

Weekly Encouragement

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Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

Make This Christmas Special - Part 3

By Rev. Peter Eng

Day 16

Liberated (Luke 1:68)

From: *The Benedictus* ([Luke 1:67-80](#))



Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, (KJV)

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. (NIV)

Whenever the Jews of that time think of redemption, they think of liberation from Roman rule. They were thinking of a political redemption.

In 1998, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Liberation of Iraq Act which calls for the removal of Saddam Hussein to liberate the people of Iraq from his oppressive rule. In 2003, Saddam was removed from power under President George Bush. As December 2011 draws to a close, American troops are leaving Iraq, and turning over the military bases to Iraqis. The Iraqis tormented by

Saddam would say Iraq was liberated in 2003. People loyal to Saddam and his stoutest opponents (Shiites Muslims) ironically agree that 2003 was the occupation of Iraq not the liberation of Iraq. As American troops leave, the Kurds, Christians and other persecuted minorities are wondering if Shiite domination of Iraqi politics means the end of their liberty.

Political liberation can be tricky. Redeemed from what to what? Why does the redemption of one lead to the oppression of another with such regularity?

Zechariah, who uttered these words, was thinking of political redemption. He was praising God at the birth of John, who would usher in the Savior, "that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us." He was thinking Romans. God was thinking the worst hater of his people, the devil. He would redeem his people from their sin. He would liberate us from the bondage of sin and make us his own.

Jesus redeems us from the penalty of our sin – namely death – by his death. Jesus redeems us to eternal life by his resurrection. By his resurrection he became the firstfruit of all who will defeat death in the resurrection.

What a glorious message! We have reason to rejoice and to tell others about it.

Day 17**Worship Service (Luke 1:74)**From: *The Benedictus* ([Luke 1:67-80](#))

That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, (KJV)

We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, (NLT)

There is a church that has these words as you enter the worship hall, "Enter to Worship." And as you leave the church, you see these words, "Depart to Serve." It is no accident that we call our Sunday hour the "Worship Service." Worship leads to service. Service is motivated by worship. True worship cannot be passive or be without service. Sacrificial service cannot be sustained without the supply of worship.

The term "freedom of worship" is not wrong, but it is somewhat misplaced and misunderstood. In Post-Reformation Europe, there was a demand that Christians must worship in a certain way. Some Christians left Europe for America so they could have the freedom to worship according to their conscience. Freedom of worship became somewhat synonymous to freedom of religion. But this term can be narrowly construed as the freedom of people to huddle together and worship their own God without

bothering anybody else. Worship is not private. It starts private and goes public.

Zechariah points to a time when God's people will serve him without fear. The huddle-up-and-worship type of faith is lame. The worship that issues in service is powerful. Zechariah is talking about the powerful worship that results in service. That type of worship-service attracts persecution, opposition, or at the very least, rejection. If we engage in a worship-service where the Gospel is never offered so there is no chance of rejection, we have not truly worshiped, we have not truly served.

Let our Christmas celebration express both worship and service. All of humanity today enjoys more freedom of worship service than ever before as more and more people adopt the Christian value of freedom of worship-service. Join in the worship-service of Jesus Christ that transforms the world. Invite someone to know Christ this Christmas.

Day 18**Knowledge of Salvation (Luke 1:77)**From: *The Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-80)

To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, (KJV)

You [John] will give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins (PE's own)

Zechariah's song of praise declares that his son John would give God's people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sin. A person has the knowledge of salvation when his sins are forgiven. When John grew up, *"He went into all the country around Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk 3:3).*

Christmas is a time when some look forward to baptism. I remember my own baptism on Resurrection Sunday and how I looked forward to it. I remember where I was kneeling in church. I remember the water that ran from my head to my neck and collar as I heard the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen."

They are all tied in: knowledge of salvation, baptism of repentance, and forgiveness of sin. The knowledge of salvation is the experience of what it means to be saved. Jesus' agenda is to

save us from sin. How does that come about? It comes about when we repent of our sins and confess him publicly in baptism. This Christmas we will witness some in public confession of faith in Jesus Christ. This is good. Perhaps it is even better if we don't limit baptism to Christmas, Resurrection Sunday, or some prominent date on the Christian Calendar. As much as we do not ask someone to wait for Christmas to repent of their sins, there is no real need to ask a person to wait for Christmas to be baptized. We need to see baptism more as confession and less as symbol.

This Christmas, we will see a confession of faith by people who come to the Lord in repentance. In that confession we relive our confession. In that confession, we invite others to faith and forgiveness. In that confession, we receive the knowledge of salvation. It is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. In baptism we say, "God I now publicly confess you as the Lord of my life. I am now forgiven; I am your child; and I am received into your family."

Day 19**The Miracle of Bethlehem (Luke 2:4)**From: **The Birth of Jesus** ([Luke 2:1-7](#))

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:.) (KJV)

And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. (NLT)

"Long time ago in Bethlehem, so the Holy Bible says, 'Mary's boy child Jesus Christ was born'"

It all began when Micah the prophet was telling the people there will be hard times. The Judeans in Jerusalem will suffer military defeat. The enemy will strike their leader's face with a rod. *"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small villah among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant [i.e. indeterminate] past"* (Micah 5:2).

