

The Birth of John

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Date: 17 December 2017

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[0 : 0 0] We live in a fallen, broken world, a world that is affected and infected by sin, and birth defects and other heartbreaking experiences are all as a result of the fall.

! And no one who lives in this fallen world, no one is exempt from the effects of the fall. And in the providence of God, we are all affected by the fall in different ways and in varying degrees.

But not only does this view that if you live right, your life will go right, ignore the reality of the fall, it actually also ignores the plain teaching of Scripture.

In Luke's Gospel, we have this account. The Christmas story actually begins with this account of an old couple, a husband whose name is Zachariah, and his wife, whose name was Elizabeth.

And here's what Luke writes about them in Luke 1, verses 5 through 7. He writes, In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zachariah of the division of Abijah.

[1 : 1 9] And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

But they had no child. Because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. So here we have this account of this couple, Zachariah and Elizabeth, who were both righteous before God, who were walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

Yet they had no children. Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years, and they had prayed to God for a child.

But they remained childless. Yet they were righteous. They were blameless. They were walking in all of the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

In a fallen, broken world in which men and women get married with the hope of having children, this couple's hope remained unfulfilled. God, in his sovereignty, chose Zachariah and Elizabeth to be parents in their old age.

[2 : 4 1] He chose that they would be the parents of John the Baptist, the prophet who would go before the Messiah to prepare his way. And in Luke chapter 1, while Zachariah was going faithfully about his priestly duties in the temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him, your prayer has been heard.

God has heard your prayer. You're going to have a son, and you are to name him John. And the angel further told him that your son is going to go before the Lord and prepare a people for the Lord.

And Zachariah considered his advanced years and his wife's barrenness and her advanced years.

And he said, how can this be? The angel said to Zachariah, you will be unable to speak until the day that all these things have taken place because you have not believed the word of the Lord.

And Elizabeth did conceive. And the time came for her to give birth to a son. And that's where we pick up this morning in the third sermon in our 4-5 Christmas message series.

So please turn, if you have not yet done so, to Luke's Gospel, chapter 1. And we will be reading from verse 57 through verse 80.

[4 : 1 8] Luke chapter 1, beginning in verse 57. Luke chapter 1, beginning in verse 58.

And they asked for a writing tablet and wrote, And they 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 neighbors.

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?

For the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father, Zachariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.

[6 : 02] 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 us 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 you, 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.

[7 : 05] And 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 in 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. Let's pray. Oh father, we are so grateful.

To be able to have your word. To read it. And to sit under its proclamation. And father, we ask this morning that you would take this old familiar story.

And apply it afresh to our souls. That we might hear the truth that is recorded in it. That we might see the purpose for which it has found its way in your word.

[8 : 19] And Lord, we pray that it would inform how we approach this season of Christmas. Father, I pray in the name of Jesus that you would anoint me.

And enable me to be faithful to speak only your words to your people. And God, help us all to hear and obey what you would say to us by your spirit.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. As we consider this account of the birth of John. Let's not read it as mere historical facts.

Let's not read it as a mere restatement of the facts. But remember, Luke is making a point. There's a point behind all that Luke is writing.

And he tells us in verse 4 of chapter 1 why he's writing this gospel. He says to Theophilus, Theophilus, I'm writing that you might have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

[9 : 29] Luke wanted Theophilus to not merely accept what he had been taught about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Luke wanted Theophilus to have certainty about the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

He wanted Theophilus to be certain about what he had been taught. And not just to accept what he had been taught. Luke's gospel has the same function for us today.

It is to help all of God's people to have certainty concerning these things that we've been taught.

And I think especially so in a world that is increasingly critical, increasingly skeptical of the word of God.

And in particular of the person and the work of Jesus Christ. What we have been taught is that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. He came into the world.

He lived the perfect life. He died a substitutionary death for sinners. And then he resurrected. And is now seated on high at God's right hand.

[10 : 34] And he will one day return. We need certainty about all of this because this is what Luke says in his gospel. So what Luke is saying in this account of the birth of John, Luke is in essence saying to Theophilus, Theophilus, you can be sure about what you've been taught.

You can be sure that God fulfilled his promise concerning the birth of John the Baptist. Elizabeth, who was formerly barren and up in old age, gave birth to a son.

