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## WHAT CHRISTMAS REALLY MEANS

Luke 1:67-79

By

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December 23, 2007  
Special Christmas Message

## What Christmas Really Means Luke 1:67-79

The children were putting on the annual Christmas play at church. To show the radiance of the newborn Savior, a light bulb was hidden in the manger. At the appropriate moment, all of the stage lights were to be turned off except for that one. But the boy controlling the light panel got confused and shut off all the lights. There was a dark moment of silence, broken when one of the shepherds said in a loud whisper, "Hey, you switched off Jesus!"

Even though we all know that Christmas is about the birth of the Savior, it's easy to get caught up in the cultural approach to the holiday and switch off Jesus. While there's nothing wrong with dreaming of a white Christmas or having a Christmas tree, or giving gifts to one another, the real meaning of Christmas deals with a much more urgent matter, namely, salvation.

Salvation has nothing to do with chestnuts roasting on an open fire or other warm, fuzzy feelings about an ideal Christmas holiday. Salvation deals with the messy fact that sinners need to be rescued from God's judgment. God sent His Son to bear the judgment that guilty sinners deserve. If at Christmas time, we don't think about the fact that God sent the *Savior*, we've switched off Jesus! As the angel told the shepherds that night when Jesus was born (Luke 2:11), "for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

This theme of salvation also comes through in the prophecy of Zacharias, the father of the forerunner, John the Baptist (Luke 1:67-79). You will recall that although Zacharias was a godly man, some months before the angel had struck him dumb because he doubted the promise that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son in their old age (Luke 1:20). But now that son was born and Zacharias' tongue was loosed. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he spoke this prophecy that focuses on the great salvation that God was about to bring. It shows us that ...

Christmas means that God sent us the Savior  
in the person of Jesus Christ.

Our greatest need at Christmas time is not for more things. We've all got plenty of things. Neither is it for personal fulfillment, though many think that's what they need and madly try to find it. Our greatest need is not even for the love of family and friends, as important as that is. The greatest need of every person is for salvation, because all have sinned against God. If we die in our sins, we face God's eternal judgment. God's salvation reconciles us with Him and gives us true hope, both for time and eternity. Our primary need is to know that we have received God's salvation.

Salvation is the theme of Zacharias' prophecy: He mentions "redemption" (1:68); "salvation" (1:69, 71, 77); and, "being delivered" (1:74). I want to draw out four themes from these verses related to salvation:

1. Salvation is God's doing, not our doing.

Salvation is of the Lord. This comes through strongly in these verses. Note first that the Lord God "visited us" (1:68, 78). We did not go searching for Him; He came and visited us. He saw our helpless condition, took pity on us, and came down to meet our enormous need in the person of the Savior.

This prophecy is steeped in the Old Testament. The theme of God visiting His people comes from Genesis 50:24, 25. As Joseph was dying in Egypt, he predicted that God would visit his descendants and bring them from there to the land which He had promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the LXX, the Greek uses an emphatic Hebraism, "in visiting, God will visit you," which means, "God will surely visit you." Then Joseph repeats, "At the visitation with which God shall visit you, then you shall carry my bones with you." After an interval of 400 years of slavery in Egypt, we read of God telling Moses (Exodus 3:16): "Visiting, I have visited you" (see also, Exod. 4:31; 13:19).

Even so, in Zacharias' time, Israel had not heard a word from the Lord in 400 years. The nation was now under the Roman yoke of oppression. It seemed as if God had forgotten His people. But then, after the birth of the forerunner of Messiah, and knowing the angel's promise to Mary that she would bear the Son of God,

Zacharias prophesies, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us."

If you were living in abject poverty and one day a kind billionaire visited you, you might have a ray of hope that he would take pity on you and give you some help. But God has done more than that. He not only saw our desperate condition and sent us help; He actually took our human condition on Himself! He took on human flesh, not as a mighty king, above our weaknesses, but as a baby, subject to our frailty, yet without sin. As if that were not enough, He even took our sin on Himself on the cross, bearing the penalty we deserve! It was all God's doing because of His tender mercy (1:78), not because we deserved it. God visited us in the birth of Jesus Christ.

There are many other evidences in our text that salvation is God's doing, not our doing. He accomplished it (1:68). "He raised up a horn of salvation for us" (1:69). The horn is a symbol of the strength of an animal, such as a bull (Ps. 132:17; 18:2). Here it points to the fact that salvation required God's mighty power because our enemy is so strong. But God did it—He raised it up. He did it in accordance with many prophecies which He had given centuries before (1:70-71). Alfred Edersheim found more than 400 Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, but even apart from these specific prophecies, the whole of the Old Testament points to Christ (in Norval Geldenhuys, *Luke* [Eerdmans], pp. 93-94).

