

ChristmasPortents 19-12-22b

Let's resume our study now in Luke chapter 1. This is our Christmas special, you might say. And we're looking at the things that happened before His coming. I would expect that as God engineers the design and the plans for the first advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, there will be similarities before His second coming.

And we see that there is a harking back to Old Testament themes at the beginning. And this predates, by a fair interval, the event itself. Which, in my view, the revelation of the Lord Jesus to Israel begins at the birth, revealed to just a few.

It continues at the age of 12 when He appears at the temple as a prodigy, someone who can confound the finest PhDs of the law. And then it culminates another 18 years later when He begins His ministry. And there should have been those who saw Him at the temple less than 20 years earlier who would say, this is that one, capital O. This is the one who confounded us at the temple, and here He is in His maturity representing God in heaven.

So there was an early revelation to a very few, a modest revelation to many more, and to those who should have recognized Him at His bar mitzvah, you might say. The age of 12 is when young men could enter into the fellowship. And this was an early opportunity to recognize the Lord Jesus for who He was.

And in the same way that when the people of Israel were about to take the land of Canaan, they went in ahead of time and whitewashed the cliffs and wrote the law of God at God's command on those cliffs to warn the people and give them a chance that the presence of God in the midst of His people was on the way. Plenty of time to prepare, plenty of time to literally see the handwriting on the wall and convert, plenty of time to escape the coming judgment, seeing the difference between their morals and their practices and their culture and the righteous requirements of God's law. It was all written out.

Anyone could find out what it said. Anyone could be prepared as Rahab and her family were. But it's interesting to me that you have these spaced revelations.

I would love to be qualified as Simeon and Anna, as Elizabeth and Zechariah, as Mary and Joseph, as the shepherds and as the wise men. I would like to be a junior shepherd, just qualified enough to get the revelation of the birth. But this time that we're looking at is actually well before the birth.

As we note now, as we pick up our account, we've seen that... Oh, and by the way, on the break, several of you mentioned that wasn't there another woman in the list of childless women in the Old Testament and going to 2 Kings 4 in the days of Elisha with the Shunammite woman. And not to stand on a technicality, but it doesn't say she was barren. It just says she's childless and her husband is old.

That one seems to be the husband's problem. And she doesn't pray, she doesn't ask for a child. That is an idea that Elisha's servant has.

Elisha says, what can we do for him? And he says, well, she doesn't have a son and her husband is old. And so this is when that happens. So you can include that if you want.

And that would make Elizabeth the seventh example, certainly a good biblical number. Slightly different circumstance. All of these others are said to be unable to conceive and then are miraculously enabled to do so.

So that one is attributed to the... It's like this elderly husband took a young wife and then he couldn't father a child. But anyway, resuming our study now, you get to the words of Gabriel to Zechariah. He sees him, fear falls upon him.

He says, do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer is heard. This is verse 13 of Luke chapter 1. Do not be afraid.

How many times does God have to say this when he's delivering a message? Don't be afraid. Our recent end time study, it was easy to become a little bit concerned when you hear all of the forward march of technology and intrusive monitoring and big brother-ism and the 1984 scenario for some of us. That's old hat to people who were actually born after that year.

But there is the opportunity to fear the coming of the Lord and fear the judgment, fear the judgment seat of Christ. It's important that we have a healthy respect. You look at the setting here.

Gabriel does not come to Zechariah in a vision by night. He's going to do that with others. He's going to appear in other contexts.

But it's significant that the first word from God here, the very first word that we have recorded in scripture is given in the temple, in the holy place, at the altar of incense. Zechariah symbolically is presenting the prayers of the people who are outside to God in the form of this incense offering. And God doesn't say their prayers are heard.

He says, your prayers are heard. Do not be afraid. Your prayer is heard.

And your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. In the Greek, this is J-O-A-N-N-E-S. Joannes.

J as in Spanish is pronounced as a Y. So this is Joannes. And this is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name Yohanan, which is Y-O-C-H-A-N-A-N. Yohanan.

