



Sunday School Lesson Summary for December 16, 2007
Released on December 12, 2007

"Called to Proclaim"

Printed Text: Luke 1:67-80

Background Scripture: Luke 1:57-80

Devotional Reading: Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:67-80

67 And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,
68 Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people,

69 And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David;
70 As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began:

71 That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us;

72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant;

73 The oath which he sware to our father Abraham,

74 That he would grant unto us, that we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear,

75 In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.

76 And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;

77 To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins,

78 Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,

79 To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

80 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. List three elements of praise in "Zechariah's song."
2. Compare and contrast John's role as a "prophet of the Highest" with our responsibility to proclaim Christ.
3. Write a short song or poem of praise for the area of service that God has granted him or her.

Introduction

Everyone delights in proclaiming good news. We share the joy of the young couple who announce the forthcoming birth of a child, the runner who displays his first-place trophy, or the woman who tells us her cancer tests were negative. We cannot conceal our pleasure when a grandchild has excelled in school, a recipe has turned out well, or a candidate we voted for has won.

We get special satisfaction in revealing good news after having to remain silent about it for some time. We enjoy paying tribute to a colleague at a surprise reception. We revel in the facial expressions of our children when we finally tell them we are going to their favorite vacation spot. We rejoice when we can tell our spouse of a long-anticipated promotion.

The content of this week's text is the joyous proclamation of a man who had long been forced to remain silent. Zacharias was a godly priest who in his old age had been singularly blessed with a divine promise of a son. Moreover, this son would have the unique ministry of preparing Israel for their Messiah and introducing Him to them.

Lesson Background

A genuine prophet of the Old Testament could prove that he spoke for God by being able to predict accurately what would happen. If a self-proclaimed prophet tried to do this and his prediction did not come to pass, he was to be put to death (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). But God's prophet also had the important task of proclaiming God's call to repentance. In the writings of the Old Testament prophets, this call to righteous living comprises the majority of their content.

Thus, foretelling and forthtelling were the two tasks of the prophet. John the Baptist came as "the prophet of the Highest" (Luke 1:76). In his predictive, foretelling role, John's main task was to proclaim a message of the coming of the Messiah. His message was that "one mightier than I cometh ... he shall baptize ... he will thoroughly purge" (Luke 3:16, 17).

In the forthtelling role, John proclaimed God's call to repentance. Like the prophet Nathan rebuking King David (2 Samuel 12) or Elijah condemning King Ahab (1 Kings 21), John confronted King Herod (Matthew 14:4). Like many of the prophets of old, John was finally killed for proclaiming God's truth to someone who did not want to hear it. Jesus said, "Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Luke 7:28).

Unlike the prophets before John, the Bible gives us a tantalizing glimpse of the beginning of his life. Just as the angel Gabriel had promised, Elisabeth gave birth to a son in her old age. The presentation of a newborn child was a community event. So neighbors and relatives gathered in the rural village in the Judean hill country where John's parents lived to rejoice and praise God for this blessing (Luke 1:57, 58).

The Mercies of God (Luke 1:67-75)

1. When did the ability to speak return to Zacharias? (v. 64)

In the previous lesson, "Called to Believe," the angel Gabriel came to Zacharias and delivered the message that he would have a son who would prepare the way for Jesus. Zacharias' unbelief caused him to lose the ability to speak until the son was born. When the son was born and circumcised, the neighbors and relatives wanted to name the child after Zacharias, but Elizabeth, the mother, said that the son shall be named John. In verse 63, Zacharias was still speechless, but the neighbors and relatives wanted Zacharias to make the final call. Zacharias motions for a tablet, and wrote "His name is John" on the tablet.

Zachariah regains the power of speech as soon as he demonstrates his obedience. When *his tongue is loosed*, his first words are words of praise to God. All the gratitude and wonder that has been bottled up inside of him for nine months comes pouring out.

Even after the people return to their homes, they can't stop talking about this special child (Luke 1:65, 66, not in today's text). Everyone who hears the story is amazed. What must the future hold for this child?

2. What happened to Zacharias soon after he was able to speak? (v. 67)

It is worth noting that his temporary lapse of faith did not disqualify Zacharias from usefulness to God. He was filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 67), just as Elisabeth had been earlier when Mary greeted her. The words he spoke thus prophesied of God's dealings with His people. Notice that Zacharias said nothing about the blessings the Lord had bestowed on him and Elisabeth through John's birth; he spoke only of messianic blessings on Israel.

