Christmas Special 10-12-26

This is Sunday, the 26th of December, 2010, and we're going to do a special study this morning in light of the season and the occasion that it commemorates and celebrates, the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. We'll begin, as we always do, by taking a moment to go to the Lord in prayer, focus our concentration, and to ask God's blessing on us so that our time of fellowship in God's Word will result in our having resources in our soul and things that we can incorporate in our thoughts to choose and to act and to think in a way that's pleasing in God's sight. Shall we pray? Father, what a blessing it is to recognize the wonderful, supernal gifts that you have given us that raise us above the mundane and the earthly and the temporal and the material and enable us to get a glimpse of eternal things, to prepare ourselves for life in the eternal future, to invest our lives with meaning and purpose by recognizing our place and our calling in your plan.

We know that all of these things come to us not because we are worthy or because we are deserving, but because the Lord Jesus Christ offered himself on our behalf, came and walked among us in our flesh, died as we die, and yet in his death he bore our sins and secured our eternal redemption. And for that we are so grateful, and we realize that this great light that has shined to us is a light that continues to shine on our path day by day and illuminates not only the path before us, but also into the eternal future. We ask your blessing on us as we spend time together in fellowship.

May each gift that you have distributed among us find its ministry and its function, and may each of us give and receive blessing that will honor your name and bring glory to the Lord Jesus Christ. We ask it in his name. Amen.

What I'd like to do is something that we did here yesterday in thinking about Christmas Day. Of course, it's common knowledge that we don't know exactly when the Lord Jesus was born and that the Christmas celebration that comes around annually is basically a conversion of some winter solstice festivals and whatnot. People claim that it's illegitimate on that basis, which is nonsense.

We can pick any time we want and celebrate the birth of Christ. This is a convenient time. And one of the things about symbols that I would suggest is people say, oh, you shouldn't have a Christmas tree because that was an old pagan fertility symbol, or you shouldn't have a virgin and child because this goes back to myths and legends that preceded the Lord Jesus, this whole idea of a God-human union producing a savior like Hercules or whatever.

This is just retread. The Christmas story is a retread of earlier myths and legends. I will say this about that.

A symbol and a commemoration or a celebration means what we say it means. It means what it means to me. It doesn't mean to me what it meant to somebody dancing around a maple or hanging fruit on a tree 1,200 years ago.

I don't know or care what those people thought about their particular celebration. Our celebrations mean what they mean because we say what they mean. We decide what they mean.

If we want to have a Christmas tree, we can invest it with our understanding, with our memories, with our significances. And what somebody else might have used a tree for in days gone by, what somebody else might have thought about a mother and child in days gone by,

that's fine for them, but we decide what is meaningful to us. We can decide when and where to celebrate as long as we're within the biblical guidelines that say that we don't invest special holiness in any given day.

We as believers esteem every day alike because each day is an opportunity to apply the word of God and reflect the glory of God. There are not some days that are holy days, holiday, holy day. Well, December 25th is not any holier a day, nor is Easter Sunday or Good Friday or any other feast or anniversary.

But it doesn't mean that we cannot choose certain times to remember and to recognize and to meditate on the truth that is our unique heritage as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. So don't let anybody hang you up about, oh, don't paint Easter eggs, or don't make a jack-o'-lantern. Unless you seriously believe that you're scaring away demons with your jack-o'-lantern, unless you really believe that you and yours are going to have more fecundity and more children and more prosperity because you paint eggs, as long as you're not worshiping the eggs, you don't believe in the genuine Easter bunny, Santa Claus, and so on.

These tokens and these reminders and these symbols mean what they mean to us. We define them. We understand them in a certain way.

And I don't let anybody else tell me what my stuff means to me. We all have mementos that we've gathered through the course of our life, gifts that people have given us, reminders of places or events or vacations or whatever. And somebody else might say, oh, you've got a rock.

Rocks are demon inhabitations. That's what it means to them. Well, they can go off and be scared of rocks if they want to.

I gather a rock from a beach on an occasion. I've got a little shapeless piece of flint. My sister and I were walking up in the woods.

The last time we were both up there in the woods, and we were looking for arrowheads, and we couldn't find any arrowheads, but we did find chips of flint. So I gave her one I found, and she gave me one she found. And I've got this little shapeless piece of flint.

It means nothing to anybody except me. But my sister gave it to me, and I remember the day, and I remember having a wonderful visit with her. So the little insignificant million-of-them piece of flint means something to me because I say it means something to me.

That's how all of these things are. So that's my little diatribe on celebrating Christmas. Celebrating Christmas is great.

I think I agree with Dr. Criswell, what he said in his sermon last Sunday, that the whole world pays attention at this time of year, and the reason they do is because Christians decided that this would be a great time to celebrate the birth of Christ. And the world can't help itself. Even atheists can't help knowing that Christ Mass is a celebration of the birth of Christ.

And they can say what they will, but they still have to stop. They still have to contend with it. And the only other thing I'll say about atheists is they delight in saying that they don't have a belief system.

It's a non-belief. It's a non-acceptance of what theists believe. We are theists.

We believe in theos. We believe in God. But if you really want to yank their beard a little bit, the next time you get around an atheist, just tell them, you couldn't even define yourself if it wasn't for me.

If it wasn't for me believing in God, you couldn't say that you're an atheist. You're dependent. You're a hanger-on.