This in turn is a shortened form of an original name, which is Yehohanan, which is essentially Y-E-H-O-C-H-A-N-A-N. So the beginning is Y-E-H-O. Well, this Y-H-W-H, this is God's covenant name.

This is his name Yahweh. So Yeho or Jeho is the name Yahweh. Hanan, C-H-A-N-A-N, is the word for grace, for favor, for kind disposition and goodly overt action on behalf of one.

Hanan. So the name means the Lord is gracious. The Lord is gracious.

God is gracious. God is not sending his Son for judgment. He's not sending his Son for retribution.

He's not sending his Son for a violent purpose that should inspire fear. The Lord Jesus is going to say later on, I have not come to bring judgment. I have come to bring peace.

I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly. I've come to represent the truth. Jesus said to Pilate just before the crucifixion, I have come to bear witness to the truth.

And the famous reply from Pilate is, well, what is truth? But Jesus will tell parables that the thief comes only to kill and destroy. I have come that they might have life. So the very name that is given to Zechariah for the Son is a reminder that God's plan for his people is not destruction.

This is salvation. The next verse says, you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth. Many will rejoice at his birth.

So this is not a time for fear. It's not a time to fall back. This is a time for celebration and for rejoicing.

But it's difficult to tame fear if you're out of practice. And God gives us situations large and small designed to turn us to faith. You will notice that Mary is going to be startled when Gabriel appears, but she's not struck with fear to the point that she can't process what he's saying.

She asks questions, but she's not afraid. And this should be the nature of our own faith, that perfect love casts out fear. Faith and patience is necessary to inherit the promises.

Zechariah, understandably perhaps, just can't get over the sudden appearance of this angel. So this Son, in verse 15, is going to be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb.

This is, again, my question before the break was, why the name John? This is, the Lord is gracious. Why is he being identified at his birth? Why is he not commissioned as he easily could have been, the way the Apostle Paul is commissioned, just brought to function at the point of significance, at the point where he needs to be introducing. We know that he's going to begin his ministry over 30 years in the future.

So why all of this birth narrative? Well, as you look at the filling of the Holy Spirit aspect here, out from his mother's womb, this is a reminder of his function as a prophet. There are many Old Testament allusions to this as well. The prophet Jeremiah talks about having been called from his mother's womb.

But because this announcement is made at the birth, what is the common charge? Well, you're creating a movement for your own purposes. You have a selfish interest. You have an agenda.

John is going to call attention to some of the political misdeeds of the day and misdeeds within the family of Herod, and taking his brother's wife, one thing and another. And people could say, well, you're claiming divine authority for your own agenda. You're just invoking God because you've got your own purposes.

If your purpose and function is announced before you are even born, that puts that charge to rest. You can't be accused of generating this thing out of your own mind in the way that many actually legitimately are. So announcing the function and the future of both John and later the Lord Jesus at their birth, it does two things.

First of all, it takes that argument away, that you're making this up as you go along or in reaction to current circumstances. But secondly, it is a marker that God is the one who has initiated and engineered this salvation at this time, because these are immediate prophecies. They will be fulfilled, most of them, I should say, these will be fulfilled in the lifetime of many of the people who hear them.

It is a near-term prophecy that could only come from God. How else could a baby's future be spoken of with such certainty and come to fruition so completely except from God? So it is a marker for those who love God and who are looking for God's revelation of truth. When this comes true, it can only have been from God.

You'll see this same element when the angels appear to the shepherds and they say, you are going to find this baby in this particular circumstance. And we know the details of how they knew where to look. And when they find this baby in exactly the circumstance that the angel describes and in the larger context of those sacrificial lambs and sheep that were specifically raised as a holy flock for sacrifice in Jerusalem at that place, this is a confirmation.

So what do we draw from this? What's our application? I've occasionally heard people, especially in my Baptist exposure, say that if you pray and there's an answer from God, He will give a confirming sign. And you'll find some sort of a circumstantial sign. I'm not saying that God doesn't do that.

I'm close to people for whom that does seem to happen. And that's between them and the Lord. I don't know that that's so much a biblical principle as God being gracious to someone who is trusting Him for that kind of certainty.

