

Responding to THE Birth

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[0 : 00] Others couldn't be in the room with the mother giving birth, so my dad was down the hall of the hospital waiting nervously. And he knew my mum had given birth because he could hear her cry out all the way down from the hall, It's a girl! It's a girl!

Apparently us three boys were quite a handful. I don't remember it myself, but mum didn't know how she'd cope with a fourth boy, and so she was so relieved it was a girl, she responded with this great cry of joy.

People respond to births generally with joy, even pleasant surprises. But in our passage today, we actually see more than a response of joy to another pleasant surprise.

And the responses of the birth of John the Baptist in our passage today will actually show us how we're to respond to the birth of Jesus the Christ.

But first, the responses to John's birth. So on your pieces of paper is an outline on the back, and the passage is on the other side. So point one on the outline, but if you flip over to the Bible reading, verse 57.

[1 : 06] Here is the first response, that of joy, isn't it?

But notice it doesn't say when they heard of John's birth. It actually says, verse 58, Remember, Elizabeth wanted children, but they were both old and she was barren.

And so this was a real gift from God. Like all good things in life, actually, we tend to take good things for granted or expect them just to happen if we work hard enough for them.

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 all be dealing with this COVID virus.

And so when good things do happen, then we too should rejoice at God's mercy. Like here with John's birth.

[2 : 25] So that's the first response. There's another response, though, that of belief in God's word. Have a look at verse 59 to 63. On the eighth day, 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. And 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, the angel said this to Zechariah in the temple.

He told Zechariah that he was about to have a son and to name him John. And then he told Zechariah that his son would turn people back to God, that he would prepare people for the Lord's arrival, the Lord's coming.

But at the time, you might remember, Zechariah doubted God's word spoken by this angel. And so because he did not believe the word spoken, then he in turn could not speak.

[3 : 38] Well, not being able to speak for nine months would have been, no doubt, a daily reminder not to doubt God's word, wouldn't it? What's more, they both, Elizabeth and Zechariah, saw part of God's word come true.

They did have a son. Here he is, born to them in their old age. And so they had every reason to believe the rest of God's word about their son.

So much so that they also obeyed God's word and called him John, even though it was against the culture of the day. As I said a couple of weeks ago, we have also every reason to believe God's word.

How things have happened in history, just as God said, for which we do have evidence. Our faith, as I said, is not blind faith. It's reasoned, reasonable faith.

And since part of God's word to us has already been fulfilled, then we too 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.

[4 : 49] And so here there's the response of joy at God's mercy, belief in God's word, and then praise for God's promises. Have a look at verse 64. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.

Now, if you couldn't speak for nine months, what would be the first thing out of your mouth? Oh, I can speak again. Or finally, I can tell you how to properly pack the dishwasher.

My wife would smile at that because that's probably what I would say. But Zechariah doesn't. He praises God, doesn't he? No doubt because he's realized he was wrong to doubt God's word, and no doubt because he has a son.

But he actually primarily praises God for something else. You see, nine months of not being able to talk would have also given him time to reflect.

If his son was the one who would prepare the way for the Lord, and here is his son, then who's coming next?

[6 : 02] The Lord. The Lord coming to save them just as he promised. And this is actually what Zechariah primarily praises God for.

And so point to Zechariah's praise in verse 67. Have a look there. His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. 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 and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham to rescue us from the hand of our enemies.

Now there's quite a bit there, but I want you to notice three things. At first, Zechariah speaks in the past tense. Did you notice? It's as though he's saying these things have already happened.

God has already redeemed past tense, his people. But he does that because verse 67, we're told he was also prophesying by the spirit.

[7 : 22] In other words, this is spirit inspired praise, like the rest of God's word is spirit inspired. And just as God's word comes true, so too will this.

It's as good as done. That's why he speaks in the past tense. We do it too. Like when we're so certain a sports team will win, we say, ah, they've won past tense, even before they've even played, don't we?

Well, it's the same here. Second, notice all the references to being saved. So, verse 68, redeemed, salvation, salvation, it's on the screen there.

there's lots to do with God coming to save, rescue, redeem. Why? Well, because of his promises.

