

IS THERE A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

A couple of times each year I have opportunity to teach at Mount Hermon Christian Conference Center, near Santa Cruz. I have mapped out for myself a 5 mile jogging trail which I love to run whenever I'm there. I begin at the post office, go down the hill towards Roaring Camp, through the dark redwood groves to the railroad tracks. I cross the river on the old bridge and make my way to the old railroad tunnel. Every time I run through this tunnel I think of it as symbolic of the spiritual darkness in which people live and work. When friends jog with me on this trail, they are not sure they want to continue when we reach the tunnel. I assure them, however (because I've been through it many times before), that there is a light at the end of this tunnel. On the other side there is sunshine, a beautiful river, and a clear trail downhill all the way to Santa Cruz.

In our studies in the gospel of Luke, which we resume this morning, the subject I want to address is spiritual darkness. According to Scripture, the world lies in darkness, much like the tunnel I have described. The world has no real insight as to how to address the multitude of problems it faces. Pick up any newspaper and you will immediately see the headlines: the greenhouse effect, AIDS, drugs, toxic waste, moral decay on every side. The result is that people are fearful and angry. They live isolated lives. They don't have much hope for the future. They are living in spiritual darkness, a dark, cold and fearful tunnel that seems endless.

Is there a light at the end of the tunnel? In Luke 2:21-38, we will discover the following threefold answer: 1) Yes! His name is Jesus (2:21-24); 2) Yes! For all men to see (2:25-35); 3) Yes! It's the light of redemption (2:36-38).

While the apostle Paul was awaiting the outcome of his trial by the Roman government in the seaport city of Caesarea, his faithful friend, Dr. Luke, used the two years (58-60 AD) to write his Greek friend Theophilus, an account of the life of Jesus. This is the gospel which is the subject of our study. Luke wrote, in 1:14 "It seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order...so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught." In Chapter 1:1-2:20, Luke wrote about the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, and followed this with the story of the virgin birth of Jesus, in the city of Bethlehem. As we study this gospel we will discover that Luke writes, in a sense, like a jeweler who is stringing a precious pearl necklace on a thread, one pearl at a time, until a priceless necklace is completed. We could say that the thread of this gospel is verse 10 of chapter 19: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which is lost." The pearls are the various stories of our Lord seeking the lost in order to save them from eternal spiritual destruction.

The Roman, Greek, Jewish and barbarian worlds at the time of the birth of Jesus were in dire need of a spiritual rather than a political savior. All peoples were sitting in the pitch dark tunnel of hopelessness, helplessness and sin. The religious Romans, Greeks and barbarians had created gods by the thousands, but all of them failed because they offered no hope for a broken and sinful heart. The Jewish community, who had been called by God to be the salt and light of the world, had become salt without savor and a lamp with a very low flickering wick in a very dark, dark tunnel.

Yet within their dark tunnel (some 400 years without the voice of a prophet) if people listened carefully they could hear the voice of Zacharias. At the ceremony of the naming of his son, John the Baptist, Zacharias prophesied of his future and said, by the power of the Holy Spirit, "And you child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways; to give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high shall visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death" (Luke 1:76-77).

So the question we want to ask ourselves in our spiritually dark world today, as the world was spiritually dark in the first century, is, Is there a Light at the end of the tunnel?

1. Yes! And his name is Jesus! Luke 2:21-24

And when eight days were completed before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."

Some nine months earlier, in the city of Nazareth, Mary had received a visit from the Angel Gabriel. He told her, "Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son and you shall call Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of his father David and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and His kingdom will have no end" (1:30-33)

Later, Joseph was told by the same angel, "you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:20-21). Notice that God gave both John and his cousin Jesus their names, their ministry and the power of the Holy Spirit, to do his bidding on earth. Thus, from the time of their conception they were under the authority of the Lord.

