

Redemption's Dawn

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we've been praying all service, but let's pray again because we always need to depend on God for his illumination. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, you say that we have no message but the Lord Jesus and him crucified.

So I pray, Father, that Jesus will be proclaimed from this pulpit today and that as we behold his glory in his word, you'll be pleased to do your transforming work in us.

That is our prayer this morning. And so in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, believe it or not, it's November already and so that means the end of the year is already here.

As one of my friends joke, that means you only have two more months to ignore all your New Year's resolutions. But more seriously, as we come to the end of the year, maybe it's not a bad time to ask.

What can you praise God for? What do you praise God for? Perhaps for some of you, as you look back over the year, you can look back and praise God for a year of relatively good health.

[1 : 1 2] For some of you, you can look back and praise God for a year of friendships grown and strengthened. For some of you, you can look back and praise God for a year of stability.

But perhaps for some of you, as you look back, it's not so easy to find things to praise God for. You've suffered ill health perhaps, or bereavement, or some family difficulties, and a whole range of other problems besides.

And you can't help but ask, just what can you praise God for? Well, today's passage is a passage of praise. You might have noticed it most obviously in the second half of today's passage, where Zechariah bursts into what is sometimes known as the Benedictus, which is simply Latin for praise be.

And there, Zechariah explodes into what is essentially a hymn of adoration, as he heaps thanks after thanks to God for what he has done.

But it's also there in the first half of the passage, where there is joy in the beginning and awe at the end. And here is what today's passage does for us.

[2 : 3 0] It essentially helps us to know what to praise God for. Whatever our year has been like, whatever our circumstances have been. And essentially, there are three things we can praise God for.

For his outpouring of mercy and grace, for his plan of redemption coming to pass, and for his provision of the pathway of peace. So let's look at each in turn.

So firstly, praise God for his outpouring of mercy and grace. Let's remind ourselves of where we are in this story. Two weeks ago, when we first met Elizabeth and Zechariah, we discovered that if they simply looked at all the circumstances around them, they too didn't have much reason to praise God for.

After all, they lived under the rule of an evil tyrant, serving in a time when many of God's people were hardly zealous for the things of God. Indeed, it had been 400 years since a prophet from God appeared.

And they were both old. Without a child, burden only with shame. What was they to say thank you to God for? But seemingly out of nowhere, an angel arrives and proclaims to Zechariah the good news.

[3 : 54] They will have a son who will be filled with the Holy Spirit, who will help prepare and turn many people back to the Lord. Wow, isn't that amazing?

But Zechariah responds with unbelief. As Pauling said last week, it seemed too good to be true. How can this be? Here was a priest whose job was to know the word and teach the word.

But when the word impacts him in a personal way, he can't quite bring himself to believe it. And so the angel says, well, if that's so, then you can't speak any words until the word of the Lord has come to pass.

So the last time we left Zechariah and Elizabeth, we left them on a bit of a bittersweet note. But as we rejoin this story in verse 57, there is nothing bittersweet about what we see.

Straight away we are plunged into joy after joy. You can't help but feel the waves of pleasure enveloping this family. You see, up to this point, there is still a note of uncertainty about what's going to happen.

[5 : 14] It's true that earlier in verse 24, we are told that Elizabeth had conceived. But although it seems as if the angel's promise of a baby boy is coming true, the suspense isn't quite over yet.

I mean, what if Elizabeth suffers a miscarriage? What if the baby is born but it's a girl? There are all these unspoken questions at the back of your mind.

But don't worry, Luke says, let me help make it absolutely certain for you. After all, that's the reason I wrote, isn't it? So I know your NIV keeps it simple by translating verse 57 as simply, when it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby.

But let me tell you, Luke says, how I literally started verse 57. I wrote, You see, here is God doing what he says.

Here is God acting in fulfillment of his promises. Here is God delivering on his word. And above all, here is God showing who he is.

[6 : 33] Elizabeth has suffered disgrace. But now, verse 58, the Lord has shown her great mercy. Isn't that so like God?