And so third, notice also on the screen, on the next slide, all the references to God keeping promises, like he said or promised through his holy prophets of long ago. or to remember that is to fulfill his holy covenant, his promise.

[8 : 28] That's what a covenant was, set of promises. Or the oath he swore or promised to Abraham. You see, in our first reading, we heard God promise Abraham and his descendants, the Jews, a land of their own.

But here they are in a land occupied by Romans, their enemies. And God also promised them many descendants or offspring. But here they are, one that's still one of the smallest nations.

And God also promised them blessing and through them blessing for us. But here they are ruled by the Romans and forced to pay taxes. I doubt any of us would say taxes are a blessing.

And so in verse 69, God also promised to raise up a king from King David's house or family. What the Bible calls the Christ, the Messiah, same thing.

And this king would be a super saviour. That's what a horn of salvation means. It means to raise up a mighty saviour. You see, horns were symbols of might and strength.

[9 : 38] Like on the, like the rhino. Here, I mean, take a look at this guy. You don't want to mess with that horn, do you? Can you imagine this thing chasing you like in that movie, Jumanji?

You know, you'd be terrified. The horn was a symbol of power or might. Thanks. So to raise up a horn of salvation from David's house is to raise up a king, the Christ, who will be this powerful super saviour.

And he would save them from their enemies and fulfill God's promises to them. And not just save them from enemies, but also for service.

Have a look at verse 74 again. He says to rescue us from the hand of our enemies and 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 be persecuted by the Romans at any moment. And they were. But this super saviour would save them from that.

[10 : 46] And what's more, this super saviour would also save them from judgment and death for peace and life. Just skip down to verse 78 for a moment.

Verse 78. He says, Because of the tender mercy of our God, there's mercy again, 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, doesn't it? And here, God's tender mercy sends this rising sun from heaven to shine light, to help people see, to help those living in darkness and shadow.

Darkness in terms of facing judgment for the times we've ignored God. And shadow in terms of death that's always hanging over us in this world.

This rising sun would come to us from heaven to shine light so that we might see the path to having peace with God now. freedom from judgment, peace in our lives, and to shine that we might see life beyond the shadow of death later.

[12 : 12] Which also brings us hope now, doesn't it? Someone this week told me that they were broken into and had some of their belongings stolen.

I don't think you ever quite understanding the feeling of violation that you feel unless someone has broken in and to steal from you. But I've had that before.

It is, you do feel invaded and violated. But she said, I knew they couldn't take God's love from me. And it brought her comfort. In other words, her peace with God brought her peace in her life.

Or a number of our church members have faced death without fear because they had certain hope of life out of the shadow of death.

In fact, I remember one, I don't think I've told you about this person before, but she had a massive heart attack. It was taken to the Austin Hospital. And she woke up in hospital with all her family members around her, standing around her.

[13 : 15] And she said, Oh, I didn't die. Bother. Such was her hope of life after death. But this is what this super saviour, this rising sun from heaven brings.

Of course, we know him as, this is a crowd participation moment. We know him as, starts with G's, ends in us. Thank you, all five of you.

Excellent. Excellent. Jesus. Yeah. Jesus is the Christ. They're the King from David's family. That's why we sing at Christmas once in Royal David's city.

And Jesus was sent from heaven to be 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 the Christians being killed today in parts of Africa and the Middle East.

[14 : 24] It's still happening today. Or look at the bill that was put forward to our own state parliament last week. Which for the first time in Australian history, seeks to make it illegal to pray for certain things.

Never happened before. Yet whatever happens to us in this world, we have life eternal in the next world. Where we can serve God without fear.

But the point is, Zechariah praises God, because now that his son is here, he knows who's coming next. God's super saviour, who will fulfil God's promises to save.

And Jesus did. For by his death, Jesus paid for our sins. That we non-Jews, might also be saved from the darkness of judgment, and find peace with God now.

And by his resurrection, he proved he can save us from the shadow of death. That we too might see life eternal later. Later. Later. In the new creation.

