

“Luke’s Christmas Carols: Benedictus”
Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

December 15, 2013

SI: In the middle of sermon series on four Christmas songs in Luke 1-2. Next Sunday we’ll study the song of the angels, Gloria in Excelsis. Following Sunday, we’ll study the song of Simeon, the Nunc Dimittis, which is a remarkably applicable song for the last week of the old year.

Today, it’s the song of Zechariah—father of John the Baptist. His song has been called Benedictus.

Comes from the first word in the song: Blessed be, or Praise be.

The song starts in verse 68, going to start earlier.

The context of this song, what Lord doing in Zechariah’s life extremely beneficial for our understanding.

INTRO: Allison has high school friend who is a flight attendant.
She always has stories about difficult passengers.

It's amazing how in this post-9/11 world, there are still some people who get so upset about their seat assignment or their meal, that they demand to speak to the pilot.

Of course they can't, it's against the law.

But you have to wonder how people could be so absorbed in their small concerns that they forget the pilot is flying an incredibly complex machine 30,000 feet above the ground at 500 miles per hour.

And that there is something much bigger than their meal or seat assignment—which is flying and landing the plane.

It often happens that passengers spend the whole flight upset, and even get off the airplane upset, completely missing the big thing—

That they have been safely carried through the air for hundreds of miles at high speeds, and brought safely back to earth and to their destination.

Christians are often like—worried and upset about many things many of the details of life not what we expected. That's disappointing.

We want our Pilot to do something.

We become absorbed in our concerns.

And we forget that there is something much bigger than all of our concerns—

It's bigger and more amazing than flying—

and it makes everything we get upset about small by comparison—

That big thing is God's grace.

God's grace is his favor to you in Jesus Christ.

It is God looking at you and seeing his perfect Son.

And it is God pouring out on you the great blessings of salvation through Christ.

Forgiveness of all your sins. Freedom from guilt. Clear conscience.

He is carrying you safely through all sorts of dangers to your final destination.

Christmas is a wonderful time for believers because God's grace is so evident.

We are reminded over and over throughout the season

of the grace of God through the gift of His Son.

Everything else—all our other concerns—should be small in comparison.

But sometimes they aren't. Sometimes they seem huge.

It's no secret that Christmas a time when weight of life's worries and sorrows and concerns overwhelm people—even Christians.

Many things can seem worse during the holidays:

Financial woes, health problems, unhappy children, marriage problems, unfulfilled dreams.

These things can loom so large in the minds of people—even true Christians—that their experience of God's grace is diminished.

His grace is not diminished. He is still gracious in Christ.

He's still your Pilot. He's still getting you closer to your destination.

You are still in his capable hands.

But your experience of his care, and your gladness for it is diminished.

This story about a man, a believer, who couldn't see the big thing God was doing.

He couldn't see God's amazing grace in the coming birth of Jesus Christ.

That's because one thing in his life disappointed him. He had no children.

If God had left Zechariah alone, that disappointment would have diminished his experience of God's grace for the rest of his life.

But God didn't leave him alone.

He disciplined the man so that he started to see things correctly—

and as a result, this Christmas song came pouring out of his heart.

That is what the Lord wants for you this Christmas and at all times—

He wants you to have a joyful experience of his grace in your life.

He wants you to know his favor towards you in Jesus Christ in such an intense way that the disappointments and sorrows of your life do not dominate you—but they take their proper place in your life.

You see them as small things compared to the great thing that God is doing for you.

Let's look at Zechariah's story and song under two headings,
one negative and one positive.

1. How you can diminish your experience of God's grace at Christmas.
2. How you can enhance your experience of God's grace at Christmas.

Zechariah is an example of both.

MP#1 How you can diminish your experience of God's grace at Christmas.

Not that you want to—but Zechariah first gives us a negative example as a warning.

In a word, the way you diminish your experience of God's grace is by unbelief.

Let's start by getting a clear picture in our minds of Zechariah's struggle.

He was a priest, wife Elizabeth from a priestly family.

They were born again people.

Upright in the sight of the Lord, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.

People were saved before Christ came in the very same way saved after he came.

By faith. They had faith in the Savior to come, and were righteous in God's sight.

During this time the spiritual life of Israel was very low.

Even though there was a lot of religious activity, the religious leaders, priests, teachers of the law were not faithful to the Scriptures.

There have been many times in the history of the church when that has been case.

Spiritual climate of the church and its leaders very low.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were true believers in a difficult time.

But they had no children. Elizabeth was barren.

And now they were too old to have children anyway.

It is always hard for a couple not to be able to have children.

But for Zechariah and Elizabeth it was particularly hard because there was a social and religious stigma attached.

Childlessness was believed to be a punishment from God.

Elizabeth calls it her disgrace among the people.

Word also translated reproach or insult.

Whenever her barrenness came up in conversation—people not sympathetic.

They reproached her. Well, getting what she deserves.

Teaching of rabbis, religious duty of a man to divorce his wife if she was barren.

Well, Zechariah was obviously a biblical man. He stuck with his wife.

