

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 20 December

Children's Talk: Remembering the Lord

Two weeks ago, I talked to you about a man named Zacharias, and his prayers to the Lord for a son. An angel appeared to him and told him that his prayers were answered; but because Zacharias doubted, he became mute and could not speak until the child was born.

We often pray for things that we think we won't actually get. And sometimes, you are right! You may pray for a good day, but have a bad one; a specific gift for Christmas, and not get it; to do well on a test but fail; to be able to be kind when stressed, but fall apart when overwhelmed.

But of course, sometimes, even if it takes a long time, we get exactly what we pray to the Lord for. And the question is, when the Lord finally gives you what you prayed for, will you remember Him? Or will you only think about yourself? Zacharias shows us that even though he had doubted, he remembered the Lord when his son was born:

So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John."

But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name." So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marvelled. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God. Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, "What kind of child will this be?" And the hand of the Lord was with him. (Luke 1:59-66)

Zacharias's relatives all wanted to name his son after him. Zacharias could not speak to correct them. He could have just gone along with them. But if he had done that, he would have been ignoring the angel that had told him the name should be John. In that moment, Zacharias decided he had to make sure he did everything as the angel commanded. So he took a tablet, and wrote, "His name is John." It might seem small, but this was Zacharias's way of showing that he trusted the Lord again, and remembered that it was the Lord who had answered his prayer.

When we finally have our prayers answered, it is easy to just silently forget about the Lord and even forget that we had prayed to him in the first place. Have you ever prayed to have a good day, then had a good day, and not thought twice about it? Have you ever prayed to get something good, and when you do, just assume that you always were going to so no need to thank the Lord? Have you prayed to do well, and done well, and thought it was your own efforts that made you do well? It is easy to remember the Lord when we pray for something. It is a lot harder to remember the Lord once we have it.

So let's be like Zacharias. Let's remember, even if it takes some effort, that the Lord does answer our prayers, and He is the one who gives everything good. Think of the things that you have prayed for. And for every one that you now have, give a little thank you to the Lord for giving it to you.

Zacharias: Confess the Lord

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
20 December, 2020

Two Sundays ago I talked about how Zacharias's doubt had rendered him mute. Last week Malcolm contrasted His doubt with the innocent rebellion of Mary, who was willing to have the Lord turn her life upside down. Today we return to Zacharias. In the conclusion to his story we find that his doubt has transformed into trust, and upon regaining his voice, he sings the Lord's praises. Although we too may doubt the Lord's promises, when we see them come to pass, we are given the opportunity to once again trust and render thanks to the Lord for what He has done for us.

Zacharias and Elizabeth had prayed for a son, and at last, in their old age, the Lord gave them one. Elizabeth gave birth, and her neighbours and relatives rejoiced with her. As an outside observer, this might not seem that incredible. We know the story well, so we already knew the outcome. And from that point of view we might scoff that Zacharias had ever doubted. But remember, when the angel made the promise, they were too old to have children, and had already been praying for one for years. Apart from that, it's not as if the angel simply handed Zacharias a son; it took time to realize Elizabeth was pregnant, and then even longer to wait for the child to be born. In the story it all takes place quickly; but think back to the things you were praying for nine months ago; how easy has waiting been? Or look back even longer; what were you praying for at the end of 2019? How much has changed since then, including your prayers. Just because we know that the Lord will answer our prayers does not mean it is easy to wait. And while we wait, like Zacharias, we will have our doubts. Only when we see it with our own eyes is our faith in prayer confirmed.

But when that moment comes, when the Lord does answer our prayers, whether with exactly what we asked for or in a totally unexpected way, in that moment, we have some choices to make. Those choices are represented in what Elizabeth and Zacharias do in the days following the birth. By tradition, a child was named on the eighth day, the day of his circumcision. Circumcision symbolizes the removal of everything evil so that what is good can flow in. We'll return to it in a moment. For now though just know that this moment represents true spiritual growth by rejecting evil and embracing goodness.

And in that moment, the naming is supposed to happen. In the Word, a name stands for all the qualities and characteristics that someone is known by. Assigning a name then symbolizes identifying all those characteristics. All of the relatives want to name the child after his father, Zacharias. Elizabeth, however, insists on following the angel's instructions by naming the boy John.

If we pull all this spiritual symbols together, a powerful image emerges: at the moment of seeing real spiritual growth, when our prayers have been answered, will we give credit to ourselves, or to the Lord? Will we identify our progress by our own name, or will we give glory to the Lord's name? Will we claim the success is ours, bearing our image and likeness, or will we acknowledge that all of its character and quality is in the Lord's image and likeness?

I've noticed this dynamic in myself. I pray for something from the Lord. I really need it, and don't see any way through. But then the situation resolves itself: It's not as bad as I thought it would be; people are more reasonable than expected; a solution unexpectedly presents itself. Then what do I think? "Oh, never mind Lord, it

worked itself out. Don't need you to sort things out for me. I've got this one." I hope you can see the problem with my attitude: in the moment when the Lord has answered my prayer, I act as if I, or perhaps the world at large, answered it, and I don't need the Lord to intervene! When in actual fact, *everything* that is good is provided by the Lord. The fact that He works through various means and in hidden ways does not take away from the fact that He is the one who orchestrated the solution to my problems. It would be as if I needed a lift somewhere, so I called a friend, who then drives me to my destination; and upon arriving, I turn to him and say, "Oh, never mind, I'm already here. I guess I don't need a lift after all."

