

Text: Lk 1.15-17

The sun is the star which we orbit year after year. It seems always the same, but it is always changing. I looked for some descriptions of the sun online, and found this at space.com:

The sun lies at the heart of the solar system, where it is by far the largest object. It holds 99.8% of the solar system's mass and is roughly 109 times the diameter of the Earth — about one million Earths could fit inside the sun.

The surface of the sun is about 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit (5,500 degrees Celsius) hot, while temperatures in the core reach more than 27 million F (15 million C), driven by nuclear reactions. One would need to explode 100 billion tons of dynamite every second to match the energy produced by the sun, according to NASA.¹

For all the brilliance of the sun, we all know how the setting sun creates a unique scene each evening as the sun blazes its last before night comes on. Here is how Emily Dickinson described it:

Blazing in gold and quenching in purple,
Leaping like leopards to the sky,
Then at the feet of the old horizon
Laying her spotted face, to die;²

It is as if, at the end of the day, the sun gives one last gasp of glory, then fades away.

Our topic this Christmas is the Spirit at Christmas. The first reference to the Holy Spirit comes in Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah about the birth of John the Baptist.

Read Luke 1.14-17

One of my books refers to the arrival of John as “the renewal of prophecy” and “the dawn of the eschatological era.”³

¹ Charles Q. Choi last updated, “Earth’s Sun: Facts about the Sun’s Age, Size and History,” Space.com, June 9, 2021, <https://www.space.com/58-the-sun-formation-facts-and-characteristics.html>.

² Emily Dickinson, *The Juggler of the Day*

³ David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 255.

The last prophet in Judea, as far as we know, was Malachi, over four hundred years before John.

- That would be like someone from the reign of James I — William Shakespeare, for instance.

Now, after many years, the angel prophesies of another prophet who will bring joy to his parents and many in Israel.

It might seem to some that they are watching a new sunrise, the coming of prophets again. In fact, in John, they will see the end of the OT era, it's sunset, so to speak: the last blaze of glory before a new age dawns.

The Sun Sets on the Prophets

Proposition: The glory of Israel must fade for the glory of the Israelite to rise.

I. The place of John in the prophetic lineage

A. Three characteristics

1. Greatness

a. Luke uses similar language of Jesus

Lk 1.32 "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;

1) Notice that there is no qualifier: "in the sight of the Lord"

2) This maximizes Jesus, but doesn't diminish John

b. What makes John great?

Lk 7.26-28 "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet.²⁷ "This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.'²⁸ "I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

1) He is greatest because he saw Him of whom he prophesied

2) He is greatest because he is the last, and brings to a climax the ministry of prophets in Israel

2. Asceticism

- a. The description makes people wonder if John was a Nazirite (like Samson)

Jdg 13.5 “For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines.”

- 1) Chief feature: during the Nazirite vow, the hair could not be cut
- 2) Were not allowed to be in the presence of dead bodies
- 3) Could drink no wine

- b. A similar figure is Samuel, the last judge and first prophet

1 Sa 1.11 She made a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head.”

- c. Now we have John, the last prophet

- 1) Some details of Nazirite vow (and identification as such) missing in NT
- 2) Marked by asceticism: “locusts and wild honey,” rough clothing
- 3) Here no wine, as if a priest on duty

John is certainly marked out as one of the prophets by this lifestyle, whether a Nazirite or not

3. Spirit

- a. This characteristic brings John to our attention this Christmas

- b. We will come back to this, but a few notes here

- 1) From the womb could refer to “in the womb” – as the baby John “leapt” in the womb when Mary came to visit

- 2) Yet the role of John in bringing OT prophecy to an end suggests more

“The Spirit is the major figure [in Luke], superintending the infancy stories and behind every detail. His empowering presence is a permanent fixture in John’s life and ministry.”⁴

B. Identity (17)

1. He will go before “Him” as a forerunner
 - a. Him refers to “the Lord” in v. 16
 - b. This connects him to two prophecies of Malachi

Mal 3.1 ¶ “Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts.

Mal 4.5-6 ¶ “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD.⁶ “He will restore the hearts of the fathers to *their* children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.”

2. The connection with Elijah quite clear, prompting Jewish questions

Jn 1.21 They asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.”

- a. John said he was not Elijah but recall our text

“It is he who will go *as a forerunner* before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah

- b. “Spirit and power” is not the same as the person of Elijah

⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *Luke: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 29.

“Finally, as regarded the coming of Elijah as forerunner of the Messiah, it is to be observed that, according to Jewish notions, he was to appear *personally*, and not merely ‘in spirit and power.’”⁵

More on this as well...

II. The uniqueness of John among the prophets

A. The Spirit-filled ministry makes John unique

1. Spirit-filling prompts prophecy

Lk 1.41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Lk 1.67 ¶ And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

Both of these passages will show up later in our series

2. In the Old Testament, the Spirit only occasionally filled or came upon men – but mostly warriors, not prophets

a. When Moses selected 70 elders to assist him

Num 11.25 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed *Him* upon the seventy elders. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do *it* again.

1) Interestingly, two of the 70 didn’t show up to the meeting, but stayed in the camp

2) They also prophesied (whatever that means) – Joshua wanted Moses to restrain them

Num 11.29 But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’S people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!”

⁵ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1 (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), 142.

b. Came upon the judges in their judgeship

Jdg 3.10 The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

Jdg 6.34 So the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; and he blew a trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called together to follow him.

Jdg 11.29 ¶ Now the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, so that he passed through Gilead and Manasseh; then he passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he went on to the sons of Ammon.

1) Three times mentioned of Samson

2) Also, Saul, after Samuel had anointed him, then when he led Israel in battle

1 Sa 11.6 Then the Spirit of God came upon Saul mightily when he heard these words, and he became very angry.

3) When Samuel anointed David

1 Sa 16.13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah.

4) Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada prophesied, and the men of Joash killed him

2 Chr 24.20 ¶ Then the Spirit of God came on Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest; and he stood above the people and said to them, "Thus God has said, 'Why do you transgress the commandments of the LORD and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, He has also forsaken you.'"

B. John had the Spirit from the beginning

1. The ministry of the Spirit is a major emphasis in Luke
 - a. Seventeen references in the Gospel
 - b. Fifty-seven references in Acts
2. Luke's summary notes not only John's physical but his spiritual development

Lk 1.80 And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

III. The focus of John in prophesying to the people

Lk 1.16 "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.

A. The mission is revival

1. This was always the prophetic mission
2. When Elijah destroyed the prophets of Baal, he called the people to the true God

1 Ki 18.21 Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long *will* you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word.

1 Ki 18.37-39 "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God, and *that* You have turned their heart back again."³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.³⁹ When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God."

"Turning people to God was the responsibility of every true priest (Mal. 2:6)."⁶

⁶ Constable, *Expository Notes*, Lk 1.16.

3. John's mission was effective

Mt 3.5-6 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan;⁶ and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.

B. The issue is responding to the work of the Spirit

1. Was John Elijah who should come? Listen to Jesus

Mt 11.13-14 "For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John.¹⁴ "And if you are willing to accept *it*, John himself is Elijah who was to come.

2. If you are willing to accept it...

3. John's message:

Jn 1.29 ¶ The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Will you accept it?

Conclusion:

Proposition: The glory of Israel must fade for the glory of the Israelite to rise.

The prophets disappeared after John. The new era began, the era of the Christ: the true Israelite.

Will you accept him?