

BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS!

What a wonderful time of year! We've just had our Thanksgiving week and time with family around the Thanksgiving table, and now we are exactly one month away from Christmas and all the festive activities and gifts that come along with the Holiday Season. And one of those gifts is God's Word which tells us the true story of Christmas itself. It isn't about Santa Claus, elves, reindeer, snowmen or any of those things. The story of Christmas isn't fictional. It is about reality and the real people who made it a historical reality. It's about Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, angels and shepherds and wise men and a Star that shown so very bright. Starting today, and over the next four Sundays, we'll rediscover the wonder of those days surrounding the birth of the Messiah—the doubts and fears, the faith and courage of some of the more notable characters who played such important parts in this real life drama. So, what we want to do today is to starting getting into the Spirit of Christmas.

But, before getting to Jesus' birth in that stable in Bethlehem, we'll consider the birth of another little baby because the story of the Nativity is intertwined with the birth of one of Jesus relatives—a baby whose father was Zechariah and whose mother was Elizabeth. Now the very fact that this couple was supposed to have a baby came as quite a shock, for the Scriptures tell us that they were both very old—Elizabeth was well beyond child-bearing age. And yet this baby would come, and he would grow up to be someone who Jesus would identify with the Elijah¹—the very same prophet that we've been talking about the past few Sundays. In fact, even the angel, Gabriel, who announced this little baby's coming birth made it clear that he would be the "New Elijah." This baby, of course, was John the Baptist. And, appropriately enough, his story begins in the most holy of places—in the sanctuary of the Temple in Jerusalem. For there, we find his father, Zechariah, serving as one of the priests chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of God to light the holy incense that filled the room with truly holy smoke.

It was a great honor to perform this service as a priest. In fact, many priests would go through their entire career and never be chosen to do so. Only this time the greatness of the honor would be overshadowed by the even greater surprise that Zechariah would experience there in that holy place. Luke's Gospel tells us what happened: ¹¹ While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. ¹² Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. ¹³ But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. ¹⁴ You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He

must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. ¹⁶ And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.”

Now, Zechariah was not prepared for this shocking news, even if it came from an angel of God. But, the part that the angel mentioned about the baby being like Elijah should have prompted the memory of a learned priest like Zechariah. He should have recognized the angel’s words because they were very close to the ones that the Prophet Malachi had stated 400 years before², predicting the entry of this little son that Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, would someday give birth to. But, rather than remembering the promise of God’s Word, Zechariah yielded to his own doubts—which is a terrible thing for a priest to do. And so, Luke continues: ¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.” ¹⁹ Then the angel said, “I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was He who sent me to bring you this good news! ²⁰ But now, since you didn’t believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time.” [You can hardly blame Gabriel for taking this action. It appears that Gabriel figured if all Zechariah could express was doubt in the face of such joyous news, then maybe everybody would be a little better off if he were silenced for a while. The narrative continues by telling us:] ²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. ²² When he finally did come out, he couldn’t speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary. Luke 1:11-22 (NLT2)

Now just as Gabriel said, Elizabeth, despite her old age, became pregnant. Now, if Zechariah had been the one pregnant, I wonder what he would have said. If he hadn’t gotten over his woes of doubt, he would have likely worried that the child might end up being born in some unhealthy state because of the advanced age of the womb in which the baby was developing. He might have had all kinds of doubts and worries. But, that is not the way Elizabeth reacted. Her reaction to all of this was very different from her priestly husband. Luke simply records Elizabeth as saying: “How kind the Lord is! He has taken away my disgrace of having no children.” Luke 1:25 (NLT2) And with that, she apparently went into seclusion for about five months—perhaps on a spiritual retreat to honor God for answering her prayer after all those long years that she had waited for a child.³

And during this time, Elizabeth was visited by her relative, Mary—who would soon give birth to the Baby Jesus. And when Mary greeted Elizabeth, the strangest thing happened. The yet unborn child

within Elizabeth leapt within her at the sound of Mary’s voice—apparently even then recognizing, in Mary, Jesus’s presence and His soon-to-be incarnate form. How remarkable!—little John the Baptist was even now—before he was born—announcing the coming of Jesus Christ!⁴ And with that, it tells us that something very special happened to Elizabeth. It tells us that she was filled with the Holy Spirit. And when she was filled with the Spirit, Elizabeth turned to Mary and said the oddest thing. She said, ⁴² “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. ⁴³ Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? ⁴⁴ When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵ You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what He said.” Luke 1:42-45 (NLT2)

Now, why do I say that that was an odd thing for Elizabeth to say? Well, if you notice Mary had not yet said anything to Elizabeth except perhaps something as simple as, “Hello—how are things going cuz?” Mary had not mentioned anything about her own pregnancy or what the angel had told her about the coming birth of Jesus, the Messiah. And yet, Elizabeth addresses Mary as “**the mother of my Lord**” and even tells her the “**your child is blessed**.” And not only that, but Elizabeth goes on to tell Mary why she is considered to be blessed. Curiously, she informs Mary that she is blessed for something that her own husband, Zechariah, was being punished for lacking. Elizabeth tells Mary that she is blessed because she had “**believed that the Lord would do what He said**.” In other words, Mary is blessed because she did not doubt. Zechariah’s doubt—well, it had left him speechless—quite literally.