Furthermore, God sent the Savior in accordance with the oath of His covenant with Abraham (1:72-73). Two thousand years before Jesus Christ was born, God sovereignly chose Abraham, a pagan living in the city of Ur of the Chaldeans, and promised to make a great nation of him, to give his descendants the land of Canaan, and to bless all the families of the earth through him (Gen. 12:1-3). During His ministry, Jesus told the Jews who contended with Him, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Jesus Christ was the descendant of Abraham in whom God's promises were fulfilled.

God also raised up John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, in accordance with prophecies made hundreds of years before. In Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1; 4:5, God predicted that He would send His messenger in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way

before Messiah. Even though Zacharias and Elizabeth were humanly beyond their childbearing years, God sent His angel to promise them that they would have this son who would fulfill these prophecies by making "ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17).

The point is, God did all this apart from human initiative, effort, merit, or ability. God planned it, He prophesied it, and He carried it out, in spite of Zacharias' doubts and inability to father a son. The salvation God provided in Jesus Christ comes totally from Him. We cannot do anything to earn it or work for it. All we can do is receive it.

This runs counter to the common notion that we can save ourselves by our own effort or ability. It goes against the idea that we deserve to be saved. No! Salvation is from God, apart from human merit, that no one can boast. If you think you can do something to save yourself or to provide for your own salvation, you do not understand what Christmas means.

2. Salvation is accomplished through the person of Jesus Christ.

Though His name is not mentioned specifically in Zacharias' prophecy, His person is described so that there is no mistaking it. This horn of salvation is from "the house of David" (1:69). Zacharias and Elizabeth were both descended from Aaron who was from the tribe of Levi (Luke 1:5), but Jesus was descended from the tribe of Judah through David (Matt. 1:2-17; Luke 3:23-38). As we've already seen, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (John 8:56-58).

Also, as Luke 1:76 shows, the coming Savior was none other than the Lord God in human flesh. John went "before the Lord to prepare His ways," The Lord (who is God) is Jesus. John recognized the divinity of Jesus when he affirmed that Jesus had a higher rank than he because He existed before him, even though physically John was six months older than Jesus (John 1:30).

Zacharias refers to this Savior as "the Sunrise from on high" (Luke 1:78), a reference to Malachi 4:2: "The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings." Jesus Himself claimed, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the dark-

ness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). Clearly, Jesus Christ is the Savior of whom Zacharias and all Scripture prophesied. As the angel told Joseph after explaining how Mary had conceived through the Holy Spirit, "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

3. Salvation means the forgiveness of our sins by God's mercy.

In the earlier part of this prophecy, Zacharias speaks of salvation with reference to national deliverance from enemy nations (1:71, 74). This political aspect of salvation will be fulfilled in Christ's second coming, when He will return and defeat Israel's enemies and establish His kingdom rule over all the earth. But the Jews in Jesus' day erred in that they saw God's salvation through Messiah almost completely in such political terms.

But John's ministry was intended to show Israel that salvation "consisted in the forgiveness of their sins" (1:77, literal translation). John preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). Even though Israel was God's chosen people by nationality, they still had to be reconciled to God individually through repentance and the forgiveness of their sins. Since God is holy, no sinner can stand in His presence. Since He is just, He cannot dismiss sins without the payment of the penalty. He has ordained that the penalty for our sins is death (Rom. 6:23). But because of His tender mercy, He took on Himself the penalty we deserved so that we might go free. John would later announce Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Zacharias (1:79) brings together a couple of references from Isaiah (9:2; 60:1-3), which describe those who need God's salvation as "those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death." The picture is of travelers who have lost their way in the wilderness and night falls. They grope for the path, but it eludes them. Finally, in despair, they can do nothing but sit down in the darkness, where death from wild beasts lurks in the shadows. They can't sleep because they are too cold and too afraid. Every time a wolf howls in the darkness, they shiver in fear. They huddle in the darkness, hoping for the morning light. Finally, they see a faint glow in the eastern sky. Slowly but surely the darkness yields to the bright

morning sun. In its light, they find the path that leads to peace and safety.

It's a graphic picture of those who sit in the darkness and shadow of death that comes from sin. They are lost in the darkness, not knowing which way to go. They are afraid of death, always lurking in the shadows. They don't know what to do and they can't do anything to find their way. They need light!

Then, perhaps at Christmas time, they hear that a Savior has been born. The glimmer of hope in the eastern sky begins to dawn. They hear further that this Savior died to save His people from their sins. The sky brightens. But, still, they wonder if they can be good enough to earn this salvation which Christ offers. Then they hear that it is not something that anyone can earn, but that God offers forgiveness of sins freely because of His tender mercy. The sun rises in its full light into their soul, guiding them into His way of peace.

The word "tender" (1:78) literally means, "bowels." The Hebrews thought of the bowels as the seat of the emotions. It points to God's deep compassion for sinners. Many erroneously think that God is mean and harsh, waiting to strike them down for their sins should they dare show up at His doorstep. But Jesus portrayed the heavenly Father as the father of the prodigal son who, when he saw his son in the distance, felt compassion for him (the Greek verb in Luke 15:20 is related to this noun, "bowels"), and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. Do you know this tender mercy of God in your life today?