You're contingent on those of us that believe in God. But if it wasn't for us, you'd have nothing to say about yourself. So anyway, that's my discurses on that.

But what I want to do now is go to the first chapters of Luke. And I'm going to read these to you, and you can follow along in your New King James. But I'm not reading from the New King James.

I'm reading from the translation of the New Testament that was done by Kenneth Wiest. He has a very interesting set of – it's actually a collection of articles that he published over the course of his lifetime that have been gathered together into volumes called Word Studies in the Greek New Testament. And they're organized more or less by book.

And there's four or five volumes of it, but it's really good. But what he tries to do, what Wiest tries to do, is to do sort of an amplified Bible to bring out the meaning of the Greek, whether it is the tense or the definition of the word or the particular construction of a phrase or a sentence. He tries to use extra words in English to bring out the sense that you get if you know Greek and you read it in Greek.

English just gives you kind of a newsprint picture of what's going on. If you read your King James English or your New King James or any other English translation, you're getting – it's just like a photograph on the front page of a paper. It's coarse-grained.

You can tell what it is. You can identify everything, and you can get a good idea of what's going on. But the resolution of it, the colors of it, the fine detail of it gets lost.

And so this is an attempt to try to recover and communicate some of that detail. And in so doing, we're going to be watching for, and as I read this, be watching for the elements that Luke puts into this account because if you were going to sit down and write the Christmas story, if you were going to write about the birth of Christ, where would you start? What would be the logical place? What would be the logical place? The baby being born, right? This is the birth of Christ. That isn't where Luke starts.

Luke starts somewhere else. Luke starts with people who react. The information comes, and there are the reactions of people.

Well, that's the position we're in. We know about the birth of Christ historically. We hear about it from the Scripture, but what is the effect? What is the reaction for people? Well, we can be just as interested and have just as much of a reaction or a response as the people who heard about it.

And Luke consciously, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, gives us this event largely in terms of its effect on people in the periphery. We don't get along. Now think about this.

You're sitting down. God says, fill in your name here. I want you to write the story of the birth of Jesus Christ.

And you're sitting there with a big blank piece of papyrus or parchment or something, and you're going to write it down. If you were just humanly going to tell this story, you'd get Mary and Joseph being engaged up there. All of a sudden, here's the visit of the angel, and Mary is both amazed and concerned to discover that she is going to be with child without benefit of any relations with a man, and she's going to have a son, and Joseph is going to find out about this, and they've got to get down to Bethlehem so that the prophecies will be fulfilled and so on.

You would get them down. You would probably start with that couple and their situation, follow them down to Bethlehem, and then wouldn't it be interesting to have the details? What was the inn that had no room? What kind of a stable was it? How long did it take? Did anybody help? Did the baby cry or not cry? Is the little way in the manger song correct? Did Jesus no crying make, or did he scream like a banshee when he came out and was born? We don't get any of those details. The most interesting part where the Savior actually comes into the world, we've got more detail in the birth narratives of Jacob's sons.

If you go back and look at how each of the sons of Jacob was named by Leah and Rachel and the circumstances of mandrakes and contention and one thing and another, there's lots of detail. We don't have that sort of detail with the birth of Christ. So it's very interesting to listen and see the details that are given to us because this isn't a humanly manufactured story.

This is the witness of God himself, the words that he chose, the episodes that he chose to give us. And if we pay close attention, there are some really interesting things that come out of this telling of the Christmas story. So listen to this, and it's going to be a little bit wordy.

I'll try to read it in such a way that you can follow the track of the sentences. But Luke begins this way. Since it is well known and a fact of importance that many have undertaken to draw up in a historical sequence a narrative of events.

What does that mean? There's been a lot of tellings of the story of Jesus Christ. It's well known and important that many have undertaken to draw up in a historical sequence a narrative of events concerning which there's been a wide diffusion of knowledge among us. He says, I'm going to tell you some stuff you already know.

Even as they delivered them to us for safekeeping, those who from the beginning were personal witnesses of and ministered the word. So even though a lot of other people have told this story, it seemed to me good also having traced the course of all things from the beginning in the minutest detail to write to you in a consecutive order, Your Excellency Theophilus, in order that you may come to have a full and accurate experiential knowledge concerning the undoubted truth of the matters in which you have been instructed. You've heard these things.

You've been told them by others. I'm drawing up this account so that you can have a complete and detailed understanding of what you've already been taught. It's kind of where we are, right? There arose in the days of Herod, king of Judea, a certain priest named Zechariah, the class of priests whose time of service was designated by the name Abiah.

His wife was of the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth. They were righteous, both of them, in the sight of God, ordering their lives within the sphere of all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord and blameless.

They did not have a child because Elizabeth was sterile and both were advanced in age. It came to pass that while he was discharging his duties as priest in the fixed succession of his appointed time of service before God, according to the custom of the office of the priest, as a result of casting lots, it fell to his lot to burn incense, having gone into the innermost sanctuary of the Lord. That's inner, not innermost, because it's the holy place.

And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of the burning of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing at the right side of the altar of incense. By the way, what's on the right side of the altar of incense? Remember the layout of the holy place? We've studied the tabernacle and temple.

When you walk in, facing west, in front of you is the altar of incense. What's on the left? Golden candlestick. What's on the right? Table of showbread.

