

God's certain saviour

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- [0 : 00] Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbours 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 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. 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 neighbours.
- 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?
- [1 : 04] For the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zechariah 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 the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant 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 the 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, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into 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. Well, our key verse this morning is verse 77, Luke chapter 1, verse 77, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.
- [2 : 49] The aim of this talk is to see that salvation for the forgiveness of sins lies at the very heart of the Christian message. After all, Luke is writing to give us certainty and confidence in the message of Jesus, certainty about the content of the message of Jesus, certainty to proclaim it and to defend it.
- And it seems to me that is especially important in these next three weeks or so in the run-up to Christmas. Because how would you sum up Christmas in one word? What do you associate with Christmas?

Perhaps it's food, and perhaps you've been trying to work out which supermarket has the best Christmas pudding this year, and then rushing off to buy it. Or perhaps it's telly, and you can't wait to get your hands on the TV guides, so you can plan your telly watching over Christmas.

Or perhaps it's friends and family, looking forward to spending time with them. Or perhaps it's getting in touch with your inner spiritual life and singing carols and going to as many carol services as possible.

Well, Luke, in this eyewitness, accurate historical account of Jesus' life, says the very heart of Christmas lies in the one word, salvation.

[4 : 08] And we're going to see that it's salvation for the forgiveness of sins, in particular, that Luke wants us to grasp. We've seen already in these last few weeks, in chapter 1, verses 5 to 25, the angel announces that Zachariah and Elizabeth will give birth to a son, John the Baptist, the one who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus.

We've then seen in 1, 26 to 56, the angel announces to Mary that she will give birth to a son, fulfilling the promise of God sending his eternal, everlasting king to rule and the great reversal that will result.

Well, it's now several months later, chapter 1, verse 57. 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.

In verses 59 to 64, he's given the name John, just as the angel said. And Zachariah's mouth is opened.

After nine months, he can speak again. And it causes a great sensation. Verse 65, And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea.

[5 : 24] 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. You see, they've worked out that this is far bigger than simply the birth of one person.

Notice that the friends and neighbors, they don't ask the question, Who will this child be? Is he going to be a high flyer in the city, or an Olympic athlete, or a great inventor, or a top civil servant, or something like that?

Note, they ask the question, What will this child be? What's happening? What is the significance of all of this? And the answer is in verses 67 to 79, where we see Zachariah's prophecy, Zachariah's speech.

The answer is that this son, John the Baptist, is the herald of God's great salvation. You'll see on the back of the service sheets, an outline for the talk, which you might find helpful.

First of all, a message of salvation. Because notice, will you, how the language of salvation and redemption comes throughout Zachariah's words.

[6 : 36] So, verse 68, God has visited and redeemed his people. Verse 69, He has raised up a horn of salvation. Verse 71, That we should be saved from our enemies.

Verse 74, Being delivered from the hands of our enemies. Verse 77, To give knowledge of salvation. Now, notice, will you, that this isn't any old interpretation of the events.

Nor is this one of many possible interpretations of the events. Rather, verse 67, As Zachariah is filled with the Holy Spirit, this is the God-given interpretation of what is going on.

In other words, you see, this stops us having the, well, that's just your opinion view of what Zachariah says. You know how it is, you know, you hear someone being interviewed on the radio, or on telly, or whatever it is.

And we can so easily respond, can't we? We just dismiss what they're saying. Oh, that's just your opinion. But Zachariah, you see, is not speaking his own ideas, or simply putting two and two together, and coming up with the most reasonable explanation.

[7 : 45] Rather, verse 67, this is the Holy Spirit's explanation of why Jesus came into the world. In other words, you and I are not free to decide for ourselves why Jesus came.

Did Jesus come as a great social reformer? Or as a charity worker? Or as a politician? Or something like that? No, Jesus came as a savior.

Notice, it's the salvation promised in the Old Testament. The word redeemed, there in verse 68, is full of Old Testament echoes. Supremely, the rescue of God's people in the Old Testament from slavery in Egypt at the time of the Exodus.

