

## HE MUST INCREASE: I MUST DECREASE

**"He that hath the Bride is the Bridegroom; but the Friend of the Bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the Bridegroom's voice: this my joy, therefore is fulfilled"-John 3:29**

IN Luke 3, we have the ministry of John Baptist, the "voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord,"

The story begins in chapter 1. After a silence of 400 years, God once again openly manifested Himself to His people, and the wonderful events which fill the Gospels begin.

The last previous Word of God had come through Malachi, who closed his prophecy, and the Old Testament, with the promise of the coming of Elijah to turn the nation back to God.

T the national hour of prayer, as an aged priest stood offering incense for the nation in the Tmepole, in the Holy Place, on the altar of prayer, before the veil -- the angel Gabriel appeared. He had, 6y00 years before, appeared to Daniel, and he was to appear again soon after to Mary.

There could have been no more fitting place or time to indicate that all things are through the power of prayer. And his first words were--"Fear not, thy prayer is heard" (Lk. 1:13).

The priest was Acharias, and the message was that though his wife was barren, and they were old, they should have a son.

It was to be a child of promise, a special operation of the power of God, like Isaac, Samson, and Samuel.

And he was to be a Nazarite from birth, again like Samson and Smauel.

And he was to be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb.

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kWe are impressed through all the events of Luke 1 and 2--the announcements and births of John and Jesus--with the constant repetition of the theme of intense and overflowing joy in the purpose of God--both by angels and by men.

It is an aspect worthy of deep consideration. Joy is a spiritual thing, and it should be much deeper and more prevalent among us.

We do not get and keep CLOSE enough to these things. We are missing so mujch that we would be experiencing by a deeper and more intense application. Joy is spiritual healthiness and robust wellbeing, and we are far too weak and sickly in this respect.

This attitude of ecstatic praise should be tyhe rule among God's children and not the occasional and seemingly unnatural exception.

This is manifest more naturally and freely among some of the smaller, simpler sects, who are not afraid of the ridicule of the world, and it is to our reproach that it is not more natural among us.

The Psalms of David, which are the mind of Christ, portray to us the true godly attitude. Truly they are filled with the burden of the passing sorrows of the present, but also with the unrestrainable and overflowing joy of the Spirit in all God's marvelous works and wisdom.

We do not fill our minds enough with the contemplation of eternal joys but far too much with petty, passing, depressing present things.

"Thou shalt have joy and gladness" (Lk. 1:14).

"Joy and gladness" is God's will and purpose for His people. All His appointments are to this end. The closer we truly get to the way and mind of God, the greater will be our joy and gladness.

Dissatisfaction and unhappiness are elements of the flesh--inevitable accompaniments of selfishness and desire.

The deceptiveness of the flesh is nowhere more clearly manifested than in its prompting to seek and expect joy and gladness outside the way of God. This is the essence of the temptation of Christ which he, in the wisdom of the Spirit, instantly rejected. "And many shall rejoice at his birth" (v. 14).

And we must be among them! Rejoicing MUST be the basic tone of our lives. We must continuously rejoice in these things.

Regardless of, and in spite of, present problems and disappointments, deep rejoicing will always be our principal characteristic, IF our faith is real, and if we truly believe what God has said. Any other frame of mind is a reproach against God's love and goodness. We are denying by our actions our professed faith in God's glorious assurance that (Rm. 8:28)--"I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart for my brethren, my kinsmen after the flesh." Also said (Phil 4:4-8)--"Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice!" "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

These statements are not contradictory, nor mutually exclusive. They are rather complementary. They make up the full pattern of godliness which Paul so well manifested.

Both are essential to true Christlikeness, but the rejoicing and the peace must be the broader and deeper and over-riding, and more inward, emotions. Until we develop this basic frame of mind in ourselves, and radiate it, we cannot do anyone any good. We drive people from the glorious Truth of God, rather than attract them to its joy and beauty and goodness.

God is good, and God is love, and good and love will finally fill the earth, and everything in its own way is leading forward to this final victory.

There are no mistakes or failures in the triumphant divine plan.

We must always keep the sorrow and the rejoicing in their respective relationships. One is small and passing; the other infinite and everlasting \* \* \*

"Thou shalt be dumb, because thou believest not my words." The dumbness of Zacharias was a blessing in the form of a punishment, and so beautifully illustrates the wisdom and goodness of God's ways.

He would not believe without a sign, so he was given a sign that rebuked his unbelief, yet at the same time strengthened his faith. It both humbled and comforted him, and also taught him wisdom.

