

The Lights of Christmas

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Date: 12 December 2012

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[0:00] I don't know how many of you in here have a Christmas tree in your house?

And how many of you decorated it? I'll help. All right. You help. We've got two. All right. So the wife did it. Or wife and children, possibly.

Now, in my house, I'm the tree fluffer-upper. I'll put it up. I put it up and fluff it up. We have two Christmas trees.

Okay. And I put the lights on the tree. Okay. Well, I did on one. I'll take that back. No, no, no. I did on both of them this year.

All right. We had some problems with the lights on the second tree, and Jonathan couldn't figure it out, and so Dad had to end up doing it. All right. So I put the lights on, and in one of the trees, we have these glass balls, you know, and, you know, that's pretty typical of Christmas tree ornaments.

[1:10] And they're two different colors. And then we have these bows that are made out of a certain kind of ribbon. And, you know, and they, because, you know, when you pack things up, they all get flattened out.

And so I have to also reshape those bows. This is my job. This is my job every year. At least that's what my wife tells me. In fact, she also says that you're just so good at it.

And I, you know, and I buy into that. Look, line, and sinker. But that's my job. And then I hang those up there and try to get the purple balls and the silver balls, gold balls, you know, evenly distributed around the tree.

I know you're just really enjoying my description of tree decorating. But we have trees and we have other kinds of decorations. I don't know how many of you have lights outside your house.

I know a couple of you do. Because I've been by your house. All right. So that's your job. Yeah. Right, guys? All right. You do that. You don't let your wife get up on the ladder or, you know, or stringing around the tree.

[2:19] Whatever you do. All right. So we've got lights on the tree. We've got lights outside of our house. Well, we have one light outside.

We have, if you've ever been by my house, we have a nativity that's kind of different. It's just a Joseph and a Mary and just a manger with nothing in it.

There's no baby in it. And it's just perfectly, totally white. And you shine a light on it. It's kind of a silhouette kind of thing. And so we have one light outside. And I set that up.

All right. So we've got that. We've got lights outside. Lights inside. Lights on the tree. And maybe you have other lighted things in your house.

We have, oh, these little Dickens Village. You know, these little shops and little church. And those have lights in them.

[3:17] And I'm also the one that plugs all that in every day and unplugs it at night. And some of them are in places where I literally have to crawl underneath my tree.

And you'd think I'd be smart enough to figure out a way, you know, to not have to crawl under the tree. And not only do I have to crawl under the tree, but we have this big kind of Santa Claus kind of display thing that sits right by the side of the tree and plugs in behind it.

And so I have to slide that thing out and then crawl under the tree and not knock off one of those glass balls, you know. And then plug that thing in and unplug it at night and slide Santa Claus.

Yeah. No, it's a snowman. Snowman back in his place. And are you enjoying this? Yes. This is real spiritual stuff. Real spiritual stuff that we're talking about here tonight.

And it's going to enhance your life this season spiritually. Anyway, so if you haven't guessed, my subject tonight is the lights of Christmas.

[4:25] And I personally, though maybe at least my son, Chris, he's been doing a lot of research lately for his youth into some of the Christmas traditions and their origins.

And I wanted to tell him not to do that because he's certainly going to be disappointed. Because Pat looks at some of these traditions, be it a Christmas tree or greenery or lights or, you know, Santa Claus, certainly, and some of those.

But he did it anyway. But why did I say that? Oh, I like the lights.

I like the displays. Last Saturday night, we had the youth all over at our house. And some of you might have had a visit from some of them. They did a kind of little project, bigger and better.

And so they split up into three groups. And they took a dime with each group. And they go to a house and say, I've got a dime. Would you trade me for something bigger or better?

[5:32] You know, went to Jim's house. You didn't even know we were there, did you? No, I didn't. Oh, you did? Okay. And anyway, in the course of doing that, and I can't even remember now where it was because we drove all over this city, but there is a house somewhere off this direction, it seems, that is just packed full of lights in the yard.

Has anybody been around and know where it is? We had to stop and look at that. The youth wanted to go to their house, their door, and try to trade something for them.

And so we went in there, in the driveway. And I'm just enjoying all the lights. I mean, it's a small yard, but they had more stuff packed into that yard. It's incredible.

I wish I could remember where it is. It's near Bison, I think, off over in that direction, on the other side of Madison. Anyway, they did go to the house, and the guy said, no, I don't have anything. That's all he said. They were kind of rejected there. Of course, he was probably spending too much money on his lights. He did well. I did hear this whirring sound.