What's on the table? The showbread, right? What does the showbread represent? Do you remember the symbolism of those elements? What's the table made of? It's acacia wood overlaid with gold, right? Wood, which is organic, overlaid with gold, which is imperishable. And on the table you have the loaves, 12 loaves of bread representing the 12 tribes of Israel. And on that bread has been poured oil.

So the bread represents the humanity of those children of Israel. It's perishable. It has to be replaced frequently, because the generations of Israel come and go.

The 12 tribes always exist, but the representatives in those tribes come and go. They're perishable. It's the most perishable thing in the holy place, is the bread.

But the bread is pleasing and acceptable to God when it has that oil representing the Holy Spirit on it. Do you need to stand? So, if the angel appears on the right side of the altar of incense, what is he standing close to? The table representing humanity, Holy Spirit filled flesh. And that's where Gabriel appears.

Every detail is important. It tells us he stood on the right side. And this, of course, is the right side as Zachariah faces it.

Zachariah's right. And so he's standing next to the showbread and talking about that humanity, that perishability, and yet the Holy Spirit making it acceptable. So, he appears.

Now, this is an elderly couple. They're faithful. They're obedient.

And they prayed for a son and didn't receive it. All through Elizabeth's childbearing years, she could not conceive. And what you have to wonder here is, when Gabriel says, this is in answer to your petition, was he still praying even in the face of his old age? Even in the face of being well past childbearing age? Gabriel says, I am here in response to your request.

And if that's the case, that's a lot of faith. You've got a couple maybe in their 60s, still praying for a son. It could be retrospective.

It could have been that they prayed in their younger years. And God said, well, I'm going to fulfill it, but not right now. And maybe they had sort of given up.

Maybe they weren't praying anymore, but God still remembered the request. Because he says, this is an answer to your request. You prayed.

God heard. God remembered. And now, at this time, God is answering.

In God's good time, he's going to answer. Because your petition was heard, your wife Elizabeth shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you shall have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice because of his birth.

For he shall be great in the Lord's sight. Wine and incocticating beverage he will positively not drink. He shall be controlled by the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

Now, that's Wiest's translation, but that's ek, and it's out from. He will be controlled by the Holy Spirit out from his mother's womb. And many of the sons of Israel he shall turn back to the Lord their God.

He himself will go forward in his sight in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn back paternal hearts to offspring and the uncompliant in the sphere of prudence of those who are righteous to make ready for the Lord a people which has been placed in the right spiritual state. He himself will go forward in God's sight in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn back paternal hearts to offspring, hearts of the fathers to the children, and the uncompliant in the sphere of the prudence of those who are righteous to make ready for the Lord a people which has been placed in the right spiritual state. That's going to be John's mission.

Zechariah said to the angel in accordance with what fact will I know this? For as for myself, I am an aged man and my wife is advanced in her years. And the angel answering said to him, as for myself, I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God. And I was sent on a mission to speak to you and bring you good news of these things.

And behold, you shall be continually silent and not able to speak until the day when these things take place because you did not believe my words, words of such a nature that they will be fulfilled in their appointed and strategic time. Let me ask you, does this seem harsh? Here's Zechariah, an old guy, and the angel comes and speaks to him and he has a little trouble believing it. And Gabriel says, because you did not believe, you're going to be struck dumb.

You're not going to be able to speak. Does it seem kind of harsh? I don't think so. Brian doesn't think so.

I don't think so either. And here's why. When there is a vision or apparition like this, you have two choices.

It's either from God or it's from the enemy. It's Satan masquerading as an angel of light, right? So as you debate whether or not one or the other is the case, think about where God had this meeting take place. It's one thing if it's later on, Gabriel, as we'll see in a minute, is going to appear to Mary in her home.

And you could say, well, maybe Satan got into my home. Maybe Satan got into my dreams. Maybe I had a vision in the night on my bed and Satan is talking to my mind.

Can this be Satan talking to Zachariah? Is there any possibility that Satan could be sending this message? There's two reasons why it can't be Satan. A, look at the location. You're in God's holy place.

You've got the altar of incense. You've got the candlestick. You've got the table with the showbread.

You're in the inner sanctum. Do you think God is going to let Satan come in there and deliver a false message? So application of what you know would help in this case. I can eliminate this being a false messenger or a minister of Satan talking to me because look at the place.

If God can't keep demons out of his own holy place, we're all in trouble. Secondly, look at the content of the message. Of course, we understand because we would have probably done the same thing, but Zachariah should have known as well that the nature of the message, even though it is an answer to his petition that he will have a son, it's not a simple gratification of Zachariah and Elizabeth's wish and prayer.

God doesn't say, you know, all this time you wanted a son. Well, here you go. I'll be off now.

I've got to go back to heaven and see if there's any other messages I need to deliver, but I just wanted to let you know that you're going to have a son. If that would have been a self-centered, then you could start questioning your own mind. Have I wished for this and wanted it so long that I'm deceiving myself? Maybe it's not Satan.

Maybe I ate some bad kosher dills or something last night. Now I've got some kind of a thing going on. I'm deceiving myself.

It's my flesh talking to me. The problem with that is, and the reason that can't be true, is this son is coming for a purpose. It fulfills a purpose in the plan of God.

The application I would suggest to you from these observations is we too pray. We too can be faithful and obedient. We too may have to wait a long time to see the fulfillment of our petitions, and we may not even see them in this life.