He was a righteous man, well pleasing to God (Sv. 6). But at the moment of visitation-the great moment of his life-the moment for which Israel had been waiting 400 years-he was not quite ready. He was caught off guard.

And yet he was in the very act in which his mind should have been most attuned for a divine communication. He stood before the altar-before the veil-offering the incense of prayer for the whole nation.

Six months later the same Gabriel appeared with similar abruptness to a poor, obscure young girl of Israel, as she went about her own private way, but how much more maturely does the young woman react to the sudden angelic visitation and much stranger message, than the old priest!

The lesson is to live more deeply in the world of faith, and constant consciousness of spiritual things.

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"And Mary arose, and went into the hill country of Judea, into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth" (vs. 39-40).

(The term translated 'cousin' in v. 36 is a term of indefinite relationship and usually translated 'kinsman,' as in Lk. 2:44).

Upon seeing Mary, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit to prophesy and glorify God, and Mary was likewise, and the babe John leaped in the womb for joy. This is an important aspect of the whole picture concerning John and his work-joy, and the power of the Spirit. It comes out again and again.

All was of the Spirit of God for the joy of mankind. The greatest event in human history was just beginning to unfold-spoken of by the angels as "Tidings of Great Joy"-the event for which all the ages had waited-the event around which all revolved-and all the participants are deeply moved with the joy of the Spirit.

At the birth of John, Zacharias' tongue was loosed, and he too was filled with the Holy Spirit and praised and glorified God. Of John, Zacharias said (v. 76)-"Thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest, for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways."

John's mission was to arouse the nation to repentance, and to introduce the Messiah to them--"To give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of their sins" (v. 77).

From the beginning, this aspect was emphasized--that the salvation men need is from themselves--from their own natural, death-tending characteristics and desires.

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"Through the tender mercy of our God, whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us" (v. 78). "Dayspring" means arising or dawning. A new day was dawning for Israel. The Sun of righteousness was to be manifested. This is a clear reference again to the last chapter of Malachi, the promise of the "Sun of Righteousness" to "arise with healing in his wings."

This reference to light is very frequent in relation to the coming of Christ, as in Isa. 9:2-"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined."

Light from darkness was the first act of creation.

The natural state of men is darkness, and all his natural thoughts and actions are foolishness. Only spiritual thoughts and actions are light. Paul presents this vividly (2 Cr. 4:6): "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts,

"To give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The apostle John says of the same event (Jn 1:6-9)-"There was a man sent from God whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light

"He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

"That was the true Light which lighteth every man who cometh into the world."

It can be our privilege and joy, if we chose, to come out from walking in natural death-tending darkness, into that life-giving Light.

Just accepting the Truth is not in itself coming in the light. We are only in the Light when we are consciously choosing to repudiate all the thoughts of the flesh and to walk according to the principles of the mind of Christ.

John said, at the beginning of his first epistle (1:5)-"This, then, is the message which we have heard of him."-this is the basic message, this is the key point, the heart of the matter-"God is Light, and in Him is no darkness.

"If we say we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the Truth."

And walking in light, as John goes on to show, means walking in love toward everyone. He says (1 Jn 2:10-11)-"He that loveth his brother abideth in the Light.

"He that hateth his brother is in darkness."

An act that is not done in love-through, enlightened godly love, is an act of darkness0-an act of disfellowship from God-not matter how self-righteous it may be. Everything we do must be tested by this test. Our "zeal for the Lord," like Jehu, is often really the flesh when we pride ourselves it is the Spirit.

When we act, or speak, or think, in anger, or annoyance, or impatience, or selfishness, or resentment, or for any motive except kindness and love, even if it be-as we suppose-in defense of the Truth, we are in darkness, and are disfellowshipping ourselves from God Who is Light and Love and Goodness.

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"The child grew, and waxed strong in spirit" (Lk. 1:80). What does it mean, to wax (or grow) strong in spirit"?

It means, by study, and meditation, and prayer, and practice, to be strong in spirituality and control of the flesh-0to be strong in the mind of the Spirit.

We cannot actually weaken the flesh, but we can continually strengthen and build up the Spirit. This is the whole purpose of our lives, and every moment not consciously engaged in this is wasted. Every time we subdue and control the natural thoughts and reactions of the flesh, we strengthen the Spirit-0we "wax stronger in Spirit."

This was how John spent 30 years of preparation in the desert for his so brief, but so important, ministry-"The child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the desert until the day of his showing unto Israel."

Thirty years' lonely preparation in seclusion-0then a brief ministry of a year or so-then imprisonment and death at the whim of a wicked woman. This was the life story of him of whom Christ said there had never been a greater born of woman.