

The tender mercy of our God (The birth of John the Baptist)

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Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] So, we find ourselves back in Luke after a hiatus into Hebrews with Ian last week. I hope you can remember what we've got up to in these stories of the opening reflections on the infancy of John and Jesus.

We return, if you like, back to complete the story that we found in verses 5 to 25 of the chapter as the prophecy of the birth of John.

We complete that story with the birth indeed coming about. So, we are nine months off from that, three months off from the start of Mary's visit to Elizabeth.

She's been there for those three months and John is now to be born. The second half of our passage, that song from John, the Benedictus as it's sometimes called, as Mary's is the Magnificat, this is the Benedictus, both named for the first word of the Latin rhetoric of it.

In this case, a song again of praise. Praise be to the Lord, Benedictus. So, this is presumably the content of the praise that's referred to in verse 64, that Zechariah opens his mouth and praises God and we have here the account of it.

[1 : 35] But it also is set out separate from verse 64, if you like, in order to form a parallel. So, if you remember back to that slide we had a few weeks ago, that hopefully will reappear for us.

You remember we had these kind of two parallel streams with John in the blue over on the left and then the pale blue of Jesus on the right.

Last time we were in that green block as Mary and Elizabeth got together and Mary sang her song. And we're now in these two dark blue blocks over here, the birth of John Baptist and his recognition by the inspired Zechariah.

So, it would seem that Luke has kind of pulled the song out into a separate section in order to create this parallelism between this recognition of John by Zechariah and then later on the recognition of Jesus by Simeon and Anna.

So, he's deliberately setting the two alongside one another and we'll reflect on that more when we come to look at Simeon sometime after Christmas.

[2 : 49] It also answers the question of verse 66, what then is this child going to be? And whilst it's parallel to the later greeting of Simeon and Anna, there's also clear similarities to Mary's song that we were looking at last time.

And particularly notable in that is a focus in both songs on the mercy of God. There are a few different words that get translated as mercy, different Greek words behind that.

A few different ones, but *eleos*, which is used here, isn't a particularly common word. It only comes up 27 times in the whole New Testament and six of those are in Luke.

And of those six times it's used in Luke, five of them are here in chapter 1. Twice in Mary's song, twice in Zechariah's song, and then in between the neighbour's recognition in verse 58.

So, there is a clear focus on mercy in these two songs. And it's there that we're going to focus today as we reflect on the inexhaustible nature of God's mercy.

[3 : 54] As we reflect on the tenderness of God's mercy. We see the result of God's mercy and we see a response to God's mercy. Mercy is inexhaustible. Mercy is tender.

It has a result and it should have a response. So, we focus mostly on the song and particularly dwelling and reflecting on verse 78.

The tender mercy of our God. So, then God's mercy. This concept here of mercy, this connects us back. This connects the account of John's birth with a wider expression of God's mercy to his people.

Of God's mercy to Israel as a whole. Mary sang back in verse 50 of a mercy that extends to those who fear from generation to generation.

And in verse 54 that he remembered to be merciful. The mercy that God shows to his people in sending the Messiah is of a piece with the mercy that he has shown throughout history.

[4 : 56] This is not new for God to show mercy to his people. So, here when Zechariah speaks in verses 72 and 73 of the mercy to his ancestors, of remembering his holy covenant, he brings to mind ideas like those in Micah chapter 7.

Now, that should appear for you on the screen as well. Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance?

You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us. You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

You will be faithful to Jacob and show love to Abraham as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago. Micah prophesied earlier in that chapter, he prophesied of salvation by means of enemies being vanquished, just as Zechariah does here in Ruth.

You can see it there in verse 31. The mercy that God shows here, the way that God intervenes here in history as John the Baptist and Jesus arrive on the scene, this intervention is exactly what he promised he would do.

[6 : 14] Again, verse 77 ties into that section from Micah. Luke 1, 77. To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

Micah, you will again have compassion on us. You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. So the idea that the people's problem is their sin, is their iniquities, that that is the real issue, that that is a bigger issue than the external enemy, it is not a new idea in the New Testament.

That's what God had always said was the bigger problem. Micah prophesied it. Well before Jesus came on the scene. And yet, the people have lost sight of that, haven't they?

It is largely forgotten for the people to whom Zechariah is speaking. They were looking for a Messiah who would come and drive out their enemies. The problem is their own empire.