But when something comes to us and it seems to be of God but we're not sure, we have a sudden prosperity. We say, well, is this of God or have I compromised and I've gone the way of the world and I'm being a craven materialist? Maybe we've wanted a friendship and now here comes the friendship, but I'm suspicious. Lots of other friends I've had have stabbed me in the back or disappointed me or caused me to be insecure.

Relationships have gone wrong. People have this in all different realms of life and categories of relationship. It could be people coming into our lives.

It could be situations coming in. It could be opportunities coming in. It could be any kind of a thing.

But in some way, shape, or form, the angel Gabriel comes to us and says, God is answering your prayer and giving you this gift. Well, how do you know it's of God? Well, first of all, does it partake of the things you know belong to God? Zacharias should know that this message and this information is of God because it is coming to him in the place of prayer. He is in God's temple.

He's not out at the bar at the outskirts of Jerusalem hoisting a cold one when this comes to him. He's not on the road to Jericho. He's not dickering with a caravan over the price of sheep, and at night in his tent he suddenly gets this vision.

He is executing his duties. He is a faithful believer. He's a faithful priest, and he is faithfully fulfilling his duties.

He is in the act of worship when this revelation comes to him. And if you have a worship life that is regular and consistent, and something comes as a part of or connected with that worship, that's a good positive clue. Secondly, blessings that come to us are never just for us.

It's never just, I just want you to have an experience. I want you to be ecstatic. You think about all the people in the Bible that made a petition and made a request, and when God granted it, this kind of reminds you of Hannah, doesn't it? Hannah prayed, and she wanted a son.

But what was the purpose of her request? She said, if you give me a son, I will dedicate him to you, O Lord. And that's exactly what she did. God granted the request, and you have Samuel, the great first prophet and priest of the Old Testament.

So it will always have a benefit beyond ourselves. Now, we may not be able to see it or anticipate it, but what does Gabriel say here? This son is going to be a cause for rejoicing to many. Many are going to rejoice because he is going to be the forerunner of the Messiah, and people are going to be glad that your son was born.

They're going to be thrilled to hear his message. There is blessing coming to others in this blessing that God is giving to you. And that's another way to know that something is of God, when it's not just me, myself, and I getting the benefit.

This is going to be a blessing. Through you, others are blessed. So it's a helpful thing.

And the third observation I would offer is, don't be discouraged if it takes a long time. Joseph was thrilled to be the deliverer of his people, but it took years and years and years of a very circuitous and seemingly dark path before he rose to be second in the land, and he was in a position to not only bless himself by caring for his family, but to bless everyone else by foreshadowing the Lord Jesus Christ, seemingly slain by his brethren, and yet living to deliver his people. Joseph went through those things, not just for himself and not just for his family, but for every generation of believers in every century since that time.

And God had something much bigger and much grander in view. So, the people were looking for Zechariah and were marveling at his delay in the inner sanctuary. Having come out, he was not able to speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the inner sanctuary.

He himself kept on making signs to them and was remaining speechless. It came to pass that when the days of his sacred service were fulfilled, notice, even though he was struck dumb, he still finished out his service. He didn't take a sick day.

He didn't put the back of his hand to his head and say, Oh, I just can't burn incense anymore. Just because he couldn't talk, he still finished out his service. So, when those days were completed, he went off to his home, and after these days Elizabeth, his wife, conceived, and she kept herself

in seclusion for five months, saying, In this manner to me the Lord has done, in the days when he looked upon me, to take away my reproach among men.

Elizabeth apparently had no trouble believing that she was pregnant and that God had done it. You get the idea that maybe in terms of spiritual strength, Elizabeth may have actually been a little ahead of Zechariah, because there's no doubt she doesn't have any silence imposed on her, much as Zechariah might have wanted it. Now, in the sixth month, there was sent on a mission from God, the angel Gabriel, to a city of Galilee.

When it says in the sixth month, this is the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. So, the chronology begins from the point at which she conceived. John's conception starts the clock for this section of Luke.

In the sixth month, there was sent on a mission from God, the angel Gabriel, to a city of Galilee named Nazareth. Where did Gabriel appear the first time? Jerusalem, in the temple. Where does he appear the second time? Up north, in Galilee, in the hills.

To a virgin promised in marriage to a man named Joseph of the house of David, and the name of the virgin was Mary. Having come to her, he said, Be rejoicing, because you have been encompassed with favor. The Lord is with you.

But she was greatly agitated by reason of the word, and began reasoning what sort of an exotic greeting this might be. I think you remember that the Lord is with you. I think when we went through Luke, we decided that that is a later addition in the Greek.

I don't know if you have a text note in your New King James or not about that. Anyway, she was greatly agitated by reason of the word, began reasoning what sort of an exotic greeting this was. The angel said to her, Stop fearing, Mary, for you found favor in the presence of God.

And behold, you shall conceive in your womb, and you shall give birth to a son, and you shall call his name Yeshua, Jesus. This one shall be great, and son of the Most High shall he be called. And God the Lord shall give to him the throne of David his father, and he shall reign as king over the house of Jacob forever.

And of his kingdom there shall not be an end. Now, Gabriel has twice spoken about this upcoming event. What did he say the first time to Zachariah? When your son is born, you'll call his name John.