He is not unsympathetic. He is compassionate. He is tender-hearted. And that's how he always is to those who trust him.

As Elizabeth's cousin, Mary, sang last week, his mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.

And that's certainly Elizabeth's experience. He knows God, she knows God has been merciful, and she is joyful. And my friends, when you rest knowing that this is who God is, a faithful and compassionate God, well, you can find joy as well.

But now the story introduces a complication. As faithful and blameless Israelites, Zechariah and Elizabeth would have circumcised their newborn on the eighth day.

[7 : 47] So all the extended family, already thrilled to bid over this unexpected new birth, would have been present for the circumcision party. And this circumcision party, somewhat more unexpectedly, doubles up as the naming ceremony.

Now, normally Jewish babies would already have been named at birth, but not our baby here. But that's not the only unusual thing. All the relatives are obviously expecting the newborn to be named Zechariah.

After all, he is the only child, right? And isn't it convention to name the baby after his father or grandfather?

But, verse 60, Elizabeth shocks them. No, she says. He is to be called John. So now we have tension.

Suddenly there's a risk of all those pleasant feelings turning to displeasure. Most likely, Zechariah had somehow communicated to his wife that his son is to be called John.

[9 : 03] But the attendees can't believe it. There is no one among your relatives who has that name, verse 61. You can just hear the undertones, can't you?

Elizabeth, stop this nonsense. Stop defying tradition. Is your old age making you act a little bit crazy? But obviously unable to persuade her.

Verse 62, they now turn, hopefully, to her father. And now the suspense increases. Like it or not, Zechariah is being put to the test again.

What will he do? Will he go with the flow of the world and agree with the crowd? Or will he go with the flow of God's purposes and name his son as his angel told him to?

Verse 63 gives us the answer. He asks for a writing tablet. That's not an iPad, by the way. Don't get confused. And writes down, Actually, in the Greek, it's literally John is his name.

[10 : 21] And so Zechariah is being emphatic here. It's definitely John, folks, not Zechariah. And straight away, Zechariah's tongue is loosened, verse 64, and he is free to speak.

Now, what does Luke want to communicate to us as he tells us about this naming episode? Indeed, when you think about it, why does God seem to make such a big deal about naming this particular boy John?

After all, as far as I can tell, God doesn't send an angel to every parent on this planet dictating what they should name their child.

And hey, isn't Zechariah actually quite an appropriate name? In case you've forgotten, Zechariah means the Lord remembers.

And isn't that a great name for this occasion? After all, hasn't the Lord remembered Zechariah and Elizabeth? And doesn't Zechariah himself talk about how God remembered his covenant later on in verse 72?

[11 : 43] It would have fit very nicely. So why is it crucial for us to know that he is not named after his father, but called John instead?

Well, you see, because once again, God wants to display this side of his character.

He is the God who shows great mercy. And that is reflected in John's name itself. What does John mean? Do you remember?

It means the Lord is gracious. That's who he is. And nowhere is that reflected more than in how he treats Zechariah in this very episode.

You see, the last time we met Zechariah, he didn't come out looking so good. After all, here was a priest, a man who had plenty of knowledge about God, but who ended up exposing to the world that his level of trust in God didn't match his knowledge.

[12 : 59] Remember, knowledge and trust, although related, are not the same. Just because you have knowledge about God doesn't mean you trust God.

But God is gracious. He doesn't tell Zechariah, Oh well, since you doubted my word, let me take back my promise.

No son for you. Nor does he tell Zechariah, Your voice will be taken away from you forever. I mean, think how devastating that would be if that happened.

There goes his job, and more than that, his priestly identity. But no, God is gracious. He disciplines Zechariah, yes, with months of enforced silence.

But it appears as if those months of enforced silence did him a world of good. For when the test comes again, this time, he responds with a humble, decisive trust in God.

[14 : 10] As Zechariah spells out the letters J-O-H-N, he is both being obedient to God, and at the same time, testifying to God's mercy and grace.

