

The Benedictus

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[0 : 0 0] Our scripture reading tonight, and the passage that David's going to preach to us from, is the first chapter of Luke, verses 57 to 80. This is God's own word.

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zachariah after his father, but his mother answered, no, he shall be called John. And they said to her, none of your relatives is called by this name. And they made signs to his father inquiring what he wanted him to be called.

And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, his name is John. And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea.

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. And his father Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant, David. As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy, promise to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant.

The oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. A new child will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, and give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace. And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

[2 : 2 0] Amen. This is God's holy word. We turn this evening to that passage that Chris read for us a little earlier, Luke chapter 1, verse 57 through to verse 80, our focus on the prophecy that runs from verse 67.

I suppose preparing for the arrival of a new baby can seem like an all-consuming task. There's so much to be got ready, and when God willing the baby arrives, there is, of course, a whole lot more to be done. It's a very special time, one that is often shared and enjoyed with others. And that's the kind of situation that we encounter here in these verses of Luke chapter 1. We're told in verse 57 and 58, the time came for Elizabeth to give birth. She bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. The birth of a son to Zechariah and Elizabeth had been foretold. We read of that earlier in the chapter. Zechariah the priest is visited by an angel of the Lord in verses 8 through 17. And despite the fact that he and his wife Elizabeth were childless, they were of advanced years, Zechariah is told that Elizabeth will bear him a son, and that he is to be called John. However, Zechariah's response to this startling, unsettling, astounding news is to question its veracity. And for his unbelief, we're told in verse 20 of the chapter that he's struck dumb. Gabriel tells him, Behold, you will be silent, 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. And so, what we're reading of here in these verses is that fulfillment.

Elizabeth and Zechariah's neighbors and relatives gather round to rejoice on the safe arrival of this child, and then something happens that they are quite unprepared for. Verse 59, on the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child. They would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, No, he shall be called John. And they said to her, None of your relatives.

is called by this name. In such a traditional culture, it would have been expected that the son would take the same name as his father. Perhaps they were already referring to him as little Zach.

But Elizabeth is adamant he will be called John. That's the name given to them by the angel. All very unusual. All very unusual. All very irregular. All very unexpected. And so, the relatives and the neighbors consult Zechariah. Perhaps they hoped that he would overrule this pretty strange decision. Of course, he is dumb, so they make signs to the father inquiring what he wanted him to be called. He asked for a writing tablet, verse 63, and wrote, His name is John.

[6 : 01] And they all wondered. Despite all the objections, Zechariah and Elizabeth stick to their guns. In the face of the community's incredulity and in obedience to the angel's words, they remained with the name that God had revealed to them. The name John itself means Yahweh is gracious. The Lord is gracious. Here was a child given to them by the grace of God. And that same grace loosens Zechariah's tongue and fills him with the Holy Spirit. Immediately, we read in verse 64, His mouth was opened, his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. Fear came on all the neighbors. And all these things were talked about throughout the hill country of Judea. 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. And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. All that happens here is a sign of God being at work in a very special and unique way.

Those around are astonished. John is going to be great. The hand of the Lord is going to be upon him. Indeed, as Luke will tell us later on in his gospel, among those born of women, there would be none greater than John the Baptist. That is none greater except Jesus Christ himself. And so, as Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit, he bursts into this prophetic song, sometimes known as the Benedictus.

It's a song that celebrates the goodness and grace of God in bringing salvation to his people. It looks forward in hope for what is yet to come. And Zechariah's words are a kind of meditation, a reflection on God's ways and God's work. They are, in effect, a trailer for the rest of the gospel of Luke.

Coming soon, God's promises fulfilled at last. Coming soon, God's mighty deliverance and redemption.

[8 : 36] Coming soon, God's Savior shining as a light in the darkness. Coming soon, forgiveness and salvation for guilty sinners. And there are three themes that I want to highlight in this Spirit-filled prophetic utterance of Zechariah. The first one is one that has already been highlighted in this opening chapter of the gospel, and that is this. We see here God's promises being fulfilled. Zechariah begins his hymn of praise with these words, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. Now, this theme of promise fulfillment is prominent in both gospel accounts of the nativity. Matthew chapter 1, it is highlighted in the genealogy where Jesus, you remember, where Jesus, you remember, is referred to as the son of David, the son of Abraham, the very opening verse of the New Testament. And what Matthew does is trace that line of descent and to show that how Jesus is the promised deliverer through which both Abraham and David point.