They need a Messiah who will bring political and military victory. Now the ideas are unconnected, but they seem to have completely lost sight of the idea that the problem is not ultimately a physical enemy, but a spiritual one.

[7 : 28] And so no wonder that John is sent, verse 76, to be a prophet of the Most High. To go before the Lord to prepare the way for him. To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

And as we look again back at verse 72. That mercy to the ancestors that we've seen. And the second half is just as laid out with Old Testament significance as the first.

To remember his holy covenant. Echoes of Exodus chapter 2. God heard their groaning. And he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

And Psalm 105. He remembers his covenant forever. The promise he made for a thousand generations. The covenant he made with Abraham. The oath he swore to Isaac.

This is not new for God to remember his covenant. The experience of God's people down through the ages was that their human mercy is thin and unpredictable.

[8 : 33] And cannot be relied upon. It's finite. Sooner or later, the mercy of human beings comes to an end. Unlike that, God's mercy is inexhaustible.

God's mercy never comes to an end. God's mercy is never going to run out. Lamentations chapter 3. Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed.

For his compassion, his mercy never fails. Because of his great love, we are not consumed. For his compassions never fail.

His mercy is inexhaustible. And his mercy has been promised to us. God has made covenants with his people. On the basis of his fundamental attitude of mercy, he makes commitments to his people.

He makes promises down through the ages. God has promised how he will act. And so, whilst we never have the right to go and claim God's mercy, whilst we never presume upon God's mercy, yet we do certainly expect it.

[9 : 40] We confidently know that it will be there. We can depend on it. Because we know it depends on him. It depends on what he has said. His mercy never depends on us, but only ever on

him.

His actions, his words, his promises. So we expect him to be merciful. In fact, to do otherwise is to claim that we know better than God. Is it not the height of presumption when we think and we say that God could not forgive us for something that we have done?

God says he can. God says he will. How dare you say that he will not? God's deeds throughout history show us a God of inexhaustible mercy.

God says he will. And so the only right response to that is that of the Canaanite woman in Matthew chapter 15, who came crying out, Lord, son of David, have mercy on me.

My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering, tell me. Lord, son of David, have mercy on me. That is the only response that he's ever right to God.

[10:53] Throughout the Old Testament, God steadily and persistently refuses to wash his hands of a wayward Israel. Despite their unworthiness, despite their defection from him, he will not let them go.

And the same to us today. That despite our unworthiness, despite our failings, despite the fact that there is nothing in us to warrant his love, God's mercy is inexhaustible.

Zechariah in this song celebrates today that God's mercy reaches its fullest expression ever. There cannot ever be a greater love shown.

There cannot be a greater mercy offered than the mercy that is shown as the Son of God, as the Messiah, comes into the world with all that that implies.

God's mercy is inexhaustible. Secondly, the tenderness of God's mercy. Verse 78 refers to the tender mercy of God.

[11:59] And I wonder how you feel when you think about that. If you've ever stopped to reflect on the idea that God feels tenderly towards you. Of course, it's not necessarily immediately obvious what we really mean by that, is it?

If we use the word tender today, we're as likely to be talking about a nice piece of meat as anything else. A nice tender steak. Or maybe a part of your body that's tender. Somewhere that's sore to the touch, a bite, a sting, a bruise, whatever it is.

Is that what we're talking about here? Well, it isn't a million miles away, because when we talk about a tender elbow, we mean that touching it makes you sit up and take notice.

That suddenly it kind of grabs your attention, becomes a thing of significance. And it carries with it this sense of love and care, and affection and concern, even, that I think does naturally arise as we read this section.

And that is certainly valid. That's certainly part of the picture, isn't it? John 3.16, For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

[13:09] God loved the world. And so why would we not have here in Luke to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising Son will come to us from heaven.

So, love, tenderness is part of the picture, isn't it? But I don't think that's the whole story here. Bear with me, we're going to learn a little bit of Greek this morning, okay? Now, this word isn't particularly common either, not like *Elios*, 27 times or so.

This one's only 11 times, but this one's a really fun word to say. Behind tender here is the Greek word *splagsham*. Now, you guys have an advantage on me, and you've been trying to make that sound for considerably longer, that I have splagsham that.

This is originally a physiological word. It refers to the inward parts of the body. It refers to the visceral. So, this is the liver, this is the heart, this is the stomach, the intestines.

