

UNEDITED DRAFT

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

The season of Advent is a season of anticipation. Advent means “coming” so we are anticipating the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are preparing our hearts for his coming. We prepare for his coming as a baby in Bethlehem, and also for his coming again in glory.

Sometimes it’s hard to wait for something we really, really want, isn’t it? How many of you have a Christmas list? How many of you have things on your Christmas list that you really, really want? Well, bad news. You still have to wait 23 more days (22 if you open presents Christmas Eve.) 22 more days!!! Ugh! That seems like it will never get here. 22 days is pretty close to forever, isn’t it?

But as hard as it is to wait for something that you really want, it’s even harder to wait for something that you really, really *need*. What if you were in the desert dying from lack of water. Suddenly, a guy rides up on a dirt bike and says, “I know where there is a spring. I’ll go get some water and be back soon.” Waiting for him to come back would be so hard. Not knowing how long it would take and you’re so thirsty, it would be very hard to wait.

It’s even harder to wait for something we really, really need.

The first angel of Advent is the one that appeared to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had long anticipated two things. One was some they really, really wanted. The other was something they really needed. The angel came to announce that there time of waiting was over. What they wanted and needed was going to be given by the Lord.

This angel really has the same message for you and me as well. That which we really, really need has been given as a gift from God! Let’s listen to the story.

Luke 1:5-10 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.

Here we are introduced to the two main characters in this story, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was a priest, and his wife was a PK – a priest’s kid. In Israel, the only ones who could serve as priests were descendants of Aaron who was the first high priest. There were 24 divisions of priests, and a total of about 18,000 total priests serving. These priests lived in all parts of Israel, but when the time came for their division to serve in the temple they would travel to Jerusalem to serve. Their time of service there was 2 weeks. Their main job was slaughtering animals – the sacrifices people would bring. They were butchers. All that blood shed as a vivid reminder of the horrible consequences of sin. Bloodshed and death was the only thing that could atone for a person’s sins. But even those animals Zechariah sacrificed for the people were not an adequate sacrifice. They were merely foreshadowing the perfect sacrifice: the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. Devout priests knew God’s promise of the Messiah, the promised one, the Savior, and they eagerly anticipated the day when God would send that promised deliverer. Zechariah was one of those devout priests.

The character of this couple is also described: **“Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.”** This doesn’t mean they were perfect. But they were faithful believers. They knew God’s Word and promises. They knew the ceremonial laws and followed them, and they knew what they were a shadow of the coming Christ. They looked forward to the day when God would keep his promise and send the Savior of the world.

So Zechariah and his wife, like many generations of faithful believers before him, anticipated something very important: the arrival of the Christ. And this wasn’t an anticipation of something they just wanted. It was an anticipation of something they needed. They needed God’s perfect substitute who would be the sacrifice for the sins of the world. And we need him too.

But then we’re also told about something they desperately *wanted*. **“But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.”** Their whole married life, Zechariah and Elizabeth desperately wanted to have children. But they had none. And now they were both well along in years. We’re not told their ages. 60’s? Maybe 70’s? What bitter disappointment that their anticipation of a child was never fulfilled. In addition, there was the social stigma. Couples that couldn’t have children were thought to be punished for their sins. They were looked down upon and gossiped about. Their whole married lives, they dealt with the stigma of being a couple that couldn’t have children. And at this point there really was no hope they would ever have a child. And this is where the story really gets interesting:

“Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.” So in addition to sacrificing the animals, priests also would enter into the temple – the holy place – and burn incense upon the altar of incense and pray. Incense is a spice or other substance that is burned for the sweet smell it produces. As incense was burned the smoke and smell ascended up into the air. It was a symbol of the prayers of God’s people ascending up to God in heaven.

So, which of the priests would get to enter the temple, the holy place, and burn the incense? That privilege was determined by casting lots. It was “chance.” It wasn’t unusual for some priests to NEVER have that opportunity to share in this way. On this particular day, though, Zechariah was chosen.

