

Christmas 2018 – The Transition in Transformation

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80 | Sunday, December 9, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

CHRISTMAS 2018

THE TRANSITION IN TRANSFORMATION

Luke 1:5-15, 57-80

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him 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 for the Lord a people prepared."

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

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After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

Skip to verse 57 where we will read about the birth of John to Elizabeth and Zechariah.

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.

Verses 67 and following record a prophecy, a song that Zechariah speaks under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he prophesies,

*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people...”*

I’m not going to read all that prophecy now, but I will reference it hopefully before the message is over.

This passage begins the Christmas story for Luke. He is going to tell us about the birth of Jesus. He is going to tell us about the birth of the Messiah. And he begins with another miraculous birth, the birth of John the Baptist. John comes as one who is called of the Lord to prepare the way for Jesus. He is the forerunner, the one who comes in the Spirit of Elijah, prophesied about, to prepare the hearts of people.

It’s interesting because it illustrates for us a very powerful truth about how God works in our lives. When God brings you a blessing, when God is about to do something significant in your life, he prepares you. And many times, it feels that that blessing comes suddenly or abruptly or instantaneously, but then afterward you are going to look back, and you can see how God was preparing you for that actual event, for that actual gift that God was bringing to you.

In fact, many times the very difficult things that you’ve gone through, the trials, the troubles, the bad times were necessary preparations for what God wanted to do. It’s because God doesn’t want to just give you better things, better gifts. He wants to make you a better you. He wants to transform you. God’s blessing in your life involves change. It

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involves transformation. That's part of what I really love about this story, because a transformation happens in Zechariah's life.

We read about it and what we actually observe is a particular part of transformation. There is a shift in thinking, a transition that takes place. You see it in the two accounts that we read – the angel Gabriel coming to Zechariah, telling him what God's going to do, then the man that he is a little over 9 months later, when the gift of John the Baptist comes to this family.

We just begin with this simple observation that Jesus wants to transform you. He wants to make your life new. Look at this verse. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17) When you know Jesus Christ, he recreates you. He transforms you. There is a renewal that takes place in our hearts. And the reality of that experience is an inexpressible peace, just unspeakable joy.

In fact, just one more reference here: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit: (Romans 14:17). The Holy Spirit comes in, renovates our hearts and we begin to experience the peace of God and joy. There is renewal. There is transformation that takes place.

What we want to do today is look at this subject of transformation in the life of Zechariah. What I want to do is take you through four ideas that will help you. The first one is this:

I. Transformation is greater than life's greatest thrills.

Think about Zechariah for a minute. He and his wife Elizabeth are a dear couple. They are advanced in years. They have this one massive disappointment in life. They've never been able to have children. In their particular culture, in their particular day, that brought with it shame.

In fact, when John is conceived and born, Elizabeth rejoices that her reproach has been removed. We are told that these individuals are described as righteous, faithful people of God. They have lived with this disappointment. Now imagine this: Gabriel shows up to Zechariah to say: "The greatest longing of your heart is about to come true." Not only that, it happens on the greatest day of his career.

He is a priest. He could live his whole life and never burn incense in the Holy Place, in the temple. He might never get selected. His order is to serve in the temple. He is chosen by lot as an old man and he is going to go in alone and burn incense in the temple. All of his family and friends are outside praying. It's the hour of prayer in mid-afternoon. Preparations would begin an hour or so later. Zechariah goes in to burn incense, so that's a thrill, right? Having your

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greatest disappointment changed -- no children to children. Greatest day vocationally that you'll ever have, #2, and Gabriel appears to you.

Listen, when scripture talks about an angel appearing to you, this is scary stuff. This massive, supernatural, amazing being appearing to you, and this is not just any angel. This is Gabriel. This is an especially spectacular angel, an archangel. Zechariah is having a great day.

I want to suggest to you that if you look carefully at this passage, something more significant than having children, than having career success, than having a great spiritual experience takes place in his life. **When you encounter Jesus Christ, there is a transformation that happens that's greater than any thrill you can know without Jesus Christ.**

So, #1 – Transformation is greater than life's greatest thrills.

II. Transformation is not detached from life's greatest thrills.

You see, the second I say to you, "Alright, Jesus wants to meet you. He wants to know you. He wants you to know him. He doesn't want to just give you good things. He wants to make a better you. It's better than anything this life has to offer," your mind is likely to go to this place where you say, "Yeah, but I kind of want some things in this life. There are some thrills in this life that I'm kind of hoping for."

I got in trouble because I preached a sermon on heaven one time. In the sermon I said, "Listen, I know you guys want to experience as much in this life as possible, but heaven is better than whatever you are wanting. It's better than marriage. It's better than sex. It's better than having children. It's better than your children moving out of the home. It's better than all the things that you just can't wait to happen.

And I got in trouble. In fact, it was the bucket list sermon. I said, "What is a Christian doing with a bucket list?" Think about it! I'm going to heaven, where I will see God face to face. I'll probably fly. I'll have a perfect body. "Just wait a minute. I want to go see the Grand Canyon." Right? I got in trouble for that sermon and I'm probably going to get in trouble for this one, because now I'm revisiting that one. Afterward people gave me their theology for why a bucket list is a good thing. And it's not a bad thing in the sense that we want to experience joy in God in this life. That's the point I want to make here.