You'll have joy and gladness. Many shall rejoice because of his birth, for he shall be great in the Lord's sight. Just as Gabriel tells Mary, this one shall be great.

He's going to be a Nazarite, wine and intoxicating beverage. He will positively not drink. He shall be filled instead with the Holy Spirit.

You wonder if this hadn't crossed Paul's mind at some point when he wrote, Be not drunk with wine wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit. Because Gabriel says, Your son is not going to be filled with intoxicating drink. He's going to be filled with the Spirit.

Out from his mother's womb. Now, what is the result of this? What is the blessing that goes beyond? The first time, many of the sons of Israel he shall turn back to the Lord their God. These are believers.

The Lord is their God, and he will turn them back to him. They turned away. He will turn them back.

He will turn the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. He himself will go forward in God's sight, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn back hearts of fathers to offspring. Turn back.

Father's heart was toward the offspring. Then it went away. He's going to turn it back.

And the uncompliant in the sphere of the prudence of those who are righteous. Prudence and righteousness, people that have turned away from it, he's going to turn them back to it. To make ready for the Lord a people placed in the right spiritual state.

To prepare a people for the Lord. Prepare the people for their Messiah. That's John's mission.

To prepare the people to turn their hearts. The sons of Israel. What is the bursting radius of this prophetic word? What is the extent? To whom does it apply? Israel.

Spirit and power of Elijah. Who did Elijah minister to? Israel. The nation of Israel.

The people of God will be turned back and made ready for the Lord. So now, the second time Gabriel speaks, what does he say? This one shall be great. Son of the Most High shall he be called.

God the Lord shall give him what? The throne of his father, David. Doesn't say the throne of the world. Doesn't say planetary conquest.

It's the throne of his father, David. State of Israel. He shall reign as king over the house of Jacob forever.

And of his kingdom, that kingdom of Israel, rule over the sons of Jacob, there shall not be an end. Mary said to the angel, How shall this be possible since I do not have experiential knowledge of a man? The angel answering said to her, The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you. Wherefore also the holy thing which is being begotten shall be called Son of God.

Behold, Elizabeth, your kinswoman, also herself conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren or sterile. For in the presence of God, no word shall be impossible. Mary said, Behold, the Lord's bond slave.

May it happen to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. So what's fascinating about this is, you remember where Zachariah and Elizabeth live? Way down south.

Remember where Mary lives up north in Galilee? Gabriel says, Just in case you find it of interest, Elizabeth, your kinswoman, has conceived a son in her old age. This is the sixth month with her, who was barren. For in the presence of God, no word is impossible.

Does Gabriel make any application of this? Does he offer any suggestions? Does he tell Mary to do anything? All he does is give her this information. What does she do with this information? Having arisen, Mary in these days went on her way into the hill country with haste into a city of Judah. Unknown city.

We don't know where in Judah Elizabeth and Zachariah lived. She entered the home of Zachariah and greeted Elizabeth. What's interesting to me, more so than the babe leaping in the womb and everything, is that Mary made this trip.

Gabriel mentions that this old cousin of hers is pregnant and is six months along. And why would Gabriel tell her that she's six months along? Well, for planning purposes, how long can she go and stay? And when is it that women most need help with a pregnancy, especially if they're a creaky old woman? Would be in the final three months, right? So Mary, with this information given to her by God, draws conclusions and makes plans and becomes a blessing and receives a blessing. Because Gabriel says, this seems like an impossible thing that Elizabeth in her old age has conceived.

But with God, no word is impossible. And Mary, she was sharp. She figured this out without Gabriel having to spell it out with ABCs.

Or Alephs, Bates, and Gimels. She figures that she needs to go see Elizabeth. And she goes.

And she's going to stay three months. And when she goes, Elizabeth is going to confirm for her, not only by her pregnancy, that God is doing amazing and seemingly impossible things, but she's going to get this prophetic word. So when she entered into the home of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth, it came to pass, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was controlled by the Holy Spirit and lifted up her voice with a great outcry and said, As for you, you have been blessed among women, and the fruit of your womb has been blessed.

And how can this be to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Elizabeth, how much information had she gotten? Apparently, Zechariah had had time to laboriously write out or otherwise signify what the content of the message was that he had received from Gabriel, that not only were they having a son, but what that son's purpose was, that he would be the forerunner, the harbinger, the prophet and messenger of the Messiah. So Elizabeth has had time to think about this, and she knows that the Messiah is near at hand. When Mary comes in, as soon as she hears the greeting, the Holy Spirit reveals to her that this is where the Messiah is going to come from, and it clicks, it makes sense to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth knows that Mary is apparently an unusually faithful and godly young lady. Mary knows the same about Elizabeth, in the same way that when we look around and we see each other, we've been to Bible class together for years and years, and we know that there's genuine interest and genuine enthusiasm and genuine living a life of at least attempted application amongst us, and we know that there's a difference between those who are really trying hard to walk the narrow road through the steering gate and those who may not be. Those who maybe we just don't know well enough to know what they're doing, but there are those that we know.

Mary and Elizabeth knew each other and knew each other to be in that category. So it is no surprise to Elizabeth, in fact, it doesn't probably take much of a nudge from the Holy Spirit, when Mary suddenly appears in her sixth month and she says, of course, who else would be better for this purpose than Mary? Because they know each other, they have fellowship. Gabriel doesn't have to say, by the way, it's your third cousin on your mother's side.