Verse 69, a salvation that fulfills the promise to King David that one of his descendants will be God's forever king. In verse 70, a salvation as spoken by the Old Testament prophets.

Verse 72, it's the mercy promised to our fathers. Again, Old Testament. Verse 73, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. While looking further on in our passage, verse 78, the light of the sun rising, echoes Malachi chapter 3, verse 1, and verse 79, the gift of light to those in darkness fulfills the promise of Isaiah chapter 9, so often read at Christmas carol services.

[9 : 13] In other words, you see, Luke, by saturating what is said here, Zachariah, by saturating his words in the language of the Old Testament, he is making the point that this salvation that God is now bringing is not some sort of newfangled salvation.

It's not as if it's come from nowhere. It is a fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. You'll know the Bible has one storyline, one plot line from beginning to end, 66 different books, but actually one plot line with the Old Testament, the promise of the king who will come, and then the beginning of the New Testament, the fulfillment of that promise in the birth of Jesus Christ.

It is the Old Testament that provides the key to unlocking the significance of Christmas, to understanding who Jesus is and why he came.

Friday saw the release of Clint Eastwood's latest film, Sully, and it tells the story of a great rescue. I'm very keen to see it. Next Saturday afternoon is mentally penciled in to go and see it.

The rescue of American airline pilot Chesley Sullenberger, played by Tom Hanks, whose aircraft with 155 passengers was hit by a flock of geese having just taken off from LaGuardia Airport in New York in January 2009.

[10 : 37] He made an emergency landing on the Hudson River in which all passengers survived. Three minutes from takeoff to landing on the river and he was hailed as a national hero.

And you see, it is this category of rescue, salvation, from terrible danger that lies at the heart of Christianity. Which immediately, I guess, knocks out, doesn't it, many cultural misunderstandings of what Christianity is about.

It's not just about church attendance. No, it is a message of salvation. It's not simply about being a good moral person who tries to keep the commandments. No, it is a message of salvation.

It's not about simply ticking a box on your census form. No, it is a message of salvation. But of course, that begs the question, doesn't it, what sort of salvation has Jesus come to bring?

Well, our second point, salvation for the forgiveness of sins. And back to our key verse, verse 77, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.

[11 : 49] Now, to us, of course, the word salvation just sounds so preachy, doesn't it? It sounds so churchy. But actually, it is a very wonderful word and a huge Bible idea because salvation for the forgiveness of sins is precisely the salvation the Old Testament looked forward to.

As Isaiah says, as Zechariah says, I mean, in verse 73, as he speaks of the oath that God swore to our father Abraham. So just keep a finger in Luke and turn back to Genesis chapter 12 as we look at that promise to Abraham.

Genesis chapter 12 on page 10 of the church Bibles. Genesis chapter 12, verses 1 to 3.

Now the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I'll make of you a great nation.

And I'll bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. And I'll bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you I will curse.

[13 : 13] And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. It is a promise that God is going to deal with the problem, the problem, that has dogged the world and dogged humanity since Genesis chapter 3.

The problem of sin and rebellion against God. Those of you in JAM, you'll have been looking at exactly this over the last few weeks. How sin spread from Adam and Eve to Cain and Abel and then to the whole earth.

And then the consequences of sin in terms of God's judgment summed up in that one word, curse. And therefore you see, look at Genesis 12 again because here God is announcing something very wonderful.

In the place of curse, there will be blessing. Blessing through one of Abraham's descendants. Blessing available for all nations.

People from all nations. But until that descendant of Abraham was born, the problem of sin and rebellion remained. So later on in the Old Testament, God's judgment on his people for their sin was exile as the land of Israel was invaded, occupied by enemy powers and its inhabitants were deported.

[14 : 33] And so back in Luke chapter 1, to use the language of Zechariah, Luke chapter 1, 71 and verse 74, God's people prayed for what?

For deliverance from their enemies. Not just from the nations that had conquered them, but from God's judgments and for the forgiveness of sins.

