

How Good God Is

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 December 2023

Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0 : 00] Well, thanks, Katie. Lovely to see you this morning, folks. Particularly if this is your first time with us, you are so welcome today. And it's a great joy to get into God's Word together. So if you've got a Bible, please grab it.

If you want to do that on your phone, you can do that as well. If there's one in the pews in front of you, grab that. The verses, I'm sure, will be going through them as they go on the screen. So I did a quick count this morning on my two hands, and it's eight sleeps to Christmas.

So I thought with that in mind, it was a good time to get something off my chest that really annoys me at the time of Advent. You ready for it? It's time to come clean. Here is who I've got beef with. And it's this guy. Don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of the red suit and the hat. Big fan of the belly laugh and everything that goes with Santa Claus. But what gets me every single year is what he's holding in his hand.

Do you see it? What's he holding in his hand, Innes? The good or the naughty list. The good or the naughty list. Gets me every time it's that list.

[1 : 05] You know the one that he's keeping? The one that he's checking twice? He's trying to work out who's been naughty and nice. Now, notwithstanding the GDPR implications of his data keeping, here's the beef that I've got with him.

I've got no idea where I stand with him. I have got no idea if I've been good enough for Santa. That's a stress.

I think you'll agree that you don't need this time of year. Added stress to your life. You see, Santa's character may be entertaining, but if we take in his message, quite frankly, it's exhausting.

Because here's the crux of it. His present giving is intrinsically connected to our performance keeping. And honestly, I used to think that the God of the Bible ran a similar kind of setup.

So it worked with him. He was like some kind of Santa in the sky. He was out to reward our good behavior. He was out to punish our bad behavior. It's how the gods of our imagination and our construction work, isn't it?

[2 : 09] And if we think God works like that, maybe that's you here today, then I've loved hanging out with this man, Zechariah, this week in his song, because his song blows our minds, blows all our misconceptions of what the God of the Bible is like out of the water, because his song is all about how the God of the Bible works.

It's all about how good the God of the Bible is. And it is so refreshingly good. So before we go inside his song, though, we've got to spend some time outside his song, which helps us understand it.

If you've got a Bible there, come with me to verse 5 of Luke's gospel. See, we meet this man, Zechariah, and we get his job straight off the bat.

What is he? Do you see it? He is a priest. That's his job. And he's married to this lady called Elizabeth.

And straight off the bat, Luke wants us to know certain details about their lives. Do you see? Verse 6, the two of them are blameless when it comes to living for God.

[3 : 23] There are a couple who want to honor him with their lives. They want to live for the worship of this God. And we think to ourselves, if ever there was a couple to make it onto Santa's good list, surely it was this couple we meet right here in Luke chapter 1.

Do they have rewards in store? Is life going to go swimmingly for them? Well, again, if it was according to Santa, that's a straight line that would go. But not really for this couple here, for there's a massive source of pain that's in their lives.

Do you see it there? The massive source of pain is that they are old and they can't have a child. Some of us here, I'm sure, will know the pain of that.

There's a lovely truth about the God of the Bible. He sees every pain. He knows every tear. Disappointment after disappointment. Hope followed by heartache. That has been the life story of this two devout couple here. And to compound it all in this day, it was thought that childlessness was a sign of sinfulness.

[4 : 27] And Luke's helping us see that that simply can't be the case. There's pain in their life. And yet when it comes to his day job, though, do you see things start to take an upswing for Zechariah?

He hits the jackpot. He's drawn at Lot, not just to minister, do you notice, at the temple, but in the temple. Verse 9, he enters and he is within feet of the most holy place.

That is the very place where God dwells. This is a once-in-a-lifetime privilege for Zechariah. This is the pinnacle, if you like, of his professional career.

And notice the details. He's at the right side of the altar of incense. Now, why does that matter? It matters because in this day, this is the place where the prayers go up.

Prayers of the people, they go up. And he's there at the hour of incense. Do you see that? Again, why is that important? It's important because at this point, he and those who gathered outwith to pray, they're praying particularly for the nation.

