

ChristmasPortents 19-12-29a

Good morning. Welcome to Grace and Truth Bible Church. On this last Sunday of the year, 2019 is rapidly disappearing in our rear view mirror and we're heading into 2020.

This is the 29th of December, 2019, and we're going to continue and conclude our two-part special on Before He Comes, Before He Came the first time and Before He Comes the second time. And it seems fitting as we're on the threshold of another calendar year to review a few of the things that we noticed in our end time study, but as they particularly are symmetrical with and following the pattern of the first coming of the Lord Jesus and some of the interesting features of that event and the events that preceded it. Let's take a moment to ask God's blessing on our fellowship and on our study.

And then it is going to be Bible trivia morning. We're going to see how much you can retrieve. I don't have to retrieve it because I had all the time in the world to look it up.

So this will all put you on the spot and not me. And that's the way I like it. But let's ask God's blessing on our study.

And then we'll begin. Father, it is a humbling thing to look back over this preceding year and remember the many ways that you have sustained us, provided for us, blessed us, protected us, challenged us, and taught us not only the content of your word, but giving us the occasions for application and for the Holy Spirit to make it real and permanent in our souls. We thank you for the Lord Jesus and for his tremendous work of love and grace in providing atonement and reconciliation, redemption, propitiation for us coming to earth, not thinking that his deity was a thing to be held onto, but laying it aside and emptying himself and coming in the form of a servant.

It's so fitting that the details surrounding his birth are not of ostentation or of riches or of comfort and wealth, but of a simple and a plain circumstance. We thank you for the presence of these details in your word and ask that as we look at them together this morning that your Holy Spirit will be our teacher, help us to understand what we see and to see its pertinence and its applicability in our own lives, particularly as we anticipate the soon return of the Lord Jesus for us to transport us to and into the next phase of your plan and purpose for the ages. We pray that each one that participates this morning will be blessed and be a blessing in our individual fellowship and in our gathering together as a church to appreciate the Lord Jesus Christ and to appreciate the wonderful interwoven details of your program for blessing us through him.

We pray these things in Jesus name. Amen. You'll remember last Sunday we began by looking at Luke chapter one and seeing Zachariah and Elizabeth and the details of the first formal announcement, the first clue that the time was truly at hand.

There was Old Testament prophecy, the Daniel 70th week, but such things are always open to interpretation. Which decree do you start counting from? Uh, what are sevens? Are they weeks,

weeks of years? Was it all fulfilled in the past? Many people think the 70 week prophecy is over and done with all fulfilled in the days of Antiochus and, and is, is done. And if you don't understand the weeks as weeks of years, uh, or if you understand them in different fashions, you can arrive at vastly different conclusions.

So what our overall goal here in this study last week and this Sunday is to notice the way that God brought about the first coming of the Lord Jesus, particularly in terms of its anticipating signs and circumstances. How would people have known in that day that the time was in hand? Who could know? How did they know? What did they know? And when did they know it? Uh, you have to have been alive in the mid seventies to get the full import of that. But how does that then relate to our expectation for the Lord's second coming? And we have a little bit of a complication in that we're watching for the rapture and much of what, uh, is, is foreshadowed in the Bible has to do with the second coming itself, but there's a clear seven year difference.

So we watch for the signs of the second coming and we'll know very, very nearly when the rapture is going to be upon us. So we looked at first of all, the significance of names and it's, it's emblematic. It is symptomatic.

It is an example of the way God works with two different, two different features, two different aspects of his plan. There are things that are beyond our control and there are things that seem to be within the realm of our choice. There are cyclical events.

We talked about the courses of the priesthood and how the one that included Zachariah rolled around at just the right time. And then there is an element of chance or of choice involved in the casting of lots and the various decisions that people make to be in a place at a time. And God weaves these things together.

There are some things that are as mechanical as the movement of the planets and the stars courses through the sky as our planet rotates. But then there are other portions that seem to involve freedom to choose. We are going to look especially at names this morning.

We saw that Zachariah's name, do you remember what it means? Zachariah, Zachariah. The Lord remembers. The Lord remembers.

There is remembrance. And it is significant that this announcement, this first formal announcement comes where? At the temple, in the holy place, at what time? At the time of the burning of incense and incense represents Old Testament and new prayer. What is the issue? What's the first thing that Gabriel tells Zachariah in that speech? Now, what's the big news? What's the big news? Biggest news.

If when you come rushing into the room and say, I've got news, what would you tend to say? The Messiah time is here, right? But that's not the first thing Gabriel tells Zachariah. What does he tell him? You have to look, look back in Luke chapter one. Zachariah sees him in verse 12 and in verse 13, the angel said to him, do not be afraid.