[15 : 40] Where we will serve him without fear of persecution. And where we will enjoy a perfect world. No longer broken. Free of suffering. But there is one question that you might still have.

What about praising God for his own son? I mean, Zechariah has spent all this time praising God for the promised salvation of this, you know, through this super saviour. What about John?

Well, John does get a mention, but only in verse 76 and 7 that we skipped over. Have a look there. Zechariah says, And you, my child, John, 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.

Back in verse 65, the people were in awe and wonder at John's birth and wondered what child this might be. Well, here, Zechariah tells them he'll be a prophet of God who will prepare the way for this super saviour.

[16 : 48] How? Or by giving knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of sins. In other words, telling people how they can have salvation, how they can be saved and forgiven.

How? Well, we saw it a couple of weeks ago. By turning, doing a U-turn, 180 degrees, back to God. From not believing to believing.

From not trusting to trusting. And it's the same for us today. If we want to know salvation, have it, then we ought to turn back, to do a U-turn, a 180 degrees.

From not believing in Jesus, to believing in Jesus. From not trusting in him, to trusting in him. For then we'll find forgiveness. Then we'll have and know salvation.

At peace with God and certain hope of life from the shadow of death. And so I wonder, have you done that? Have you put your trust in Jesus?

[17 : 53] Do you know salvation? And for us who do, then the responses we see here to John's birth, actually show us how to respond to Jesus's birth this Christmas.

Because Zechariah's response of praise, we've seen, is actually more about Jesus than John, isn't it? And while praise for God is the main response, after all, Zechariah begins in verse 68, and it's basically the rest of the page, isn't it?

While praise for God is the main response, it actually shows us three other ways to respond too. At first, by rejoicing in God's mercy. God's mercy on the next slide is also mentioned three times in our passage.

The first one has to do with John's birth, but the second two are to do with Jesus, fulfilling God's covenant promises. See, God's mercy, where he was faithful to his covenant promises, despite people's unfaithfulness to him, or God's tender mercy that meant he sent his only son from heaven to die for our sins and to shine light on our path, that we might see peace and life.

And so, when you sit down to your Christmas lunch or Christmas dinner this year, when you say grace, instead of the old, you know, two, four, six, eight, bog in, don't wait, why not do wait and pause and thank God for his mercy, which sent his son into our world for you and me.

[19 : 31] In response to Jesus' birth this Christmas, rejoice in God's mercy with our lips. Second, serve God in holiness with our lives.

Remember, we are not just saved from something, but also for something, verse 74 said, for serving God in holiness all the days of our lives.

And while we will do so without fear of persecution in the world to come, we're to start doing so in this world now, serving God by believing his word, because we have every reason to, so much so that we obey it.

Listening to God, living God's way, including loving others, even on the roads, even in the Boxing Day sales. In response to Jesus' birth this Christmas, we're to 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 his 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.

[20 : 50] Just as on the slide, Christ is at the front of the word Christmas, so we're to keep Christ at the front of our priorities. When Zechariah praised God, he only mentioned his son John two verses out of 12.

That's just 16.6%. It's all John got. Why? Because Zechariah knows his son is not the son who saves.

In other words, Zechariah knew God's promised super saviour was the most important part of his praise. And so amidst the busyness of Christmas with planning and shopping and family gathering, let's keep Christ at the front of our Christmas.

Not just when you pause at lunch to say thanks for God's mercy, but perhaps even setting some time aside, whether by coming to church or on your own, to reflect on what Christ gave up to be born into this world and die for our sins.

In other words, we're not to let all the other good things, and they are good things, you know, food, family, friends, and of course, presents. We're not to let those good things drown out the best thing, Christ.

[22 : 03] In response to Jesus' birth this Christmas, keep Christ at the front of Christmas, and let's praise him with our lips, our lives, and our hearts. Let's pray.

Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder this morning of how we're just respond to the birth of Jesus as Zechariah responded at his son's birth.

Help us, we pray, to rejoice at your mercy, to serve you in holiness, and to keep Christ at the front of our Christmas.

For we ask it in his name. Amen.