When you know Jesus, that transformation brings actual fulfillment to all those other thrills and desires. Without Jesus we spoil them. We taint them. We corrupt them. The greatest pain we have in life is when a blessing becomes a curse, when kids become the avenue for heartache, when marriage becomes the road to devastation. We've all experienced it

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in one form or another. Jesus wants to do something in your life greater than, but not detached from life's greatest thrills.

III. We all need transformation.

Now, this is an interesting point, because Zechariah experiences this, but you would be mistaken to think that Zechariah and Elizabeth are “bad people.” They are described as righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. This is really interesting, because a week or two ago I talked about the scriptural truth that people are not described as good in the Bible. They are described as loved and treasured and precious to God, but not good. We are all in need of salvation.

In your small group I encourage you to see how this verse harmonizes with that truth. I'm not going to tell you now. I'm just going to make you curious about what the answer is. If people aren't good, then why are Zechariah and Elizabeth described in this amazing way?

The point I want you to get right now is this: **Zechariah needed transformation. He was a faithful man, but he had lost faith. He had stopped believing, stopped anticipating, stopped expecting God to move. He was going through the routine and the rhythms of life without a sense of the presence of God and an anticipation for what God wanted to do.**

If you are having trouble believing, it doesn't put you in a class of people worse than anyone else. It is the human condition, and we need transformation. We need the help of Christ in our lives. We all need it – old, young, all types of people. Here's the main point. This is the point we wanted to get to: There is a transition that happens in transformation. Do you see it in Zechariah's life?

I always find it fascinating when you read about someone in the Bible asking for a sign. Because Zechariah asks Gabriel for a sign, and I think of Gideon. You may have never heard about Gideon, but Gideon was told to do something by God. He was not this bold, courageous man. First thing he did for God, God told him to go tear down an idol pole that was at his in-law's house. There's a whole sermon there, I'm sure. So he does it at night, thinking no one will see him. He's just so cowardly in everything he does. That's the feeling you get, right?

Do you remember his fleece? Have you heard the story about his famous fleece? He says, “Okay, God. Just give me a sign. Make the fleece wet and everything dry.” And it happens! He wakes up in the morning, wrings out a bucket-full of water from the fleece, then he says, “Maybe that was just a freak of nature. Okay, God, make the fleece dry tonight and

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everything else wet.” He sloshes out to this dry fleece the next day. And God just patiently takes him through all these signs.

And here’s Zechariah, an old man whose wife is barren, and he just asks for a sign! Gabriel’s response is this: “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I came to give you good news. If you’re going to speak with unbelief you’re not going to speak for nine months.” That’s my paraphrase.

Here’s the fascinating thing about it. We think in terms of justice. There is something that Gideon got right so he didn’t deserve judgment, and something that Zechariah got wrong so he deserved judgment. I don’t think that’s the best paradigm to look at this with. I think God is all about transformation in your life. He wants to renew you. I believe that he met Zechariah in that nine month period and renewed him. I mean, do you want to go through some transformation? Just don’t speak for nine months. Literally say nothing.

Look from the moment of his unbelief to where God puts him. When John is born, everyone wants to name the baby what? Zechariah. You’ve always wanted a child. You’ve never had a child. This is about you, Zechariah. This is about your family name. Let’s name the baby Zechariah. But the first thing that Zechariah writes and then says is, “His name is John.” That’s because a transformation in kingdom thinking has taken place in his life.

This is the transition. This is the switch in our thinking. We stop thinking just in terms of “my fulfillment, my marriage, my family, my finances, my contentment, my comfort, how God is going to help me, how God is going to make me, how God is going to better me. None of that is bad. Certainly, life with God is just better. Though it may at times bring great trials, great difficulty, even great suffering, it’s better to have God with you. Amen? But there is a shift that should come to every Christian where I see myself in the kingdom advance of God Almighty.

Just contrast this man on the greatest day of his career to Zechariah when John is born. He is all about the kingdom of God. He is all about how God is going to use this son to glorify his name and redeem his people. He speaks out this glorious song of the forgiveness of sin and the redemption of mankind and God’s purposes filling the earth.

I want to say to all of us this Christmas season: If you lack fulfillment in your life, if you just seek fulfillment you will probably remain unchanged. But when you seek the kingdom of God, you will experience an incredible fulfillment.

Scott was baptized today. What a blessing to see your family baptized. Scott and I go to the same gym. As you can tell, we really take care of ourselves. Adam Greenfield used to be on staff here and he went to same gym, too. Adam has only been gone for a few weeks. He was the Executive Pastor. We believe he’s going to be leading another church here in town before long. Scott couldn’t believe that Adam was a pastor. He thought he was a fitness coach. If you don’t know

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Adam, Adam is in pretty good shape. He's jacked, as we would say, right? But he seemed to find it easy to believe that I was a pastor. I don't know. That doesn't say much for your judgment, Scott.