And what's the message? Your prayers have been heard. The very, this is the announcement that is going to precede. This is what sets everything in motion for the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel, the biggest event in all of human history, bigger than Haley's comment, bigger than a supernova, bigger than anything is the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But in typical God-like fashion, there is understatement. There is a, an attention to detail and a building up. Now, point of application.

Many times in our prayers, we're looking for the big solution. We're looking for the, the answer. There's a gap.

It needs to be filled. There's a crack. It needs to be mended.

It's broken. It needs to be repaired. It's lacking.

It needs to be provided. There's too much of this and it needs to be reduced. There's not enough of that.

It needs to be provisioned. And we're just looking for this big idea. We're very simplistic problem request.

Where's the answer. But when you see the pattern in scripture so often, God uses the strategy of the indirect approach. One of the best books I ever read.

Don't go buy it. It's only if you're bent a certain way. But Liddell Hart wrote this great military strategy book called Strategy of the Indirect Approach.

And he traces it down through history, whether it's Napoleon, whether it's battles in World War II, where you, it's hit them where they ain't it's the unexpected. It's the don't attack the point of strength use an indirect approach. And God invented the indirect approach.

So here's Zechariah in the temple. When's the last time an angel appeared to anybody? Centuries. Centuries have gone by.

There are a couple of anecdotal stories of an angelic visitation, like in the Maccabees, but in inspired scripture, it has been hundreds of years. The angel appears in the first thing out of his mouth is what your prayers have been heard. This is a faithful believer who has been praying for a son.

And at the time of the offering of incense, which is symbolic of all of the prayers of the people, the angel says your prayers have been heard. And this is a metaphor that the prayers of the faithful in Israel for their deliverance, this coming of a son to vindicate and, and fulfill the hopes and expectations of Zechariah and Elizabeth reflects in a larger sense, the hopes and expectations of the nation. And when the angel says your prayers have been heard in that setting and with those people outside praying, this is the beginning of the announcement that those great prayers have been heard.

So again, the point of application, don't worry if the fulfillment of a prayer doesn't seem to happen, like putting, I would say a quarter, but I'd have to say put a dollar bill in the machine and out comes a soda. God is not mechanical. God is creative.

God uses every circumstance to teach us and to impress on us the value of our faith, our patience, and the value of our prayers. Your prayers are heard. When you go back to the 70 weeks prophecy, that's one of the last previews of this time.

What's the first thing the angel says to Daniel? What has he been doing for the whole preceding chapter? Praying. And this same angel tells Daniel, your prayers have been heard. Your prayers have been heard.

When you think on the meaning of Christmas on the wonderful coming of the Lord Jesus, your prayers have been heard. This is what it is to love the Lord, your God. This is what it is to honor his name, to look to him for provision, for protection, for fulfillment, for purpose and meaning.

And that's expressed in our prayers. This is a story. The Zachariah story is a story about prayer.

It's at the time of prayer. It's the first thing out of Gabriel's lips after do not be afraid. Your prayers have been heard.

Daniel, your prayers have been heard. Fill in your name here. Your prayers have been heard.

Now what is the condition for your prayers being heard? What's our memory verse? The Lord's arm is not shortened that it cannot save. Neither is his ear heavy that he cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated between you and your God and your sins have hid his face from you that he will not hear.

Daniel spent that whole chapter. We saw that when we went through Daniel, all of the preparation, the intensity of his devotion and his dedication in that prayer. Zachariah and Elizabeth are devout, righteous couple that have been praying for decades.

The effectual fervent prayer availeth much. Is that how the verse goes? Say it with me. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

You can't lay claims on God's promises if you're not believing and living in faith. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Your prayers have been heard.

If you don't remember anything else from this study, remember that your prayers are taken seriously in heaven. They are heard, which it's kind of like when you're turning in a paper in school or you're writing a letter to somebody and it's not like in the days of text where you can make an instant correction. You consider and carefully word what you say because it's going to travel a distance.

It's going to be graded and you go over and over and this is what Daniel did and this is what Zachariah and Elizabeth did. What is the basis for praying for a child? This is heritage. This is

what God describes by way of blessing and so there is a claim.

There is a basis and we want to consider our prayers. We want to pray the kind of prayer that God can answer affirmatively, not pray carelessly, not play, pray hastily, not pray frivolously. You know, Jesus said in some cases, you're all you want to do is pray that you may consume it on your lusts, but to be a qualified person sending a prayer to God, it will be heard.

That's number one. We saw what Elizabeth means and the pattern going back to other barren women in the Old Testament. I count six.