[5 : 35] They're praying for their people. And they're praying really simply this, God, would you come and save us? God, would you come and save us?

And Gabriel appears to him, God's heard your prayer. Elizabeth will have a son and his name will be John. He'll be set apart from the Lord. Do you see that? We don't just get his name.

We get his job description, if you like. We don't just get his lifestyle. We get his life purpose. He's going to be the one to get the people ready for the coming of the Savior. And you think, wow.

And yet Zechariah doesn't believe it at first. I don't know. Maybe it's too painful a reality for him to get his head around. Please don't get my hopes up again. Of a child.

How will this be? He says, verse 18. Which we're to interpret, Luke says, As disbelief. Again, if this were up to Santa, At this point, Zechariah makes a huge mistake.

[6 : 39] He would be on Santa's naughty list. So you think to yourself, Is God going to move on? Is God going to pick someone or somewhere else?

Or is even God just going to take him out Because of his disobedience. Well, God in classic Zoom call style, In wonderful grace, make no mistake, He makes him mute.

Now, have you ever wondered why God put him on mute? I've thought about it this week. I've never actually thought about that before. Have you ever wondered why God made him silent?

Of all the things that God could have done. Well, I take it that Zechariah Watches everything unfold in front of him, Unable to speak. I wonder if this just leaves him With a lot of thinking time.

God needs to do some work in his heart. Imagine him going home, verse 24. He sees Elizabeth become pregnant. Notice the little detail there.

[7 : 41] He goes home. This birth is, pregnancy rather, is marvellous. It's not miraculous like Jesus' was. He goes home. But imagine these two, this old couple.

I'd love to have been in that antenatal class, Would you not, as that couple walked in there? Are you here for your grandson? No, no, no, no. My wife here is having a baby. Are you sure? On their Zimmer frames, in they go.

Imagine him hearing from Elizabeth That when Mary came to visit them, At verse 39, Elizabeth reports to him How Jesus in her womb, In Mary's womb rather, Rejoices at Jesus.

John in her womb rejoices at Jesus In Mary's womb. He leaped for joy. I love the sense of wondrous anticipation There in that scene.

Don't miss that. And it's all about the names. All about the names. John, whose name means God is gracious, Is wonderfully and joyfully celebrating in this moment The presence of Jesus, Whose name means God saves.

[8 : 44] God is gracious meets God saves. What about those two things have in common? John's got a lot of thinking time. Zechariah's got a lot of thinking time.

Has Zechariah got it? Well, it comes to the names. Tradition of the day says that the son takes the father's name. But the suggestion comes from left field from Elizabeth.

Do you see it? To go for John. Will the silent Zechariah say the same? But it's bigger than that. Will he, having had time to think deeply on these things, Will he begin to walk by faith And not by sight?

Grabbing a writing tablet, verse 63. Love how tablets aren't a modern day invention. Verse 63, really simply. We'd love to have thought of him writing this.

His name is John. And his charades days are over. He's off mute and his mouth is opened. And again, notice what he's singing about.

[9 : 53] What is it that makes him sing now? It's not simply that he's having a child. As glorious as that is. Because God has been at work in his heart.

What grabs him now is what God is doing In this moment. In the arrival of his son. And on a side note, Isn't it interesting how Luke lets us know Just how much this whole episode It grabbed the attention of the neighbours?

Do you not love that? As they looked in and they saw That God was up to something. God was breaking in here. He was working in marvellous ways In the hearts and the lives Of those who were faithful to him In this household.

And as they saw the worship and wonder That filled Zechariah and Elizabeth's house. And as they hear Zechariah praising God Like he's never praised him before.

Do you think that made an impact on them? Verse 65 You bet it did. They were filled with awe. It really made me think this week About my neighbours Both physically But also those who I rub shoulders with every day.

[11 : 04] Do they see me celebrating Christmas With the joy of this household here? So we step inside this man's song This old man Whose heart has been so deeply captured by grace And it's a lovely picture of what the gospel does Do you see how we've got Mary, this young girl?