So, if Mary had not yet told her anything, how did Elizabeth know all of this about Mary? Well, the answer is very clear. Having cast all doubt aside, Elizabeth’s heart had been filled in a way that she now saw clearly even those things that before she would have never seen. But before her heart was filled in this way, she had trusted in God’s promises and expelled all her doubts. All of which raises a crucial question: Who would possibly want to live their life under a shroud of doubt?

Doubt is a thief. It robs you. Doubt robs you of the *Spirit of Christmas*. And if you lose the *Spirit of Christmas*, you lose your perspective on life. And even worse—you lose your perspective on *eternal life*. And so, someone might say: “But, I want the proper perspective of life. And not only that, I love the *Spirit of Christmas*. So, what is this **Spirit** that I may have it too?” We, as Christians, need to be able to answer them. But, first of all, we need to realize that they are asking the wrong question, because the question isn’t “**what**” is the *Spirit of Christmas* (the *Spirit of Christmas* is not a “**what**”). Rather, the *Spirit of Christmas* is a very real “**who**”. Not a fictional “who” as in the *whos in Whoville* in the *Grinch that Stole Christmas*—but a “**who**” in the sense of a very real person. The *Spirit of Christmas* is a real person because the *Spirit of Christmas* **is** the person of the **Holy Spirit Himself**.

That's why the Christmas Story in Luke's Gospel begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, and not with Joseph and Mary. Zechariah and Elizabeth frame the issue of ***doubt vs. faith*** and that is where the Christmas Story properly begins—framed in the very same choices that Jesus would offer to the world. “Will you have faith or will you be filled with doubt?,” Jesus would ask again and again.⁵ It is a question He still presents to everyone, one way or the other, today. And the truth is, everyone answers Him—one way or the other. Zechariah, the learned priest, showed doubt, but Elizabeth displayed great faith in the promise of God that she would, in fact, bear a son—the one who would grow up to be the greatest prophet of all, John the Baptist.⁶ With a heart filled with doubt, Zechariah was not only rendered speechless, but he was, for the time being, spiritually blind as well. But, when he cleared out the doubt, he made room for the ***Holy Spirit***—and then, Zechariah too began to have all the insight that only the Holy Spirit can give. Then, Zechariah's mouth was opened and he could once again speak. And, now his tune changed considerably. Luke tells us: ⁶⁷ John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he spoke God's message: ⁶⁸ “Let us praise the Lord, the God of Israel! He has come to the help of his people and has set them free. ⁶⁹ He has provided for us a mighty Savior, a descendant of his servant David. ⁷⁰ He promised through his holy prophets long ago ⁷¹ that he would save us from our enemies, from the power of all those who hate us . . . ⁷⁶ You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare his road for him, ⁷⁷ to tell his people that they will be saved by having their sins forgiven. ⁷⁸ Our God is merciful and tender. He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us ⁷⁹ and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death, to guide our steps into the path of peace.” Luke 1:67-71, 76-79 (TEV)

Those words of Zechariah reflect the *Spirit of Christmas*. They truly show what a difference being filled with the Holy Spirit can make. I am afraid that too often we fail to see what a dominant figure the Holy Spirit is in these opening passages of the Christmas Story. Yet, note how very involved the Holy Spirit is in all of this. In Luke 1:41, it tells us that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Verse 15 explains that John the Baptist, even in the womb, was filled with the Holy Spirit. Later, the Holy Spirit would come upon Mary.⁷ And as we just read, once Zechariah demonstrated his faith in God by honoring God's directive that the baby be named “John”—then, even he was filled with the Holy Spirit and he began to prophesy.