Jesus is the great deliverer that all the Old Testament saints had been looking for down through the centuries. His arrival is a sign that God is fulfilling his promises and achieving his purposes. And there's something similar to that going on here in Luke. The connection is being made to show that those ancient covenant promises of God are now ready to be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus the Messiah. And you'll notice here that Zechariah clearly references these great promises, both made to David and Abraham. He speaks of a coming Savior in the house of his servant David as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.

And then to show the mercy promised to our fathers, to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. At this point in Israel's history, God's promises were very old. That great and gracious promise made to Abraham of a people and a land through whom the whole world would be blessed was by this time a couple of thousand years old. Nonetheless, that ancient covenant promise of God remained intact, ready to be fulfilled. The wind, the rain, the great storms of human history had beat upon that promise. Generation upon generation had come and gone, yet that promise of God remained bright and shiny and new as the very first day it was given. For time and the passing of ages cannot erode, deface, or obliterate the promises of God. Men and women come and go, empires rise and fall, history ebbs and flows, but God's promise endures. We're told that God has now raised up a horn of salvation for the house of David. The phrase horn of salvation indicates a mighty and powerful Savior. God has remembered His holy covenant. He has not forgotten His people. He has not forgotten the promise He made to Abraham. Fulfillment is now upon us. Zechariah mentions, as I said, the Abrahamic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, after centuries, the Jews were still looking for a new king to arise from the house of David. And what we have here is the people that God promised to create in the land that God had promised to give, awaiting the person that God had promised to send.

And Zechariah realizes in these events that that special person's arrival is now imminent. God's Messiah is now about to take center stage. God's ancient promises are ready to be fulfilled. God is faithful, His promises sure and firm. Well, we hear much, don't we, about promises and vows from the lips, perhaps of politicians. I doubt it's much of a surprise to us that many such promises prove to be empty and worthless, because human beings break promises. People let us down. We're all promise breakers.

There's only one promise keeper, and that is God Himself. He keeps His promises. I think it's worth laboring that point. Oftentimes in life, we cannot see any tangible sign of God's promises being fulfilled. Things may be hard and difficult, but if we are God's people, we are called to hold on to the promises of God. We look around Western culture, the witness, the demise of the church, and sometimes we despair. But we have the promise of Jesus Christ Himself. I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail. We may be facing illness and even death. We may be anxious and worried about the future. And Jesus says, in my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? Or we may be weighed down and troubled by our sins. The apostle tells us if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Maybe we're struggling. We're wondering, can we keep going in the way of faith? Jesus says, I give them eternal life. They shall never perish. Neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand. God's promises shall not be broken. God has bound Himself in covenant love to His people forever. And here we read of those great Old Testament promises, all being fulfilled in the coming of Jesus the Messiah. All the promises of God, yes and amen, in Jesus Christ. All fulfilled in Him, in a person we can come to know and love. He is the one in whom we can come to know and experience the living God for ourselves. He is the one who will carry us through difficult times, hard times. He will never leave us or forsake us. His promise is forever sure.

[16:08] I recall some years ago the death of one of the members of my church, a lady called Betty Buckley, and being told of how in the midst of very challenging times. She had two, at that time, two young daughters. She was virtually destitute. She'd been abandoned. She was alone with her two young daughters, and they told me of how she would literally stand on her Bible to pray and to claim the promises of God. I'm not recommending that as a technique, but it was very moving to hear her daughters. She said, I don't know. She said, I don't know. She said, I don't know. She said, I don't know.

I wonder this evening, have God great, great promises got hold of your heart like that?

Because sometimes in life, those promises are all we have to hold on to. We're standing on the promises of God. There's that old hymn. We don't have it in our repertoire.

Maybe get Donald and the music team to remedy that. Standing on the promises that cannot fail. When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail. By the living Word of God, I shall prevail.

Standing on the promises of God. Where are you standing tonight? So that's the first thing here. The promises of God being fulfilled. The second thing, we see God's purpose being revealed.