What I will say is that in Scripture, and you look at situations like this, there is affirmation of some sort for those who are looking to God. They are asking and seeking and knocking. When we go to God in prayer and we are asking for truth, we are asking for God's action, for God's presence, for God's power in our lives, and then there seems to be a response.

There is an answer. There is a new circumstance. There is a Scripture that is brought to our

attention.

There is a word in the mouth of a fellow believer, speaking the truth in love perhaps. But God the Holy Spirit is going to connect dots for us to give us assurance. This is more overt in Old Testament days.

And this is an Old Testament day. But God will not only speak to us through His word, but He provides assurance. And I think that assurance is individualized.

In Zachariah's case here, the assurance comes in a negative. Look at the question. After announcing that he will be great in the sight of the Lord, we'll come back to the rest of verse 15 in a moment, he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

He will also go before Him, before God, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Zachariah says in verse 18, How will I know this? Now, if you think about this for a moment, especially in contrast to the revelation to Mary in the next chapter, or actually the next section of this chapter, starting in verse 26. But he says, How will I know this? I'm an old man.

My wife is well advanced in years. What's the problem here? Why does God strike Zachariah with the inability to speak? What are the bona fides? We had a recent review Bible class talking about Paul presenting the message, and he himself is a qualified messenger. The content of the message is biblical, and the reception of the message was heartfelt and genuine.

And there were those three parts, the messenger, the message, and the response to the message. Well, you have that same idea here. Who is the messenger? And where is the messenger? In other words, why should Zachariah have not really had to question this message? He's in the holy place, and there's an angel there.

It's the right place. It's the appropriate place for a prayer response from God to be announced. Your prayer has been heard.

You're going to have a son, and he's going to be special. He has a function before the Lord like no other since prophetic days to represent the Lord and to call the people back to God, to go and prepare a people for the presence of God. But Zachariah says, How shall I know this? There's nothing necessarily wrong with God presenting a sign when the shepherds are watching their flocks by night, the angel appears and says, Glory to God in the highest.

And they say, And this will be a sign unto you. Shepherds didn't ask for a sign. The angel says, When you need a sign, here's its purpose.

You'll know you found him because you're going to find him wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And they don't doubt it. They don't say, Well, but wait a minute.

If he's the king of Israel, what's he doing in these humble circumstances? When they hear the heavenly messenger and the multitude around him praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace toward men of goodwill, that's enough. The bona fides of the messenger are sufficient, and the quality of the message and the content of the message are convincing. They believe it.

They immediately put their flocks in care and go and seek the child. Zechariah, as a priest, these are shepherds, a priest, knowing the significance of the holy place, knowing the significance of the location of the angel, the presence of the angel, the power from God's throne, questions the message. And he gets something of a rebuke from Gabriel.

Gabriel says, I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, who was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. What's not to believe? Oh, circumstances won't permit. He doesn't say, How do I know you're an angel? He doesn't say, How do I know my prayers have been heard? He thinks the birth can't happen because Elizabeth is old.

And this is impugning the power of God. If the message is right and the messenger is right, it doesn't matter how impossible the message sounds. And this is something for us.

If God says He will keep us in perfect peace when our mind is stayed on Him, then perfect peace can be had. And we can't come back and say, But nobody knows the trouble I've seen. How can anybody have peace in my circumstance? That's going to get a rebuke.

God is in His heaven. We know the scriptures are inspired, authoritative, cannot be broken. And if they tell us that we qualify for a promise, it doesn't matter how impossible that promise sounds.

Take it to the bank. Cash it in. Doubt not.

I'm Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. He sent me to give you this good message.

What's your problem? And because of this, in verse 20, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day that these things take place because you did not believe my words. You have no excuse for not believing. And because of this, why of all possible... He doesn't break out with leprosy.

He doesn't go blind. Why is it He can't speak? He's not qualified to be a bearer of this message. He's not qualified to talk about it because He doesn't have faith.

This is one thing that's been missed in the evangelical world. We're not qualified to talk about the Lord Jesus to others. We're not qualified to announce the wonders of salvation, God's deliverance, God's future life, when we don't have faith ourselves.