If, if you add the woman who had no son because her husband was old, that would make seven. But you have Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah, the mother of Samson. So with this pattern and, and in particular right in the middle there, you have you have Hannah in first Samuel and it's very significant because you have the beginning of the people with Abraham and a barren wife.

You have the beginning of deliverance with Rachel who, if she doesn't have Joseph, what happens in the famine? I mean, so to speak. And then with Hannah and Samuel, you have the beginning who's going to anoint the King of Israel if not Samuel. And so at these points of important creation of new entities and new functions within God's people, there's the least likely candidate, but it is someone of faith.

Sarah is a woman of faith. Rachel is a woman of faith and Hannah is a woman of faith. And you get that most clearly with Hannah, with her prayers and her affliction.

More about that soon. But you have this idea of the unexpected. It's indirect.

You would expect that God would have a large family and ensure that if any one of the sons passed away, there's another one to step up and take his place. But here's someone that, how many sons does Sarah have? One, only one. Abraham's going to marry Keturah and have like 17 sons, but none of those are the right guy.

He is with Hagar and has Ishmael, but he's not the guy. How many sons does Rachel have? Only two. And there's Joseph and there's Benjamin.

And that interplay is very important. A lot of what happens with Joseph's deliverance of the nation hinges on Benjamin and that elder and younger of that pair. You come to the mother of Samson and Samson himself and deliverance from the Philistines.

Where is Israel relation to the Philistines if there's no Samson? He's a mighty man and we'll be talking about him a little bit later. So when Zachariah is told that his prayers have been answered, and this is the second point of our application here, what is his response? Give me a sign. I need a sign.

It's not enough that I'm in the temple at the time of prayer and an angel has appeared to me.

What sign do I have that what you say is true? The message and messenger are the sign, right? And our third point of application is we don't need to look in this day and in our dispensation for overt signs. The message and the inspired scriptures are the sign.

The scriptures themselves carry the freight. They bring the message and they themselves are witness to God and to themselves. That with the Holy Spirit in the mouth of two or three witnesses, the thing is established in the combination of the witness of faithful believers who are listening to the Holy Spirit and the witness of the word to itself is all the sign we need.

If God has made a promise, that's all the sign you need. If there hadn't been an angel in the holy place, well, our equivalent would be if we didn't have a Bible, if it was all just hearsay or handed down in verbal mythology, but we have the scriptures and you can tax these scriptures. You can put them under a microscope and it's just like the Mandelbrot set.

It doesn't matter how you magnify them. They are internally consistent. They are without flaw.

They're without error. They are beautiful. They interconnect across centuries, books, Old Testament and New, 66 books, 40 different authors and its consistency is a witness to itself.

There's no other book like this. So if you want to know about answered prayer, what are the three things we've reviewed? A, if you qualify yourself by being righteous and faithful, your prayers are heard as long as your iniquities are not separating. And we have first John one, seven, we have first John one, nine, we have Psalm 51.

We have abundant witness in scripture for how to make sure that our sins do not separate between us and our God walking in the light as he is in the light so that we have fellowship and the blood of Jesus Christ keeps on cleansing us from all sin qualifies us, as it says in Hebrews to come boldly to the throne of grace for help in time of need, grace to help in time of need. Come boldly. The Lord Jesus has made a new and living way through the veil.

So confidence, we have that confidence from scripture. We claim scriptural promises. We have scriptural access.

We have the witness of scripture to Christ's procuring that and gifting us with it in Christ. We are a new creation in Christ. We have that boldness.

We are royal family of God. We are believer priests after the order of Melchizedek and we are qualified. God has given us that privilege and we exercise it.

So the response once we have prayed knowing our prayer has been heard, what then is our going forward attitude? Not demanding a sign, not the failure of Zachariah. When he says, how will I know? The angel says, I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. Who is the messenger from the presence of God that speaks to us and confirms our glad tidings? It's the Holy Spirit, isn't it? Not just a messenger, God himself.

The third member of the Trinity has come from heaven and confirms. We have, I think I quoted it backwards either last week or sometime in the recent past, but we have a better covenant founded on new and better promises. And one of the signs of our covenant is the presence not of an angel at Sinai or an angel in the holy place, but God himself and the person of the Holy Spirit that the Lord Jesus has sent to us to be our comforter and our guide and our teacher and our encourager.

He's the one that has come from heaven. So when you see Gabriel saying I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God, if you have any doubt about your prayer being heard and about your request being considered and God working things together for good, often in indirect ways, we think it's going to be answered one way and it gets answered in a completely different way. But we rest in confidence because we have a messenger from the presence of God confirming that message and that's part of the sign.

