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- Part: 39 [Lessons in Worshipping Christ from the Wisemen](#)
- Part: 34 [Christmas: How Close Can You Get? Knowing Him for Salvation](#)
- Part: 33 [Christmas: The Only Gift Everyone Really Needs](#)
- Part: 32 [Christmas: Call His Name Jesus—At the Name of Jesus](#)
- Part: 31 [The Six Names of Christmas - Seeing Jesus as: Immanuel God with us](#)
- Part: 30 [The Six Names of Christmas-- Immanuel: God with](#)

Priests--Indifferent People



Part 25 (051204PM)

[Return to previous Page](#) | [Print](#)

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There were a group of people who loved and talked just like Zacharias and Elisabeth. They lived in the same towns, they worked the same hours—and even attended the same synagogue. They knew the Bible backwards and forward. They were close to God in every way—but the heart!

The differences between Zacharias and Elisabeth and the rest of the religious professionals pointed out in the Christmas story are so stark and distinct I like to think of these distinctions between them as continental divides--junctions of monumental and of eternal proportions. This morning I called this one difference a continental divide. Remember that sign?

"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." Two raindrops can fall just inches apart, and yet arrive at two vastly different destinations.

Two people that live side by side, walk through life so similar yet in the end go to opposite destinations. The Christmas story contains such a 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.

The lesson for us this Christmas--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. Tonight in Matthew 2 we will examine the chief priests and scribes. Open there with me.

- [Matthew 2:1-6](#) Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 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: 6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.' " NKJV

Who were these priests and scribes? Most likely the priests were descendents of Aaron and Zadok and the scribes were descendents 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.

Remember who we already met? It was Zacharias who was just one of 24,000 priests who served at the Temple 2 weeks per year. When God left him in mute silence, what was ZACHARIAS doing? He was following the tradition of Ezra and studying God's Word.

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.

Here are all the places Zacharias found promises of Christ's coming. First he quotes from Psalms 18, 23, 32, 34, 83, 106, and 132. Plus he uses extensive quotations from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi!

	Us
Part: 29	Joseph & Mary: The King's servants
Part: 28	Lessons from the Wise Men Giving our Worship to Jesus
Part: 27	Simeon & Anna-- Single Hearted Devotion
Part: 26	The Humble Shepherds
Part: 25	Priests-- Indifferent People
Part: 25	The Characters of Christmas
Part: 24	Christmas Traditions: Their origins and meanings
Part: 24	Ordinary People: Zechariah & Elisabeth
Part: 23	The King's Glory
Part: 22	Joseph & Mary-- Does God have all of YOU?
Part: 21	So close and yet so far Zacharias, Elisabeth, Chief Priests and Scribes
Part: 20	The King's Seekers the Shepherds
Part: 19	The King's Seekers Magi and Shepherds
Part: 18	The Wonder of Christ's Love
Part: 17	The King of Christmas and Herod
Part: 16	What is Christmas
Part: 15	Simeon & Anna Finishing Fruitfully
Part: 14	The Shepherds
Part: 13	The Magi
Part: 12	Joseph & Mary Walking with the Lord
Part: 11	Zacharias and Elisabeth -- The 1st Spirit Filled Family
Part: 9	The Priests & Scribes: So close and yet so far
Part: 8	The Two Kings: Herod and Jesus
Part: 7	Joseph and the Magi
Part: 6	The Origin of Christmas Traditions
Part: 5	Are you looking for Christ this Christmas?
Part: 4	The Fourth Glory of Christmas: His Name
Part: 3	God With Us
Part: 3	Lessons in Worshiping Christ
Part: 2	Anna: Living a Life of Praise
Part: 2	God In A Manger
Part: 1	The Fullness of Time: The Day Jesus Was Born

What a wonderful example of the devotion of Ezra to God's Word in Zacharias' life. But by Christ's time this personal devotion in a religious professional was rare. Genuine devotion for the Lord had waned for the most part. The indifferent and Christ neglecting Religious Leaders are such a warning to us today. Think of all the opportunities these religious professionals had to get close to God.

- **They lived in the presence of God.** Old Testament Worship centered around the Tabernacle and then the Temple. Divinely designed liturgy was carried on for 1,500 nearly unbroken years in the way Moses was told by God to do it on Mt. Sinai.
- **They saw all day long the symbols and pictures of salvation.** The epicenter of that worship was the Holy Place. In the front half of it stood the Altar of Incense, Golden Lampstand and Table of Showbread. The room was divided by a curtain. This curtain was actually a finely woven rug 4 inches thick, 60 feet high and 40 feet wide. Massive and towering and declaring one clear message STAY OUT. No natural light ever penetrated its dark depths. Even the light of the ever burning lamp stand never reached behind the veil.
- **They held the Holy revelation of God's Word.** Most people could not afford a personal copy of God's Word—but these men were surrounded by mountains of scrolls. They were read, they were discussed, they were copied, and they were stored everywhere around them.
- **They sang each day from the Psalms.** Each day the Temple rituals included public readings, Levitical singing and chanting of God's Word. Most of these men would have head these regular portions so often that they would know long passages and even many chapters by memory.
- **The priests wore the clothing that reminded them in every way of God.** The white robes and special sashes as prescribed by Moses were carefully changed into daily at the Temple. Those who were involved in the sacrifices actually would have had blood splashed upon them every day. They would have gone through the entire drama of salvation each day. An innocent and spotless animal brought, the offerer placed his hands on the head of that animal confessing his sins and those of his family. The priest then took the animal, killed it, caught its blood and poured it around the altar and burned the sacrifice. A complete picture of the sinless Lamb of God, who spotlessly offered Himself for the sin of the world. He poured out His blood and died on a cross becoming our sin.