Mary knows who Elizabeth is by name. Elizabeth knows Mary from the sound of her voice. And the Holy Spirit confirms in her soul, this is where the Messiah is coming from.

And this is just straight message from God, the Holy Spirit, as a comfort and an encouragement and an aid to Mary's faith. She believed it when the angel told her, but you can imagine, you know, as the days would go by and subsequent doubts, well, did I really see that guy? Did I really hear that guy? Did I hear what I heard? Did I understand it correctly? I will go see Elizabeth. And when she sees Elizabeth in her sixth month, manifestly, visibly pregnant, and Elizabeth gives out with this reply, this greeting, what a wonderful encouragement and comfort from God to Mary.

And God didn't send another angel. God did it through a fellow faithful believer. And it's a wonderful thing that God does for us to comfort us and encourage us and allow us to be a blessing and allow us to minister to one another.

And how meaningful this is and how much closer these two ladies are, both because of their faith and because of this unique opportunity that God has given them. Mary says, and then you have the Magnificat, as the Catholics have named it, My soul is extolling my Lord, my spirit exultingly rejoiced in God my Savior, because he had regard for the humble position of his bond slave. The other thing you notice about this is Zachariah is an unimposing, unimpressive, unpromoted, run-of-the-mill priest.

He's in, what is it, the 24th course of Abijah. He's, you know, there's priests all over the place. He's just another priest.

His wife Elizabeth is just another aging lady. They're an elderly couple. They're childless.

If anything, they're sort of looked down on with pity, if not contempt, in Israel because they have no children. And this is, you know, in those days especially was thought to be some sort of a rebuke from the Lord that you weren't thought worthy to produce offspring and contribute to the tribes of Israel. And so they're not well thought of.

And then here's this girl who's betrothed and not even married yet up in Galilee, which is an unimpressive and unspoken of part. You know, it wasn't well spoken of. You remember later on, Nathaniel or somebody's going to say, Philip or someone, can any good thing come out of Galilee? It wasn't well thought of.

And this is where God has put this most important of all occasions and occurrences. So Mary commemorates this. That's what her song is about.

From this time forth, as particularized by this great event in my life, all the generations shall speak of me as spiritually prosperous. Wouldn't it be great if that was the case? The Catholics have turned Mary into a big ritual and an icon and a statue and somebody to pray to. What Mary anticipated was that future generations would think of her as spiritually prosperous, enriched by the blessings of God, because he who is mighty has done great things for me.

Not investing Mary with holiness and grace and power and perpetual virginity and her mother with perpetual virginity and so on, but that future generations will speak of me as spiritually prosperous, enriched by the blessings of God, because he who is mighty did great things for me, and holy is his name. Not holy is Mary's name. Holy is God's name.

His mercy is to those who fear him, to generations and generations. He brought about strength with his arm. He dispersed those who with contempt and haughtiness hold themselves above others in the intellectual insight and moral understanding of their heart.

God bypassed the Pharisees and the scribes and the notables and the high society and the well-off in Israel. He dispersed them. He deposed potentates from their thrones and exalted those who are in a humble position in life.

Well, that's us. We're one of a numberless sea of faces. All you have to do is sit in an airport for a while to be reminded of that.

Go to the mall at Christmas time to be reminded of that. There are swarms and swarms. We're like ants.

You pound on the ground outside an anthill and wait for them all to boil up. Well, that's what we're like. And yet, in your life and in my life, God can accomplish his purpose and his plan and glorify his name.

He laid hold of Israel his servant with a view to helping him, calling to remembrance his mercy, even as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever. Mary remained with her as her guest for about three months and then returned to her home. Well, Elizabeth's time is fulfilled.

You know the story of Zechariah getting his speech back and so on. And a little note of detail there. Apparently, Zechariah was deaf as well as dumb because when they're arguing over what the child should be called, it says they made signs to him asking him what he thought his son's name ought to be.

If he could hear, they would have just said, Hey, Zechariah, write down what you think the boy's name ought to be. But they had to sign it to him. Deafness and dumbness were often associated.

Apparently he was deaf as well. But when he is able to speak, he gives this great prophecy to give a knowledge of salvation to his people in the putting away of their sins through the compassion of God and so on. And there'll be a light rising in the east from on high to look upon and render us help, to bring light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, direct our feet into the road of peace.

Again, largely Israel-centric. And then you finish up with a story of Simeon and Anna. And I don't have time to read the details of those stories.

I just want to read one part out of Wiest's translation. The announcement was made to the shepherds. You recognize that they were the lowest stratum.

Everything in this story speaks of the commonplace, the non-notable, the non-special. Mary is nothing special. Joseph is nothing special.

Elizabeth and Zachariah, nothing special. The shepherds, nothing special. What distinguishes them? What marks them out as objects for God's grace and the fulfillment of God's plan? All of them are faithful.

All of them are believers. Not only believers in God in the salvation sense, but believers in God's word. When the angel speaks to the shepherds, they don't say, man, that's a long trek to Bethlehem.

I don't know what that just was. But they believe. They immediately stop what they're doing and they go and they seek out what they've been told.