And so when we consider the people mentioned here early-on in this Christmas Story, we can see that whenever they had faith, whenever they allowed the Holy Spirit to dwell in their hearts, they began to see things so very differently, so very clearly. That's why it is true that when doubt robs you of the Holy Spirit—of the *Christmas Spirit*—it takes away that clear perspective, particularly as it relates to

your perspective on eternal life. For those who live their lives without the insight of the Holy Spirit, when they comment on the after-life, you can sense something in their words. If you listen closely, you can hear the dark echoes of doubt, laced with fear, in what they say. Sometimes they attempt to cover it up with expressions that deny their fear by trying to sound so learned. Other times, they disguise their fear by trying to be funny and just laugh it all off. Take for example, the comment by Henry Miller, the secular humanist, whose view on death and the afterlife was summed up by his following comment: “Of course you don't die. Nobody dies. Death doesn't exist. You only reach a new level of vision, a new realm of consciousness, a new unknown world.” Or, take the comedian and atheist, Woody Allen, who said: “The chief problem about death, incidentally, is the fear that there may be no afterlife -- a depressing thought, particularly for those who have bothered to shave. Also, there is the fear that there is an afterlife but no one will know where it's being held.”⁸

Miller died years ago, and considering Woody Allen's age—he might want to rethink his feigned humor before it's too late. But, what skewed and misshapen views of eternity we find in these two statements. To answer Miller, no, it is not unknown what follows death. In fact, the Bible makes it very well known—there are two destinies, and two only: Heaven and Hell. And for Woody Allen, he need not worry where the *“afterlife is being held”* as if he might miss out on it—the flames that await those who continue to hold his views will make it quite evident where Hell is.

Henry Miller and Woody Allen are but two examples of the robbers who try to snatch away your perspective on eternity by filling you with doubt. But, for those who have the *Spirit of Christmas*—the Holy Spirit in their heart—their attempted robbery simply will not work. Because like Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary and John the Baptist, those who put away doubt and accept the Spirit into their lives, they become keenly aware of what eternal life is all about. They know that eternal life isn't something for which you must wait to die before you can experience it. For a Christian, death is not when your eternal life begins. Why?—because the Christian life isn't about dying, it's about living. Eternal life starts in the here and now. It starts the minute you believe in Jesus and surrender your life to Him. It starts when you allow the Holy Spirit to be in control of your life. I love the way the pastor and Christian writer, Mark Driscoll, puts it in his new book, *Spirit-filled Jesus*: “Christianity [isn't] something for old people to think about at the finish line and nothing for young people to fret about at the starting line. [This misunderstanding on the part of young and old alike] “may explain why churches are filled with grandparents, but not their grandchildren.”⁹ Everyone—young and old alike—need to be Spirit-filled right now. Putting that off for some other day is a disastrous plan—because for those who delay, too often *someday never comes*. And, they lose out on God's wonderful offer of eternal life.

Now, there might be a lot of great Christmas bargains coming up tomorrow on Cyber-Monday. But, none of them could ever come close to what God is offering to you. And what better time of year than now to take God up on that offer? Like I said at the outset, what a wonderful time of year this is!—Thanksgiving in November, Christmas in December. What a great time to be filled with the *Spirit of Christmas*—the **Holy Spirit**—all it takes is true faith to let Him into your life. Zechariah, the great priest, learned something about his faith—he learned just how little he had. His encounter with Gabriel gave him an opportunity to reassess his ability to trust in God’s promises. In times of doubt and worry, we need to take a cue from Zechariah.

That’s really what the *Spirit of Christmas* is all about. It’s the *Spirit* of those who chose eternal life—because those in Christ love November and December . . . and January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, and around to November and December again—and on through the years as they live their eternal life now, in the joy and peace of Jesus Christ, and continuing with life in Him throughout all eternity.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
November 25, 2018
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
©2018 All Rights Reserve

¹ Matthew 11:14 (NLT2) [Jesus said:] “And if you are willing to accept what I say, he is Elijah, the one the prophets said would come.”

² Malachi 4:5-6 (NLT2) ⁵ “Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives. ⁶ His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

³ NLT Illustrated Study Bible, Luke 1:24, Tyndale: Carole Stream, Illinois, (2015), p. 1816.

⁴ Ibid, Luke 1:41, p. 1816.

⁵ Matthew 21:21 (AMP) ²¹ And Jesus answered them, Truly I say to you, if you have faith (a firm relying trust) and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, Be taken up and cast into the sea, it will be done.

⁶ Matthew 11:11 (NLT2) “I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist. Yet even the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he is!”

⁷ Luke 1:35 (NLT2) The angel replied [to Mary], “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.”

⁸ Stephanie A. Sarkis Ph.D. , “What's After This?: 30 Quotes on the Afterlife,” Psychologytoday.com, June 4, 2012.

⁹ Mark Driscoll, Spirit-Filled Jesus: Live by His Power, Charisma House: Lake Mary, Florida (2018), p.16.