Joseph and Mary, being of Jewish origin, were living out their lives under the law of the Lord. Paul wrote in Gal. 4:4: "But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." Later, Jesus would say to his disciples, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill it." Jesus humbly submitted to the requirements of the law, not for his own account, but as a sign that he voluntarily took upon himself the obligations of his people so as to be their Redeemer.

As a child born under the law, therefore, Mary's new-born baby was subject to the rite of circumcision. Some 2000 years earlier, God had appeared to his childless friend, Abraham, and said to him, "Walk before Me and be blameless and I will make establish My covenant between you and Me... you shall be the father of a multitude of nations...kings shall come from you. I will establish My covenant between you and Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an eternal covenant to be God to you and to your descendants after you" (Gen. 17).

God revealed to Abraham that he was to use physical circumcision, the shedding of blood by cutting off the flesh from the head of the male penis, as an outward sign of the covenant. Circumcision presumed that the person to be circumcised was a sinner because the "flesh" was a symbol of a life lived without God.

Spiritually, circumcision symbolized the deepest spiritual reality of the Jewish religion. Deut. 10:16 says, "The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." Paul wrote to the Colossians concerning the work of Christ in their spiritual lives, "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ" (Col. 2: 11).

This covenant was filled with physical blessings to the circumcised Jew who by faith entered into this agreement with God. Later, the apostle Paul would remind the Galatian Christians that God was not only speaking of physical blessings but also the spiritual blessings of the coming of Messiah from the loins of Abraham, who would in turn bring the spiritual blessing of salvation to all, Jew and Gentile alike, who placed their faith in him as Lord and Savior.

So the baby Jesus, the sinless, innocent one, was willing on our behalf to allow himself to be placed under the Law in order to bring us redemption by the shedding of his own blood on the eighth day. By doing so he was placed in the shadow of the Cross, "for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin" (Heb. 9:22). Only he could circumcise man's rebellious hearts.

Circumcision was followed by 33 Days of Purification. The Law said, "...when a woman gives birth and bears a male child then she shall be unclean for seven days...and on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall remain in the Blood of her purification for 33 days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary, until the days of purification are completed..." (Lev. 12:1-8).

Following the circumcision in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph carried the baby Jesus some three miles to the temple in Jerusalem in order to go through the Rites of Purification for Mary, and Dedication for Jesus. As they entered the temple area they were greeted by many different sights and sounds: the scent of incense; the money-changers at work; the lowing of the various animals awaiting purchase and sacrifice; the many priests with bloodied aprons; the prayers of many in the court of the women and Gentiles; the men reading the scriptures in the courtyard of Israel.

Leviticus 12 continues: "And when the days of her purification are completed for a son or for a daughter [Mary and Joseph left Bethlehem and headed up to Jerusalem], she shall bring to the priest at the doorway of the tent of meeting, a one year old lamb for a burnt offering [Mary was restored to fellowship with God], and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering [cleansing from the pollution of the Adamic sin as well as personal sins]. Then he shall offer it before the Lord and make atonement for her; and she shall be cleansed from the flow of her blood... but if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, the one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering, and the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean." (Lev. 12).

Mary and Joseph chose the poor selection, for the mother who brought the Lamb of God into the world could not afford to purchase a sacrificial lamb at this time. But in time her son, Jesus, would be called by his cousin John, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Once again, Jesus was placed under the shadow of the cross.

Following this, there was a presentation of the child to the Lord, an acknowledgment of the Lord's ownership. During the same period, the couple presented Jesus to the Lord according to the Law which said, "Every first born male that opens the womb shall be called Holy to the Lord" (Ex 13:2). Presenting one's son to the Lord was in reality the "Rite of Redemption."

According to Ex. 12:2, every first born was to be set aside to service within the temple but the child could be redeemed by offering five shekels (Num. 8:15-16). Thus, the Redeemer was redeemed from temple service only to serve his Father in every way, for that was his life's focus and desire. And again, that was in the shadow of the Cross, for Jesus said in the garden of Gethsemane, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but your will be done" (Luke 22:42).