And now you see wonderfully the Holy Spirit is announcing that in the birth of John the Baptist, that salvation is here for he'll prepare the way for Jesus Christ himself.

Verse 77, again, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus will die on the cross in our place for the forgiveness of sins for those who trust in him.

A salvation notice and wonderfully notice verse 72 is completely undeserved. It is to show the mercy of God and verse 78 is because of the tender mercy of our God.

[15 : 43] The never stopping, never giving up, completely unbreaking, always forever love of God. In other words, you see, Christianity will not make sense to me until I realize this one thing that I am a sinner in need of a savior.

It's been said that if our greatest need as human beings had been for information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been for money, God would have sent us an economist.

If our greatest need had been for technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been for pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But actually, our greatest need is for rescue, forgiveness. And that is why God sent a Savior. Let me say it again. This is not simply one of many equally valid interpretations of what it is that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. No, this is the interpretation.

And it is precisely this gospel, this gospel of the forgiveness of sins that is then proclaimed throughout Luke. So just turn over to Luke chapter 3 verse 3. This is the message that John the Baptist proclaims when he is grown up. Luke chapter 3 verse 3. What is it that John the Baptist proclaims? And he went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What's more, this is precisely the message that the Lord Jesus, having risen from the dead, then commissions his apostles to take to the end of the world. So turn to the very end of Luke's gospel, to Luke chapter 24.

Luke chapter 24 verse 45. Here is the risen Jesus, just before his return to heaven.

[18 : 01] Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

This says Jesus, the message of forgiveness for sins is the message that should be proclaimed to all nations. Why? Well, because verse 24, this is the message that lies at the heart of the Old Testament.

It is the message that addresses our greatest need, the need for forgiveness, the need for a savior. And therefore, you see, Luke, who wants us to be certain of the truth, partly for ourselves, partly so we can proclaim the truth, is giving us a benchmark whereby we can assess whether as a church family, whether as individuals, whether as a church family, whether as individuals, and indeed whether other churches are on message or off message. Sadly, there are churches which don't have this message of salvation for the forgiveness of sins at the heart of the message they proclaim. Instead, their focus is on social justice or political engagement or emotional well-being and wholeness or inclusion or building community.

Perhaps for some of us, or perhaps for some of those we know, this message of the forgiveness of sins sounds rather negative, perhaps especially in an age of self-esteem, whereby from about the age of three or four, children are taught in school how wonderful they are. Perhaps you're someone, and you love to hear of God's mercy and God's kindness and God's salvation, but you don't want to hear about God's holiness and his judgments and sin. But of course, the thing about a rescue is there's always an upside, isn't there, as well as a downside. There's always both, because salvation is always salvation from something.

It's good news precisely because of the alternative. So the pilot, Chesley Sullenberg, is saving 155 people from death. Or the England rugby coach, Eddie Jones, I think we can now say after yesterday, has saved our country from humiliation, undefeated in 2016.

[20 : 35] Or did you hear about four-year-old Susie McCash, who saved her mother's life when her mother suffered an allergic reaction? And this four-year-old picked up the phone, dialed 999, and with the help of the person on the other end of the phone, was able to get her mother the medicine she needed before the ambulance arrived. And she was awarded a bravery award by the police. You see, the upside is the rescue. It's great news. Someone's life has been saved.

But the downside is always the alternative, isn't it? What might have been what the rescue was from? It's only once we have grasped what the rescue is from, that actually we really appreciate how wonderful the rescue is.

Now, for those of us who are followers of Jesus, one of the wonderful things I take it about the next few weeks is the number of opportunities you and I will have to say something to friends and colleagues and family and neighbours about Christmas. Indeed, the Prime Minister last week encouraged Christians to do so, didn't she? To encourage Christians to speak about their faith and to speak about the meaning of Christmas. But I take it, the challenge is to make sure those conversations are on message. You know, not to be content simply with saying something which just kind of fiddles around the edge. You know, what are you doing for Christmas?

