

BLESSED BE THE LORD!

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Want to get in the right frame of mind for Christmas? The Benedictus (Luke 1:67-79) is an exquisite jumping off point for your Advent meditations. Historically, this prophetic canticle has been used as the chief canticle in the Matins services. It is one of three beautiful canticles in the early chapters of St. Luke's gospel along with the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and the Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29-32). Every Christian should know all three of these canticles by heart.

The angel of the Lord had revealed to Zacharias that he and his aged wife would have a son whom they were to name John (Hebrew: Yohanan, meaning 'the Lord is gracious'). This child would be the divinely appointed forerunner of the Christ, foretold in the Old Testament (Mal 3:1ff., Isa 40:3ff.). Thus, the birth of John the Baptist was not only joyful news for a childless couple in their old age, but it was, more importantly, an indication that the long awaited Messiah was about to appear in fulfillment of God's promises. Therefore, on the day that John was circumcised, and given the name John in obedience to the command of the angel, Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost and prophesied the canticle we now call the Benedictus (Latin: Blessed be).

The canticle has two parts, vss. 68-75, and vss. 76-79. Let's take a look:

Luke 1:68-75 "Salvation Unto Us Has Come"

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 swore 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.

In this canticle we praise the Lord God because in Jesus Christ he has visited and redeemed us. We were slaves to sin and under the sentence of eternal death, but now we are redeemed by our heavenly Visitor. The Lord Jesus Christ is a horn of salvation which God has raised up in the house of David. A horn in the Bible symbolizes power and ruling authority. By the time Jesus was born the family line of king David had fallen into obscurity so that Jesus was born, not in the palaces of the wealthy and powerful, but to two lowly descendants of David, Joseph and Mary of Nazareth. But though lowly born, Jesus is born in fulfillment of God's promise to David, is a son of David, and is mighty to save all who call upon him. We are a people who have been visited and redeemed by the promised King of David's royal line. God has done just what he said, and done it for us.

This fulfillment of divine promise in the birth of Christ is further elaborated as we continue. Verse 70 tells us that all the prophets of God since the beginning of the world have foretold his coming and salvation; all the prophets from Adam to John. Lutherans have always insisted that Christ is the center of the Old Testament message. Luther said, "The Bible is the manger in which Christ is laid." This fulfilled promise of salvation in Christ is further described in terms of being saved from our enemies and from the hand of all that hate us. The Jews in the time of Christ forgot that more than earthly enemies were indicated here. Certainly our salvation includes ultimately our complete deliverance from even earthly enemies of the Word of God. When we enter the church triumphant in glory our victory over all enmity will become completely manifest. And even in this life under the cross we frequently witness the defeat of those who rise up against God, his Word and his church. But more than any temporal enemy, we are endangered by spiritual enemies. These are sin, unbelief, temporal, spiritual and eternal death, and the devil and his angels. These enemies far transcend temporal enemies in menace and power. But Christ has come among us to defeat them and render them powerless for us. In this victory we already anticipate the consummate victory of the kingdom of glory.

Verses 72-73 refer to the covenant God made with Abraham and his seed. In Gen 12:2-3 and its parallels in Genesis, God promised to make of Abraham's seed a great nation, saying, "in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." This covenantal promise of blessing for the whole world through the seed

of Abraham is the mercy promised by oath to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ who is the promised Seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16). We sinners who are in desperate need of the blessing of mercy now possess it by faith in Christ through whom blessing has come to all the families of the earth. Salvation is accomplished and offered to all.

We who are delivered by Christ from the hands of sin, death, and hell are now free in the forgiveness of sins; free to be the children of God. In this freedom of reconciliation there is nothing to hinder the full blessings of grace from being granted to us. In this grace we serve God, not as snivelling slaves, but as reverent sons and daughters. The grace by which he has saved us also moves, leads and enables us to conduct ourselves in holiness and righteousness while we remain in the world.

Why aren't more people rejoicing in these fulfilled promises? Because they remain blind to their true condition and deceive themselves that all is well without Christ. Therefore all of this sounds like nice religious patter to them. But when a person comes to see the truth about himself as a lost and condemned sinner on his way to hell, and realizes that no amount of self improvement is able to change that dire situation, then what once sounded like nice religious words, become a lifeline grasped with relief and joy! Let's take a look now at the second part of the canticle.

Luke 1:76-79 "The Authentic Witness Points Beyond Self to Christ"

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.

As Zacharias praises God in prophecy under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, the focus of the prophecy turns to the infant John and his vocation in God's plan. John's life and mission is not an end in itself; it serves the mission of the mightier one who is coming after him. His very life is a testimony to the coming of that other Life which is the Light of men. In his adulthood, John continually indicated that he understood this very well. In Matthew 3:11 John says, I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and *with* fire. In John 1:30 he says, This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And in John 3:30 he says, He must increase, but *I must* decrease.

As it was with John, so it is to be with everyone who wishes to give authentic witness to Christ. It is not ourselves, our accomplishments, our holiness, our wisdom, our faith or our service that we are called to testify to, but Christ and what he has done for us in his gracious visitation from on high. He must increase and we must decrease. We now live to bear witness to Jesus.

In verse 76 John is called the prophet of the highest. He is the final Old Testament voice who sums up the whole and points to the coming one. He goes before the Lord to prepare his way. How? By preaching the Word of God through which knowledge of salvation by the remission of sins is given. He who has forgiveness has everything else as well. Preaching and witnessing that is short on the forgiveness of sins and long on other things is not authentic testimony.

The remission of sins comes through the tender mercy of God by which the dayspring from on high hath visited us. That is, it comes through Christ who came into the world to save us by atoning for our sins and reconciling us to God. This forgiveness is received by faith in Christ. Salvation and remission are for all people, but only those who receive it by faith enjoy its benefits. No one will be saved by religious ritualism, or by good works and human righteousness, or by any other god or savior than the Triune God. God was under no compulsion to save us. He could have damned us, but in mercy he visited us from on high with redemption.

Christ is the dayspring, or the sunrise. All witnesses from John to the apostles and all the servants of the Lord through the ages reflect the light of Christ the Sun of righteousness. The moon is beautiful, but it has no light of its own. The light it sheds so beautifully in the world is reflected light from the sun. Its beauty is in its source. So it is with us. Our lives are to point to and glorify the Lord (Mat 5:16). We live in the light of his eternal blessings. We are no longer in the darkness of sin and spiritual blindness, stumbling toward judgment day and damnation. Through Christ we live in the daylight of grace and mercy, enjoying the

blessing of peace with God.

If we let the devil deceive us into placing a counterfeit in the place where only Christ belongs, we will soon lose our joy and salvation. But by holding to Christ as our redemption, wisdom, strength and hope as his Word declares, we will remain unmovably anchored to the only true foundation. And thus anchored, we rejoice at the opportunity to celebrate the enduring joys of Christmas without being overwhelmed by the commercial obligations of Xmas.