The spiritual principle here is found in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." The cross opened the gates of salvation. Yes, the cross is the light at the end of the tunnel. The cross was the means of salvation then as it is now.

Two of our college students were waiting for a table in a local restaurant a couple of months ago. As they waited, they were discussing the Bible. A girl standing nearby overheard their conversation. She reached into her pocketbook and took out a Bible. "Do you know anything about the story concerning Jesus and Nicodemus in the gospel of John?" she asked. The three of them ate dinner together that evening, and our students invited her to attend the college class at church on Sunday. She attended that class for about a month, and just recently she shared with the class that she had invited Jesus Christ to become her Lord and Savior.

Is there a light at the end of the tunnel?

Yes! His name is Jesus.

2. Yes! for all men to see

Luke 2:25-35

And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, and He took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,

"Now Lord, Thou dost let Thy bondservant depart
In peace, according to Thy word; For mine eyes have seen Thy
salvation,
Which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples,
A light of revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Thy people Israel."

And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him. And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed--and a sword will pierce even your own soul--to the end that thoughts from many hearts will be revealed."

As Mary and Joseph carried the baby Jesus to the temple area, the Holy Spirit was moving Simeon, a righteous and devout saint who was looking for the "Comfort of Israel," the Messiah himself. Finally, it was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see physical death until he first saw the Messiah. Then, in that moment of time, the parents of Jesus and Simeon met. Simeon then took the baby Jesus in his arms and praised God that he was allowed to live on earth long enough to see the comfort of Israel (Isa. 40), and the salvation of God (Isa. 52:10).

Simeon went on to say that the baby whom he held would have a two-fold ministry. First, he would be a light of revelation to the Gentiles. The Lord said of his Messiah,

"I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness
I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you
I will appoint you as a covenant to the people
As a light to the nations, to open blind eyes
To bring out prisoners from the dungeon
And those who dwell in darkness from the prison" (Isa. 42:6-7).

Remember that the Gentile nations, the Romans, Greeks and barbarians, were sitting in a great darkness, void of the true knowledge of the one and only Living God. They needed the hope of light at the end of the tunnel.

Secondly, to the Jews, the Messiah would be "the glory of Thy people Israel." In the early days of Israel, Jehovah God would appear in the tabernacle as a bright light so that the people would know of His presence. Jehovah was the glory of the Israelites, but in time they went after other gods, were taken into captivity, dispersed among the nations, and lost the glory of the Lord so that the other nations no longer looked to them for truth. Now Simeon said that the baby Jesus would become all that Israel had lost. He would become in his humanity the "shekinah." Israel had been chosen to be the Light of Nations (Isa. 49:6) and had failed, so now Christ would become what Israel should have been, "The Light of the world" (John 8:15). He would be light for the Gentiles and glory for the Jews, with the bottom line of salvation for both. As John wrote, "And the Word became Flesh, and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, glory as the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1: 14).

Finally, Jesus was appointed for the rise and fall of many in Israel. Mary and Joseph were amazed at all that was said of their little baby Jesus, first by the Angel Gabriel, then by the shepherds, then by Elizabeth and Zechariah, and now Simeon. He blessed Joseph and Mary. Then he focused on Mary as he held her child and prophesied to her by the Spirit, saying, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall (death) and rise (resurrection) of many in Israel." Israel's destiny was tied to this man. As Paul said, "For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23).

Herod the Great sought to kill the baby Jesus only to die of a horrible disease in Jericho; Pilate, the Governor, declared him King of the Jews publicly but denied him privately; Judas denied him and went out and hanged himself; the Jewish leadership rejected their Messiah and King and became Roman slaves in 70 A.D.

Peter wrote, "The Stone which the builders rejected, this became the very cornerstone and a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed" (I Peter 2:7-8, quoting Palms 118:2; and Isa. 8:14). So this baby Jesus would be the cause of many stumbling and falling in Israel.