3. By what title did Zacharias address God in his song? (v. 68)

Zacharias uses the title "The Lord God of Israel" in his song, which is called the Benedictus, the Latin translation of the first word, "blessed." The Greek word translated "blessed" means "praised" or "spoken well of" (cf. vs. 64). All that Zacharias spoke of in this song brought praise to God.

The title "The Lord God of Israel" was a direct reference to Yahweh, who had graciously chosen to be Israel's God. Since Zacharias was a Jew, it was proper for him to reference God this way. Through Israel's Messiah God would now show Himself to be the God of all mankind.

Also notice that Zacharias did not talk about being mute for nine months after he regained the ability to speak. He did not curse God for making him mute. He was not concerned with what God did to him because of his unbelief. He simply praised God for the salvation that He was about to give Israel (and ultimately for the rest of the world, too). We should take a lesson from Zacharias' response to God's chastisement.

4. Praise of God is still appropriate for us 2,000 years later. What avenues do you have for praising God? What tends to prevent you from pouring out praise to Him? How do you overcome this?

We often think of praise as a corporate activity on Sunday mornings. But we can and should praise God in the privacy of our thoughts as well. Praising God is a part of our purpose and privilege (1 Peter 2:9).

Even on bad days the redeemed have much to be thankful for. Mother Teresa has been attributed with saying, "In light of Heaven, the worst suffering on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on earth, will be seen to be no more serious than

one night in an inconvenient hotel." Jesus offers us abundant, eternal life. In light of this, our proper response is praise (Luke 19:37-40).

Differences in ways people offer praise sometimes create conflict. God cares more about the sincerity of our praise and worship than the style of its expression (Psalm 150; John 4:23, 24).

5. To whom does "horn of salvation" (Luke 1:69) refer? Why is He called this?

"Horn" was a common Old Testament term for strength, for the horns of an animal symbolized its strength (cf. Ps. 92:10). Here, the "horn of salvation" refers to the Messiah, whose strength would deliver Israel. Since the Messiah, Jesus, is God Himself, He has all strength, and therefore the "horn of salvation" symbolizes the assuredness that each Christian should have concerning his or her salvation.

6. Quickly think of three things for which to praise God. What do these three things say about your view of what's most important?

If "family" tops your list, perhaps you need to read Luke 9:61, 62; 14:26 (see Lesson 13). If some material possession is most important, read Luke 12:15-21. If personal comfort is a big deal to you, see Luke 9:58. Notice that "salvation" is high on Zechariah's list. It should be on ours as well.

7. Was the theme of the messianic deliverance of Israel new in Zacharias' day? (v. 70-71)?

God's mercies to Israel had not just recently become known; they have been spoken "by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began." Since "world" can also be translated "age," we should take this phrase to mean "from long ago" or "from of old." The theme of Israel's deliverance by the Davidic Messiah can be found in many prophetic writings of the Old Testament (Isa. 11:1-12; Hos. 3:4-5).

8. Why was the deliverance from enemies a major theme in Israel's thinking?

The deliverance in Zacharias' mind was probably more physical than spiritual. Over the centuries, many people had come to hate Israel. At the beginning of the nation, the Egyptians hated them, and the pharaohs oppressed them. On their way to Canaan, they were ambushed by the Amalekites and snubbed by the Edomites. The Moabites tried to have them cursed, and the tribes of Canaan engaged them in battle.

Throughout history, the Jews had been opposed, harassed, and attacked by enemies on all sides. The Good News is that God kept Israel through all those times, and we see that God kept his promise to Abraham that Israel will always remain, even today.

9. What was the nature of God's covenant with Abraham? (v. 73-74)

Israel's deliverance was not only foretold by the prophets; it was embedded in the covenant promises given to Israel's forefathers. Zacharias especially called attention to the oath that God swore to Israel's forefather, Abraham. The earliest record of God's promises to Abraham is Genesis 12:1-7. He promised him land, the posterity

of a great nation, and a blessing to all the earth through him. He also included blessings on Abraham's friends and curses on his enemies.

The Lord solemnized His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15:7-21, stressing his descendants' inheritance of the land of Canaan. But the oath Zacharias referred to in Luke 1:73 was no doubt God's reaffirmation of the covenant in Genesis 22:15-18, given after Abraham placed Isaac on the altar. The Lord said, "By myself have I sworn" (v. 16). He reassured Abraham that all the promises He had previously made were intact and would be fulfilled.