[6:41] I think it was his electric meter going around. But I enjoy it. When I was growing up as a kid, we lived in Clinton, Missouri.

And we would travel to the plaza in Kansas City and see all the lights there and the fountains. And we would do that. Did that a number of Christmases. And I don't know if they still do that or not there. But enjoyed that. And some of you have been to some of these churches that have living Christmas trees.

Earth Baptist used to. I've never seen it. When we lived near the Memphis area, we would always go to Bellevue Baptist Church. And they always had a huge living Christmas tree program.

And all the lights, the dazzling lights. I've been to Silver Dollar City in December around the Christmas time. If you've ever been to Silver Dollar City around the Christmas time, the lights.

[7:46] There must be a billion. They keep them up lights. Well, yeah. And they're all lit. And every tree totally shrouded by lights.

And they're pretty. And they kind of add a, I don't know, something to the holiday. They're not particularly spiritual or religious in that sense, of course.

And again, I'd have to admit there's probably some kind of pagan origin to them. But we don't think of that in our day. And so I guess maybe there's some point where they're harmless.

Did you know that in the Christmas story, as presented in Scripture, there are a number of lights mentioned in the Bible?

Some of them actual lights, luminaries. And some in figurative ways. And I think it's kind of a neat little walk through the Christmas story and consider some of the lights of Christmas.

[8:51] So I'm going to give you a number of them. There are a number of lights that are in connection with the story of Christmas. And I would call those the lights of Christmas.

And then each of these lights of Christmas that we're going to consider here tonight testify to the Christmas light.

So there are the Christmas lights. And they testify to or really put on display or illuminate. We could maybe think of it in a number of different ways.

They declare the Christmas light. And we all know, of course, who the Christmas light is. Here's light number one. And you might not think that this is a Christmas light, but it is in connection with the story, the unfolding, the narrative as it unfolds concerning the birth of Christ.

And it's found in Luke 1.9. And here's what the Bible says. According to the custom of the priesthood, Zacharias, of course, this is that part about Zacharias, the soon-to-be, at least at this point, soon-to-be father of John the Baptist, where Zacharias, Lot, fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

[10:15] Now, there's the first light. A luminary. The altar of incense. And it was Zacharias' job. And it was a very privileged job.

You might recall a few Sundays ago when I was preaching out of that text. Very privileged, very honored job for the one of thousands of priests to have the opportunity to go into the holy place and to be responsible for the altar of incense.

Because that altar of incense was to continually burn. They were to never let it burn out. And presumably, the altar of incense had been burning from the very beginning, way back in the days of Moses when God gave through him all of the design for the instructions for the tabernacle.

So, that was his job. And it was a light in the holy place. And I would call it a light of Christmas.

And yet, the fire of the altar of incense was a light of Christmas. But it was not the Christmas light. Not the Christmas light.

[11:34] A representation of, in some sense, although the altar of incense, its primary symbol was prayer. The prayers offered up to the Lord.

And in this day, when Zacharias went into the temple, there were a multitude of people outside the holy place praying, the Bible says.

And a lot of scholars speculate that their prayer was not just for Zacharias. It could have been many of them were praying for him because his wife was barren.

He didn't have a son. But their primary prayer was for the Messiah to come. They were living in desperate times.

And many of them, kind of like we have experienced in our culture at certain junctures in history, a heightened expectation for the coming of the Lord.

[12:35] I think we're probably living in that time right now. We probably have every reason to be. He may be coming very soon. But I think in this day, there was this heightened expectation that the Messiah was going to come at any moment.

Now, they didn't understand how he was going to come and they certainly never would have guessed the way he actually did come. But this is why I connect the altar of incense, that fire that Zacharias kept burning as a light of Christmas.

It was a precursor, this event, a precursor to the coming of Christ. But it wasn't the light or the Christmas light. Light number two, in that same event, same instance, there in the holy place.

The Bible says in Luke 1.10, And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing at the right side of the altar of incense. Now, I would suggest to you that, of course, this was Gabriel, a bright, shining angel.

And his presence, that immediate presence there beside the altar so startled Zacharias that he was terrified to the point of, I started to say speechless, that's going to come a little bit later for him, but he was to the point of actually shaking in fear, quaking in his boots, we would say, though he probably wore sandals and not boots.

[14:02] And so here's this bright, shining, glorious archangel, not just one of your everyday run-of-the-mill angels, though I would admit that if just a regular everyday run-of-the-mill angel appeared before me, I would be just as terrified, I'm sure.