If we can't believe God's word in one area, we are not really qualified. This is why the qualifications for an elder are specific and are designed to filter out the unqualified to serve as

a messenger. It's a higher standard.

All of us should meet that standard, but you can't function as a messenger without them. Zechariah gets the message, but he can't pass it on because he's deficient in faith. You did not believe my words.

They will be fulfilled in their own time. Your lack of faith isn't going to change their fulfillment. So the people are waiting for Zechariah.

Marvel that he lingered so long in the temple. Well, look by way of contrast at verse 26. In the sixth month, you see at the end, in verse 24 and 25, after those days, it doesn't say how long.

If we wanted to do a time calculation, there have been people who said, well, we actually have some annotations of the courses and when they served, and we can figure out when Zechariah was in the temple and when he got this message. And then Elizabeth conceived, and Zechariah will, you know, the time clock starts with this. But you can't do that because it says in verse 24, after those days.

This is an indefinite period of time. We don't know how much time elapsed between the announcement and the conception. It's after these days.

Time passed. Then Elizabeth conceives. She hid herself five months saying, thus the Lord has dealt with me in the days when he looked on me to take away my reproach among the people.

And this is literally to look upon is what it says, but the idiom means to be gracious and it goes back to the name Yohanan. Yahweh is gracious. And when she says, this is what the Lord has done for me at the time when he has been gracious to me, when he has looked upon me to take away my disgrace among people.

And this is symbolic of the entire nation. God has looked on the nation and is ready to take away its reproach and its low status, not having fruitfulness and so on. So then in verse 26, now in the sixth month, this is the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

So we can't, there's flexibility here. We can't pick the time, but we know the internal timing. After five months, Elizabeth announces her pregnancy.

And a month later, Gabriel goes to Galilee, to Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary, Miriam. Having come in, the angel said to her, Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you.

Period. If you haven't marked your Bible from our Luke study, you can cross out the rest of that verse. Blessed are you among women.

But when she saw him, none of that is there. Now, like Zachariah, Gabriel appears, and he just comes into the house. This is not the temple.

She's not at a place of worship. She's not presenting a sacrifice at the altar. She is simply in the house.

And so it's a domestic setting. Now, what is Zachariah's function? What is his job? He's a priest. And so in the place of his notable function, Gabriel appears.

What is Mary's function? She's a housekeeper. She keeps house. She's betrothed.

She's essentially a housewife. There's all of this angst and agony about women who are married and don't have a paying job. When someone asks, well, what do you do? I'm a housewife.

And the Women's Liberation Feminist Movement just went ballistic over this. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a housewife. And she is at the place of her function.

She is in the house. She is doing her domestic chores, her domestic existence. She's not a woman with servants.

She's not sitting fanning herself with a mint julep while the servants are catering to her whims. She's a working girl. And she's at work in the house.

And here Gabriel appears. Having come in, he says, Rejoice, highly favored. The Lord is with you.

She was troubled at his saying and considered what manner of greeting this was. What is the greeting? Be happy. You are highly favored.

And she says, That's an interesting way to greet me. He doesn't come in and say, Excuse me, are you Mary? Excuse me, are you the betrothed of Joseph? He knows me well enough to say, I'm highly favored and I should rejoice. So she's considering this.

And it's very unexpected. It troubles her. So the angel says, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a son and will call his name Yeshua. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Highest. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Mary said to the angel, How can this be since I do not know a man? Now, this is not a question of doubt. This is a question of practical consideration. What do I need to do to put myself in the position where I can bear such a child because I'm not in a situation where I can conceive? It's not doubt.

It's a question about procedure. Do you see the difference between this question and Zachariah's question? He's already been told that his prayer has been heard for a son and that prayer is going to be fulfilled. There are no practical considerations.

He and Elizabeth are married and there's nothing to stop it except doubt due to age. They're not going to have to find a mandrake root or drink a special potion. This simply requires believing what God says.

Mary is not in a position to bear a child because she's not in a marriage yet. And so Gabriel says, and she's not rebuked, he says, The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The power of the highest will overshadow you.