He is testifying to God's choice, not so much to forget his sin, but more profoundly, not to hold his sin against him.

That's grace. And perhaps there are some of you today who are in the same place as Zechariah. You have a pretty reasonable knowledge of the Bible.

You are attending my Old Testament class. You might even be serving in some capacity as a Sunday school teacher, perhaps, or as a Bible study leader.

But if you're honest, you know that your level of trust in God is not where your knowledge is at. And perhaps right now, you're in a season where God has exposed that.

[15 : 15] Where, as you look back over the year, you can pinpoint moments where it's so clear you are a knower rather than a doer of the Word. And having felt exposed, you're a bit afraid to kind of meet God knowing what you are.

Well, God says to you, look at Zechariah writing the name John. And let a snapshot of that scene point you to my grace.

That's going to be John's lifelong job, really. Well, let John remind you now of who I am. The Lord is gracious. I am the God of second chances.

You can be certain about that, he says. Then respond with obedient faith. That's why God is so praiseworthy.

That's why the first thing Zechariah does as soon as he can speak is to explode with praise. My friends, whatever year we've had, whatever circumstances that we've undergone, we can be certain that our God is full of grace and mercy.

[16 : 32] He's never stopped being that. And as you turn to him, trust him, and act on what he says, he is ever ready to give you a fresh start.

A friend of mine suggested that perhaps that's also why John is called John rather than Zechariah Jr. By being identified with his heavenly father rather than his earthly father, he represents a fresh start, a new kind of beginning, a brand new way that is Jesus-shaped, not Zechariah-shaped.

Well, that's what God wants to offer us. He is the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in love and mercy.

That's why we praise him. But what else can we praise God for? Well, secondly, praise God for his plan of redemption coming to pass.

Now, we've just noticed in verse 64 that the first thing Zechariah does upon God pressing the unmute button is to praise God. And then in verse 68 onwards, we are told the content of his praise.

[17 : 52] But what comes in between? Well, in verse 65, we discover the neighbours are filled with awe and can't help talking about what's going on. After all, whenever God's people consistently trust God, they can't help but be distinctive, can't they?

And so the neighbours notice that. And the big question they are asking is this, verse 66. In light of what we've just seen, what then is this child going to be?

That's the natural question, isn't it? But here's the big surprise. Now that Zechariah has gotten his voice back, you would have expected him to talk all about his child.

Just imagine meeting someone who's wanted to be a father for a long time and who finally has his long-awaited child. He probably can't wait to tell you all about the first time they stood up, the first time they said, da-da, the first time they pooped.

But look at Zechariah's speech in verses 68 all the way to verse 79. And you see, his son hardly gets a mention.

[19 : 13] It's really only just verses 76 and 77. What's going on? Surely Zechariah should be praising God for his long-awaited son.

What's going on? Well, he is doing that. But he's doing so in light of the bigger picture. You see, Zechariah understands perfectly well what his child is going to be.

His child is going to be the opening act. His child is going to be the signboard. His child is going to be the advertisement. But his child is not the big point.

His child is important, but only in as far as he is going to be the one who will showcase the star of God's big plan.

The one who is going to be born in the very next chapter. And it is God's great big plan that will make his son significant rather than the other way around.

[20 : 23] And that's why Zechariah praises God the way he does. So what is this great big plan of God? Well, he tells us in verse 68.

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. It's all about redemption. But what does redeem actually mean?

It's one of those words that gets thrown around in church all the time, but what does it mean? Well, imagine a prisoner in a dark dungeon. His hands and his feet are completely bound in chains.

He is behind iron bars. He is guarded by armed, muscular men. But redemption comes when the strong men are overpowered, the key is placed in the lock, and the prisoner is released.

That's redemption. It's about liberation from slavery. It's about the price paid to secure such a freedom. And it's one of the most important words in the Bible.

[21 : 32] It's one of the most important events in the Bible. for redemption is what God accomplished historically at the Exodus. As Pharaoh and his army are overpowered, and God's people, once slaves in Egypt, are now set free to serve a new master.