But the angel represents a light, a light of Christmas. And he had revelation, which is a, figuratively speaking, also light, illumination, inspiration.

He had a word for Zacharias. And his word for Zacharias was connected in a very significant way to the coming of Christ.

Because his word for Zacharias, of course, was that he was going to have a son, his wife, in her old age, in barren condition, was going to give him a son. And this son would be the forerunner, the one who would announce the coming of the Messiah, who was coming at any moment, very soon after.

Alright, so here's another light. So we have the altar of incense that is a light of Christmas, but not the Christmas light. And we have the bright, shining, glorious angel, who is a light, a light of Christmas, but not the Christmas light.

[15:28] Light number three, in Luke 1, 76, and this is Zacharias speaking, and he says, and you child, and he's speaking of his son, John the Baptist, you child will be called the prophet of the highest.

For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people for the remission of sins. And then, in John 1, 6, this is what the Bible says of John the Baptist.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John, and then we skip to verse 15. John bore witness, this is what the Bible says, he bore witness of him and cried out, saying, this was he of whom I said, he who comes after me is preferred before me, for he was before me.

All right, now, I'm calling this a light of Christmas in the sense of illumination, in the sense of his witness. We today, even, as witnesses, we bear the light, we shine the light of the gospel.

And this is what John the Baptist was doing, in a figurative sense, was a light of Christmas, but John was not the Christmas light.

[16 : 51] Even though John's birth was supernatural, wasn't it? He had a miraculous birth. John, as the angel said, was the greatest among all the prophets.

John was, according to John 1, the voice of the one crying in the wilderness. And John's message was very strong. One of judgment is coming. Repent. The Messiah is here.

And even all of that, as significant as all of that was, John was a light, but not the Christmas light.

Light number four, in Luke 2, 9, and we're going to be preaching on this this Sunday morning.

But it's that portion of the text or the narration concerning the shepherds out in their fields watching over their flocks by night, you know. And in Luke 2, 9, it says, And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone round them.

King James says, Round about them. And they were greatly afraid. So would you be. But picture this. I don't know that we can picture what this probably was like, may have been like, the glory of the Lord shone around them.

[18 : 15] Now, this is more than just simply the presence of a bright, shining, glorious angel. The Bible says it's the glory of the Lord was shining around them.

This was a bright and dazzling light and an incredible kind of experience for these shepherds. And even more significant, of course, was not the experience of the angel and the light and the glory of the Lord.

And then, after that, the multitude of the heavenly host. As great and wonderful as that was, the most significant part of it was what the angel said to them. But here's a light.

A light of Christmas. The glory of the Lord. But the glory of the Lord was, in a strict sense, a light of Christmas, but not the Christmas light.

It was a reflection of the glory of God, but a reflection of it as represented by the angels that it gathered there. Number five, light number five, Matthew 2, 1 through 2, and I'll skip on to 9 as well, but here's what the Bible says.

[19 : 32] It says, Behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him.

And behold, and this is verse 9 of Matthew 2, the star which they had seen in the east went before them till it came and stood over where the young child was.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. All right, so what's light number five? The star. The star. And it's a pretty incredible part of the story, the Christmas story, intriguing part.

Then, over the years, a lot of speculation about that star, just what it was. And I might list a few of them here. Here's about four, and they're more than this, but here's four ideas about the star.

Some have said that it was actually two planets that lined up, Jupiter and Saturn. And they lined up making a very bright light in the sky, and it was that light that the wise men saw and were, in a sense, following.

[20 : 47] That doesn't really do it for me. Second one, and this is probably, probably not going to be your pick, but not mine either, a low-flying meteor. That's really what the star was.

So, it's just perfectly explainable. You know, it just happened to be one of these meteors flying through our atmosphere, and so, you know, the friction and all of that, and then this bright light, and so that's what the star was.

Interesting. Another one idea is an erratic comet that came very close. Erratic, I guess, this somehow, for them, explains the fact that the stars seem to move and then stop and so forth.

So, some erratic comet, that doesn't really do it for me. The fourth one, those who kind of want to make everything in the Bible figurative or symbolic, there have been those who said that really the star that Matthew mentions is just figurative language.

And really what it meant was, and this quote, it stood for the inner vision of the star of destiny in the hearts of man.

[22:06] Now, you like that one, that's what the star was. It wasn't a real star, not even a real light. It was an inner light. And so, Matthew is just kind of speaking figuratively here.

I believe the star was supernatural. What about you? Amen. I think it was a supernatural event. I'm not, and don't think we ought to try to explain it scientifically.