Therefore, that which is to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And if you haven't amended your translation, we went through this when we translated Luke. Therefore, that which is to be born will be called holy because it has been conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Be called holy, the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age. This is now the sixth month for her who was called barren.

For with God nothing will be impossible. Mary said, Behold the maidservant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word. Here's your counterexample.

When you get a message in answer to prayer, that's all you need to know. Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.

Well, you then have the visit, you have the song of Mary, you have the birth of John, Zechariah's prophecy, you have a lot of content there in Luke. But we're looking at the preview of coming things, the preview of the coming of the Lord. What are the first signs? And what's encouraging is that at the birth, 30 years before the Lord Jesus is going to come and present the kingdom, 12 years before He's going to be down at the temple revealing His special nature to the leadership of Israel, there were people who could know.

If you want to know the timing of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, A, be qualified. Zechariah and Elizabeth are righteous. They are faithful.

Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, Simeon, Anna, share a quality of belief, righteous living, righteous practice, and a desire to know. If that is you, then as you look at current events, as you look at the details of prophetic scripture that we have seen Old Testament and new, ask if it is God's will, if it is pertinent and helpful for us to know, He will let us know. And wouldn't it be great to be among the first to... Do Zechariah and Elizabeth know the year that John will begin his ministry and the year that the Lord Jesus is going to begin to present the kingdom? They don't.

But they've got a pretty good idea that these things will take place when John and later Jesus are somewhere in their adult years. It's pretty soon. It's somewhere 12 to 30 years in the future.

And they can know and they can prepare and they can do their part in the nurture and admonition of their children to ensure that they have access to the word of God, that they have an example in the home, that there is concourse and fellowship with other believers. And that's

their role and that's their function. But look at Simeon and Anna.

They just get to see it and to know that it is near and it fulfills the joy of their heart. And even though they probably both perished before the Lord Jesus actually began His ministry and John began announcing it, it is enough to see the presence of the child. They get to hold the child in their arms.

They get to see Him in His incipient presence. What a blessing! What a confidence that when they fall asleep, they know that when they awake, all of God's promises to Israel will be in fulfillment mode. And that can be us.

We have many great and precious promises and we know their fulfillment by the faithfulness of God and the timing that God gives us. It's not going to be the day or the hour but we will know the season and the more faithful we are and the more interested we are, the more God will reveal to us. And we'll have the good sense to know when to speak, when to remain silent.

Zechariah has to be silenced because he's not qualified to speak. I don't want to be that guy. I want to be qualified to speak, qualified to share, qualified to rejoice.

The message is joy. This is why our Christmas song Joy to the World, you run all the way down the sea scale there. Joy to the world, the Lord has come.

Everything we learn in Scripture, whether it is warning, whether it is instruction, whether it is admonition, whether it is encouragement, whether it is comfort, is all designed to give us a deep-seated joy. The joy that we experience now will be multiplied almost infinitely when God fulfills His promises to us as He did to Israel on this great occasion. Well, it's something to think about as we anticipate the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

God works in patterns. God is unchanging in the way He works. And I expect that there will be believers in the church who are going to have a pretty good fix on the rapture.

I think there are people in the tribulation that are going to realize that they are in it and know how long it will last, know when to flee, know how to treat the beast, will be able to understand and interpret all of the information given to them in the Revelation. We look at it in prospect and realize that as with the Old Testament, it is applicable to us. Know the signs of the time.

Live a life that redeems the time and invests it in eternal inheritance because the coming of the Lord is near. Let's close here in a word of prayer. Father, thank You for the truth of Your Word.

Thank You for the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the wonderful revelation that we see in Him, the fullness of deity and bodily form and the pattern of fulfillment of Your promises to Israel. And we have confidence that those same principles of fulfillment apply to us who are the body of Christ and who have a special set of promises founded on a new and better covenant. We pray that as we reflect on these things over the holiday season that God the Holy Spirit will bless them to our hearts, bless our fellowship and our time of reflection and appreciation in the

days ahead.

We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.