

December 9, 2018

“Praying through Christmas: The Benedictus”

Luke 1:67-80

FCF: Our struggle to pray

PROPOSITION: (magnet) As we consider God’s great salvation
(anchor) we we will be drawn into prayer.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Christmas, it is said, is the most wonderful time of the year. Sadly, that’s often not true. The season is more often more full of worry than wonder, as much tension as tinsel. Think with me. When you heard that our Advent series was “Praying through Christmas,” I wonder if the thought came to your mind, “That sounds fine. But I’m too busy for that. I’m too burdened to pray, too broken.” Let’s just be honest. For most of us, there is a barrier to prayer at Christmas.

That is a real problem. So what’s the answer? The message of Christmas itself.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Luke 1:57-80](#) (vv.67-79)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Being clear on our definitions is not just useful but vital. Why? Language can be fluid. Words can have different meanings in different times or contexts. Here’s a list of 11 examples ([READ](#)): awful, cheat, egregious, furniture, girl, meat, naughty, nice, pretty, sly, and terrible. Each of these, if you go back a few centuries, meant something entirely different than today.

Let me give you a 12th candidate, another word needing clarity: prayer. Culturally, how do we think of prayer? As the last resort. That’s why we say, “That doesn’t have a prayer.” But biblically, how should we think of it? As the first resort. Prayer can be defined in a very simple way: a believer’s communication with God. A believer’s communication with God. That’s the definition. Here are a couple of clarifiers. First, ultimately, prayer is always a response to God’s initiative. Second, we are all wired to respond to His initiative. That’s worth thinking about.

What does this have to do with Christmas? Christmas is about just that - God’s initiative. Christmas is the celebration of the coming of Jesus, God’s great salvation, all His initiative. As we bring these threads together and consider God’s great salvation, we will be drawn into prayer.

As we consider God’s great salvation, we will be drawn into prayer. How then can we consider His salvation? By listening to the words as we find here in the Benedictus - the words of Zechariah, the words of the prophets, and the words of John. That will draw us into prayer.

I. THE WORDS OF ZECHARIAH

First, Zechariah speaks of God’s favor and a work of strength ([READ Luke 1:68-69](#)).

A) *God’s Visitation*

1. In the past

Zechariah speaks of God’s visitation. Just as He had with His people in Egypt and Babylon. Just as He had with Sarah and Hannah, giving children to those childless women. God was coming.

2. At this moment

Just as He had and more, God was visiting His people in the arrival of Jesus, God in the flesh.

B) God's Redemption

1. In the past

And, just as in the past, this visitation was for a redemption – the ransoming and rescuing of His people from their bondage and enslavement. Freeing them from their shackles and chains.

2. At this moment

Just as He had and more, God was redeeming His people through this child, God in the flesh.

And note that the verbs here speak of something yet to come as though it already had. Why? Zechariah is speaking prophetically, sure of this work of strength (**READ Luke 1:69**).

Illustration:

What is this “horn of salvation?” The horn is that of an animal, the weapon with which an ox attacks or defends itself. Hunters of wild ox will tell you that when one of those beasts scuffs the ground and begins to swing its horns back and forth, it is preparing for a charge. And you don’t want to be on the wrong end. The point being that this horn was a symbol of strength.

Zechariah sees the coming of a horn of salvation, a mighty Savior - not John but Jesus.

Application:

So how should this help us pray? Jesus as our mighty Savior tells us two things. First, He had to come. Second, He has come. He had to come for we had sunk so low that He had to go that far. Our situation was that dire. He had to come as our mighty Savior. And He has. His love for you is not a reluctant one. Not in any way. It is a zealous love. Does that not fill your heart with hope, and a resolve to follow the One who has gone to such lengths to come after you?

Again, as we consider God’s great salvation, we will be drawn into prayer.

II. THE WORDS OF THE PROPHETS

For this salvation is one of strength. And a promise kept (**READ Luke 1:70-75**). Again, we hear this theme of a savior. The attention now shifts to the words of the ancient prophets.

A) The Fulfillment

1. Traced to Abraham

What was spoken is now fulfilled. What was promised is now performed. And this promise is traced not just to David but Abraham – blessed by God’s grace to be a blessing for God’s glory.

2. Reflected in the names

And fulfillment was reflected in the names. Zechariah’s name means “God has remembered.” Elizabeth’s means “God is oath” or “absolutely faithful one.” John’s means “God is, or has been, gracious or merciful.” The promises have been kept! And it comes out even in the names!

B) The Substance

1. Freedom to serve

But, just to be clear, what is the substance of this promise? It was the promise of deliverance, freedom to serve the Lord – something the Promised Land could only picture and symbolize.

