

Responding to THE Birth

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[0 : 0 0] was giving birth and so my dad was down the hallway of the hospital waiting nervously. He knew though my mum had given birth because he could hear her cry out all the way down the hall, it's a girl, it's a girl. Apparently us three boys were such a handful, I don't remember it myself, but it was such a handful she didn't know how she'd cope if it was a fourth boy and she was so relieved it was a girl that she responded with a cry of joy. People respond to births generally with joy, even pleasant surprises and in our passage today there is that response of joy to another pleasant surprise, the birth of John the Baptist. But the more we work through our passage today the more we'll see that the responses we see are actually even more appropriate for the birth of Jesus. But first let's have a look at the birth of John and those responses. So at point one in the outlines and then have a look on your sheets at verse 57. When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy and they shared her joy. Here is the first response, isn't it? Joy. But notice it doesn't say when they heard of John's birth. It says no, when they heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. Remember Elizabeth wanted children but she was barren and now they were both old and so this was a real gift from God. Like all good things in life actually, we tend to take good things for granted and expect to have them if we work hard enough for them in life, don't we? But our world is broken.

Good things aren't always guaranteed. Anything can happen. I mean who would have thought this time last year we'd be dealing with this COVID virus? No one. And so when we do enjoy good things, we should rejoice at God's mercy in this broken world like here with John's birth. And so there's the first response. The second though is belief in God's word. Have a look at verse 59.

On the eighth day when they came to circumcise the child and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah as is the custom. But his mother spoke up and said no, he is to be called John.

They said to her, there is no one among your relatives who has that name. Then they made signs to his father to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet and to everyone's astonishment, he wrote, his name is John. Now remember a couple of weeks ago when we first met John the Baptist, this is what the angels said to Zechariah in the temple.

He said, your wife will bear you a son and you are to call him John. And remember the angel said that this John would turn many people of Israel's back to God. He would be like an Elijah who would prepare God's people before the Lord's arrival. But at that time, Zechariah remember doubted and did not believe God's word spoken by the angel. And so he in turn could not speak himself for nine months.

[3 : 3 3] Well, not being able to speak for nine months, no doubt was a daily reminder not to doubt God's word. What's more, both he and Liz saw part of God's word come true, didn't they? He was their son, just as God promised. And so now they had every reason to believe the rest of God's word about their son.

So much so that they obeyed God's word and called him John, even though it was against their culture of the day.

As I said a couple of weeks ago, we too have every reason to believe God's word. Things have happened in history, just as God said, for which we have evidence. Our faith is not blind faith, it's reasoned, reasonable faith.

And since part of God's word to us has already been fulfilled, then we have every reason to believe the rest of God's word to us. So much so that we too can obey it, even if it goes against our culture.

And so here, the first response, joy at God's mercy. Secondly, belief in God's word. And thirdly, praise for God's promises. Verse 64. Immediately, Zechariah's mouth was opened and his tongue was set free.

[4 : 58] And he began to speak, praising God. What would the first words out of your mouth be if you couldn't have spoken for nine months?

Finally, I can speak. Finally, I can tell you how to pack the dishwasher properly. My wife is smiling because that's probably what I'd say. But Zechariah doesn't do either of those.

He praises God, doesn't he? And no doubt because he's realized he was wrong to doubt God's word to start with. And no doubt because he is his son in front of him. But he actually primarily praises God for something else.

You see, nine months of not being able to talk would have also given him plenty of time to reflect on the angel's message. That his son would prepare people for the Lord's arrival, the Lord's coming.

And so if his son had arrived here, then who was coming next? The Lord.

[6 : 06] And so he praises God that he had come to redeem, to save his people, just as he promised.

This is what Zechariah primarily praises God for. So point 2, verse 67. His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, But praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

How? Well, he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. Just as he said through his holy prophets of long ago, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy to our ancestors, to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham, and to rescue us from the hands of our enemies.

Now, there's quite a bit here, but just notice three things to start with. First, Zechariah actually speaks in the past tense, doesn't he? Praise God because he has come and has redeemed us.

But he speaks in the past tense because we're told in verse 67 that he's actually prophesying by the Spirit. And the rest of God's Word, which is also Spirit-inspired, comes true.

[7 : 29] Well, so too here would this Word come true. It's as good as done. That's why he speaks in the past tense. We do the same thing as well.

So if we are certain one of our favorite footy or cricket teams or whatever is going to win, we say they've already won, even before they've played, don't we? Well, so too here.