Her song is a deeply personal one And yet we also have Zechariah, this old priest His song is a beautifully corporate one Even there do you see how this gospel This good news of good joy Is for everyone It's all strata of society As this priest He maybe reflects on the mess That he and his people have made of things Over the years By their foolish choices and their sin And the wonder that this God He acts Not like Santa He doesn't reward performance He doesn't Act on the basis of our performance No, no, no He works according to his promise A promise that snowballs down the ages With prophet after prophet That centres on a king And that's what's implied there By, if you're wondering about that language The horn of salvation Verse 69

That's what that means It means God's going to raise up a king What is it about this king That gets Zechariah singing? Really quickly It's two things Firstly, that he is a king of might He will save us from our enemies Now, Zechariah at that point May well have been thinking about The occupying Romans in his mind But equally, given that he mentions The forgiveness of sin at verse 77 There must be a sense in which he realises That the biggest problem for him and his people in life By a country mile Is their failings Their sin against this God The sin, that defiance that starts In the attitude of our hearts Against our creator This holy God The sin that's turned us in on ourselves That is seen in so much of the selfishness That pervades our actions That's our biggest problem in life Bigger than climate change

Bigger than economic uncertainty Bigger than political instability Our biggest problem in life Is our sin against this holy God You know, spiritually speaking We are like those workers Who were trapped in that mine in India A few weeks ago Imagine their sense of utter helplessness And that's how the Bible speaks Of our situation out with Jesus We are lost We are helpless You know, I've got a good friend Andy Who works as a pastor down in Nidri One of those economically deprived areas Of our city And he always says this After 12 or 15 years of working there He says the biggest problem we have In our community here is not poverty As big as that is It's not poverty It's pride See the language here From the slave market Verse 68 That God is going to redeem us He's going to buy us back The language from the gladiators

Arena Verse 71 This God is going to deliver us You see, this king has come To deal with the penalty That is due to us Because of our rebellion against him That's the language the Bible uses To help us understand What this child would grow up to be As he heads towards the cross You know, the crucifixion Was not the sad anticlimax To a life that promised so much No, actually the cross of Christ Is the very crown and glory Of this king's mission And for what purpose And I love seeing this in the passage Please see it Verse 75 What is the purpose of all this?

[15 : 13] That we might serve him Without fear Because of this king When you accept him There is no sense of dread And nervousness As we come before this God No, no, no, no He doesn't have a Jekyll and Hyde Kind of heart Towards his people He acts to take away our sin As we say sorry And as we turn As we run to him Forgiveness means That we can call him father Adoption Being adopted As a son and daughter Of the living God Adoption means We can call him Abba There is no fear now Because of Jesus As we come before our God Jesus will save us From our sin For

himself And that is why We will serve him As Zechariah says here In holiness and righteousness All our days With this God It's not a case of We have to serve him You come to see The beauty of Jesus And quickly

Your hearts come to see Wow I get to serve him In the words Of Charles Spurgeon Jesus is the most Magnanimous of captains He's a king of might Is this Jesus And really quick He's a king of light See verse 76 It's almost like Zechariah at this point Spontaneous praise For what this God Is doing at the minute It's almost like He pauses at this point And he turns to his son He thinks about the boy Who is holding Probably in his Rickety bony arms And he says You son Your role will be To prepare the way For this saviour to come Because of the Tender mercy of our God Do you not love Those two words?

Not harsh Discipline No the tender mercy Of our God Zechariah here He's tapping into The language of The reading that we Started with Archie read from us From Isaiah chapter 9 Of this light That will shine Into the darkness This light That will shine To those who are In the shadow of death Do you hear what he's saying Verse 79 This sunrise will visit us It will give light To those who are Sitting in darkness And that's the thing About the Bible There's a lot of darkness At this point In the journey And yet here is Luke declaring to us That this light Is about to burst into And is smashing into Our darkness To conquer it So do you hear Zechariah's song He's saying that The heart of this God Isn't like Santa's That this God Does not come To deal with us According to our performance No this God Acts for his glory In accordance with His promises

