

He Ties Our Tongues to Retune Our Hearts!

Introduction

The Text

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ 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. (Luke 1:57–66)

I Talk Too Much

- A. I have personally found myself convicted, humbled, and encouraged by the passage of Scripture before us, and the story it connects us back to with Zechariah. It is one of my gravest problems, it seems to me, that I talk too much. I know you'll find that hard to believe. It's a bit ironic really, that I begin my time of talking to you here this morning with a remark about how I talk too much. But, nonetheless, I fear it is true.
 - 1. It's true of me at home. It's true of me in the church. When an issue presents itself, I'm ready to give advice without really listening or praying. When a critique comes, I'm ready to make a defense before really hearing the other out and bringing such things before God.
- B. But all of this talking in home and church or wherever I am is only symptomatic of a deeper issue: I talk too much with God.
 - 1. What I mean by this last line is that I often come to Him with my own agenda and ideas and talk over Him, even against Him.
 - a. I may try to give myself to prayer but it's often not in the way our Lord taught us. There's a reason why He begins: "⁹ Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mat 6:9–10).
 - i. Such a beginning is an invitation for God to speak. You are above me, You are good and great, You be set apart, You be the king, You tell me what You want to do. You speak. Here I am. Listening. Silent.

(1) It is only when we have reached that posture of heart that we are ready to speak. Or another way of putting it: Until a man has been silenced before God, we can be sure that He is not yet ready to speak with or for God.

- C. God has His ways of helping us with this. Zechariah, we are told, was a man righteous and blameless (v. 6). As a priest he would have been a teacher of the things of God and yet he still had so much to learn. He talked too much. His own thoughts, his own ideas, his own will were all still too amplified. And he came at God in this way and God turned the volume down, powered him off really. “You will be silent...” (v. 20a).
1. This silence was God’s way of taking Zechariah off the stage and putting him back in the audience where he belongs: “Watch what I will do. Listen to what I will say.”
 - a. It may have seemed harsh at the time but it was really the most loving and gracious thing God could do for him. This kind of silence, as I hope will become clear in our time together here this morning, is a gift of God’s grace.
- D. As we move into our text here, you will see in your handout that I have divided it up and put it under 4 headings which we shall move through now 1 at a time.

(1) The Right Time (vv. 57-58)

- A. We come first to vv. 57-58, and, as we do, something immediately jumps off the page at us: “Now the time came...” (v. 57a).
1. What time? The time spoken of by Gabriel back when he was first announcing the birth of John to Zechariah: “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” (Luk 1:20).
 - a. Zechariah had been sitting in silence now for 9 months, an excruciatingly long time I would imagine. But now the word of God is coming to pass, and the time of discipline is coming to an end.
- B. And there is a sweet truth in here for the children of God: God’s discipline has boundaries, it has an appointed time. It is never inordinate. It is always measured out in accordance with mercy. He keeps us in our trials only insofar as they continue to serve His loving ends for us: “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb 12:11).
1. Every trial you face has its moment and its goal. When we are in it, it hurts, but it hurts like the plow hurts the earth as it makes room for the seed that, in time, will become a bountiful harvest.

(2) The Eighth Day (v. 59a)

Not the Birth But the Circumcision

- A. Now, I mustn't get ahead of myself here. For, in our narrative, the day of John's birth comes and goes, and yet Zechariah is still silent. One might have expected him to regain his speech at this point, but his silence continues for another 8 days—until the time God prescribed through Abraham for the circumcising of a newborn child in Israel: “And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child” (v. 59a).
 - 1. This day would be the occasion of Zechariah's newfound voice. Not the day of his son's birth but the day of his circumcision.
- B. This detail recorded for us by Luke here might be initially lost on us. But I wanted to explore its significance in light of what circumcision meant in its OT context and what it came to mean as redemptive history carried into the NT.
 - 1. When we are done with this survey, I trust, you will see why God had Zechariah wait in silence for 8 more days.
- C. So what is circumcision? It can be understood at different levels. I'll give us 4 here. We'll take them 1 at a time, each taking us a bit deeper as we go.

Level 1: The Sign of the Covenant

- A. The first way to understand circumcision is as a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham.
 - 1. Covenants, it seems, were often accompanied by physical signs that served to remind the parties involved of the agreement made between them.
 - a. This is what Jesus gives us in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper that serve as a sign of the New Covenant He has made with us. When we take that bread and wine we are saying, “Yes” to the New Covenant with Christ.
- B. In the same way, when the Israelite's put themselves or their children under the knife of circumcision they were saying, “Yes” to God's covenant with Abraham: “We're in this with YHWH.”