[18:18] In verses 70 through 75, the prophecy goes on. He has visited, redeemed His people, raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

And then He goes on to say, to grant us that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. And what Zechariah is reminding us of here is that God is in the business of redeeming a people for Himself. Zechariah speaks of the deliverance that God will surely bring to His people. It's the style of many of the prophets that He speaks of something future as having already been accomplished. Why? Because God has purposed it and decreed it. The Lord is visiting His people just as He did in the days of the Exodus. He's rescuing them from their enemies. He's raised up a horn of salvation for His people. The language and imagery borrowed there from Psalm 18. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I will call on the Lord who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. It's the picture of God as a place of safety for His people. An impregnable fortress that cannot be stormed, a rock that cannot be moved, a victor who crushes His enemies beneath His feet. And in the birth of John, Zechariah sees that God is on the move, bringing deliverance to His people. Once more, He's bringing redemption. Once more, there's going to be an exodus. Once more, there's going to be a great salvation. The language used here is very concrete, very physical. You'll notice a particular focus on God's people being delivered from their enemies, rescued in order to serve the Lord in righteousness. Divine deliverance at hand. It will come to pass. It's not something vague. It's not something nebulous. It's not something ethereal or otherworldly. It won't be purely spiritual. It will be physical, a tangible rescue. Enemies will be defeated. A deliverance will involve flesh and blood. C.S. Lewis once wrote, there's no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That's why He uses material things like bread and wine to put new life into us. We may think this rather rude and unspiritual. God does not. He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.

And that's why at this time of year, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the incarnation. In the incarnation, Jesus takes to Himself our flesh and blood. And that's why the resurrection is a bodily resurrection. The physical and material is to be redeemed. According to Paul, believers are given resurrection bodies. That's why we have in the book of Revelation a vision of a new heavens and earth, because we live in a world that has stopped working properly. God's good creation has been despoiled.

We live in a world that is groaning and creaking, subject to frustration. And the Scriptures tell us that when human beings decided to be their own master, a curse fell on the created order. Everything began to go wrong. Everything became subject to bondage, decay, and death. And yet the Bible also tells us that this state of dis-ease is but a temporary condition, because the healing medicine for this state of death and decay is the gospel of Jesus Christ. And a day is coming when the full effects of that healing medicine will be there for all to see. And God's purpose will be fully revealed. All things made new. The old order of things passed away, replaced by a new world, a new heaven, a new earth. Here is the purpose of God in a new creation. And in that new heaven and earth, we will be completely delivered from our enemies.

If I can paraphrase that famous Scottish singing duo, the proclaimers. It will be sin no more, evil no more, suffering no more, unrighteousness no more, pride no more, lies no more, death no more, tears no more. And Paul himself uses this kind of language in writing to the Corinthians.

[23 : 46] 1 Corinthians 15, 22 and following, As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive, but each in his own order. Christ the firstfruits, then it is coming, those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and every power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. All, you see, will be brought to subjection. Everything will come under the rule of Jesus Christ. Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The New Testament hope is not that of some disembodied, vague, ethereal existence. It looks forward to a physically renewed creation, to resurrection bodies, to a transformed heaven and earth in which we will be completely delivered from every enemy, and in which we can serve God without fear and in holiness and righteousness.

It's a glorious hope of a great deliverance. And this is what Zechariah catches a glimpse of here. God's promises being fulfilled. God's purpose being revealed. And thirdly and finally here, God's people being prepared. Verses 77 to 79, you, child, you will be called the prophet of the Most High. You will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high and give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

That final section of Zechariah's hymn really focuses on John's future ministry and on the arrival of the Lord himself.

John is called the prophet of the Most High. He will prepare the way of the Lord, a ministry of warning and preparation, alerting people to the coming of the Messiah. The people are to be made ready for His arrival.

Hearts need to be prepared later in this gospel. Look, quotes from Isaiah 40. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make His path straight. Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill laid low. The crooked shall become straight, the rough places level, and all flesh see the salvation of our God. John's task is to prepare the way of the Lord. And the way in which this is described by Zechariah is as the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Jesus Christ will come as the light of the world. The darkness will flee, before Him. It's not just the sunrise of a new day. It is the sunrise of a new world, a new creation, the beginning for humanity in the coming of the Savior. Those famous words in John's prologue, there was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through Him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

[28 : 01] The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. The light of salvation is now dawning upon the world in the person of Jesus Christ. And you'll notice at the heart of this salvation is the forgiveness of sins. To give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins.