They believe the word of God when it is delivered to them. Well, the part I want to get to here is when eight days were completed at the end, this is verse 21, the period where he was to be circumcised, his name also was called Yeshua, Jesus, designated by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. When the days of their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, this means it's now been about a month, they brought him up to Jerusalem to dedicate him to the Lord, even as it stands written in the law of the Lord, every firstborn male child shall be called separated to the Lord to be exclusively his and to offer a sacrifice according to that which has been spoken in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

And anytime you think about those pairs of birds, it reminds you of that death and resurrection motif in Leviticus 14 where one bird is slain and dipped in the blood of the other bird and set free. And the two birds represent death and life, death and life. And at Jesus' dedication, the sacrifice was those two birds.

Yes, it tells us that Mary and Joseph were not well off and that this was the poor person's offering, but the two birds were in the law of Moses to be offered at this time because it foreshadows death and life. Two birds, one is slain, the other is dipped in his blood and identified with him and it is death and life, death and life. Death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord foreshadowed.

There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous, reverenced God, and was pious, looking expectantly toward that which will afford comfort and refreshment for Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him.

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit in answer to prayer and to this revelation he was holding fast that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. This is fascinating to me. You know, the timing of the coming of Jesus was generally predicted in Daniel's 70-week prophecy, but there was a man in Israel who so loved God and was such a man of dedication and prayer that God revealed to him, I am going to let you see the beginning of the fulfillment of all of these things.

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. What's interesting about this is it echoes these earlier themes, waiting a long time, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, for fulfillment. Watching and waiting and faith not flagging, faith not failing.

Zechariah is a priest and when he is given the word he can't believe it and so he is struck dumb. He is unable to speak. You think about the priesthood in Israel.

When they get the word, they don't believe it and they are struck dumb. They are unable to tell the people. They are unable to confirm.

They are unable to fulfill their priestly function verbally because they don't believe. If you don't believe, you are not going to speak. Here is Simeon, who is not a priest.

He is just a pious man and he is an old, old, old man. But he is waiting and waiting and he is praying and praying and in answer to his prayer, God says, I am going to give you a special gift. You are going to see the Messiah before you die.

Well, you think about all those Old Testament saints mentioned in Hebrews 11. All these died in faith, not having received the promise. But like Simeon, Simeon sees the beginning.

He holds the Christ child in his arms and that is enough for him. He doesn't have to live to see the inception of the kingdom. He doesn't have to see the triumphal entry and what they would imagine to be day one of the kingdom.

All Simeon needs is to see the child on the scene. He is here. It is going to be 30 years before the ministry of the Messiah even begins.

But for Simeon, it is enough to get that glimpse of just the beginning, the beginning of God's work. It isn't this true of all of the Old Testament saints. They get just a glimpse of the beginning of God's work and they expect the rest on faith.

They are fully convinced that the rest of it will happen. When Simeon sees the child, he went in the control of the spirit to the outer temple when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him according to the established custom of the law. Simeon himself also gladly received him into his arms and he eulogized God and said, As things now are, you are releasing your bond slave, Master, according to your word, in peace, because my eyes saw your salvation, which you prepared before the face of all the peoples, a light for a revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel.

And his father and mother were marveling at the things which were spoken concerning him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, Behold, this one is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and for a miraculous attestation, assent to which is being constantly refused. He is going to be a sign that is going to be rejected and refused.

Moreover, through your soul there shall pass a sword in order that the deliberations of many hearts may be uncovered. You notice that really the first time we see the Gentiles come into view is in the prophecy of Simeon. It isn't Zechariah the priest.

It isn't the message to Mary. It isn't the response of Elizabeth. It is Simeon the outsider who first says this is also going to be the light to the Gentiles.

Then Anna the prophetess, a daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher, this woman well advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from the time of her state as a virgin and she herself a widow eighty-four years, did not leave the temple, rendering sacred service to God with fastings and petitions night and day. And at that very hour, coming up and standing by, she kept on giving thanks to God and kept on speaking concerning Him to all who were expectantly looking toward the redemption of Jerusalem. Well this is such a fascinating pair of individuals to greet Mary and Joseph at the temple with the Christ child because it's not the priests, it's not the Pharisees, it's not the rulers, it's not the nobles.

It is two people, one man and one woman, who are exceptional in the area of their faith. I'm particularly intrigued by Anna because you're given the time periods. From the time that she was a virgin and she got married, she lived with her husband seven years.

And then you have this period of eighty-four years. And it's unclear in the Greek, if you look at all the scholars, they say we don't know if this means that she was a widow eighty-four years of age or she had been a widow for eighty-four years. But because the passage says that she was very advanced in years, well advanced in years, eighty-five was an old age in those days, but I think this says she was married for seven years and had been a widow eighty-four years, which means that she was married ninety-one years ago and if she was married at age fourteen, then we're talking she's about a hundred and five or so.

That's well advanced in years. But what's interesting about that is she was married and had a normal life for seven years. And the number seven is very significant in Scripture, as you know.

You think back, for example, to the dreams that Joseph interpreted for Pharaoh, the seven years of plenty, followed by the seven lean years, the Sabbath week being seven years long, and there is a time where Anna... Why Anna and why give the history of her marriage? Why not say she was an old widow and she was rejoicing and dancing around telling everybody that the Messiah had come? Why give this history? There is a significance to it and I think a suggestion as to what that significance is is she was a virgin, just like Mary, this is the second time we have virginity mentioned in the context, and from the time of virginity, she was married seven years and then she lost her husband. Well, if you think back to the time period, this is well back. You can look up 88 B.C. If she had just been a widow for 84 years, you go back from, let's say this is 4 B.C., that would be 88 B.C., what was going on in that year, I didn't see anything special.

