**THE WORLD BEFORE CHRISTMAS**

In order to fully appreciate Christmas, we need to understand what the world was like *before* Jesus was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago.

In order to do that we need to go way back to “the beginning” and work our way up.

The world *before anything* was dark, void, empty and formless.

**Gen 1:1-2** In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. **2**Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Note: The earth was “formless”, “empty”, “dark”

1. **CREATION (the beginning)**

**“Let there be light”**

**Gen 1:3“**And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.”

So many important aspects to study in the first three verses of the Bible, but one that is often overlooked is “God”

The Hebrew word/name for God is **“Eloha”.**

But that is *not* exactly the word that is used in Genesis 1.

Throughout the chapter the word/name for God appears in the Hebrew as **“Elohim”**

Elohim is Eloha, with an “im” at the end, making it plural.

*This is very important to remember whenever we look at* ***John 1:1 “The word was with God and Was God”***

God created mankind in his own image. In order to have fellowship “love and be loved”.

He saw that it was “very good” (perfect, unspoiled, pure, holy)

Mankind sinned against God, creating deep separation with God.

* Sin grew and permeated the earth;
* By the time of Noah, mankind had become “*100% evil”.*

**Gen 6:5-6“**The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. **6**The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.”

* God destroyed the world by flood and restarted with Noah and His family.

About 400 years later, God decided to reach out to mankind once again…

1. **ABRAHAM (2000BC)**

**Gen. 12:1-3**The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

**2**“I will make you into a great nation,
    and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
**3**I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you

Abraham was already 75 years old, yet through Him God kept his promise;

He became the father of Isaac, the Grandfather of Jacob(Israel) and the Great-Grandfather of the 12 Sons of Israel.

Jacob and His sons experienced great famine in their land and moved to Egypt at the request of their brother Joseph, whom they tried to kill, but now had become powerful.

Hundreds of years later, the descendants of Israel were no longer guests in Egypt, they were slaves.

1. **MOSES (1450BC)**

God raised up Moses to not only lead them out of slavery and to the promised land, but to give them the “Law” and a method by which they could worship Him and know “His Presence”(Deut. 33)

1. **JUDGES / KINGS (1300-586)**

For the next 800-900 years Israel tried to rule itself through Judges, and then Kings. Sometimes they honored the Lord, but most of the time they continued to do evil in His sight and become more and more separated from Him.

1. **PROPHETS (1020 – 400 BC)**

God sent them Prophets during this time to speak His word to them, correct them and in some cases warn them of coming events.

Once again, at times the people turned to God and experienced his presence, but for the most part, they continued in Sin (Separation) from God.

God spoke of this through Isaiah:

**Isaiah 29:13**

The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

**Throughout the entire time from Abraham through the Prophets God promised to bless all the people of the World through a coming “Messiah”.**

**The Prophets wrote many prophesies including:**

* **“**a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” (Isa 7:14)
* “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called; Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isa. 9:6)
* “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (Micah 5:2)

The *final verses* of the Old Testament;

“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes” (Mal. 4:5)

*(which told them that before the Messiah comes, Elijah must return first)*

1. **“400 YEARS OF SILENCE” (420BC – 1st Century)**

**It is known as silence because the prophets were silent, and it seemed that God’s plan for His people had become dormant.**

**It was not entirely silent, however. It could have just as well been known as “400 years of *violence”***

During this time one kingdom after another conquered the land of Judea and established their own rulers and religions, often by bloodshed and oppression, including;

* The Persians,
* The Greeks (Alexander the Great)
* The Syrians (Seleucids - Antiochus IV Epiphanes) –

Who was finally defeated in the Hanukkah Story.

Just when the Jews finally got their independent kingdom back (Hasmoneans) the most powerful and brutal Empire in history conquered them; The Romans.

But instead of destroying them, they kept them as a client-state of the empire requiring them to work hard and pay heavy taxes.