And it didn't happen in secret. It wasn't hidden somewhere in a corner. Neighbors and friends were present. Relatives were present on the eighth day to name the child when he was being circumcised.

And he wasn't named according to tradition based on his father's name. He was given the name John. And Zechariah, who was dumb for nine months, Zechariah prophesied and he blessed God when he spoke.

Look at verse 65. Luke puts this in. And it's important to note that Luke was writing at a very close time to when Jesus had been born and lived and died.

[11 : 59] He writes in verse 65. In other words, Elizabeth did not go in some far country, have a child or bring back a child and say, this is my child.

Now Luke says, what happened didn't happen in a corner. He said, this happened in broad view. There were witnesses there. Relatives were there. Neighbors were there. And this whole thing was talked about in the whole hill country of Judea.

He says, the office, many people know about this is no secret. What I'm writing to you is not fable. What I'm writing to you is the truth.

Now, as important as it is for Luke to record these details of the birth of John, it is so easy for us to see it more as the end of the sentimental story for this couple who couldn't have children and in their old age, God blessed them.

But Luke has a larger reason for recounting these details about the birth of John. Luke tells us about the birth of John because, here's the reason, the birth of John was the salvation sign for the birth of Christ.

[13 : 45] That's what Luke is doing. Luke is not just randomly recording history. Luke is recording John's birth because the birth of John was the salvation sign for the birth of Christ.

So to put it another way, the birth of John pointed to the birth of Christ. So Luke is going through this painstaking effort to chronicle John's birth and Zechariah's prophecy.

Because he wants us to see that it's ultimately about Jesus. It all points to him. It is all about him.

And in this account, Luke helps us to see that what John did in his birth, he would do in his life.

In his birth, John pointed to Christ and in his life, he would also point to Christ. For the remainder of our time this morning, I want to primarily focus on Zechariah's prophecy.

This prophecy that starts in verse 68 of Luke chapter 1.

[14 : 56] And although this prophecy is 13 verses long, when you look at it, it actually is only two sentences. It's two very long sentences.

And these two sentences will form the basis of the two points that I will share for the remainder of this sermon. My first point is that Zechariah's prophecy recounts God's plan in redemption history. Zechariah's prophecy recounts God's plan in redemption history. We see this recounting of God's plan of redemption history in verses 68 through 75.

And it is instructive to note that Zechariah's prophecy is what we can call a bridge prophecy that connects the Old and the New Testaments.

It was the last prophecy of the Old Testament and the first prophecy of the New Testament. In that sense, Zechariah's prophecy looks back to God's promise of redemption in the Old Testament.

[16 : 05] And then it looks forward to the fulfillment of that same promise in the New Testament. Zechariah's prophecy is a long song of praise to God and it's called the Benedictus.

The word Benedictus is the Latin translation for the word bless. It's the first word in the first line of Zechariah's song. And it corresponds to Mary's song, which we call the Magnificat.

We both lift up praise to God. So here we have Zechariah, unable to speak for nine months. And now, on the day when his son is circumcised, on the eighth day, he regains his speech.

And that must have been a wonderful occasion. One, to be able to talk, but also to have a son born to you in your old age. But what we see is Zechariah subordinates his obvious personal excitement to God's redemptive plan.

And I think it's a striking aspect of the Benedictus. Despite being overjoyed by having a child, a long-desired child, Zechariah's immediate words are Godward.

[17 : 27] In verse 64, he tells us, he says, well, Luke says, And immediately his mouth was open and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.

Let's look at what Zechariah says to God in his song of praise. In verse 68, 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.

Here we see that Zechariah does not have John in view. He has Christ in view. He says that God has raised up a horn of salvation in the house of David.

John was not from the house of David. John was from the house of Levi. Jesus came from the house of David. And so Zechariah is blessing God for God's son Jesus, not for his son John.

Now, it's reasonable to conclude that when Zechariah was dumb and unable to speak and Mary had visited the house for some three months, as he no doubt was studying scripture and hearing that Mary now is pregnant with the Messiah, I think Zechariah understood that God had broken into

human history to perform his promise of redemption.

[19 : 00] Notice in verse 68 that Zechariah uses this word visited. This word visited is Old Testament language to show how God has come to his people in a real way.