And now Zechariah declares the bigger redemption is here. A new Exodus is here. But who is God going to raise to accomplish this? Well, Zechariah says, look at verse 69.

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. That's who my son is going to be pointing to, Zechariah says. But why in the world is he called a horn?

Well, to try to explain that, let me tell you about my trip to Madrid in Spain. I've been there once with the hope of witnessing an actual bull fight, but unfortunately I didn't get the chance to.

But I've seen the bulls, and I can assure you they are pretty massive. And apparently the horns on these fighting bulls are longer than in most other breeds, and they have a whole set of muscles in their shoulders and in their necks, which means their horns carry their distinctive strength.

[23 : 00] And that's the idea here. In the Old Testament, horns were a common metaphor for power and might. And it's no surprise to see that metaphor used only of God in the Old Testament.

Not man. For instance, in Psalm 18, verse 2, David calls God the horn of his salvation. But, there might be one exception.

In Psalm 132, verses 17 to 18, the Messiah from David's line is also described as a horn. But is that the same as being the horn of salvation?

After all, the psalmist didn't say so explicitly. He just said horn. But now, here in verse 69, Zechariah leaves us in no doubt. Guys, the Messiah is finally here and he is indeed the horn of salvation.

And that means he is mighty to save. This is the plan God is bringing to pass. This is the plan he's put into motion ever since Genesis 3.

[24 : 15] Not just something he thought of at the very last minute. This is the plan verse 70 that the prophets foretold long ago. And this is the plan God is bringing to completion.

This is the fulfillment of his promises, verse 73. This plan is so certain to pass that in verses 68 to 75, Zechariah talks about events that should take place in the future in the past tense.

Notice how consistently he keeps saying he has, he has, he has, all throughout. It's like he's saying the promises of God are as good as done.

And indeed they are. For by the end of Luke's gospel, we will read of Jesus dying and rising again and telling us that the entirety of the Old Testament is fulfilled in him.

By the end of Acts, Luke's sequel, we will find the Apostle Paul preaching how Jesus has brought about God's redemption plan to pass. But here is the good news.

[25 : 28] It has been done. So my brothers and sisters, as J.C. Rao once said, let us be persuaded of these promises.

Let us embrace them and not let them go. They will never fail us. God's word is never broken.

He is not a man that he should lie. We have a seal on every promise which Zechariah probably never saw. We have the seal of Christ's blood to assure us that what God has promised, he will surely perform.

That's what we can praise God for. When you have a voucher for something and you redeem it, that thing now comes into your possession. It's yours.

Well, my friends, if you trust in Jesus, that's the equivalent of cashing in on your voucher. Salvation is yours because redemption has occurred.

[26 : 39] And redemption is always accomplished for a purpose. Look at verse 74 and notice why God redeemed us. It's so that we will serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

You see, this is God's plan too. This is what he always intended. He intends to set us free, but we mustn't misunderstand. In God's world, true freedom is not defined as doing whatever we want, whenever we want.

True freedom is defined as living in conformity with reality. True freedom arises when we know who we are and what we were made for.

Those who are designed to love and serve God. True freedom comes when we can live without fear and give the Lord our all.

Which brings us to our third and final reason for praising God today. Thirdly, praise God for his provision of the pathway of peace.

[27 : 56] You see, what kind of redemption does God ultimately provide? When we look at something like verse 74, it seems clear, doesn't it?

It's salvation from our enemies. And Zechariah knew very well his people had faced enemy after enemy throughout their history. There was Pharaoh and the Egyptians, there was Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, and there was Herod and the Romans.

And there is no doubt that as Zechariah spoke of salvation from his enemies, surely he would have hoped, at least in part, for a liberation from these foreign oppressors.

To have a horn of salvation come and fight against these enemies would certainly have been attractive indeed. And that is certainly part of what God intends for his people.

You see, God's promises are so big that he intends that one day, all those who oppress Christians in places like North Korea and Saudi Arabia and China will be no more.