To save us So let me just ask you As we close Have you entered Into the joy Of knowing the salvation That God offers to us In the person Of his son Do you know The burden lifted Of your sins forgiven Do you know The peace Of your conscience Cleansed Do you know Life to the full With the God Who created you All of that Is on offer In the person Of Jesus You know Just as we wrap this up Let me tell you About my Friday morning It's 8.30am I'm beginning the school run The kids are dressed We're out the door It's beginning to get light I put the alarm on I close the door I lock the lock And I look out And I'm tired But I'm pretty sure I've seen a firework Go across the sky And I think to myself Surely I can't be

The only one That just saw that Before I grass up The neighbours And call the police Who's setting off Fireworks at that time In the morning I turn to the kids Kids did you see anything Did you see anything Did daddy just imagine that We saw nothing dad So cross the road Make him away to the school Meet some other parents On the school run Did anyone else See something in the sky This morning Didn't see anything In the sky this morning I must be thinking I'm really tired Beginning to lose it Then another parent Came at me this time She said Listen listen Did you see something In the sky Yes I saw something In the sky And we worked it out We went on Google As you do Modern parents Did anyone else See the meteor No No one saw Anyway Three seconds It lasted This meteor Just went across The sky Wonderful thing Full of colour And light And it was absolutely [20 : 08] Incredible when we Worked out what it was But here's the thing About the meteor The meteor was wonderful For three seconds It was purple It was green It was blue It had a tail It was lovely And then it disappeared And it struck me As I've hung out with Zechariah This week in his song And do you see How he mentions there He sings about What God is doing In this moment And he references Verse 69 The house of David What that is code for Is God's forever king And it struck me That he is celebrating The fact that the life Of God's king Will be the opposite Of that meteor What will start Really humbly With an unspectacular Beginning in Bethlehem What will end With him on the cross In his earthly life What will happen

Will it be Forever glorious And mighty The reign of this King Jesus He's the opposite Of the meteor And that is why I love the invitation To come to this king This morning Who we're still Speaking about And celebrating And who's still Changing hearts The world over Some 2000 odd Years later What would have been The odds on that How do you explain that It's because this king His reign will have no end This king is not like The meteor Who will be Three seconds Have his moment In the sun And he will be Forever banished To folklore No this king Is an everlasting king Who really does Transform lights John would write this At the beginning Of his gospel The light shines In the darkness And then get this And the darkness Has not overcome it Two giveaways We'd love to give you Just before we sing And we wrap this up This morning That you can get On your way out One is just a really Nicely decorated Christmas version Of Luke's gospel If you're wondering What all this has been About this morning If you've been wondering What I've been speaking about That is something for you To take away this morning It's our gift to you Please grab it On your way

out today And another one Is just a giveaway For you as well This book by a guy Called Bob Lapine Called The Four Emotions Of Christmas Just might connect With what's going on In your life just now The different emotions That we feel But it's going to connect you And tell you about The good news of Jesus Grab those two this morning As you go We'd love to be Our gift to you Why don't we pray And let's pray To this God Of light And so Father We thank you so much For this morning Lord on all the fun And all the festivity And all the laughing Lord We thank you For the serious news The wonderful Life transforming Good news Of the coming of Jesus So Father I pray That in all the busyness Of this season That you would meet us Where we're at Lord I pray for those In this room today For whom this is Really difficult A really hard time of year Remembering the Maybe the death Of loved ones Maybe the stresses Of some of the things We've been thinking About today Lord I pray That the Prince of Peace Your Son By your Spirit Would meet them Where they're at Father for those of us Perhaps who are just Really tired And weary I pray that we would be Greatly strengthened By the King of Light Father we pray as well As those For those of us Who are doing well Father we pray That you would help us To have joy In this King Lord help us Just this Christmas To make time To do what Zechariah did Just to take time To reflect And would you do Some deep work In our hearts Father Help us to see The beauty Of what you're doing In this moment So Lord we just Thank you for today Thank you for everything That's gone on Father be with us As we finish this morning In Jesus' wonderful And in his strong name We pray Amen