Level 2: The Symbol of the Covenant

- A. The second way (moving a level deeper now) to understand circumcision is as a symbol of the covenant it signifies.
 - 1. What I mean is this: the sign itself has symbolic value, it portrays in some way the covenant arrangement it stands for. It is not some random externality, like a string tied around a finger, to merely help us remember. The externalities themselves are chosen to be illustrative.

- a. Consider the Lord's Supper again. The bread and wine are not random. The broken bread is His body broken, symbolizing His being broken for us on the cross. The poured wine is His blood poured out, symbolizing the way He would be crushed like grapes under the winepress of God's wrath on that cross. And it was through His death that the new covenant could be established with us.
 - i. The sign of the covenant symbolizes the stipulations of the covenant.

B. How should we understand circumcision then? What does this sign symbolize?

1. To get at this it would be best to go back to where the sign was first given in Gen 17:

"¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless,² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.'³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, '⁴Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.'

⁹And God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised...' (vv. 1–12a).

- a. It cannot go unnoticed that there is striking overlap between God's purpose here with Abraham and His commission of Adam a few chapters back in Gen 1-2.
 - i. God is going to "multiply [him] greatly" (v. 2b),
 - ii. "make [him] exceedingly fruitful" (v. 6a),
 - iii. give him a nation in a holy "land" (v. 8),
 - iv. and yet his nation will infiltrate and fill all the nations, indicated by his new name: Abraham—"Father of a multitude" (v. 5).
- b. This is the Adamic commission given to Abraham, only now in a fallen context. And, as such, it is no longer man who will do this for God but God who will have to do this for man!

- i. He will take a man whose body is “as good as dead”, with a wife whose womb is as “barren” as the desert (Rom 4:19), and from them, He will fill the earth with a people whom He will start to renew in His image.
- C. Circumcision is chosen as the sign of the covenant because it is also symbolic of what God is covenanting to do. As Adam was called to multiply and fill the earth with God’s image-bearers but failed, so now God is cutting away the flesh of men’s reproductive organ and forging a new principle of life and fruitfulness by His grace! Here is both judgment and salvation, death and life!

Level 3: The Spirit of the Covenant

- A. We move another level deeper and we find circumcision connecting us to the spirit of the covenant. In all the physical, earthy elements of the Old Covenant God is always aiming at something more substantial, something spiritual. Circumcision is no different.
 - 1. The removal of the flesh and the principle of new life coming forth pictured in the sign of circumcision, was itself a picture of what God desired for Israel to do not merely with their physical bodies but with their hearts: “Circumcise...the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn” (Deut 10:16).
 - a. It was a call, a command that Israel would prove helpless to obey.
 - i. But God knows this. He’s trying to increase their awareness of their need for His mercy, for His intervention. That’s why He brings in the Law 400 years after Abraham—“to increase the trespass” (Rom 5:20a); “so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world...held accountable to God” (Rom 3:19); that they might be taught to yearn for the circumcision of heart that only He could perform (Gal 3:24)!
- B. This is the great expectation of the entire OT. It’s what Moses leaves Israel with in Deut 30 as he’s bowing out. It’s his last act. Israel is getting ready to enter Canaan. And he says this: “You’re going to move through times of blessing in the land when you’re obedient and curses when you’re not. And ultimately you’re going to end up scattered to the wind, exiled among the nations (because your hearts are stubborn). But...⁵The Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.⁶ And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (vv. 5–6).
 - 1. The law will no longer be etched on stone or carved into your skin, it will be written into your heart, for, as Ezekiel tells us “I will put My Spirit within you” (Ezek 36:27a).
- C. Now this leads us back to our text and brings with it a whole new world of meaning. It’s the hardness of Zechariah’s heart, the stubbornness of his unbelief, that finally leaves him

silenced before God, mouth shut, tongue tied—a picture of Israel, and humanity for that matter, in exile and waiting for the arrival of the mercy of God.

1. And God waits for the day of John’s circumcision to circumcise Zechariah’s heart, as it were, whereby His Spirit would fill Zechariah, opening his mouth, loosing his tongue, and causing him to love the Lord his God with all his heart and soul.
 - a. The word declared by Moses in [Deut 30](#), the time beyond the blessing and the curse, is being initiated in these events, only not so much through John, but through the one John is going before: Jesus.

Level 4: The Shadow of the Covenant

- A. And this takes us finally to our 4th and deepest level of meaning. Circumcision, in the end, served as a shadow of the coming One who alone could fulfill all that this covenant stood for. It was God’s way of narrowing in on the family line through which the promised offspring of [Gen 3:15](#) would come—the One who would undo the serpent, reverse the fall, and circumcise men from the inside out!