But the same Jesus would also be the source resurrection to new life to many in Israel. Nicodemus would step out of the darkness into the light of life; a demon-possessed man would be set free from a cave to minister in ten cities; Levi, the publican, would become Matthew the apostle; Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector and sinner once lost, would become found; the thief on the cross would become a son of God

Through the centuries since, the Lord Jesus Christ continues to be a sign to be opposed. For instance, at a wedding in which I participated recently, the young couple (who attend here), wanted to have a clear presentation of the gospel shared with their non-Christian families as part of the ceremony. At the reception later, many different responses were shared with me by the guests who heard me present the gospel at the wedding. Some rejected me; some ignored me; some were resentful and argumentative; and some asked questions. Jesus was a sign to be opposed by many of the 300 guests at that wedding.

"And for a sign to be oppressed." Perhaps this comes from Numbers 20. Israel was rebelling against God and they were punished. There would be no comfort until that rebellion was dealt with. The Lord Jesus Christ continues to be a sign to be opposed. There is no neutral ground. "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me, scatters," said Jesus (Luke 11:23).

Finally, Simeon said to Mary that "a sword will pierce even your own soul to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." Mary would suffer as she watched the rejection, persecution, arrest, trial, crucifixion, death and burial of her son. Her joy would return after the resurrection. But this Son would be used by God as a sword to open the hearts of men and women, so that they could experience righteous judgment of the intents of their hearts, not their outward actions. As Moses told Israel, the reason they spent 40 years in the wilderness was "...that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not" (Deut. 8:2).

Is there a light at the end of the tunnel? Yes! His name is Jesus; Yes! For all men to see;

3. Yes! It's the Light of Redemption, Luke 2:36-38

And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with a husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. And she never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. And at that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

This woman, Anna, is the very picture of Israel during the Babylonian captivity. Jeremiah wrote in

Lamentations 1:1, "How lonely sits the city that was full of people; she has become like a widow." Her widowhood was a picture of a city without her husband, God himself. At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God and continued to speak of him to all those who were looking for the "redemption of Jerusalem."

In the midst of this terrible spiritual darkness, the Lord had a small remnant, Elizabeth, Zachariah, Mary and Joseph, some shepherds, Simeon, and now Anna, who saw the presence of the baby Jesus and understood who he was, "the Redemption of Jerusalem," the Messiah. To her widowed heart, the great hope of Israel was not so much in looking for comfort, rather it was looking for redemption. Her tribe, Asher, was in political exile; the Land of Israel was ruled by the hated Romans; the City of God was ruled by the corrupt King Herod the Great and was in a state of social, moral, and spiritual decay; the Temple of God was a stronghold of the Pharisees. So Anna (Joyful One) was looking for redemption (freedom from bondage and enslavement), hopefully beginning at the temple and moving out into the city, then into the land, finally, to the nations of the world.

Is there a light at the end of the tunnel? Yes! His name is Jesus. Yes! For all men to see. Yes! He is the light of redemption. "...there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12).

Recently I was at Mount Hermon and wanted to show a friend my run to the tunnel. We headed down the hill, through Roaring Camp, across the railroad tracks, through the Redwood forest, up onto another set of tracks, across the bridge, up through the darkness of the forest towards the tunnel. As it came into view, I was shocked to see that a storm had caused a mud slide. The tunnel leading to the warm sunshine on the other side, and the joy of running into Santa Cruz, was completely cut off. All I could think of was the verse in 2 Peter 3: 9-10: "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but is patience toward you, not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up."

Right now there is light at the end of the tunnel, and that light is Jesus. He will not always be there. That is why the Scripture says so clearly, "Behold, now is the day of salvation." My encouragement to those who are sinning in spiritual darkness is to run towards Jesus, for he is the light, life, wholeness, peace and joy that you have been looking for all your life. Run toward him while there is still time. Place your faith in him as the Lamb of God who takes away not only the sin of the world but is willing to forgive your sins and give you his life--eternal life--right now.

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