They placed a Tyrant named *Herod* over them that was the most paranoid and ruthless dictator they have ever known.

Herod would regularly kill people, even in his own household whom he feared threatened his power and position, including his sons, his wife and her entire family.

This is the same Herod, whom the wise men revealed that they were following a star and seeking the King of the Jews.

**Matt 2:16 “**When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under.”

The Priesthood was also corrupt. These were the High Priests who controlled the temple. They were made up of the “Pharisees” and “Sadducees”. At one time the “Essenes” were also part of the temple priesthood, but they got so fed up with the corruption that they moved to the Dead Sea and wrote the Scrolls (Qumran).

Because the Temple was the only place one could worship God and have their sins forgiven, the Chief Priests would extort ridiculous sums of money from their own people with temple taxes and money-changing for sacrifices. Very few priests and were righteous and there was an over-arching culture of godlessness even within the Holy City.

***This* was the world Jesus was born into.**

**This is THE WORLD BEFORE CHRISTMAS.**

* The World – Was ruled by a powerful evil empire who took on entire kingdoms as “tax-slaves”
* The Nation – Was ruled by a paranoid Tyrant who would kill anyone who he considered a threat.
* The Temple – Was ruled by corrupt Priests who were always on the lookout for those they considered heretics and would quickly out them to death.
* The prophets were silent for hundreds of years.
* God did not speak to His people in the usual ways that he had in generations past.
* The present days were grim and hopeless, and the future looked worse.

**then *something* happened…**

**Luke 1:5-25 “**In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. **6**Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. **7**But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

**8**Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, **9**he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. **10**And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

**11**Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. **12**When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. **13**But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him **John.** **14**He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, **15**for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. **16**He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. **17**And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

**18**Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

**19**The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. **20**And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

**21**Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. **22**When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

**23**When his time of service was completed, he returned home. **24**After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. **25**“The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

This is how the birth of John the Baptist came to pass.

Remember the prophecy in the last verses of the Old Testament;

“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes” (Mal. 4:5)

*(In order for the Messiah to come, Elijah must return first.)*

 Gabriel told Zechariah “**17**And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah,”.

This was it! It was happening!

After so many years of silence, this was the first sign of the great things to come.

**The Birth of John the Baptist**

**57**When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. **58**Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

**59**On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, **60**but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

**61**They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

**62**Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. **63**He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” **64**Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. **65**All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. **66**Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

**Zechariah’s Song**

**67**His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

**68**“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
    because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
**69**He has raised up a hornof salvation for us
    in the house of his servant David
**70**(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
**71**salvation from our enemies
    and from the hand of all who hate us—
**72**to show mercy to our ancestors
    *and to* ***remember*** *his holy covenant,*

***73****the oath he swore to our father Abraham:*

***Zechariah*** – “God Remembers” (*Zechor*)

The days were dark and hopeless, but God had not forgotten them.

He never forgets His people.

The plan was already in motion.

Jesus would soon be with them (Emmanuel – God With Us)

*“O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear”*

John the Baptist was the first sign of the Promise of God being fulfilled in the darkest time.

The days we are living in are also dark.

Many have become worn out and hopeless.

The faith of many has run dry and some have even fallen into unbelief.

The world powers offer us no hope,

Our own nation is riddled with hatred, division and corruption.

The difference between our world, and the world before Christmas is;

***WE HAVE JESUS!***

We have the light of life living inside of us.

Christmas is a reminder of the very first time that light came into the world.

It’s a perfect opportunity for us to rekindle our lamps.

Allow them to burn bright, because there is a desperate world suffering in darkness that needs the light we have within us.

Christmas is the perfect opportunity to remind ourselves and others that *Jesus is here.*

We just need to *seek* Him, and we will *find* Him.

John came as a “*witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe”.*

That’s *our job* as well.

Let’s spend this Christmas season “*Testifying about the Light of Jesus”, so that through us, others might believe.*

**John 1:1-14** “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

**The True Light is Jesus – and *He is Here With Us!***

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