Oh, we're spending time with family or we're spending time with friends or we're going, you know, to have some sun in Spain or, you know, whatever it is. That is off message. Instead, to say something like this, well, actually, as a Christian, the most important thing about Christmas is to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Saviour, the one who came to bring the forgiveness of sins. And then to simply see where the conversation takes you. And to trust the Lord, that you'll have a great conversation having said that. Indeed, whenever there's an opportunity, not just at Christmas, to proclaim the Christian faith, let's make sure the forgiveness of sins is at the very heart of what we say. I take it there are 101 things we could say about the Christian faith in many situations. But Luke wants us to have certainty about what lies at the very heart of the Christian message. Not just for our own understanding, but also so that it's this message of the forgiveness of sins that is then at the heart of what we're seeking to proclaim to others.

So, a message of salvation, a message of salvation for the forgiveness of sins. Thirdly, and peace with God. Luke chapter 1, verses 78 and 79. Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Here is the glorious results of the forgiveness of sins. I think it's easy for these words to trip off the tongue. So easy in a few minutes as we share bread and wine together, just to take it all for granted, to take the forgiveness of sins for granted. And actually, these two verses, I think, verses 78 and 79, are a real tonic for our souls. Verse 78 is a quote from Malachi. Have you ever watched the sunrise? Perhaps especially somewhere near the equator, where it all happened so quickly, and in a moment, the landscape is completely transformed.

[24 : 20] Well, to know for yourself the forgiveness of sins is to have moved from the realm of spiritual darkness to the realm of spiritual light. Fulfilling the promise of Isaiah, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. In verse 79, it's to have moved from spiritual death to spiritual life. To stand before God on the final day unforgiven is to remain in the realm of spiritual death. To stand before God on the final judgment day with your sins forgiven, because you're trusting in Jesus, is to have moved to the realm of spiritual life. It is, end of verse 79, to walk in the way of peace. Peace with God.

Our world longs for peace, isn't it? Peace between nations, peace between families, peace between communities, peace between colleagues, peace within ourselves. But far greater, far more wonderful is peace with God. That word peace that Luke uses actually has a sense of an era of peace, just as a government might boast in bringing in a new era of prosperity. So Jesus' salvation ushers in God's new era of peace. Peace with God, peace with one another. Life it is meant to be a foretaste of the new creation. And notice too that God's goal in all of this is that we'd serve him.

Verses 74 and 75, that we being delivered from the hands of our enemies might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. If you put your trust in Jesus, you are set apart to serve him at home, at work, at school, not simply on Sunday morning, but on Monday morning and Tuesday morning and Wednesday morning. A life of real purpose and significance. Now for some of course, I guess reading that will be a rebuke because if we're honest with ourselves, we're pursuing our own agenda in life. But I take it for many of us, actually it will be a real encouragement.

As we can honestly say, yes, I am seeking to serve God, to serve the Lord Jesus through the week. A new life of purpose and a new life of joy. I think one of the really striking things as we look through the whole of Luke chapter 1 is how joyful this chapter is. Have you noticed that?

Reading it on Sunday mornings, reading it in growth groups, it's a chapter which is full of joy. Chapter 1 verse 14. And you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth.

[27 : 09] Chapter 1 verse 44. For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leapt for joy. Verse 46. Mary said, my soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

And verse 58. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her and they rejoiced with her. You see, I take it the danger is, for those of us who have been Christians for a while, which I guess is many of us, is that while we can have certainty about what the gospel is, why we can even defend the gospel and we can explain the gospel, yet actually we can also fail to wonder at the gospel and to be overjoyed in the gospel. I know I can. And in short, we can be joyless.

Well, if you are looking in here this morning in the Christian faith, we're delighted you're here. Well, we'd love you to come to know this salvation that Zachariah praises God for, for yourself.

The forgiveness of sins, moving from darkness to light, from death to life, from bringing an enemy of God to being at peace with God. And then to begin this new joy, this new life of joy, this new life of serving him.

And if you have never done that, then do come and speak to me afterwards. And I'd love you to point to you in the right direction.