Even when I do initially acknowledge the Lord because the solution or resolution is so miraculous, over time that acknowledgment fades. The change or resolution becomes so natural, so part of who I am, that I forget that I could be otherwise, and as a result, forget to acknowledge and thank the Lord for it. Even a good habit or a spiritual practice that has been part of your life for decades is only possible from the Lord's involvement. The moment we forget this and take it for granted is the moment we make ourselves vulnerable to backsliding and relapse. Pride goes before a fall. If we want our growth to remain it is important that we name it for what it is: a gift from the Lord more than a product of our own creation.

This is especially true when the change is one that takes hard work over a long period of time. The exertion on my part, and the grind of working month after month or even years, seems to emphasize my part in growing spiritually and hides the Lord's role. It really can feel like I have done a ton of work, no thanks to God. But really, although the exertion is necessary, all the real work has been done exclusively by the Lord. Any modicum of true change can come only through the power of God. It takes a lot of work before we can even admit this truth:

When a person's state is such that he imagines that good and truth originate in himself and that the power to resist is his own, the goods and truths from which he fights against evils and falsities are not really goods and truths, however much they appear to be so, for they have that which is his own within them, and he places self-merit in victory, boasting as though it were he that had overcome evil and falsity, when in fact it is the Lord alone who fights and overcomes. That this is indeed so none can know except those who are being regenerated by means of temptations. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1661)

As this passage points out, we cannot even see the Lord's part until we are already in the thick of temptation and regenerating through it. So if we don't see it right away, that's fine. But once we have arrived, continually remembering the Lord's part with gratitude is crucial if success is to become permanent. In the end, Zacharias remembers God's part in answering his prayers, and so he supports his wife's obedience to the angel, and names the child John, as we discussed in the Children's Talk.

Having done this, his mouth was opened and he could again speak. The first thing he did with his newly regained ability to speak was to praise God. You might remember that last time I mentioned that his muteness symbolized an inability to confess the Lord when in a state of doubt. But when the doubt has been removed and trust in the Lord confirmed, we regain a full ability to show gratitude to the Lord and share the good news with others. Zacharias, in praising the Lord, reveals two important, and connected, things that we can be grateful for:

Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited and redeemed His people,
And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David,
As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
Who have been since the world began,
That we should be saved from our enemies
And from the hand of all who hate us,
To perform the mercy promised to our fathers
And to remember His holy covenant,
The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:
To grant us that we,
Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
Might serve Him without fear,
In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.
(Luke 1:68-75)

The first part of this praise is straightforward: he is especially thanking the Lord that He has provided a means of being saved, that He has remembered His people, that He has fulfilled His promises, and so on. But I think it's also powerful what he said at the end, about *why* the Lord has done all these things:

To grant us that we,
Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
Might serve Him without fear,
In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.
(Luke 1:74-75)

The point of being saved is that we can then serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness.

When the Lord brings about a change in us through shunning evils and repentance, we can not only be grateful that those spiritual enemies have been removed; we can also be grateful that in removing them, we are given the opportunity to serve the Lord with joy, in wisdom and from love. This is a general rule of life, and in fact, it is also symbolized in circumcision. The removal of the foreskin represents the removal of evil so that what is heavenly and good can pour into a person.

It is plainly evident from all this that to whatever extent a person shuns evils, to that same extent he is with the Lord and in the Lord; and that to whatever extent he is in the Lord, to that same extent he does what is good, not from himself, but from the Lord. From this comes the general law: that to whatever extent a person shuns evils, to that same extent he does what is good. (*The Doctrine of Life* §21)

If then the Lord can perform the miracle of saving us from sins and evil, than by definition He can also bring us into the joyful exercise of good things.

Of all the things that we pray, perhaps the most important are the ones that have to do with being changed into new and better people. These are also the prayers that can be most disappointing when they go unfulfilled, and the most

impossible to believe when we pray over deeply ingrained evils. But in spite of our doubts, the Lord can change us, if we are willing to do the work of shunning evils and repenting. We cannot do it under our own power, but the Lord can grant us that power, and more.

So I want to end on two questions: first, what is your worst quality? A quality that you feel is an essential part of you, and yet have prayed for improvement and not seen much? It could be big, like dishonesty or cruelty, but it also might be smaller (seemingly) such as laziness or gossip. You might not believe that after all this time, the Lord can do much to improve that trait. The story of Zacharias and Elizabeth teaches us otherwise: it teaches us that our longstanding prayer for life-changing truth can be realized, even in old age. Hold onto that hope.

The second question is this: what is a major change for the better that you have undergone, at any point in your life? It could be a change you made as a teenager or early adulthood, and you haven't looked back since. It could be more recent or fresh in your mind. But no matter how long ago or recent it was, or how firmly rooted or tenuous it might be today, take the time to thank the Lord, even now, for that change. He was not just there in the moment of change; He has been there in every moment since, preserving that positive change. The change is not yours, nor is holding onto it yours. It is the Lord's power that has allowed that change to persist. And remember also not just the dropping of a bad habit or the removal of some foible; remember, as Zacharias did, that in removing our spiritual enemies the Lord makes way for joy to enter, the joy of doing what is good and in being better than we were.

As we approach Christmas and the conclusion of this year, it is easier than most to reflect back on the hard times, what has been lost, what should have been and was not, and to feel that it's been a waste of a year. But that's not entirely the case: for all that we have missed out on, nothing can take away the growth that we have been able to go through spiritually. The outward circumstances may remain bleak; but spiritually, the Lord has continued, more than ever, to offer the power to grow and become better people:

To grant us that we,
Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
Might serve Him without fear,
In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

Amen.