They had prayed for a child for years. They waited for God to answer.

But when got too old to have children they quit praying,

because they thought the time for those prayers to be answered had passed.

But prayers uttered in faith are always answered.

Sometimes Lord answers strangely, completely different from what expected.

Sometimes many years later, after we have quit praying.

As the story begins we're told that Zechariah's division of priests on duty—
he was chosen by lot to burn incense in the temple.

This was a once in a lifetime honor.

Priest chosen would enter temple alone, burn incense before curtain,
pray for the nation of Israel, come out and give Aaron's benediction to people.

So Zechariah was chosen. As he was burning incense, angel appeared.

Zechariah was startled and gripped with fear.

But angel told him not to fear that he had good news.

Your prayer has been heard, Elizabeth will have a son.

Then angel told him this son will be great in God's sight,
filled with Holy Spirit from birth.

And this child would go before the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah,
and turn the hearts of many people back to the Lord.

Zechariah would have recognized those words.

They are a famous Messianic prophecy in Malachi 4.

But how did Zechariah respond? Did he say:

That's Malachi's prophecy! Are you saying the Messiah is about to come?

After all these years of waiting, is God's salvation about to come?

No, he said: How can I be sure of this? Wife and I are too old to have children.

The angel Gabriel called it what it was—unbelief.

Zechariah didn't believe God could or would keep this promise.

All the sins we commit are rooted in unbelief in the promises of God.

Whenever sins crop up in our lives—whether attitudinal or behavioral—
it's a sign of lurking, growing, unbelief in God.

Zechariah's doubt, his disappointment in this area of life—

not only kept him from believing that God was going to give him a son—
it kept him from seeing the really big thing God was doing.

I once knew a Christian couple whose marriage was coming apart.

The wife prayed and prayed that God would change her husband and save marriage.

But when months passed and she didn't see the changes she expected,
she became angrier and angrier, not just at husband, but at God for not fixing it.

Then one day, her husband asked her to go to a movie.

It was a tiny thing, but it was God working in his heart, moving him toward wife.

But instead of seeing his invitation for what it was,
the beginning of an answer to her prayers—she was furious.
She accused her husband of not being serious about their marriage,
she accused him of mocking her and she threw his invitation back in his face.
She was a believer, but she let unbelief blind her to what God was doing.

Unbelief expresses itself in the life of a believer in different ways—
cynicism (that was Zechariah), anger, anxiety, bitterness, covetousness,
despondency, impatience.

All of those attitudinal sins keep us from seeing the big and small things
the Lord is doing in our lives and in the world.

It's Christmastime.

We are celebrating the greatest, most amazing event in all history.

The eternal Son of God became man for our salvation.

He became one of us so that he could live and die for us—
and forever be our Mediator and Savior.

That is amazing.

Your experience of God's grace should be rich as ponder the old story.

What's on your mind?

What thing in your life is so consuming you that you think about it constantly?
And is that making you angry at God? Or cynical? Worried, impatient, discontent?

Have you quit praying because God in his timing has not answered your prayers?

If you can't reflect on the wonder of Christ's birth because of these things,
you will go through Christmas and come out other side, just as spiritually empty.

It's problems with the little things—the little disappointments—
that diminishes your experience of God's big, amazing grace.

You can diminish your experience of God's grace at Christmas by simply doing
what Zechariah did—focusing on the disappointments and the doubts,
allowing your unbelief to grow—and expressing no amazement at the incarnation.

But Zechariah didn't stay in that position.

MP#2 How you can enhance your experience of God's grace at Christmas.

The Lord was not willing to leave Zechariah in this condition.

He did not withdraw the promise because Zechariah doubted.

Angel said God going to give the son anyway.

But Lord dealt with Zechariah to change him.

All the sins we commit are rooted in unbelief in the promises of God.

The flip side of the coin, the positive side, is that all righteousness,
all good deeds in our lives come from faith in the promises of God.

So your faith in those promises has to be renewed.

In the pattern of the Lord's dealing with Zechariah, we see how his faith was renewed. There is in this, three disciplines for you to imitate.

1. Mute your murmurings

The Lord, through Gabriel, struck Zechariah mute.

Going to be mute until this son is born.

Why this discipline?

God was so gracious determined to fulfill his promise anyway.

But he didn't want Zechariah to be able to make any comments.

If Zechariah had not been struck mute, would have continued to voice his doubts.

Elizabeth is not pregnant, she's just sick.

Yes, she is pregnant, but she's probably going to miscarry.

If child is born, can't be healthy if born of such old parents.

The miracle would have happened, but it would not have built his faith at all.

It's so easy to talk on and on about the thing that looms so large in your life—
your disappointment with God in the way he has handled it.

You can hash and re-hash the same thing over and over.

You can tell your story over and over. You can analyze it and analyze it again.

Maybe there are certain people who this is all you talk about with them—
this is your theme. Maybe you just talk to yourself.

But it becomes so central, so important you rarely experience God's grace.

Quit talking about it, to yourself or to other people.

At least try quitting during Christmas.