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. The people never went inside the temple. In fact the priests didn’t often go into the temple either. The people gathered in the courts around the temple. The priest would offer sacrifices in front of the temple... outside. But every morning and every evening, a priest went in to burn the incense and pray for God’s people, the people would kneel outside, pray and wait until the priest reemerged. It normally didn’t take long at all. The priest didn’t want to remain in that holy place for long... he knew he did not belong in the presence of God. So he did his duty, burned the incense, offered prayers and got out.

So Zechariah went in to burn the incense and pray. He is standing in the presence of God, offering prayers to God. And what prayers would Zechariah be praying? Certainly a prayer for God’s people, and for those gathered outside. Surely a prayer for the Messiah who would come and rescue his people. Did he still pray that they would have a child? That seems to be implied by what we’re about to hear.

Luke 1:11-17 **Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.**” Isn’t it interesting how brief and concise Luke is? He doesn’t embellish the story or dramatize it. The angel appeared... on the right side of the altar of incense. Why that detail? Because it really happened, and that’s where the angel was. But although Luke casually relays the appearance of the angel, Zechariah most certainly did not accept that appearance in a casual manner. The appearance of an angel of God is a miracle, and this is the first miracle that we know of in Israel for hundreds of years!

“When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.” The typical reaction of people in the presence of a holy angel.

But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.

The angel says something incredible! Their waiting for what they really, really wanted was over! God heard their prayers. The angel promises that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son. And the name of that son would be John. Why that name? John means: “The LORD is gracious.” What a fitting name! The time of your waiting is over. God has answered your prayers. The Lord truly is gracious.

But the birth of this son is not only something that answered the prayers, the desires of Zechariah and Elizabeth. There was a greater purpose for this son! He would also be the answers to the prayers of God’s faithful people, giving them what they truly needed! What they needed and what we need more than anything else is the Savior. The one who would rescue from sin, and deliver from death and the devil. The biggest news was not that an old couple was going to have a baby, but that baby would be the one who would prepare the people to meet their Savior! Listen:

He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. In other words, this son would be special. He would be dedicated to the Lord and would serve the Lord in a special way. **Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”**

This son of Zechariah whose name would be John would prepare the people for the coming Christ / Messiah / promised one. He would call the people to repentance. Those that had wandered and strayed from the faith he would bring back to the Lord. In the spirit and power of Elijah he would show people their sins and then point them to the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. By calling people to repentance he would be preparing the people for the Lord.

Friends, this is what was truly needed by all the people in Zechariah’s day. And it is what is truly needed by us today as well. What do you *want* for Christmas? Well, you might have a long list. But what do you really need for Christmas? You *need* a repentant heart, and Savior who forgives you. You need a repentant heart. You need to see clearly the sin in your life and all the ways you have fallen short of God’s perfect expectations. Where have you fallen short when it comes to your relationship with God? Have you made *God take second place* in your life? Have you been too busy with other things to give him the time of day? Or even something so trivial an hour or so out of your week? Where have you fallen short in your relationship with others around you? Where has your love for others fallen short? With whom have you been

impatient? Harsh? Short-tempered? Rude? Understand just how offensive these sins are to your God. No how much he is disappointed. Saddened.

So what you really, really need is sins forgiven. What God really, really needed was a way to forgive you that would still maintain his justice. So God gave was exactly the Savior that both you needed, and he needed! He sent a Savior who was true God and true man – God’s own Son. As true man he was born under the law and he took your place as a man. As a man he was capable of dying for your sin, which is the wages of sin. As true God, he was perfect. As true God his death would have enough value to pay for the sins of the entire world.

What you and I truly need, God gave when Christ the Savior was born. The angel appeared to Zechariah telling him that because he is gracious, he was granting to him both what he wanted and what he needed – a son who would prepare people to meet the Lord.

I pray that angel’s announcement has also helped you to recognize what you truly need and that this Christmas you will look forward to what God gives: A Savior is born to you – he is Christ the Lord. Just the Savior you needed! Amen.