

Advent: The Names Say It All. John – Luke 1:57-79

When I was a boy we were not allowed to talk about Christmas before November 5th of November: Bonfire Night. After that Christmas was the next best thing in the year to look forward to. That is what Advent is about.

When parents are expecting a baby, they have to choose a name. There is not a huge amount of significance to the name beyond us liking it. In the Bible things are very different. When God names, it is always significant, and it gives us a clue what is coming next. And Christmas begins with God naming the key players involved. That should make us take notice! The names really do say it all.

The build up to the first Christmas begins with God telling Zechariah that he should call his son *John*, which means, *'The Lord is Gracious.'* It's as if the opening scene of the drama of Christmas is 'Grace'. But what is grace?

Grace is the opposite of Karma. Karma is you getting what you deserve. Grace is you getting what you don't deserve, being treated way better than you deserve. The problem is that we like the idea of Karma – for others, but we want, and need grace for ourselves. From the events surrounding John's birth we will see why we need grace and where we can find it.

Grace Takes Away Shame

Shame is a powerful thing. Zechariah and Elizabeth are filled with joy in part because the shame of their infertility has been taken away. Whilst there is no promise that we will always get what we want, God still takes away our shame: the shame of failure, of past sin, of failing to meet others' expectations. Christmas tells us God removes shame, and replaces it with the greatest gift of all: his Son. The fact that he gave his Son for you tells you that you are loved regardless of your performance, or your past, or what others could say about you.

Grace Keeps its Promises

The prophet Malachi foretold the coming of John the Baptist, and the Lord himself who would follow. Why did Malachi make that promise in the first place? Because the Jewish people of Malachi's day were in trouble. They felt God had failed to keep his promises, and they felt abandoned by him. Sometimes we can know what that feels like. But that is why Zechariah saw John's birth as God keeping his promises. Christmas tells us that God has not abandoned us, however bad life may seem.

Grace Restores Relationships

The holiday season can be a serious strain on relationships. But so can everyday. Grace is different. Zechariah is told that his son will turn fathers to children. Grace does that. When we understand how Jesus treated us, humbling himself to come for us, it affects how we treat others. Grace restores relationships.

Grace Brings Forgiveness

If John had been called 'The Lord is a Scorekeeper' instead of 'The Lord is Gracious' – Christmas would not be such good news. Scorekeeping destroys relationships. And if God were a scorekeeper no one could stand before him. But with grace comes forgiveness. And when we are grace receivers we can be grace givers and forgive those who hurt us. That is why 'The Lord is Gracious' is such good news.