Included in these promises was the prophecy that Abraham's multiplying seed would "possess the gate of the enemies" (Gen. 22:17). Zacharias picked up the thought when he said "that he would grant unto us,...[deliverance] out of the hand of our enemies" (Luke 1:74). Thus, a prominent theme throughout his song is that Israel was about to be "redeemed" (v. 68), "saved" (v. 71), and "delivered" (v. 74).

10. What was God's purpose for Israel as a covenant people? (v. 74-75)

Zacharias knew that God called Israel to reflect His glory to the rest of the world (cf. Deut. 26:18-19). So he saw God bestowing His mercies so that they "might serve him without fear" (Luke 1:74). What better way for Israel to bear witness before the World than to enjoy His peace?

The purpose for Israel was to be a priestly nation to the rest of the world. In other words, Israel was to intercede with God on behalf of the world. Israel was to show the other nations how to live for God. Likewise, Christians should intercede on behalf of the world and be an example of how to live a godly life. It is important for all Christians to pray for the lost souls to receive Christ and to actively preach the message to these lost souls.

The Mission of God's Covenant (Luke 1:76-80)

11. What was John the Baptist's task in relation to the Messiah? (v. 76-77)

Zacharias addresses his baby telling him that he would be called "the prophet of the Highest." He would derive his significance from the One he proclaimed, who was "the Son of the Highest" (v. 32).

John's unique prophetic role lay in his mission to go before the Lord and prepare the way for Him. He would be the prophesied voice "that crieth in the wilderness. Prepare ye the way of the Lord" (Isa. 40:3). He would be the one of whom the Lord said, "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me" (Mal. 3:1; cf. 4:5-6).

John's preparation was to "give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins." In the final analysis, only Jesus could accomplish what was stated here. But John would have the privilege of calling attention to the need of salvation and to the One who can provide this salvation.

12. How was Jesus' arrival on the earth like a sunrise? (v. 78)

The salvation that the Jews (and everyone else) needed had come through the tender mercies of God. From His merciful heart had come the sunrise from heaven to

visit them. This is a beautiful description of Jesus Christ that corresponds to Malachi's "Sun of righteousness....with healing in his wings" (4:2).

This heavenly sunrise would cast His light abroad "to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:79). The similarity of this statement to Isaiah 9:2, combined with Matthew's declaration of its fulfillment in Jesus' ministry (Matt. 4:13-16), suggests that Jesus' light would reach beyond the Jews to the Gentiles (cf. Luke 2:32).

Messiah's spiritual light would also "guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79). In their wanderings, human beings stray into conflicts with God and one another. Only the light of salvation can bring them into the path of peace (Rom 5:1; Eph. 2:14-18).

13. In what circumstances did John continue to grow to manhood? (v. 80)

In verse 80, the verb tense describes his development as continual; he kept growing and becoming strong in spirit. He was developing physically and spiritual strength as he prepared for his unique ministry.

Much of this was done in solitude—in the desert away from normal society. This may have been due in part to the deaths of his elderly parents, but God used these circumstances to prepare him for the type of ministry he would have. John, like Elijah, would never be at home in the religious establishment, and it appears that God was protecting him from its evil influence.

Conclusion

John's mother, Elisabeth, stood up against the pressure of popular opinion and insisted that what God said about naming the baby would be carried out. John's father, Zechariah, was faithful as well—once he had learned from nine months of silence. He joyfully proclaimed the praise of God and the salvation of God.

Following in his parents' footsteps, John was faithful to his own call to proclaim. To people who trusted their own goodness and ancestry to save them, John proclaimed repentance. To a nation largely unaware that they sat in darkness, John proclaimed the coming of the Lord. He was the prophet—the spokesman—for God.

We can learn from the example of the godly family of today's lesson. God has called His people to proclaim. Let us be faithful to that call.

Prayer

Our Father, we praise You for Your tender mercy. We thank You for the remission of our sins. Loosen the self-imposed silence of our tongues so we can be bold to proclaim Your wonders. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

John was called to proclaim. So are we.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

We have waited another whole year for the Christmas season to arrive. We enjoy hearing the traditional account of the coming of God in human flesh in the town of

Bethlehem, David's ancestral city. That community is now surrounded by enemies, and we should pray for its people. Let the arrival of the Babe remind us of the coming arrival of the King. Meanwhile, we can promote His cause to the world.

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