

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Revelation 22:20, we read these powerful words, "He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." The church is always looking forward and always waiting. The church under duress has always been waiting. Again, the powerful words of Psalm 30:5, "For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favour lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning." Israel had waited 400 years for the Word of the Lord to come. It had been some 400 years since the watchmen named Malachi stood on the walls of Zion, predicting the end of the night and the coming of the morning. Then he said, "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays." Last time we saw that Malachi was speaking of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was a truly righteous man and who came to restore us to God in peace. The Prince of Peace came to bring us hope and light in this dark world.

As it is often said, it is dark before dawn, and so it was. The people were walking in the darkness, waiting for the great light. One last watchman had yet to come. Again, we turn to Malachi 4, "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction." With the same words that end that silence of God to Israel, the voice of the Lord comes by the angel Gabriel and John the Baptist will come to usher in the new day.

Last time we pondered that wonder of light over against the darkness and the sun of righteousness. Now let us consider the daybreak. It is a physical thing, and it can be stunning. A fisherman looks to the skies in the morning to see what the new day will bring. The new day fills us with the hope of a fresh start, a better day and a foreshadow of the day when every tear will be wiped away, and there will be no more sin or death or sorrow. How long will the night last? What about the night? When will the morning come? The faithful who revere the name of the Lord had lived and died waiting like watchmen for the morning for the rejoicing that will come in the morning. John the Baptist was sent with the Spirit of Elijah as the last watchmen waiting for the mystery of the new day of Bethlehem. I bring to you the Word of the Lord under the theme:

**The Herald of the Dawn is Heralded:
1 Great in God's Eyes 2 A Symbolic Life 3 One Like Elijah**

Great in God's Eyes The night had become very dark by the time Herod the Great had taken the throne of David. Herod had Idumean blood, that is, the blood of Esau. This was a great discouragement. Sure, he had built a super temple, but, alas, that temple was a beautiful shell as far as flesh and blood are concerned, but where was the faithful worship of God. The temple was on the one hand run by the wealthy and Roman appointed Sadducees, who had turned the beautiful shell into a den of thieves contrasted with the legalism of the Pharisees. Where was the grace? Where were the joy and the love of God and neighbour? When the ark of the covenant was taken in the days of Samuel, a mother named her child Ichabod for the glory had departed from Israel. How long the night? Ichabod exists once more

But there is a glimmer of light now in the names of those two older people. Zacharias was in his sixties then and was childless together with Elizabeth. I think we can say that they like every couple had prayed for a child. For many years they had prayed and offered sacrifices. Had the prayers died by then? I think so. But then, God remembered them. Did you know that the name Zechariah means just that? Zechariah means, God remembers! Do you know what Elizabeth means? It is derived from the Hebrew, Elisheba—"my God is my oath!" Trusting God, they perhaps gave up hope for their child but not for the new day. They, too, waited in faithfulness for the child they believed would come even though they had lost hope for their opportunity to parent. So faithful Zechariah remembered his God and his duty and that day, as he did twice a year as a faithful descendant of Aaron, the priest performed his duty. Then something happened! Something special. Ichabod is departing and God remembers! Zechariah, God remembers, Elizabeth, God is my oath!

According to the commentaries and sages, perhaps once in a priest's lifetime, the lot was chosen to burn the incense. He would take care of the showbread, tend to the altar and ensure the fire did not go out. He was still working in the night of time. As he looked about the Holy of Holies, not dead but spared that Israel might be spared, he would have noticed that the ark of the covenant was not there anymore. What happened to it? We do not know except that after the Babylonians took it to one of their religious museums, it seems it was never returned to Jerusalem. Ichabod reigned there too. But the dawn was breaking. And an angel of the Lord stood in front of Zechariah. Yes, Israel, Zechariah! The Lord remembered. This event, too, is part of the wonders of the mystery of Bethlehem.

Gabriel promised Zechariah that he and his wife would have a son. Yes, they were too old, and yes, Zechariah ought to have believed. Nonetheless, they would have a child, and they were to name that child Joh, that is grace, or the Lord is gracious. What's in a name they say! Runaway Ichabod for the glory of the Lord is shining now. A new day is going to break. They kept His oath and remembered, and the herald of the daybreak is heralded. Zechariah will rejoice for the child will be great! He will be raised as Nazirite, the spirit of Elijah will be upon him and he will prepare the way of the Lord. This is good news! Zechariah will be silent until the day his son is born. But the Lord remembered and kept His oath. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

What a great message this is for us today as the church! It can feel like night sometimes. Where are the Christian heads of state or judges? Why does it seem that our world is utterly immoral, and we are finding it tougher to be a Christian? Our beloved around the world suffer immensely, and the church, the bride of Christ, cry out Come! Come quickly Lord Jesus. We believe that there is a new day coming. We always have hope. Morning by morning, new mercies I see! God is our oath and he will remember us.

