

The Birth of the Baptiser

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[0 : 00] Let's just pray. Father, we pray that you would teach us from your word. You have said that your word is living and active, sharper than any sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, that is able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Please enable me to speak your word faithfully and please cause it to do what you have promised at will. And we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ and for his glory. Amen.

Please sit down. Well, I was intrigued this week with a new set of statistics from our friends across the Tasman in New Zealand.

You see, this month has marked the beginning of the release of key data from their 2013 census. Now, the person I was reading had taken an interest in statistics regarding religion in New Zealand and he noticed that what can also be observed in Australian statistics, You see, what has happened in there is he noticed that there is a number of people who are...

that the number of people who are identifying themselves as Christian is decreasing. Let me give you some statistics. In 1996, it was 63% of the population.

[1 : 18] In 2001, it was 59% of the population. In 2006, it was 54% of the population. And in 2013, it was 49%.

So that's the first trend. So that's the first trend, a drop in 14% over 15 years in those who will explicitly identify themselves as Christian. Whether there are that many Christians or not, it's those who are willing to identify themselves that way.

Our commentator, though, noticed another trend. You see, in 1996, those identifying themselves as no religion amounted to 25%.

In 2001, 30%. In 2006, 35%. In 2013, it was 41.5%. And our commentator observed that if the trend of these statistics, one downward, one upward, continued, then you know what the result would be in the very next census?

It would be that there are more people with no religion in New Zealand than those who are willing to identify themselves as Christian. Now, the statistics in Australia, fortunately, are not nearly as grim as those in New Zealand, but the trend is much the same.

[2 : 29] In 2011, our census revealed that 61% of Australians identify themselves as Christian, while 22% identify themselves as no religion.

However, I do wonder if New Zealand is leading the way that we are heading in and we will reach eventually. You see, the signs are there.

We are increasingly becoming places of no religion, places where belief in God is diminishing.

Friends, such unbelief, I think, can take a variety of shapes.

It can take the shape of just sheer doubt or lack of confidence in God or lack of confidence in God's goodness or his benevolence or his involvement or his commitment or whatever it might be.

But not only can it take different shapes, it can be caused by different causes. A gradual confidence, for example, in human ability, will diminish God's reality in the minds of people.

[3 : 30] Or it might be a gradual lack of hearing explicitly from God. Or it may just be simple hard-heartedness. It can be a variety of other causes.

But friends, I think that our passage today that we are going to look at speaks into that world and offers us a perspective on it. You see, the background of our passage today is unbelief in the ancient world.

Let me explain. Open your Bibles with me at Luke chapter 1. Remember where we were? Luke chapter 1. And just to remind you of what we've done in these last few weeks. Do you remember the story?

A few weeks ago, we read the story about an aging priest called Zechariah in chapter 1. He had been given that great privilege of burning incense in the temple. While he was there, a messenger from God came to him.

The messenger delivered a remarkable word from God about a child to be born whose name would be John. John questions the messenger of God. He wavers in unbelief.

[4 : 31] He expresses doubt. But look and listen to the response of the messenger. It's in chapter 1, verses 19 and 20. The angel said to him, I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God.

I have been sent to speak to you and tell you the good news. And now you will be silent and will not be able to speak until the day this happens. Because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.

It is a terrible rebuke, isn't it? Even here, you see, even here in the temple of God, in the presence of God, priests doubt. They waver in unbelief.

And so God strikes Zechariah dumb. Now let's travel in time. Elizabeth, his wife, conceives. She rejoices with Mary, her relative, who also conceives.

The baby, her baby, Mary's baby, leaps in the womb. Sorry, Elizabeth's baby leaps in the womb at the voice of Mary. Elizabeth is then filled with the Spirit and blesses Mary.

[5 : 33] Mary, who believes God's word, declares God's praises. And that brings us to our verses for today, 57 to 66. Let's check them out. Verse 57 says that the time came for Elizabeth to give birth.

She bears a son. Justice Gabriel had said. In my own mind, I think, well, Zechariah's surely believing now, isn't he? But he still has no voice, let me tell you.

Verse 59 says that on the eighth day, they come to do what the law had required of them. That is, they come to circumcise their child. This was also the time at which a child traditionally might be named.

Whoever was in charge was therefore going to follow the normal practice. That is, they were going to name him after his father, Zechariah. But his mother speaks up. Look at verse 60.

This is a special child. A special child demands a special name, a name specified by God himself. And so she says, no. No, he is to be called John.

[6 : 37] And they press on. I wonder whether the people here wonder whether Elizabeth is making a unilateral decision without her husband. And so signs are made to the father. His will is sought.