He's come to them in mercy and grace by sending Jesus Christ as their savior. And notice that Zechariah speaks of God's redemption as an accomplished fact.

He says he has visited. He has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation. And he is able to speak this way, even though at this point Jesus was still in Mary's womb.

Because when God speaks his decrees, they are as good as done. And Zechariah has already experienced. He knows that this promise, Messiah, is in the womb of Mary.

And this point would be about six months in the womb of Mary. In verse 69, he again uses Old Testament redemptive language in the term horn of salvation.

[20 : 13] And here we're reminded that salvation is from the Lord. It is the Lord who visits and redeems his people.

It is the Lord who raises up the horn of salvation. And friends, this morning, the reality is, if God does not act to save, then no one will be saved.

And God acted in salvation history to save. And that's the only reason that men and women, boys and girls are saved.

And again, not talking about John, he's talking about Jesus. He knew John was not the horn of salvation. John would go before the one who was the horn of salvation.

But John himself was not the horn of salvation. And here, brothers and sisters, again, we can gain certainty. God kept his promise.

[21 : 13] God kept his promise. Look at verse 70. It says, God did what he had spoken by the mouth of his holy prophets of old.

Now, why is this important? Here's why it's important. By including this part of Zechariah's prophecy, Luke is contributing to his larger point of helping his readers to have certainty.

Luke wants Theophilus and us to be certain that through his holy prophets, long ago, God promised that he was going to send a redeemer.

He was going to raise up a savior. He was going to raise up a horn of salvation. And now he's saying God fulfilled it. Long ago, through the prophets, he spoke this promise.

And now he is fulfilling this promise in the person of Jesus Christ, the baby that was in the womb of Mary.

[22 : 18] And so why does God raise up a horn of salvation? Well, the first reason is given in verse 71. That we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Now, the Jews who would have heard Zechariah speak those words, that God raised up a horn of salvation to save us from our enemies, they would have thought that their primary enemies were the Romans who were occupying the land.

That's where their mind would have gone. They would have thought it was the Romans. And perhaps even Zechariah may have thought it was the Romans who occupied their land, who ruled over them.

But as the story of redemption unfolds, it's clear that the enemies of God's people were not just human enemies. We see that God visited his people to save them from their ultimate enemies, which was sin and Satan.

And the second reason that God raised up a horn of salvation, we see in verses 72 and 73, to show mercy, promise to the fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to Abraham.

[23 : 40] Here, Luke is helping Theophilus. And us to see that in sending Jesus, the horn of salvation, God was fulfilling a longstanding covenant promise that he had made to Abraham and the other fathers in salvation history.

And then we see the third and the ultimate reason for a horn of salvation in verses 74 and 75, that his people, being delivered from the hands of their enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all their days.

And how would this happen? It couldn't happen under the old covenant. But what we see in verses 74 and 75 is the work of Christ, his substitutionary death on the cross is foreshadowed.

That was the way that we would be able to serve God through what Jesus Christ would do on the cross to enable his people to serve God in holiness and righteousness all of their days.

So Israel's real need was not to be delivered from the Romans, but to be delivered from sin and from Satan. But if you were to take a poll in John's day, in Zechariah's day, and you would ask them, what's the greatest need of the nation?

[25 : 12] What do we really need? David said, we need to get rid of those Romans. They are a problem. But it was not.

Their biggest problem was sin. Their biggest problem was Satan. And they needed God to visit them and redeem them from the power of sin and Satan so that they could serve him in holiness and righteousness all of their days.

You know, the truth is, we're not very different from the people of Israel in Zechariah's day. Our greatest need this morning is not a solution to the things that press hard against us and make our lives uncomfortable.

It's not our greatest need. Our greatest need this morning is for God. Our greatest need this morning is for God to visit us so that true deliverance can come to us.

Deliverance that only he can bring. But part of the human condition is to look beyond and to miss what our true need is.

[26 : 28] We tend to look at all the symptoms in our lives. And our hope is that those symptoms would go away and that they would be dealt with. But what we see is what we need is we need God.

We need God to visit us. We need God to come to us. We need God to do for us that which only he can do so we can live before him in holiness and righteousness all of our days.

The world is filled with enormous needs. There's a need to feed people. There's a need to clothe people.