[29 : 11] Sometimes we look at verses like verse 74 and too quickly over-spiritualize the promise contained there. But in its final form, that's the kind of salvation God will one day achieve.

He will accomplish a final deliverance from all those who mean to cause harm to his people. When we gather in heaven, you can be sure that it's one of the things all persecuted Christians will praise God for.

But the words the Holy Spirit puts in Zacharias' mouth shows us we must not under-spiritualize salvation either. In verse 77, notice how salvation comes about.

Does it come about simply when God's people are delivered from their physical enemies? No. It can only be achieved through the forgiveness of sin.

For finally, this is the biggest problem that we all face. In the end, our most dangerous enemy is not the enemy outside, not people who want to impose on us a particular kind of religion, not people who want to promote anti-Christian values or people who mock the Christian faith.

[30 : 38] Contrary to what we often think, they are not the biggest threat. Our most dangerous enemy is the enemy within.

As someone once said, what God is most concerned about here is not the people who occupy their land, but the sin that occupies their hearts.

You see, what is sin? Well, think of what is at its center. At the center of sin is I. That's what sin is essentially about.

It's about putting me, myself, and I at the center of everything instead of God. It's about pushing God off his throne and putting ourselves on it.

And when we do that, we are effectively declaring war against God even if we don't realize it. That is sin. And if we are at war against God, well, there can be no bigger problem than that, can't they?

[31 : 44] because that means we are God's enemies. But the irony is when we choose to put the spotlight on ourselves rather than God, we end up in darkness.

When we pursue our own paths thinking that we'll find something better at the end of it, then if we go God's way, we'll simply end up lost. But here is why we can praise God.

He doesn't let us pursue our own paths. Instead, verse 78, because of his tender mercy, notice that character is on display again, because of his tender mercy, he causes the rising sun to shine on us from heaven.

Or more literally, he says that the dawn will come and visit us from on high. That's the literal translation of verse 78. But here's the big surprise.

When redemption's dawn comes, it doesn't come like the horde of salvation we expect. He doesn't come with a mighty army of angels or with ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons and witty political slogans.

[33 : 12] No. He comes as a meek and weak man who willingly submits to death on a cross. And get this, he dies for his enemies.

He comes as someone who allows his enemies to frame him and crucify him and at the end of it all he simply says, Father, forgive them.

It is for their sake he dies. And though he comes as the light, it is darkness that characterizes his most significant moment, as darkness hung over the land for the hours he hung on the cross.

And as he does so, he steers us onto the pathway of peace, no longer at war with God, no longer his enemies. But at peace with him.

For his name is Jesus. And what does that name mean? It means the Lord saves.

[34 : 25] That's what we can praise God for. You see, Jesus isn't just here to meet our felt needs, he's here to meet our deepest need. And what we need most is to be reconciled to God.

And it is Jesus and Jesus alone who can accomplish that. No human government, no human technology, no human philosophy can ever do that. And so let's follow in the footsteps of Zechariah here.

Let's make Jesus the one whom our entire lives are to revolve around. And just as a quick aside to parents today.

Did you notice how this particular parent doesn't make his son the focus, but the son of God the focus instead? I think that reminds those of us who are parents not to make our kids the focus at the expense of Jesus.

Indeed, for all of us, let's not make anything else but Jesus be the centre of our praise and the centre of our lives. For when we focus on Jesus, we can be certain we will always have the greatest reason to praise God for.

[35 : 46] Let's do that now as we pray. Father, as we come to you right now, the only thing we want to say is praise you.

Praise you for what you have done. Praise you for sending this horn of salvation for us, the Lord Jesus who is mighty to save. Thank you he is the one who gives us forgiveness, who has liberated us from slavery to sin, and who will one day liberate us from the hands of all our enemies, all those who oppose you.

So help us now to serve you without fear, because we know in your presence there is nothing greater than you. So once again, Lord, as we go into the coming week, whatever weeks we've had, help us to live knowing that we can praise you no matter what.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.