And he responds by requesting a writing tablet. And in verse 63, he squirms his wish. His name is John. Now, up until this moment, John's unbelief had been relatively private between him and a messenger of God.

His belief is now very public. It's accomplished. It's accompanied by obedience. And against all custom, you see, John listens to God's instructions and names the child with God's name.

As Mary's belief had expressed itself in voice, so now his does as well. Look at verse 64.

Immediately, his mouth was opened. His tongue set free.

He began to speak, praising God. You see, Zechariah here expresses his belief. And he speaks. And he speaks of God.

[7 : 41] And he does so publicly. And he speaks in praise of God with a tongue set free by faith and obedience. Look at now at verses 65 and 66.

The focus shifts to the neighbors. And we're told these things. All the neighbors were filled with awe. And throughout the hill country of Judea, people were talking about all of these things. Everyone who heard it wondered about it, asking, what then is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand was with him. Now, friends, do you see it?

Elderly, apparently infertile parents have a child. That's remarkable. A father not naming his son after himself.

That too is unusual, surprising, perhaps astounding or remarkable in itself. It's certainly contrary to custom and to nature. But you add to this a man struck dumb, whose lips are then freed by belief and obedience.

[8 : 43] And you've got an incredible combination, haven't you? It's one that strikes fear in the people here. They talk. They wonder about this combination of events that's happening. It sets them asking, just who is this child going to be?

Clearly, the Lord's in all of this. Clearly, the Lord's hand is with him. Now, with that, we switch back again to Zechariah. He's the father of John. And in verse 67, he speaks.

Now, normally, you see, at this point, it's the time for paternal musings, isn't it? Surely, Joe is going to be a great whatever. I wish and I hope that that's what he's going to be.

But no, these are not the normal paternal musings of a father who might wish great wishes for his firstborn. No, Zechariah is filled with the spirit of God. And he speaks with God's voice in bold prophecy.

His prophecy falls into two sections. You might notice there's verses 68 to 75, which praises God for what he's done for his people. And then there's 76 to 79, where he prophesies more specifically about God's purposes for John.

[9 : 55] Let's just take a look at each of those sections. 68 to 75. If you look closely, you will notice that the focus falls not on John, but on the house of David.

Can you see that? Verse 69. Zechariah praises God because he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

Horn's another word for a rule, if you like, or a ruler. But what exactly will this horn of salvation accomplish? Well, look at the words that are used by Zechariah as he explains.

Look at verse 68. God has acted. He's come to his people. He's come to his people in raising up a horn of salvation from the house of David. And in this, he has redeemed them.

Verse 68. Now look at verse 71. In fulfillment of the prophets of long ago, God has given them salvation from their enemies. Now 72. He has shown mercy.

[10 : 50] He has remembered his holy covenant, the oath he swore centuries and centuries ago to Abraham. And also that God's people might be rescued.

For what? So that they might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of their lives. Can you hear the words? Redemption, salvation, deliverance from servitude, forgiveness, freedom from fear of death, peace, fulfillment of ancient promises, freedom to serve God without fear amidst all the blessing of God's promises fulfilled.

Now friends, do you notice the tense? Did you see the tense in all of this? Can you see it there? It is said in the past, isn't it? Zechariah, you see, had been characterized by unbelief.

Not anymore. Now he's full of belief. In fact, he is so confident of God's purposes that he talks about them prophetically as though they were already accomplished. It's as though God has redeemed and saved already.

In Jesus, the son of David, the child of Abraham, it is as good as done. Zechariah's faith in God is recovered at this point, isn't it?

[12 : 00] Well and truly. Now look at 69 to 79 or 76 to 79, I mean. Do you notice how the shift, there's a shift in focus?

Now the spotlight falls on his child, on this child, the forerunner to the son of David. And Zechariah is clear. Whatever God is doing, whatever he's about to do through the son of David, how's he going to do it?

He's going to do it through this forerunner, his son, John, the prophet of the Most High. This John will go before Jesus. He will prepare the way for him, just as Isaiah prophesied.

And his basic role will be to give God's people a knowledge of salvation. The message that John brings will declare the forgiveness of sins. But the son of David will bring the opportunity for the people of God to serve God in peace.

And we, this side of Jesus, know that Jesus brought such forgiveness, don't we? Now look at verse 78. Look at the key word there.

[13 : 06] Can you see it? It is mercy. God's nature, friends, is to be merciful. And in what he is doing in and through John the forerunner, and Jesus the Saviour is demonstrating mercy.

In his tender mercy, the rising sun will come from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and the shadow of death.

Friends, the rising sun here is, I think, a reference to Jesus, surely. In Jesus the coming light, the rising sun, God will visit his people.