And we don't want to fail in the area of faith because what does that do? It renders us mute in terms of body of Christ witness on this earth. There is a time to speak and there is a time to remain silent. Jesus would heal a man and say, don't tell anyone, tell no man.

And he would go and speak. He was told not to speak and he spoke. There are other times when we are to speak and being mute or silent is the wrong answer.

How do we know when to speak and when to remain silent? That same Holy Spirit guides us, brings to our mind. Scripture gives us the fruit of the spirit, which includes long suffering and gentleness and goodness and self-control. And we will have a sense.

We will know from examples in scripture. We will know from recent study in the word of God when to speak, when a word fitly spoken is going to be like an apple of gold and a picture of silver. And when it is time to answer nothing, the Lord Jesus in his trial, sometimes like a lamb before his shearers is dumb.

So he opened not his mouth. There were other times when he spoke. How did he know? He was filled with the spirit.

He was guided by the spirit. He was the living word of God and all the Holy Spirit had to do is bring a pertinent scripture to his mind. And he knew what to do.

He's our example. That's what we do. So we have a counterexample in Zachariah not being able to speak.

Then we saw the announcement to Mary that's been gone over so many times. And I refer you back to our study in Luke for the details of Mary and the song of Mary, which is a wonderful study in itself. And when we did Luke chapter one, we looked at that song as it compares and contrast with the song of Hannah.

And it's a really a wonderful thing. And then you have Zachariah's prophecy. And that's the

reason that Luke chapter one has 80 verses in it.

I think maybe only Psalm 119 exceeds it in length, but it's a long chapter ending with the child grew and became strong in spirit and was in the desert till the day of his manifestation to Israel. And this is talking about John the Baptist. Well, what I want to continue with this morning is the other early witnesses to the arrival of God's salvation, because this is what we're watching for today.

I want to know what are the signs of his coming? Well, what were the signs of his first coming? What was their nature? One thing we have to factor in is the difference in dispensation, because where the age of Israel was earthly and literal and material, you had physical sacrifices on a physical altar at a physical tabernacle and later a physical temple. You had physical appearances by angels and by prophets supernaturally demonstrating by physical miracles, the authenticity and the content of God's communication, right? In this age, it is spiritual. Jesus told the woman at the well, the time is coming when it's not going to be a matter of which mountain are you on.

It is worshiping the Lord in spirit and in truth. So our signs are not likely to be physical signs such as preceded the Lord's birth. They're going to be discernible in the spirit and in the truth.

Spiritually by spiritual truth, interpreting the signs of the times in the light of spiritual truth. We're not looking for, and we'll see this when we look at the Lord's words in red in the latter chapters of Matthew. But we're going to pause here and take our break.

What is our major emphasis here in the first session? The coming of the Lord is tied to answered prayer. The coming of the Lord's messenger is tied to answered prayer. The choosing of Zachariah and Elizabeth is answered prayer.

It is targeting righteous people who are praying and the coming of the Lord is answered prayer and who will follow instructions once they are given. This is who we want to be. We want our prayers to be not only heard but answered.

We want to be those to whom God can send grace and opportunity for service. Think of the privilege of raising, and we don't know how many years, Zachariah and Elizabeth are old and it occurs to the mind that who knows how long they lasted after his birth. They were very elderly and you don't have the longevity that you had back in Abraham and Sarah's day.

Abraham and Sarah live into the adulthood of their sons. But you wonder, John seems to have dwelt in the desert and this is why they think he might have taken up with the Essenes or the folks that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls and so on. But think of the privilege of preparing God's message to Abraham and Sarah.

God's messenger taking care of him as a child, being a living witness, a living sign. This elderly lady like Sarah who has a miraculous child with a special purpose and just her existence is a sign and she is assigned to her cousin Mary. What a privilege it is to be someone who follows

God's way and is used by God to bless so many others and they would have no concept of how many people would know their story and know the details that are recorded in scripture.

Just as we don't know the ripples and the effect that God has in our lives, no matter how insignificant we may seem or how out of the way or out of the mainstream, you have no idea what God can be doing in and through faithful believers and faithful disciples both now and in future opportunities. Many times that this is all preparation and the fulfillment and the performance and the application and the service is yet future in the two kingdoms that are yet to come. So it is all about faith.

It is about maintaining our righteous life before God. Be holy as he is holy and know that our prayers are heard and God will answer in his unique, divine, indirect fashion. When we come back from the break, we're going to take a look at the further anticipations of the person and work of the Lord Jesus recorded in scripture and see some fascinating things having to do with names.

We'll do that after the break.