From that time, the people knew God's Savior would come from Bethlehem. They don't know everything about him, but it sure sounded supernatural because his origins would be from the hoary,

unknown, eternity past. Not a mere mortal for sure.

But Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth not Bethlehem.

Augustus had issued a decree of census, but it was not around the time of Christ's birth. Furthermore, King Herod was exempted from the census because he was considered a loyal client-king of Augustus. But God did not make a mistake. Herod fell out of favor with Augustus and Herod conducted a belated census – at God's perfect timing. Everything conspired so Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to register.

We celebrate Christmas with a lot of Bethlehem references. It is no coincidence. It is the miracle of Bethlehem. Caesar and Herod, the world in motion, all came together so the prophecy may be fulfilled that the Savior of the world should be born in a village called Bethlehem.

Tell the miracle.

Day 20**The Hardship of Bethlehem (Luke 2:5)**From: The Birth of Jesus ([Luke 2:1-7](#))

To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. (KJV)

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (NIV)

We see Mary in the Christmas pageant travelling to Bethlehem. We usually see this in the type of comfort that even royalty of that time do not enjoy. How can we feel Mary's pain? Perhaps we cannot, and never can. But what we can understand is that the miracle of Bethlehem came in the midst of Mary's hardship.

Sometimes, we get the impression that God's plan for us does not include hardship. When we think of a good God, we think he is good because he removes pain from our life. We typically think pain and God's plan are not compatible. But they are. Just look at Mary travelling with child, perhaps on a donkey, perhaps in a cart, perhaps on foot. The Miracle of Bethlehem was conceived in hardship. Some of us may be going through tough times. This naturally makes us look inwards as we try to sort out our problems. There are times when we just have to hang-in-there. But we cannot

overlook God's hand in our lives in the midst of hardship.

What was in Mary's heart when she travelled to Bethlehem? Was she thinking, "What a pain! What a pain!" Or was she thinking, "What a miracle!"

This Christmas as our thoughts turn to reaching out to those who do not know Jesus, as we look forward to the miracle of faith, we can say, "Another duty! What a pain!" We can give every reason not to think beyond our own hardship, and never experience the true joy that comes when we see God's hand at work.

God is working this Christmas, whether we see it or not, whether we rejoice in it or not, whether we take part in it or not. But when we join in continuing the work of Christmas in outreach, we will find new hope, new peace, new joy and new love.

Day 21**Still No Room (Luke 2:7)**From: The Birth of Jesus ([Luke 2:1-7](#))

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (KJV)

and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (NIV)

How can they have no room for Jesus!

At Christmas we retell the story of the shameful neglect of Jesus at his birth. We tell people they need to find room in their heart for Jesus. That is true. Today, as at his birth, we can hear the voices saying, "I don't have time to think about Jesus, it is my party time." "I have my school work." "There is tension in our home." "My kids need me."

We can expect these, and other objections as we invite people to come celebrate the birth of baby Jesus. Of course, they don't know what they are missing. So these excuses sound truly strange to one who knows the grace of salvation in Jesus.

But the need to make room is not limited to them. It also applies to us. If we care to admit, our lives are pretty crowded with stuff. We are as busy as anyone.

We give the same reasons for not spending time and effort to reach others for Jesus. We and they are too similar for comfort.

Why would they not give Jesus room? Because giving would take something from them before they could surrender it to Jesus. It is not that people don't want to give to Jesus. It is that we want to give what costs us nothing. We will give spare room, spare cash, spare time for Jesus. When giving requires giving-up, we balk.

In frenetic Singapore, we can hardly give time without giving-up time. In crowded Bethlehem, Jesus could not find room because no one wanted to give-up room. Do we have room for Jesus this Christmas? Will we give time even when it means giving up time? Can we have room for Jesus if we don't make room for Jesus?

Day 22**Terrified to Glorified (Luke 2: 9)**From: **Announcing Jesus** ([Luke 2:8-20](#))

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. (KJV)

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, (NLT)

It was village somewhere between Aberdeen and Peterhead. They had two classes for Primary school. (I think it was Primary 1-3 in one class and Primary 4-6 in another class.) This village had a quaint old house for rent. I must check it out. Never mind the storm warning. I piled wife and three little kids (between two and seven) into our used but newly acquired SAAB to check out the distance, the general feel of the place, etc.

The light was failing and the wind was howling. We arrived at the village, and before I knew it, we reached the sea. We heard it first. The waves from the North Sea smashed harbor wall with a boom at each impact, sending salty blankets over the village. We were about 70 meters from the sea wall, but the waves beat so hard we could feel the ground tremble. The sea was beating and bullying the land. I abandoned the idea of living there.

The shepherds could not help it. They were terrified when the tranquil changeless sky lit up at night. It would be infinitely more terrifying than the waves I experienced. It was nature gone berserk. But their terror was immediately followed by assurance that all is well; that the angels were there to announce to them the birth of the Savior of mankind.

Imagine the impact of that message. Feel your puny self you mortal! As you cower in fear, the God who has total control over your fear is bringing you good news! On this day is born to you a Savior. He is Christ the Lord! The God of incredible power as you cannot even imagine has given you the gift that will redeem this world in the person of a tiny baby. What a mystery! What a gift! We must tell it, mustn't we?

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.