2. Freedom from sin

It was a freedom from the tyranny of sin, its power and guilt – far beyond any exodus before.

That's what the prophets promised - a rescue, a deliverance, a restoration of shalom.

Application:

How can this help us pray? Again, what had the prophets promised? What is it Jesus has brought? (**READ Luke 1:74-75**) The Savior has come that we might serve Him without fear. Now think of all that we fear. Yet we are free from it all. Because of Jesus, we have freedom from the fear of our past – any recitation and condemnation for all we've done or failed to do. We have freedom from the fear of the present – of having to perform and measure up. We have freedom from the fear of the future – of our failure and what it might bring. We are free.

As we consider God's salvation, we are drawn into prayer. This can ignite and fuel it.

III. THE WORDS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

For this is a mighty salvation. It is a promise kept. And it began with a forerunner (**READ Luke 1:76-79**). Now what is the significance of this forerunner? At least two things.

A) The Focus of John's Mission

1. To go before the Lord

The first thing being the focus of John's mission. As the forerunner of the Messiah, he was to go before Him as a herald – not in reconnaissance but to prepare the way, the people's hearts.

2. To give knowledge of salvation

He was “to give knowledge of salvation” – to preach and to make clear the gospel, the good news of the coming of the kingdom, to explain the necessary response of faith and repentance.

B) The Purpose of John's Mission

1. Because of the mercy of God

That was the focus of his mission. Which was driven by its purpose. Through John, the people would hear of “salvation” connected to the “forgiveness of sins” and the “tender mercy of our God.” Salvation comes not by our tenacious effort but His tender mercy. Which is good news!

2. Because of the darkness of the times

And that good news, that light, needed to be made clear all the more because of darkness and confusion. Most in John's day sought out the wrong kind of salvation. They thought of it in only political terms – freedom from Roman oppression. They saw their problem as a political one and so they longed for a political savior. But those problems were but pointers, signposts, symptoms, of what they really needed – deliverance from the power of their spiritual enemies.

John would make all that clear - the need for the coming of this mighty Savior.

Illustration:

(**READ Luke 1:78-79**) It's quite an image used here - a group of travelers, moving through the wilderness, overtaken by darkness before they can reach their destination. The night is so long. The sounds and shadows are so frightening. They are terrified and powerless. But then a bright light appears, the "dayspring" of dawn out on the horizon, dispelling the darkness.

Application:

How does this help us to pray? Can you not see yourself there among the people of those times and their low expectations of their need and this Savior to come? We are not so different. And God is the same then as now. He is not satisfied to simply give us what we want. Think of how we assess our greatest needs by sight, in terms of our circumstances, and insist "that" is what needs to be fixed – not us. If we just had a better job. If we just had more income. If our marriages would get fixed or our kids get straightened out. If only this, if only that. Now hear me. God is more than able to repair those things. But most often that works begins at a level far below the surface of our assessments. In fact, He may well be using those things to point us to our heart issues – pride, self-righteousness, unresolved guilt and shame. Whatever His purpose (of which we cannot be sure) we can count on His presence (of which we can always be sure).

Again, as we consider God's great salvation, we will be drawn into prayer.

CONCLUSION:

Social media certainly has its problems. Facebook can be used to bully. Twitter can be a place of circling sharks waiting for the scent of blood. Snapchat can wound with all the evidence of harassment gone in seconds. So, yes, social media has its problems. But then there's the free concerts via the flash mob. Yes, it's been used to gather angry voters and even looting. But there are also the pillow fights, snowball fights, disco routines, and mass games of duck-duck-goose.

So it's not all bad. Especially when you see the YouTube video from a few years ago of the U.S. Air Force Band performing at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington. A single cellist took a seat, began to play, and was slowly surrounded by more and more musicians playing "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." Vocalists, shedding coats that hid their military uniforms, appeared in the rafters to sing this and then "Joy to the World." It was amazing. All around them, visitors watched - stunned, smiling, and taking cellphone videos. The schoolchildren were slack-jawed. And the band's reward? Plenty. Sustained applause from the accidental audience.

For most everyone loved it. Of course they did. Why? What was so compelling about this? I'm sure there are many layers to the answer. But one has to be the power of the songs - not just the music but the words. There's something deep within us, beyond merely nostalgia, that responds. There's something there that resonates. At what? The message of Christmas.

As we consider God's great salvation, we will be drawn into prayer. May we then hear these voices, these words from Zechariah, from the prophets of old, and from John the Baptist.

PROPOSITION: (magnet) As we consider God's great salvation
(anchor) we will be drawn into prayer.