You go back another seven years to 95 B.C. or so, and there's nothing all that special going on, but that age range where you have someone being in the vicinity of 100 years old and having been widowed for that long, and you say, well what could possibly be at the end of your life after having, she doesn't have the option of having a child late like Elizabeth or Sarah, so what is the end of her devotion?

What is the end? What is the product or the fruit of your faith? All of that piety, all of that faithfulness, she never remarried, and you get the idea that she had a hope of the resurrection. She had this, you get the idea that that seven years was like symbolic of a perfect marriage, seven years, it was a perfect time, and she loved her husband, and she never remarried in the next 84 years, which by the way is 77 plus 7, and so for her 77 plus 7 years later, she sees the Christ child, she sees the means by which God is going to restore to her, her husband that she loved in her youth and had this wonderful seven year marriage to.

Why would somebody not remarry? Why would somebody, well if you love your first spouse, and believe me, nothing against remarriage, but there are people, there's one love in their life, and if they lose them, and they're a believer, they're just going to wait, it's like that loved one's away on a trip, and I don't care how long it's taking, we will be reunited in the resurrection, and I'm waiting for that, I'm not interested in marriage with anybody else, and this is not to disparage any second or third marriages, I think those are wonderful, not a thing in the world wrong with it, it's just in the souls of some people, there is a lock that takes place, and nothing can break it, not even death, they say till death do us part, for some people even death doesn't part it, and I think Anna was one of those people, and she was waiting for her husband, and

when she sees the Christ child, he is going to be the victor over death, he is going to be the one who is going to bring back, through his work on the cross, all of those Old Testament saints, including her long lost husband, 77 plus 7 years ago, she is holding in her hands, she is looking in her eyes, at the reunion with her husband, and she is just ecstatic, and she tells everybody, she has no doubt, there is no hesitancy in her mind, she tells everybody, he is here, he is here.

And for people who are willing to listen, to an undocumented source, Simeon doesn't have a THD, Anna is a prophetess, but they always look at them a little bit askance, it's kind of like the Indians wouldn't kill a crazy person, the Philistines wouldn't kill a crazy person, out of superstition, who is going to actually believe the testimony, of the common people, this low ranking priest Zachariah, and his wife, this girl from up in Galilee, this old, old man, who thinks he is not going to die, until he sees the Messiah, and this ancient, ancient, 105 year old, pruny little woman, who believes that she has seen the Messiah, well, those who have an ear to hear, those who are living a life of faith and obedience, God brings them together, they confirm one another, Simeon hears what Anna has to say, Joseph and Mary hear what they have to say, they have been visiting with Elizabeth and Zachariah, and that small, even scattered community of faith, gets the word.

God bypasses the mighty, and gives grace to the humble, the shepherds on the hillside, what chance did they have? God gets them the word, and they get to go see, and all of them see this hope, this future hope, they are all Old Testament saints, and they see the beginning of it. I don't know if those shepherds lasted long enough, to see the Lord Jesus fulfill his ministry, Elizabeth and Zachariah most certainly had died, by the time John and Jesus began their public ministries, Joseph apparently died as well, Anna and Simeon long gone, but they saw the beginning, and it was enough, they were ecstatic.

We in this life, see the beginning of what God is going to do, we see just the hem of the garment of our salvation, but to the extent that we are faithful, and that we believe, and that we make petition and request to God, to show us his grace, and show us his word, and show us his will, you never know if you're not going to be, that seemingly unknown, unremarkable person, through whom God is going to do great things, it's a wonderful example for us, to stick with it, and to trust God, and to know that God is in his heaven, and his plan and purpose is going to be fulfilled, and those who seek it, and search for it, as for his treasures, are going to understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God, and we can be right in there, with Simeon, and Anna, and Zachariah, and Elizabeth, and Joseph, and Mary, common people, through whom God does extraordinary things, to whom God shows eternal things, it's all a matter of faith, it's a matter of being consistent, and being patient, and waiting, all of these people, except Mary, are old timers, waited a long time, but their wait, and their patience was rewarded, so it's a little side note, to the main Christmas story there, that God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble, and the humble is us, not many mighty are called, it isn't the wisdom of this world, that God appeals to, God uses the foolish things, the common things, to confound the wise, and to accomplish his plan and purpose, and that's us.

So it's a great hope, and a great encouragement to me, to think that even as unremarkable as I am, and as unremarkable as we probably are, God can do great things in us, through us, and for us, let's close here in a word of prayer.

Father thank you for the wonderful grace, that encompasses us within your plan and purpose, that weaves us into the tapestry, of the revelation of your character, in these many ages and dispensations, each generation has had those, whom you have favored with insight, and with opportunity, and we find ourselves in this generation, recipients of that wonderful heritage, and that unlimited grace, we thank you for that, we pray that we will be ever mindful, of the potential and the opportunity, that you've given us, and as the new year approaches, and we live out the remainder of the lives, you've allocated to us here on earth, that God the Holy Spirit, will impress these truths on our hearts, so that day by day, hour by hour, decision by decision, we can live in a way, that is pleasing in your sight, and that brings glory to the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to deliver us, all those years ago, we pray it in Jesus name, Amen.