He remembered His promises to send the son who hung in the night in the noon of the day! He came like the bright and morning star, the beautiful saviour. The night of waiting will turn to the morn of rejoices. Yes, He suffered and died, and it seemed that the darkness had conquered the light, and the night had swallowed the morning. Ichabod! The church cried; the glory has departed. But in three days, Ichabod turned to Zechariah for God had remembered. Jesus is alive! He is coming. Repent and believe! Turn your hearts to the Lord and your eyes to heaven.

A Symbolic Life Gabriel commanded Zechariah, "He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born." What is that all about?

Before the sun of righteousness will rise a light, great, though the greatest light must shine for a time. A voice must cry out. The hearts of the people must be prepared. God sent John the son of Zechariah as a symbol of purity, faithfulness and hope.

John will be a prophet. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will not be filled with fermented spirits. In another time, when it was dark, and the philistines made the lives of the Israelites miserable, God spoke to a couple who, too, had lost hope that they might ever have a child. Manoah and his wife were barren. One day the angel of the Lord (was it the Son of God? Was it Gabriel?) came to Mrs. Manoah and said, ***You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines.*** (Judges 13:4-5)

God remembered and gave to the couple a child who was named Samson. Samson sadly took foreign women, touched dead animals, and broke all the law concerning the law of Nazirite as we read in Numbers 6. In time he let a loose woman trick him into having his hair cut, and he died a rather sad and yet heroic death. In that broken man, God brought salvation to Israel, restoring the glory through Samson's hair and the power of the Holy Spirit.

But a better day was coming, and a better prophet was coming. John did not just have the Holy Spirit upon him due to his long hair and beard but was filled with the Holy Spirit. He lived in the desert, and the people came out to him to hear the Word of the Lord. His life was a living testimony of obedience. Do you remember those last words of Malachi? "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel." When the Sun of Righteousness arises, people must be ready. John by his life, taught them of full obedience and what it meant to be set apart from the rest world as he was set apart by his calling, words and life. He would prepare the people for the mystery of Bethlehem. Even as a child in the womb, filled with the Spirit, he moved strongly when he felt the presence of Jesus in Mary's womb. Mysterious things, for sure! But these are things that God has planned before the dawn's early light.

One Like Elijah There is something about Elijah. He, of course, started so strongly. He was a man of holiness and courage. He cried out to a wicked generation and through Him, God did some pretty amazing things—at least on a human scale.

He worked in the days of Ahab and Jezebel. He was the light in that shadow of darkness. Ahab married a foreigner, and she brought her foreign gods and an entourage of priests and false prophets. Elijah called a contest then pitting the LORD against Baal. He entered right into the supposed territory of Baal, the god of thunder and lightning and fire calling down fire from heaven upon an altar. He said to all those gathered there, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing. Elijah had come to turn the hearts of the people to God.

The story is well-loved in the church. Elijah ridiculed the 400 prophets of Baal who danced and shouted and screamed and even cut themselves but to no avail. After a quiet prayer to the LORD, He sent fire from heaven. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God! God used Elijah to turn the hearts of the people to the Lord.

Now John would do the same. He would call the people to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. There is something special here. See, the older folk of Elijah's day worshipped Baal, but he turned their hearts to the children. Something new had to replace the old!

The old wine was to be put away. New wine was to be put into new wineskins! It was time for a new era. What of the night? The night was coming to an end. John's birth and work, his preaching and life would see to that. He came to make the people ready for the Lord. He came to unite fathers and children in the new hope and the coming of the new day. The child would be born in Bethlehem. The child would be John's cousin and the last Old Testament prophet would pave the way for the great prophet!

Conclusion It is one of those special moments. I don't know that we ponder it enough that the Lord lets us go in with Zechariah and hear the promise and live in the new era of hope. The word came. God made promises and kept them. O, I know some will scoff. Others will put it off as so much needless history or a good story. But we must choose today. The Lord He is God! The Lord remembers. God remembered us—Zechariah. My God is my oath—Elizabeth. God sends grace—John. The Sun of Righteousness who is the Prince of peace, the son of Mary who is the Son of God, would and did come to Bethlehem. It is a mystery to those who are perishing but to those of us who know the child who grew up to be a man who took on Baal and Satan to save Elijah and John by his death and resurrection on the cross. He is coming again.

What of the night? A new day is dawning, and it is certainly a better day! Amen