It is a physiological nerd. And so, I suggest that we get another part of the picture if we talk about it being gut-wrenching. Because this isn't just cute and fluffy bunnies and little baby chicks and kittens in teacups kind of tenderness.

[14:27] It isn't only that. This isn't the tenderness that sits on a surface like that and makes you go, aww, and then move on. This isn't meek and mild.

This is a tenderness that comes up from the very core of your being. This is a tenderness that reaches out and grabs hold of you and makes you really feel something. Secondly, you find this Greek word.

If you dig in a bit to how the Jewish people used this word, by which I mean how the Hebrew Old Testament gets translated into Greek, Greek, where *shlachan* gets used, is often used where the idea in the original Hebrew is one itself of mercy.

So this word could equally be translated, tender here in the NIV, the ESV and so on, but equally, mercy, which would give us something like, because of the merciful mercy of our loving God. This is not a surface thing. This is not a lightweight idea. This is the kind of tenderness, this is the kind of mercy that acts.

[15:35] A cuddly bunny makes you go, aww, that's nice. The tender mercy of our God causes him to send his son. Whenever Jesus is spoken of as having mercy on someone, whenever anyone comes to Jesus and asks for mercy, Jesus always acts.

Mercy is never just a feeling that sits inside Jesus and is just there. Mercy flows up out of us and overflows into action.

And so here, God's final act of revelation, God's sending of his son, is the natural outflow, is the overflow of his mercy.

It is the natural, the inevitable result of this heartfelt, garland-ching, tender mercy. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.

The tender mercy of our God is inexhaustible. And if mercy is seen in action, if mercy has results for God, what do we see here God doing?

[16:49] What does this attitude of mercy produce for us, if you like? Well, at the beginning of verse 72, the first of the two times that mercy is used in this song, at the beginning of that verse, you have the word to.

To show our mercy to our ancestors. To points us back to what's gone before, doesn't it? It says, this is the purpose of the proceeding. So the redemption of verse 68, the mighty and powerful salvation of verse 69, the salvation from our enemies of verse 71, all of those things are a consequence of God's mercy.

All of that serves to show God's mercy. And again, verse 78, the second time that we have mercy, again it begins, because, because of the tender mercy of our God, again it puts us back.

And so John will be the prophet of the Most High, John will prepare the way for the Lord because of God's mercy. Because of his mercy, verse 77, he will give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

How does all this take place? Well, back in verse 68, God is to be praised because he has come to his people. Verse 78, the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven.

[18:14] We don't have time to unpack that picture. Guys, this time, just trust me, this is a reference to Jesus coming down from heaven. This is messianic imagery, okay?

And the result here is that the light will shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the path of peace.

In other words, the result of God's mercy is the incarnation. The result of God's mercy is that Jesus comes down from heaven and lives among his people. The result of God's mercy is the next 23 chapters of Luke.

All that follows is a result of the tender mercy of our God. It is that mercy that drives him to act that produces all of these results.

Fourthly, finally, let's look at the response to mercy that we see mulled for us in this passage.

[19:17] If, as I hope we are, we are wowed by the God that we see here, if we are blown away by the tender mercy of the God who stoops down to rescue us, who comes to redeem us, what do we do with that?

Well, firstly, we praise God, don't we? That's the response from Zechariah to God's mercy, the mercy that Elizabeth's neighbours and relatives are recognising in verse 58.

The mercy that Zechariah celebrates in his song is what drives his praise. Notice how verse 64 begins. Immediately, immediately, Zechariah's mouth was opened and his tongue set free and he began to speak, praising God.

So it's quite a change from the Zechariah that we saw a few weeks ago, isn't it? The Zechariah there, who couldn't believe that God would do what he said he would, well, that Zechariah has had nine months to think about it, nine months to reflect on what we've revealed to him, and that Zechariah has now managed to come to the point of a better response.

And God's punishment to Zechariah, the fact that he was unable to speak for nine months, the result of his faithlessness, the purpose of that punishment was always this result.

[20 : 34] A chastened and transformed Zechariah now comes and emulates Mary's faith that we saw in her initial response and in her song. I have something of her attitude has rubbed off on him over the three months that she's been staying with him.

But this chastening, this obedience, is always the intent of godly discipline, isn't it? Whenever God brings these things into our lives, this is the purpose, restoration, chastening, and resultant obedience.