When you see your thoughts following that same path, stop it.

When find yourself calling that person to go over it again, stop it.

Mute your murmurings. It's essential for experiencing his grace.

2. Open your eyes and ears.

God muted Zechariah. For 9 months all he could do was watch and listen

As he did, something happened inside.

Became amazed at God's grace. Began to rejoice in God's salvation.

By watching and listening his murmurs and doubts began to fade.

He saw Elizabeth beginning to show signs of pregnancy.

He heard her and Mary talking.

He had time to reflect on the word of the angel—prophecy.

As he saw the things God was doing in his life, in wife's life—

he began to experience God's grace in a fresh way.

You have to do the same. Open your eyes to what Lord is doing in your life.

Start with the fact that you are alive, breathing, has given you life to live.

Look around at the blessings he has given you.

Look at the way he has carried you through trials of life.

Look at the way that even your disappointments are part of his plan.

Listen to fellow believers talk about how God has been good.

When tempted to worry, or feel sorry for self, or be disappointed, or doubt God—

open the Good Book—read Matthew or Luke's Christmas story.

Read about Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, wise men, baby Jesus.

Listen to those old words.

Ponder how this little baby came to destroy the works of devil, make all right,

and how your life is completely different because he came.

Take your bulletin home—read words of these great Christmas carols.

Play some Christmas carols on sound system—not just background music—
listen to the words.

What a wonderful time of year when we are surrounded by so many reminders
of God's grace—open your eyes and ears.

3. Praise the Lord.

Finally we get to Zechariah's song.

His tongue was loosed when he wrote on tablet—His name is John.

John means—the Lord is gracious.

In writing that Zechariah was recanting the doubt expressed to angel.

Yes, I believe. God is gracious. He does all thing well in his time.

Then out poured this song, the Benedictus.

It's a wonderful pattern for our praise.

The most striking thing about this song is that Zechariah does not start by thanking God for giving him a son.

Doesn't start by saying I praise you Lord for answering prayer of many years ago and giving us our little boy John.

He praises God for his salvation through Christ.

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us. Horns were symbols of strength. A horn from the House of David.

Why was Zechariah excited about the immanent birth of Mary's son?

Because the Messiah was going to bring salvation from enemies.

Enable us to serve the Lord without fear all our days.

The thing that excited Zechariah most was the thing that should have excited him 9 months earlier when he met the angel in Temple.

The Messiah is about to be born and would bring salvation long hoped for.

Salvation is forgiveness of sins that makes us right with God.

Then—after praising God for Christ and salvation—sings about his son.

You child, will be called prophet of most high.

Sings about what John's role would be in preparing way for Messiah.

Once again, see Zechariah putting things in the place he should have put them 9 months earlier when talking to Gabriel.

The great thing about having a son—how this fit into God's great plan for his glory and the advance of his Kingdom.

To enhance experience of God's grace—praise him like Zechariah did.

Start with the big blessing, the eternal blessings you have in Christ.

When bow your head to pray—before meal with family, in private devotions.

Praise you God for the salvation I have in your son—

for the forgiveness of sins, delivering me from Satan's power, reconciling me to you.

Then, move on to all the other blessings of this life—and you will find that even if you are thanking God for something as common as food on plate, or as wonderful as your children, that you will see those things as coming through Christ.

And your experience of God's grace to you in Christ will be enhanced.

Not that his grace was ever removed during your times of doubt, disappointment, or even anger. He continues to be gracious, even as he was to Zechariah. But He wants you to know that because His Son has come to earth— saved us by his sins by his death—that all is well with those who trust him. The big thing is settled—safely delivered from sin and death, on way to glory.

CONC: Charles Spurgeon—the famous 19th century Baptist preacher— once said that the Christian life is like a great ship, a great ocean liner. All the passengers on that ship are going to the same port—heaven. They all have the same Captain—Jesus Christ. They have all put their faith in the Captain to guide safely across sea. But the experiences of each passenger on that ship can be very different.

One passenger dines at the Captain's table every night— But another passenger trips while coming on board, breaks his leg— and spends the entire voyage in the infirmary. Spurgeon's point is that true believers who have very much in common— who are going to the same place, trusting the same Savior— can have very different experiences of the Christian life.

One of the things that makes a big difference is the way you handle unbelief. How you deal with the disappointments of life.

St. Augustine said:

Rejoice, you who are weak and sick: It is the birthday of Him who makes well.
Rejoice, you who are in captivity: It is the birthday of the Redeemer.
Rejoice, you who are slaves: It is the birthday of the Master.
Rejoice, you who are free: It is the birthday of Him who makes free.
Rejoice, you Christians all: It is Christ's birthday.

This is not to minimize your disappointments— It's not a small thing to be sick, or a slave, or a captive. But if you are going to experience God's grace in this life, then you must mute your murmurings, open your eyes and ears to what God has done and is doing. And you must praise him for sending his Son for your salvation. Not just at Christmas time. That's good advice for all times. But what a good time Christmas is—surrounded as we are by all the reminders of God's grace.