That's the great need for all human beings. To know the forgiveness of our sins. Why? Because as human beings we're guilty before God.

We need to be forgiven. That guilt is real. Sometimes, excuse me, sometimes we hear in our culture that guilt isn't real.

You know, it's just a feeling. It's a problem. It really belongs to the past. People today no longer believe in God or sin or the Ten Commandments, even right or wrong. Everybody's, you know, happy just doing their own thing, going their own way, following their own heart. Yeah, people might be bored.

They might be apathetic. They may be confused. They may be insecure. They may be lacking purpose in life. But burden with guilt? No, no, no. People today, though, are not bothered by that. That was true in medieval times or Victorian times. But guilt is a kind of psychologically, sociologically created phenomenon. It can be alleviated by counseling and therapy and all sorts. A mental order, a disease that we can treat. Something that's not real. It's subjective.

[29 : 56] But that's not what the Bible says. The Bible says that our guilt is objective. You know, after all, if we've jettisoned all these ideas of God and the moral law and sin and guilt and all that, why do human beings not feel a lot better about themselves?

Deep down, we all have memories of shame. Thoughts and deeds that make us feel profoundly unworthy.

Guilt is a real problem, even in a guilt-denying society like ours. We are objectively, all of us, objectively guilty before God. And our guilt before our Creator doesn't disappear when we die. We take it with us. Because the root of our guilt is not something sociological or psychological. It is actually something theological. The psalmist says, If you, O Lord, kept the record of sins, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness.

And this is whom John will prepare a people for, for Jesus Christ, the Savior, who's come to deal with all our shame and guilt, to make us right with God, and to bring us the forgiveness of our sins that we so desperately need. And that's why in Luke's gospel, we witness Jesus journeying to the cross. For it's from a crucified and risen Savior there flows to ordinary sinners like us, forgiveness and cleansing from sin, divine mercy and love, righteousness and acceptance with God. And friends, isn't that good news? Isn't that good news for you, for your family, for your neighbors? Isn't it good news for a guilty world that stands under the just judgment of a holy God? Many years ago, time is almost gone. Many years ago, there was a priest in the Philippines who was well loved and respected. But he was a man who was haunted by the memory of a sin he'd committed when he was back in seminary. He had repented of this sin often, but had absolutely no sense of forgiveness in his heart. Now, in his parish, there was a somewhat eccentric woman who was always claiming to have visions of Christ in which the Lord would speak directly to her. And the priest was rightly skeptical about this woman and her many, many visions.

But one day, he was so troubled in his heart about his past that he asked this woman, he said to her, next time you have a vision of the Lord, ask him what sin I committed when I was in seminary.

[33 : 05] And the woman assured him that she would do so. And so sometime later, he met the woman again, and he asked her if Christ had appeared to her in one of her dreams, and if she had asked him about the sin he had committed back in seminary. Oh, yes, the woman said. I saw him. I asked him, what did he say, said the priest. The woman replied. He said, I don't.

Remember. I don't remember. God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah and says, they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Let me ask you tonight, do you know anything of that forgiveness in your life? It is your greatest need. What a great Savior we have in Jesus Christ, because in him our sins are remembered no more. It is a liberating forgiveness that sets us free to walk in the way of peace.

To this dark world, Jesus Christ comes and shines his light. To this dead world, Jesus brings life. To this guilty world, he brings forgiveness.

Here in the words of Zechariah, we are being prepared. Yes, to face the challenges and difficulties of this life by laying hold of the sure promises of God. Prepare to face the future by seeing something of God's purposes that lie ahead. Prepare to meet with a God who in his great mercy remembers our sins no more. Let's pray together. Lord, grant us your grace. Grant us faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

[35 : 47] For he is indeed a mighty Savior. Lord, you know us, you know our circumstances, you know our lives. You know each of us better than we know ourselves. Lord, speak your word into our hearts.

May we be a people of faith and trust in your promises. May we be a people of hope looking forward to all that you have promised to accomplish.

And may we be a people who know what it is to be forgiven and to live in the light of your mercy and grace. As we pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.