The second thing to notice are all the references on the screen there to being saved. This is what he's praising God about, this salvation. Like, redeem, salvation, twice, rescue.

The Lord was coming to save his people. Why? Well, because of his promises. So on the next slide, you've got the repetition of this idea of promise there.

Like, just as he said or promised through his holy prophets. Or to remember, that is, to fulfill his holy covenant. A covenant is just a set of promises. Or the oath he swore or promised to Abraham.

[8 : 31] You see, in our first reading, we heard God's promises to Abraham. Remember, for those who were here during Genesis, the promises, land, offspring, blessing. God promised the Jews a land of their own, but here they are in a land occupied by their enemies.

He promised them many offspring or descendants, but here they are, still one of the smallest of nations. God promised them blessing and through them blessing to us in the rest of the world.

But here they are, ruled by the Romans and forced to pay taxes, which I doubt any of us would say is a blessing. And so in verse 69, God says he's going to come to his people and save them, redeem them, by raising up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

This reference to David is a reference to raising up a king from David, King David's family line. And that's what the word Christ and Messiah means, anointed king.

And this king would also be a super saviour. That's what a horn of salvation means. It means someone who's powerful to save. Horns were a symbol of power and might.

[9 : 42] And so think on the next slide, you know, the rhino, the mighty rhino. You know, you don't want to mess with that guy, do you, or that horn? And it's from the movie Jumanji, so imagine it chasing you. You know, you'd be terrified, wouldn't you?

The point is, the horn was a symbol of power or might. And so God was coming to redeem his people by raising up this mighty saviour, this super saviour, from the house of David, this Christ, this king.

And he would save them, verse 71, from their enemies. In fulfilment of God's promises to them. And not just from enemies, but have a look down at the rest of verse 74.

And not just from the hand of our enemies, but to enable us to serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. You see, the Jews were not free to serve God without fear.

They could have been persecuted by the Romans at any moment and were. But this super saviour would save them from that. And not just that, but also from judgment and death for peace and life.

[10 : 55] I just skipped down to verse 78 for a moment. Here we read, Because of the tender mercy of God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Now, light helps us to see in dark places or shadowy places, doesn't it? And here, God's tender mercy is going to send this rising sun from heaven to shine light on those living in darkness and shadow.

A darkness in terms of facing judgment for all the times we've ignored God. And shadow in terms of death that always hangs over our life in this world.

But this rising sun would visit or come to us from heaven to shine light so that we might see a path to peace with God instead of judgment. And a path to life out of the shadow of death.

Life eternal later. Which brings us hope in life now, doesn't it? Someone told me this week that they were broken into, their house was broken into, and they had a number of things stolen.

[12 : 16] And I don't think you ever quite understand the feeling of violation you feel until someone breaks in and steal. It's happened, someone broke into my car years ago, and I can still remember that feeling.

But she said, I knew they couldn't take God's love from me. Whatever else they took, they couldn't take that and it brought her comfort. In other words, because of her peace with God, she had love.

And that peace with God brought her peace in her heart, despite the theft. Or a number of our church members have faced death without fear, because they had the certain hope in life, of seeing life again after the shadow of death.

I've told you about a number of them. One I don't think I've told you about before is a lady who had a massive heart attack. She ended up in the Austin Hospital, and she woke up with all her family surrounded the end of her bed.

And she said, Oh, I didn't die. Bother. Such was her hope of life after death. But you see, this is what this super saviour, this rising sun from heaven brings.

[13 : 27] And we know who he is, don't we? He's a crowd participation moment. And he is, starts with G's, ends in us. Thank you, all five of you. That was fantastic.

Jesus, yeah. Jesus is the Christ from King David's line. That's why we just sung, once in royal, kingly David's city. That's why he was born there. And Jesus was sent from heaven, born as a man to shine light on us.

As Jesus himself said, I am the light of the world. So that we might see the path to peace with God now, and life eternal after death later.

Where we too will be saved from all our enemies. Unless we think we Christians don't have enemies, then look at Christians being killed today in parts of Africa, or the Middle East. Look at the bill that was put forward to our state parliament last week, which for the first time in Australian history, seeks to make it illegal for us to pray certain things.

Yet whatever happens to us in our state, or in this world, we have life eternal in the world to come, where we can serve God without fear. But the point of all this is, Zechariah praises God.

[14 : 42] Because now that his son is here, he knows who's coming next. The Lord. The horn of salvation. The super saviour.

