were like the magi, having considerable political as well as religious power. First among the **chief priests** was the high priest. The ruling high priest also presided over the Sanhedrin, a type of combined senate and supreme court, made up of seventy of the key Jewish religious leaders. Another of the **chief priests** was the captain of the Temple, who was appointed by and responsible to the high priest. He ranked second to the high priest in authority. The others included among the chief priests were not a particular category but were composed of various other leading, influential priests, including the leaders of the daily and weekly course of priests, the Temple treasurer, and other Temple overseers and officials. Together with the high priests and the captain of the Temple, they formed the priestly aristocracy often referred to loosely as the **chief priests**. The **scribes** were primarily Pharisees, authorities on Jewish law, scriptural and traditional, who were often referred to as lawyers. They had considerable prestige among Jews, and were recognized

What a sobering warning for us this Christmas these Priests & Scribes can be. Who were these priests and scribes? The priests looked back 15 centuries to being of the Tribe of Levi, and descendants of Aaron and Zadok. The scribes were also Levites but were directly looked upon as descendants of Ezra the scribe. Just to see the character of these men look with me at [Ezra 7:10](#). *For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.*

But by Christ's time this personal devotion had waned for the most part. And we will find that far worse than the insecure and self-serving Herod are the indifferent and Christ neglecting Religious Leaders.

- They lived in the presence of God.
- They saw all day long the symbols and pictures of salvation.
- They held the Holy revelation of God's Word.
- They sang each day from the Psalms.
- They recited, memorized, and discussed the Word of the Lord.
- They wore the clothing that reminded them in every way of God.
- They only held God's Word in their hands – not in their souls.
- God was only near in their mouths – and not in their hearts.

Yet all that exposure to God ended up only in their head, not in their hearts. They did not choose to let those truths invade and take over their hearts and wills. The spiritual skin of their lives, overexposed to the Light of God's truth, had developed the deadliest cancer of all – spiritual indifference.

- They cared not for God.
- They loved not the Lord.
- They longed not to know and worship Him.

[Matthew 15:8](#) *'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.*

Think of the dangerous place these religious leaders found themselves in.

- Every day as they dressed in their priestly vestments the sacred anointing oils made with the secret and unique formula mandated by God, causing them to smell like no one else on earth ever could as they approached the Lord.
- Every day their hands and clothes were deeply filled with the indelible scent of incense as the fragrant smoke rose before God as a picture of their prayers of worship.
- Every day they came home with blood stained clothes from the substitutionary sacrificial animals they offered according to God's Word.

They were over familiar with god.

1. **They missed the Word.** GOD WORD PASSED BY THESE MEN. They dealt with God's Word, but God's Word was never allowed to deal with them. [Isaiah 29:13](#) Therefore the Lord said: "Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men.
2. **They missed the Worship.** THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE RELIGIOUS NOT WORSHIPFUL.

- [John 4:24](#) God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

1. **They missed the Way.** THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE ACQUAINTED NOT EXPERIENCED WITH GOD. They were good at the outward motions but not the inward worship.
- [Joel 2:13](#) So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the Lord your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm.

1. **They missed the Walk.** THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE HEARERS NOT DOERS. THEY WERE TALKERS NOT WALKERS.

- [2 Peter 2:19](#) While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage.

1. **They missed the Witness** . THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE SELF-RIGHTEOUS. They felt they were GOOD enough for God. Consequently God's word isn't for me here and now, its something for out there or something. So they knew about the texts but failed to notice the significance of this event.

- [1 John 5:10-13](#) He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son. 11 And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.
- [Matthew 23:27](#) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.
- [Luke 5:17](#) Now it happened on a certain day, as He was teaching, that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present to heal them.

1. **They missed it all!** GOD COMES TO THE LOST SEEKERS. They knew all about God, but didn't care enough to go five miles south of town and experience it.

- They pointed others to seek out the Savior but never went to worship themselves.
- They knew the prophets, but did not believe prophecy. God can only be found when we seek Him!

*Deuteronomy 4:29* But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. (NIV)

*Luke 18:13* And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

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