I told you that whole digression to say this. The person who gets obsessed with physical health is usually not very healthy. If you get obsessed with your body, it will lead to fear and paranoia and you won't be healthy. Generally, health comes as a byproduct of a certain approach to life.

Fulfillment in your soul will only come when Jesus Christ reigns in your heart, and it will come for all of eternity. But if you make fulfillment the god of your life and personal pleasure and comfort, it will not be a foundation upon which you can build.

I want to end in the next five to seven minutes by telling you a little about how to do this. There is a transition that takes place where it's not me-thinking, it's kingdom-thinking. I want to say that the thing you can do most to help yourself in this regard is kingdom prayer.

I'm grateful to an author named Smed who has a book on prayer that we will make available at the bookstore. He does a great job of talking about this. Do you remember the model prayer? We just studied this in the Sermon on the Mount. The model prayer – we call it the Lord's Prayer, right? There are seven requests in the Lord's Prayer. The last four have to do more with personal needs:

- 1) Give us this day our daily bread,
- 2) Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,
- 3) Lead us not into temptation,
- 4) Deliver us from evil.

Here's how I look at these. The first one: basic provision. The second one: my relationship with God, my relationship with other people, and then the last two: spiritual warfare. But all four, if you look closely, describe what transformation looks like on the personal level. It's not, "Give us this day our luxury vehicles," right? It's not that it's bad to have a luxury vehicle; that's not the point. I'm not here to make you feel guilty. But you do know that contentment is unrelated to what you have. Jesus is inviting you to a simpler perspective of humility, reliance on him, and contentment.

Think about how many of us in this room will live for decades, by the grace of God, with plenty, and fret about it the whole time. God is wanting to bring a personal transformation in our lives. Forgive us our debts as we forgive debtors. That's just clearly transformative. I'm receiving grace and I'm extending it and it flows out from me. Then the last one,

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spiritual warfare – there's not this attitude in the Christ follower that says, "I've got this. I don't struggle with this. I don't struggle with that."

I met with a dear pastor this week. He's a friend. This pastor happens to pastor the church that my daughter goes to. I sat across the table from him and said, "Brother, tell me: If you were to fall, would it be more likely with pornography or a woman? Are you more susceptible to pornography or to a woman coming and showing you undue attention? This brother looked at me and goes, "I thought we were just having lunch!" Then, the dear brother (I love this guy) said, "Man, listen. Thank you. I want you to ask me these questions. You have my permission to speak into my life." I said, "Brother, I don't need your permission. My daughter goes to your church and I am asking you if you're on track. And I'm coming down here if you're not."

There is a humility that characterizes the Christ follower. "God, here I am! I'm a priest! I've followed you for 80 years or 60 years, or whatever Zechariah is. You give me the honor of going into the temple, the Most Holy Place, and I'm completely unaware of your presence and completely void of faith. I'm living like it's impossible for you to give a man in his old age and a woman in her old age a baby, when you created and spoke the universe into being! And I'm a priest!"

That man who undergoes that transformation does not think, "Wow, I've got this figured out. No, there's a humility, a brokenness, and a sweetness about the way that man interacts with other people. John Newton said it this way: Imagine blind Bartimaeus, once Jesus heals him, going around with his cane beating all the blind people saying, "What's wrong with you?"

Okay, personal transformation. This is not where the model prayer begins. It's where it ends. This seed is planted in the soil of kingdom thinking. "Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your name." I just want to make a case for Christians actually loving one another and thinking, "This is not just about an individual pursuit, but it's about all of us calling God Father and the Church in Broward County working together for the exaltation of the name of Jesus Christ. So we are not just locked in, siloed in our thinking about our individual walk with God, or our family, our church, or our little group, but "Our Father in heaven, glorify your name."

There is something amazing that happens when we love one another and unite together in the name of Jesus Christ rather than building our own kingdoms. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done. Lord, we want people in this city who don't know Jesus Christ, who don't do your will, who don't care about doing your will, to be saved, gloriously saved, and come to faith in Jesus Christ. We want their lives to match your will so that you will be glorified. We want those who don't know Jesus to be saved and we want the saved to act like they're saved. Your kingdom come."

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So here's what 2019 holds for us, Riverside. Transformation, kingdom thinking, kingdom advance will only happen as we give ourselves to kingdom prayer. Here is Pillar #1 of the vision for 2019. Are you ready? Every Wednesday at noon we will have a men's prayer meeting here at Riverside. The goal will be kingdom praying for kingdom advance, and we will stream that on our website. If you say, "I work in Miami" or "I can't get there," maybe you can't be here every week, maybe you can get here once a month, maybe you can't get here at all, but you can stream.

Maybe you're even in a place where you have the liberty in your workplace where you can pull together two or three other Christians. They don't have to go to Riverside. You could say, "Listen, we are praying. Join us. There will be a 10-15 minute teaching followed by about a half an hour of prayer, about a 45 minute time. We will pray for God's advance in our city, in and through us." Amen? To use an overused phrase, maybe it doesn't sound sexy; it brings transformation. It brings the transition, the shift that we want to happen in our lives.

What is on the other side of that door is amazing joy and peace in the Spirit of God as we see God transforming our city and renewing others all around us. Amen?