Who will fulfil God's promises to save. And Jesus did, didn't he? For by his death, Jesus pays for our sins, so that we can have peace with God instead of judgment. Save from that darkness.

And by his resurrection, he proves he can save us from the shadow of death, and give us life eternal. Where we can serve him without fear, and enjoy a perfect world, an unbroken world, without suffering.

But hang on a second. What about praising God for his own son, John? Have you noticed Zechariah has spent all this time praising God for his promised salvation through this horn or super saviour?

He hasn't actually mentioned his own son, just born. Well, John does get a mention, but only in two verses, verse 76 and 7. Have a look there in the middle. He says, And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

[15 : 59] Back in verse 65 and 6, the people were awe and wonder at John's birth, and they actually said in verse 66, What then is this child going to be?

Well, here is the answer. He'll be a prophet of the Most High God, who'll prepare the way for the Lord, as we saw a couple of weeks ago. How? By giving knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of sins.

In other words, telling people how they can be forgiven and saved. How? Well, by repenting and believing. That's what we saw a couple of weeks ago, remember? Doing that U-turn, you know, the 180, from not believing to believing, from not trusting to trusting.

And it's the same for us here today. If we want to know salvation, if we want to have it, then we're to turn, do a U-turn, from not believing in Jesus to believing in Jesus.

From not trusting him to trusting in him. And then we'll know salvation. We'll know peace with God, which brings peace in life. We'll know life eternal, which brings hope in life.

[17 : 08] And so I wonder, have you done that? Have you put your trust in Jesus do you know that salvation, that forgiveness we can have? And for us who do, then the responses we see here to John's birth actually show us how to respond to Jesus' birth.

Because Zechariah's response of praise is actually more about Jesus than John, isn't it? And while praise for God is the main response, we see other ones within Zechariah's praise, which actually starts in verse 68 and goes for the rest of the passage, doesn't it?

And it shows us three ways to respond. Firstly, to rejoice in God's mercy. God's mercy on the next slide is mentioned three times in our passage. First to do with John's birth, but the other two are to do with, you know, God keep being faithful to his covenant promises despite people being unfaithful.

You know, God's mercy that sent his son from heaven to shine light, to die for our sins. And when you sit down for Christmas lunch or dinner, whatever you're doing this year, rather than saying the old, you know, two, four, six, eight, bog in, don't wait, why not wait for a moment?

Pause and thank God for his tender mercy in Christ. In response to Jesus' birth this Christmas, rejoice in God's mercy with our lips.

[18 : 36] Second, serve God in holiness with our lives. Remember, we saw in verse 74 that we're not just saved from something, but for something. For serving God in holiness all the days of our lives.

And while we will do that without fear of persecution in the world to come, we are to start doing that even without fear now in this world. Serving God by believing his word.

We have every reason to. And not just believing it, but obeying it. Listening to him, living his way, including even loving others. Even on the roads.

Even in the Boxing Day sales. In response to Jesus' birth this Christmas, serve God in holiness with our lives. And third, we're to keep Christ at the front of Christmas.

You see, we can praise God with our lips by thanking him for mercy. We can praise God with our lives by serving him in holiness. But we can also praise God with our hearts by keeping Christ as the most important part of Christmas.

[19 : 45] Just as the word Christ is at the front of Christmas, so we are to keep Christ at the front of our priorities. And when Zechariah praised God, remember, he mentioned his son John just two verses out of twelve.

That's just 16.6%. That's it for John. Why? Well, because Zechariah knew his son was not the son who saves. In other words, he kept the super saviour as the most important part of his praise.

So too are we this Christmas. So amidst that busyness of Christmas with the planning, the shopping, the family gathering, let's keep Christ at the front of Christmas. And not just when you pause at lunch to thank God for his mercy, but perhaps even setting some time aside and whether it's at church or on your own at home to reflect on what Christ gave up to come into this world and to save you and me.

In other words, don't let all the other good things, they are good things, food, family, holidays, presents, we're not to let those good things drown out the best thing, Jesus.

And so in response to Jesus' birth is Christmas, keep Christ at the front of Christmas and let's praise God with our lips, our lives and our heart. Let's pray.

[21 : 09] Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the responses we see at the birth of John, which really teach us the responses we're to have at the birth of Jesus.

and so help us, we pray, to thank you for your mercy with our lips, to serve you in holiness with our lives and to keep Christ at the front of Christmas in our hearts.

For we ask it in his name. Amen.