John will come first. He will instruct people concerning salvation and forgiveness of sins. But Jesus the Messiah, well, he will go further. He will be a bright shining light who will take people out of darkness and bring them into God's way.

John may well proclaim the son of David with all his salvation and peace, but Jesus the Messiah will bring them into that salvation. He will be, Jesus will be God's means for tender mercy.

[14 : 18] Friends, what a word from God this is. That's what we remember at Christmas. Births. Births of a forerunner, the birth of a forerunner, and the birth of the one he foreruns, the Messiah.

The rising sun from on high who dawns upon us, who shines on us living in darkness and the shadow of death, and who therefore guides our feet into the way of peace.

He, this one, is the author of salvation, the prince of peace. And then the passage closes in verse 80, with the child growing, becoming strong in spirit, until the day God has prepared for him comes. At which point he appears publicly in Israel. Now, having said this, I want to return to where we started in this Bible talk as a way of finishing today. I want to talk about unbelief. Let me tell you just a little bit about the days of the birth of John and of Jesus.

Let me tell you, they were dark days. The great prophets of Israel had been dead for many hundreds of years. They and their predecessors had uttered many great and spectacular prophecies.

[15 : 35] Through them, God had promised much. But since then, there had been silence. Much silence. God's people were now under foreign overlords.

God's country was overrun by people of strange and modern habits and ways. They were oddball religious people, not like Jews.

And on the whole, God seemed silent. They were dark days of oppression and of God's quietness. And then he bursts momentarily through into the lives of a few isolated individuals.

One up in Galilee of the Gentiles, one down south in Judea. Gives the birth of two boys. And then 30 years of silence reigns.

Elizabeth is no doubt dead when those 30 years are finished. Mary is ageing. Those who pondered at the circumcision of John, well, I suspect they've stopped pondering.

[16 : 45] No doubt some in Israel are unbelieving like Zechariah. But God is not restrained by doubt. He slowly and quietly did his work preparing the forerunner.

And he prepared his son. And then the day came. John came baptizing. And sure enough, Jesus came to John. And he baptizes Jesus.

And God declares Jesus to be his son with whom he's well pleased. And then Jesus stands up. You can read about this in Luke 4 in the local synagogue. And reads the prophet Isaiah.

And then he rolls up the scroll. And he gives it back to the attendant. And then he sits down to preach as was the custom in those days. And the eyes of everyone in the synagogue fasten on him. And he begins to preach. And his first words are these. Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Or is fulfilled in your hearing.

[17 : 48] Friends, this one Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises of God. It has taken, let me tell you, centuries.

No. Millennia. For God to reach this point. And when the fullness of time came though. God sent his son, as Paul the Apostle says.

Born of a woman. Born under the law. To redeem those under the law. So that we might receive adoption into sonship. Can you hear what I'm saying? You see, the days of Luke 1 in many ways are not unlike our days.

Our days are days of growing unbelief. As our census shows. As New Zealand's shows. God seems silent in our days, does he not?

There have been many prophecies. Many promises. And now there appears to be much silence from God.

[18 : 52] Friends, I was ordained a long time ago. And in my first church appointment, when you went to a funeral. People listened to the Bible readings. And they sang the hymns.

Now, if I was standing in front of you and this was a funeral. 50% of you, 30% of you would not sing. Why?

Because they've ceased to believe in it. It's an enormous and profound difference. And it represents where we are. But I want to tell you.

That God is still at work in his world. His promises. Have their yes. And there are men in Jesus. He will come again.

He will fulfill all the great promises of God. There will be a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. He is God. And God's word is God's word.

[19 : 56] It is guaranteed in his son. Friends, Zechariah's humanness, I think, can be a lesson to us. You see, even the faith of pious people such as us can pause, can't it?

And ponder. Even the godly can be doubters. But our doubt will not stop God's purposes in his world. They will come to pass.

They have been ordained by God from before all eternity. Friends, let me urge you to be reminded of God's faithfulness this Christmas.

Not of his silence, but of his faithfulness. He does not forget his promises. They will come to pass.

They did in Zechariah's day. They will come about in God's good time in our day.

They are assured by God whose word never fails. So trust him and obey him. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for the birth of Jesus, your son.

[21 : 05] Thank you that all your promises have their yes and their amen in him. And thank you that you are still at work in your world.

And you will send your son back. You will fulfill all the great promises that have their yes in him.

There will be a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

And where your son is acknowledged. We thank you that your word is your word and it is guaranteed in your son. Please help us this Christmas to hang on to these things and to grasp and hang on to your faithfulness.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.