For Zechariah, the doubt that he showed back in that previous episode, the discipline that resulted, did not mean the end of his spiritual ministry.

We see him here filled with the Holy Spirit. We see him prophesying. The Zechariah, who a hundred months ago couldn't believe it would happen, is now restored, and now believes.

But this isn't just an automatic result from the child's birth, is it? The angel did say back in verse 20 that he would be unable to speak until these things were to take place.

[21 : 42] But here we see he doesn't reclaim his speech the moment that John is born. He regains his speech when John is eight days old. Why does that happen?

Well, I think to show us, to show him, that this isn't just a mechanistic thing. This isn't a time out for a set period. His restoration follows on from his repentance.

He shows by his assertion that the boy's name is John, verse 63. He shows by obeying God's command there, he shows that he has come to repentance, that he has come to believe God, that he has come to take God out his word, and so he is therefore restored.

And how does he respond? Verse 64. Immediately his mouth was opened, that his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. His response to God's mercy in restoring his speech, his response to the mercy of the gift of the Son, of the gift of not just any boy, but this boy who will be significant in God's purposes, his response to God's mercy in the coming of the Messiah.

His response is praise. So we respond in praise, and secondly we respond in service. Take a look at verse 74. To rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear.

[23 : 06] The Bible unashamedly presents our service of God, our glory of God, our worship, as the purpose of our salvation. That response is part of the point.

The idea here encompasses both what we think of as service the things that we go and do, and we'll come back to that, but it also encompasses what we think of as worship, that these two are interwoven and interrelated in God's purposes.

And so this is the same idea as the reasoning why God brought his people out of the land of Egypt in the Exodus. Yes, he did it to give them a good and a pleasant land. He did it that they might live there according to his ways, but he also did it, Exodus 3.12, that they might worship God.

John Calvin commenting on this passage says, God's purpose was that being redeemed, they might dedicate and consecrate themselves entirely to the author of their salvation.

As the efficient cause of human salvation was the undeserved goodness of God, so its final cause is that by a godly and holy life, men may glorify his name.

[24 : 18] In other words, the purpose is both that it arises out of the goodness of God, that it is the overflow of God's mercy and kindness, and also behind that is the intent that men will glorify his name.

Westminster Shorter Catechism, what is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Our purpose as human beings is to glorify God, to worship him, to serve him.

To serve him in every aspect of our lives. That all of our lives should be in praise and service of God. And part of that, I think it is fair to say, should be that we share in God's attitude of mercy.

Luke 6, 36, be merciful just as your Father is merciful. We've reflected primarily this morning on the mercy of salvation, but the Gospels are full two of other examples of God's mercy.

Time and time again, Jesus shares mercy as he heals people, as he casts out demons, as he feeds the crowds, and as he heals those of the good news. And I don't think it is a stretch to point out that the primary way that God accomplishes these mercies today is through his people, is through you and me.

[25 : 39] I said earlier that we never hear of Jesus having mercy without him doing something to help. Might the same be true of us, that we don't let our feelings of mercy stop somewhere inside our hearts, but that they overflow outwards into genuine service.

And this service, if you notice the end of verse 74, is characterised in that it is without fear. Now we know from Proverbs chapter 5, verse 10, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

But the fear there in Proverbs is the kind of awe, is the kind of wondering amazement that leads to devotion. The kind of fear that Zechariah is talking about here is the kind of fear, the kind of paralysing terror that says to you that God is hostile to you.

The kind of fear that God doesn't love you, that God is your enemy, and so how could you possibly presume to serve and worship him? That is the fear that we should be without.

That is the fear that this view of God's mercy dispels. That fear would prevent us from serving him in holiness and righteousness all of our days.

[26 : 55] But that is the fear that we do not need to have. We do not need to fear that God will not accept our service. We do not need to fear that God will not accept us as his.

We do not need to fear because we serve a God who is tenderly merciful towards us, because we worship a God whose mercy is inexhaustible. That's right.

God, we thank you that you are a merciful God, that your heart overflows with grace, our mercy, and compassion towards us, that you feel tenderly towards us, arising from the very heart of your being.

We thank you that your mercy never runs out, that we can have confidence in your mercy, because you have promised it to us. Lord, would that confidence give us great joy in all that we do.

Would it drive us to worship you and to serve you without fear all the days of our lives. Amen.