“¹¹In him...you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” ([Col 2:11–14](#)).

1. Christ will fulfill in Himself all that circumcision stood for as the sign, symbol, spirit, and shadow of the Abrahamic covenant. In His crucifixion, He is being cut off as it were, discarded as dead, sinful flesh. And in His resurrection He forges the principle of new life and fruitfulness, overcoming the dead and barren nature of humanity in Adam.
 - a. And we are given both sides of this in Him by His Spirit. We have received the “circumcision of Christ”!
- B. That’s why, I think, God has Zechariah wait in silence for 8 more days. The circumcision of heart by the Spirit of God, long anticipated in the OT, is being inaugurated in the coming of Christ!

(3) The Perfect Name (vv. 59b-63)

“His Name Is John!”

- A. But let’s keep following the narrative. For as we come to [vv. 59b-63](#), we see that Zechariah has an important decision to make regarding the name of his son. It is here that he will prove whether he has been trained by his time of silence, whether he has learned to listen to God or is still attempting to talk over Him.

- B. This group of neighbors and relatives around Elizabeth in v. 58 is excited, and understandably so. God is doing the miraculous in their midst. They accompany Zechariah and Elizabeth for the circumcision of the child, and it seems this would also be the day when the parents would choose a name. The crowd is arguing for what seems to have been customary at the time: naming the boy after his father, or at least after some other relative.
1. But Mary will not have it: “No; he shall be called John” (v. 60).
 - a. And, as I have drawn attention to the meaning of John’s name before, let me just remind us here once more. For John means in the Hebrew: “YHWH is gracious.”
 - i. The essential meaning would seem to be: where the law and ceremonies and traditions of Israel have failed to work obedience from the heart, God’s grace is now prevailing! Here is the move towards grace.
- C. But what will the father say? The crowd is not satisfied with her answer. It breaks tradition. It’s not customary. Surely Zechariah wants his boy to be called by his name?!
1. Now here’s the decision. Is Zechariah going to go with God on this? Has he been sufficiently humbled? Is he ready to see what God’s grace can really do?!
 - a. “He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John!’ And they all wondered” (v. 63). He takes the future tense used by Elizabeth (“His name shall (will) be John”) and drives it like a stake into the ground with his use of the present tense: “His name is John.” What God has said of this son stands. There is no greater affirmation Zechariah could have given. He has humbled Himself and received the grace of God.

The Exit and Entrance of God’s Grace

- A. We might note here that receiving God’s grace, the filling of His Spirit, the circumcision of the heart, is at once both an exit and an entrance.
1. He gives up his name. There’s a deathblow to the flesh in this right? “This is my boy. I want to call him by my name.” But Zechariah of all people knows this isn’t true. This is God’s boy. And what grace has shown me in giving him to me. “His name is, not Zechariah, but John.”
 - a. He’s letting go of his pride, letting go of his name, letting go of family traditions, to come into God’s story, a new family, a new life. If we would be born again in Christ we must first be willing to die with Him.
- B. “So many are trying to get born again without this exit and entrance of grace offered in the crucified and resurrected Messiah. We try a new career, a new haircut, a new diet, a new location, but the same principle of pride is still at root. I’m still talking. It’s still me. When I

let go of that and go silent, when I let my tongue be tied in knots by the law of God, then I am ready to be born again, not from below, but from above! Then I am ready to enter that family of God and receive the name He would give me! YHWH is gracious!”

(4) The New Song (vv. 64-66)

A. As we draw now to a close, we come to the climax of this story: “Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God” (v. 64).

1. You have to love Luke’s little detail here: “Immediately...”

a. With this word we are connected to numerous places all over Luke’s gospel where God’s power and grace are shown to be immediately accessible to needy sinners!

i. Like the woman who presses through the crowd just to touch the fringe of His garment and “immediately” power goes out from Him and she is healed (8:44).

b. It highlights for us this profound truth: God is right here! He is in this room. And He will not hesitate to pour out His grace upon you. He’s not like my 2008 Macbook that takes like 5 minutes to pull up an application. When you really draw near to Him, He draws near to you immediately: “Whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (Joh 6:37b).

B. Finally, when we read v. 64 with what follows, we see that it was in this moment that “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit...” (v. 67), and this “blessing God” is filled out for us in the song recorded in vv. 68-79.

1. This is where God wants to take you! He doesn’t strike us silent because He’s an abusive parent who’s just tired of hearing his kid talk. He ties our tongues so he can retune our hearts and teach us to sing!