What was wrong with all this? They only held God's Word in their hands – not in their hearts. 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.

Look at Christ's words about them.

- **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 they came home with blood stained clothes from the substitutionary sacrificial animals they offered according to God's Word.
- 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 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.

How clearly Jesus would warn us of this type of person. Remember Matthew 23:3-5. Especially look at v. 5 "*But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments*".

The word translated[1], borders or hem, is actually referring to the fringes, or tassels (called tzitziyot, in Hebrew), required to be on the four corners of all clothing of Jewish men, in accordance with God's instruction. (**Num. 15:37-41a**)

In ancient Israel, men wore four-cornered outer tunics with these tassels, or **tzitziyot**, tied to the four corners. This outer garment became known as a **tallit**, and eventually evolved into the more formal prayer shawl.

But, why tassels? These tassels were to remind each Jewish man of his responsibility to fulfill God's commandments. In fact, these tassels are tied into 613 knots to constantly remind them of the 613 laws of Moses. There are 613 letters in the Ten Commandments, as well as 613 specific laws that are recorded in the OT. Of which there are 365 prohibitions (The "thou shalt not" laws), and 248 affirmations (the "thou shall" laws).

The knots also correspond with the ineffable name of God, the unspoken yod-heh-vav-hey, Yahweh. Because they were hanging on the four corners of your garment, in full view of everyone including yourself, they would be a constant reminder to walk according to God's Laws. The Hebrew word we translate as Law, is *halacha*, and it literally means, "walk." You see, following God's law is a daily walk. And to stay on His path of righteousness, we all need constant reminding. Wearing these tassels would be comparable to us wearing a large Bible on a rope around our necks. How would we behave in public, how would we speak to others, where would we go? God intended them to be a constant reminder of His Word when he told the Israelites to wear these fringes.

The Tallitha (prayer shawl) has[2] 5 knots to symbolize the Torah; it has 4 spaces to represent the letters YHWH. Keep all 613 laws, make tassels long. The Rabbis taught that Messiah's tassels would heal and forgive so that is why Jesus responded as He did when the dying woman grabbed His tassel. She confessed her faith by grabbing

His tassel.

What is the problem? It was only one small point that made these two raindrops fall so close and end up so distant—these religious professionals were indifferent to God's Word. They were not looking for Jesus. 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.

- **Matthew 2:4-5** When he had called together *all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.* 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: (NIV)

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)

They were over familiar with god. What a sobering warning for us this Christmas these Priests and Scribes can be.

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.

Be careful about knowing too much about the Lord—it can lead to dreadful 'over-familiarity'! They were over familiar with god.

They missed the Word. GOD'S 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.

They missed the Worship. THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE RELIGIOUS NOT WORSHIPFUL.

God is actively seeking our worship (John 4.24). And He is very selective about who can worship Him (Philippians 2.19)--those who have new hearts!

- **John 4:24** God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

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.

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.

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.

- **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.

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!'*

But among all those religious professionals, 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—OUR LIVES ARE REDEEMED (v. 68). "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people."

We see such power in that 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.

Jesus Christ came to earth to bring "deliverance to the captives" (Luke 4:18)—that was the message He preached at His hometown synagogue. Christ's salvation is offered 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).

This Christmas remember with Zacharias that 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! Are you bound to some secret or public sin this morning? Jesus wants to redeem and liberate you—just ask Him. Say "Jesus open the prison door of my bondage".

This Christmas remember with Zacharias that 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. Are you chained to fear about the past, the present or the future? Jesus banishes all fears when we open our eyes to His Presence. Just say, "Jesus redeem me from my fears."

This Christmas remember with Zacharias that 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". Jesus clearly stated in His ministry that all sins are forgivable. Just ask Him, seek His cleansing. Say to Jesus this Christmas, "Cleanse me now." And hear Him say, "I am willing—be clean."

This Christmas remember with Zacharias that 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." Just say, "Jesus let me start over again in you—give me Your new beginning."

JESUS CAME TO DEFEAT OUR ENEMIES--OUR ENEMY WAS DEFEATED: (vv. 69–75).

- Luke 1:69-75 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. NKJV

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.

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--OUR DEBT WAS CANCELLED BY HIS DEATH (vv. 76–77).

- Luke 1:76-77 "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, NKJV

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—OUR NIGHT WAS ENDED BY HIS LIGHT* (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.

- [Luke 1:78-79](#) 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.” NKJV

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!

[1] Clarence H. Wagner, Jr., *Lessons from the Land of the Bible*. Jerusalem, Israel: Bridges for Peace, 1998. p. 26-27.

[2] Ray Vander Laan video oral comments.

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