Because what we do when we try to explain it scientifically, we end up with no miracle and no supernatural God and it kind of cheapens the whole thing. But it was supernatural.

I think probably along the lines of the Shekinah glory of God. And I don't have a problem with that. I think the same, as the glory that shone round the shepherds there who were watching their flocks at night.

If you go back further, I think it's the same as the cloud and the pillar of fire that led and protected Israel when they came out of Egypt.

[23:09] That's supernatural. It was a God thing. The same kind of glory, I think, that filled the tabernacle in Moses' day. The same as the light that you might remember when Jesus was transfigured and He became so bright.

I think the King James puts it whiter than white could be. However white that could be. And it's just the glory of God, the Shekinah glory of God.

And so this star was supernatural. And why would I say that it's not an actual star or some natural phenomenon?

Because, well, obviously only the wise men saw it, apparently. We don't have any record of anybody else seeing it, though there have been supposed documents found where others have written about a star that they saw and such.

But apparently all the wise men saw it. They were looking for it. It appeared. Also this star appeared and then it would disappear and then it would appear again. That doesn't point to any kind of natural phenomenon.

[24:21] It moved. Stars don't move. They may seem like they move. It's actually, you know, us. We move. But the star is not moving.

But this one would appear, disappear, reappear. It would move and guide. And then, obviously it stopped at some point. That's the way the Bible describes it.

It stopped right over where the child was born so that the wise men could find him. Well, not where he was born, but where he was at the time. By the way, he was living in a house, not still in the stable by then.

And so, you know, this is not a natural event. It's supernatural. But having said all of that, still, the star was a light of Christmas. Not the Christmas light, of course.

And so, one more light, and that would be the true light. And everybody knows where we're going with this or where I'm going with this. Because, see, each of these Christmas lights, and I suppose if I looked a little further, I might be able to find some other representations of light and figurative senses.

[25:28] But all these that I've mentioned, five of them, all of these lights simply served as displays. And I kind of like that word. And I'll explain it a little bit later.

Lights that acted as displays for the Christmas light. I use that word because this time of the year we have a lot of light displays.

And there are things set up, whether it's a tree or whether it's the corner of your house or a bush out in front or whatever you hang the light on. There are things that display that light.

And these lights I mentioned are displays of the Christmas light. They put it on display. And the Christmas light, of course, is Jesus.

Obviously. It's that babe in the manger. It's the light. And I might give you several references in the Bible. We're talking here about the star that will come out of Jacob, Numbers 24:17.

[26:31] We're talking here, we're talking about Jesus. We're talking about the bright and morning star, Revelation 22:16. We're talking about, and we looked at this when we were in Luke 1, the day spring from on high.

Day spring means the rising of the sun and stars, the rising of the light. The day spring from on high, Luke 1:78. Also, the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it or overcome it, literally.

John 1:9. The light of the world, John 8:12. Jesus said that himself, of himself. And also, is the light that we will one day all see again.

And it's interesting, in Matthew 24, 30, the Bible says, immediately after the tribulation of those days, we've been talking about last things and the tribulation.

The end of the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

[27 : 40] Translation, everything will be dark. Everything will be dark. But, but not totally dark. There will be a light because then it says, then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven.

And then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they will see, how are they going to see him? The sun's blotted out, the moon is dark, the stars have all given up their light.

How will they see him? They'll see him because he is the light. And so they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Tremendous passage.

And though Jesus doesn't say so in that particular passage, other places we could go reveal that we'll be coming with him. We'll be with him. And so, we'll see that light and be with him.

So Jesus is then what? The true Christmas light. The true Christmas. All the other lights that we've talked about, both literal lights as well as figurative lights, supernatural lights, as well as even some man-made lights.

[28 : 48] All are representations or displays of the true Christmas light. And so here's what it all comes down to, this question that you ought to ask yourself.

Are you his light display? I think of it in that sense. We set up light displays and decorations and we like those and I like them and I don't have any problem.

But are we a light display? I don't mean, and some people, you know, they'll wear Christmas lights around their neck, you know, and such.

In fact, we sold them at LifeWay, I remember, a couple of years ago. You could buy garland to put around your neck and it had a little battery pack and it would even flash around you.

and I thought, how ridiculous. But I don't mean that kind of light, of course. But we're to be displays of the light of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[29 : 49] We're reflecting His glory. We are displaying the great worth of His nature and character and His grace. We are also illuminating the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

and we're to be light displays and not, of course, just at Christmas but every day of our lives.