You must understand that God must judge all sin or He would no longer be just. He can't just brush it aside. At the judgment, He will pour out His eternal wrath on all sinners who have not put their trust in Jesus. But, God is not only just, but also merciful. His great love and mercy caused Him to send His own Son to bear the penalty that we deserved. If, like the prodigal son, you repent of your sins and come to Jesus, He will forgive you completely and you will know His tender mercy.

Years ago, a man named Dr. Barnardo, who ran a London orphanage, was approached by a dirty, ragged little boy who asked for

admission. The doctor looked at him and said, "But my boy, I don't know you. What do you have to recommend you?"

The boy was not only needy, but also bright. He quickly held up before Dr. Barnardo his ragged coat and with a confident little voice said, "If you please, sir, I thought these here would be all I needed to recommend me." Dr. Barnardo caught him up in his arms and took him in, because that truly was all he needed to recommend him—his rags.

Do you need forgiveness? Then bring the rags of all your sins and apply to Jesus. He bore your penalty in His body on the cross. Because of His tender mercy, God will pardon all who seek His forgiveness. Salvation means the forgiveness of our sins by God's mercy. There's no such thing as sin that is greater than the tender mercy of our God!

Thus salvation is God's doing, not ours. It is accomplished through Jesus Christ, the Sunrise from on high. And, it means the forgiveness of sins by God's mercy. But that's not all:

4. Salvation results in a life of holy service to God.

Zacharias says that we, "being rescued from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days" (1:74-75). Contrary to what many think, salvation is not primarily about us and our happiness. The Christian life is a blessedly happy life, full of joy and gladness. But God doesn't save us so that we can live happily ever after, ignoring the needs of others. He saves us so that we might glorify Him (make Him look good) as our joy in Him overflows into a life of holy service. People who think they're saved but who live for themselves and their own happiness to the neglect of others are deceived. True salvation always results in a holy life given over to serving our gracious God who has granted deliverance from the bondage of sin.

Years ago a Salvation Army officer, Captain Shaw, went to India as a medical missionary to a leper colony. His eyes welled with tears as he saw three lepers in front of him, their hands and feet bound by chains that cut into their diseased flesh. Shaw turned to the guard and said, "Please unfasten these chains." "But it isn't

safe," the guard replied. "These men are not just lepers; they're dangerous criminals."

"I'll be responsible; they're suffering enough," Shaw said, as he took the keys, and tenderly removed the shackles and treated their bleeding ankles and wrists.

About two weeks later Captain Shaw had his first misgivings about freeing these criminals. He had to make an overnight trip and feared leaving his wife and child alone. His wife insisted that she wasn't afraid; God would protect her. So the doctor left. The next morning when Mrs. Shaw went to her door, she was startled to see the three criminals lying on her steps. One explained, "We know the doctor go. We stay here all night so no harm come to you." That was their response to the doctor's act of love for them—to serve him freely out of gratitude. That should be our response to God's freeing us from bondage to sin—to give our lives in holy service to Him.

### Conclusion

Zacharias' prophecy tells us the meaning of Christmas: That God sent us a Savior in the person of Jesus Christ. I am inadequate to explain this to you; God Himself must break through if you would grasp it and respond.

During the Christmas season of 1879, an agnostic reporter in Boston saw three little girls standing in front of a store window full of toys. One of them was blind. Coming closer, he heard the other two trying to describe the playthings to their friend. He said he had never thought of how difficult it would be to explain what something looks like to someone who has never been able to see. That incident became the basis for a newspaper story.

Two weeks later this same agnostic attended a meeting conducted by the famous evangelist, D. L. Moody. His purpose was to catch Moody in some inconsistency. But he was greatly surprised to hear Moody use his newspaper account of the three children to illustrate a spiritual truth. He said, "Just as the blind girl couldn't visualize the toys, so a lost person can't see Christ in all His glory." He said that God must open the eyes of those without Christ so that the person will acknowledge his sin and trust the Savior in humble faith. God opened that newsman's eyes. He saw his own

need and discovered for himself the truth of Moody's words. (From, "Our Daily Bread," Winter, 1980-1981.)

If you have never trusted in Christ as your Savior, you sit in darkness and the shadow of death. But through my words today, God is visiting you with the good news that He is merciful to sinners. Ask Him to shine into your heart to guide you into the way of peace. Repent of your sins and trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior. If you turn to Christ you will know His tender mercy that forgives all your sins. You will know the real meaning of Christmas: that God sent us a Savior in the person of Jesus Christ.

### Application Questions

1. How can we help people who do not know Christ see their true, desperate condition before God (see Gal. 3:10, 24)?
2. Why are people inclined to think that they can do something to save themselves? How does Romans 9:16 refute this?
3. Will the fact that God offers forgiveness by His mercy lead to loose living? Why/why not?
4. How can we deepen our daily awareness of God's tender mercy toward us?

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