

The Hope of Christmas

This is the last Sunday before Christmas, and by now all the kids are waiting impatiently for that special day to come! Have you ever thought that the dynamic of “waiting” was an integral part of the first Christmas?

For generations, there was always a remnant of Jewish people who waited every single day anticipating the arrival of the Messiah. They literally lived their everyday lives expecting him to appear, looking for him. But nothing happened. Generations of them were born and generations of them died, and there was no fulfillment of that promise.

Thousands of the Jews essentially abandoned the heart of their faith during this time. After all, they had been through captivity in Egypt, in Assyria, in Babylon, and in Medo-Persia. They had been through many civil wars and the destruction of the beloved temple built by Solomon. Now they existed under the iron boot heel of the Roman Empire. And the Messiah had not come. There hadn't even been a glimpse of him.

Have you ever had a time in your life when God was so quiet that you found yourself asking, “Why am I doing this?” Is this more of a superstition that I was raised in than something that is really true? If so, then the Christmas story is definitely for you!

Luke 1:5-7 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. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

These were good people, but their entire faithfulness to God was based on a promise given to Abraham 2000 years before they were born – and that promise hadn't been fulfilled!

Genesis 12:1-3 Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

After their first captivity in Egypt ended, when Israel finally became a kingdom, it looked like this promise had a chance – definitely so during the reigns of King David and King Solomon. But after the kingdom fractured into civil war and went into captivity again, and again, to believe that Israel would bless the whole earth seemed like cruel mockery.

By now, the nation of Israel had changed hands over 25 times! They had absolutely no clout among the nations of the world, and at the time of Zacharias and Elizabeth the country has been dominated by the Empire of Rome for decades. For generations they had believed that the Messiah would come. But absolutely nothing had happened!

To add insult to injury, in 63 BC the Roman General Pompey the Great intervened in a civil war between the Pharisees and Sadducees, broke down the wall of the Temple courtyard, pushed past the Temple guards, went right into the Temple itself, and marched straight toward the Holy of Holies. This was the place where the Jews believed that God dwelt, by His Shekinah presence between the angels on the Ark of the Covenant. This was the place where only the High Priest could go, and even he could only enter one day a year, on the Great Day of Atonement. This was the Ark that Uzzah touched by mistake and died for it. This was the place that the Jews couldn't even look into, for fear of death.

On this day, as Pompey pushed past the Temple's defenses, many of the priests committed suicide. They couldn't bear to watch as the Temple was defiled by a Gentile, and they were even more afraid of the wrath of God that was about to fall if Pompey dared even to look into the Holy of Holies. Those that remained alive gasped as he pulled the veil aside and walked into the holiest place in all of Judaism, where he calmly looked around ... and walked out, unharmed. The implications were clear – Jupiter, the god of the Romans, must be more powerful than Yahweh, the god of the Jews. The power of God, and His promises, were untrue – simply a myth that the Jews had mistakenly believed for centuries.

“Of the Jews there fell twelve thousand, but of the Romans very few ... and no small enormities were committed about the temple itself, which, in former ages, had been inaccessible, and seen by none; for Pompey went into it, and not a few of those that were with him also, and saw all that which it was unlawful for any other men to see but only for the high priests. There were in that temple the golden table, the holy candlestick, and the pouring vessels, and a great quantity of spices; and besides these there were among the treasures two thousand talents of sacred money: yet did Pompey touch nothing of all this, on account of his regard to religion ...” (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book 14, Chapter 4)

The word spread quickly throughout Israel, and thousands more of the Jews would eventually secularize or totally abandon their faith. This event shook Israel to the core. Zacharias' father was without doubt a priest serving in the Temple on the very day of Pompey's desecration, and Zacharias would forever remember the night he came home weeping and tore his robes because the Temple – and everything they believed in – had seemingly been proven untrue by a pagan general who had ignored everything they held sacred, and God did nothing.

And yet, with all this horrifying history in his background, this young man Zacharias grew up and became a Jewish priest like his father before him, served God his whole life, and entered into his twilight years still believing in the promises and the power of God that to many, many others was simply no longer real. Others lived their lives as though their daily existence and meager possessions were all that mattered, but Zacharias still lived for something MORE ... he continued to live every single day as though the Messiah could suddenly appear. Hundreds of the Jewish priests had let serving God become simply a religious ritual, and multiplied thousands of the Jews in his generation had turned away from worshipping in the Temple altogether. They had decided that their secular life was more real to them, and they began to believe in Greek and Roman philosophy more than in Scripture. But not Zacharias!

Others said, "It's over. It's fiction. It's just a myth that our forefathers believed in. The Messiah isn't coming." But not Zacharias!

Priestly duties at the temple alternated between each of the families that had descended from those appointed by King David in 1 Chronicles 23. The offering of incense was one of the most solemn parts of the daily worship and, owing to the large number of eligible priests, no priest could hope to perform the task more than once during his lifetime. But it just so happens that Luke records in his gospel that, during the week when it was the duty of his family to serve at the temple in Jerusalem, the lot for the privilege of performing the incense offering had fallen to Zechariah.

Luke 1:8-13 And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

It is not an accident that Luke starts his gospel with Zacharias' story!

Luke 1:18-20 And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

God has had this day marked on His calendar for centuries!

Luke 1:26-27 And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

In the sixth month of what? Of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy! Zacharias and Elizabeth got to be the opening act for the great drama of redemption that was about to unfold. The Messiah was finally here!

I'm also standing here today, in spite of what many people would say is strong evidence to the contrary, and I'm also standing on a 2000 year old promise that to date has never been fulfilled. But while many people have abandoned this promise, I still look for it every day. While others say, "It's over. It's fiction. It's just a myth that our forefathers believed in. The Messiah isn't coming," I still believe that He is about to return!

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

I know there are scoffers and mockers, but they can't shake my faith!

2 Peter 3:3-4 Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.

2 Peter 3:8-9 But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

The only reason God has waited this long to return is MERCY. But be assured of one thing, **God has had this day marked on His calendar for centuries!** The Rapture will happen exactly when He planned it!

Hebrews 9:28 So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

Luke 21:28 And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.