There's a need to give shelter to people. And there's good work to do all those things. And this is a time of the year when those things come in view and many people are seeking to try to make people's lives a little better even if just for one day out of the year.

And these wonderful works. As wonderful as they are. They can easily forget what the greatest need is.

[27 : 39] Because if a person does not know Jesus Christ as Lord and personal Savior his or her greatest need is not for food not for clothes not for shelter but it is for the Savior himself for God to visit them for God to come to them in the person of Jesus Christ to set them free from sin so that they may serve him in holiness and righteousness all of their days.

And we need to remember this. We need to remember this that no matter how desperate our own circumstances or the circumstances of others. What we need more than anything else is we need God.

We need him to visit us and do for us what only he can do. In a strict sense the Benedictus ends in verse 75.

It ends in verse 75 because that's when Zechariah that's the point at which Zechariah turns his attention away from praising God to now prophesy and speaking directly to his son John.

But broadly speaking the whole thing is the the Benedictus but what we see in these final verses of Zechariah's prophecy these four verses as Zechariah addresses this eight days old infant what he does is he sings about this is my second point John's place in redemption's history.

[29 : 22] He sings about John's place in redemption history. You see this in verses 76 through 79. It's the second sentence in Zechariah's song.

In verse 76 what Zechariah does is he echoes the words of Gabriel about John and as great as John was Zechariah makes it clear that John is the one who will prepare for God's salvation not the one who will bring God's salvation.

And what he does is he outlines John's ministry. First he prophesies that John will be a prophet of the most high in verse 76. and a prophet is one who represents another one who speaks on behalf of God.

He tells us John will be a forerunner before the Lord. And notice again when he talks for the Lord that Jesus is referred to by this divine title Lord.

Lord. And John would be the one who would go before him in those days whenever a dignitary somebody very important was coming into town there would be those who would go before them to prepare the way for them to come to make sure that everything was in order.

[30 : 54] And that was John's divine task to prepare the way for God's salvation. So John's ministry was a ministry of preparation and repentance. It was a ministry to help people to see their need for the one who was coming after him.

The one who alone could save them. Notice in verse 77 John was only preparing a people for salvation.

He could give them knowledge of salvation and the forgiveness of sins but he could not bring that salvation to them. We're told in verse 78 that it would come because of God's mercy.

It would come through God's Son, the sunrise, who will visit us from on high. So John's preaching was to prick the consciences of people.

Couldn't save them. He could only tell them to reform their ways but ultimately John would point to Christ who would bring salvation some 30 years later.

[32 : 06] And John at the time when Christ was beginning his ministry stood on the muddy banks of Jordan and he pointed and said behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

He identified him that he is the one. I can prick your conscience about sin. I can tell you that you need to repent but that's the one who is going to be able to enable you to do that.

That's the one who is going to take away the sin of the world. Look at verse 79 and we see the reason that this sunrise and the person of Jesus is needed.

The sunrise and the person of Jesus is needed because the whole world is in darkness and in the shadow of death. And Jesus came into this world as the light and the life of the world to be a light in darkness and a guide to the paths of peace.

And this is salvation language. This is the language of salvation because it describes the condition of Adam's fallen race in darkness and in need of a light to guide.

[33 : 18] And this light is to come from the outside. It is to come from outside of the darkness. It can't come from within the darkness. This darkness speaks about those who sit not only in sin but also in despair.

Those whose lives are broken from the effects of living in a fallen world. Those who have experienced injustice. Those who have experienced the loss of families and loved ones due to war and violence.

The senseless murders that we have experienced in our country over the past year where there is no hope of true justice for those who have lost their lives. This darkness speaks about those who themselves have come to a point where medicine offers them no hope or perhaps a family member, medicine offers them no hope and they are in darkness and they are in need of the sunrise to come and be the light.

Let sunrise from on high to shine on their dark path. Zechariah tells us this is what God is doing, fulfilling his promise, sending John to go before the one who's going to make all of these things a reality that he has spoken long ago to the fathers.

In his ministry, John typifies true gospel preaching. See, true gospel preaching helps people to see their need for the Savior and then points them to the Savior.

[35 : 19] That's what John does. That's what John does in his ministry. He helps people to see their need for the Savior and then he points them to the Savior.

If you look at verse 80 at the end of our text this morning, it says, John was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

And essentially, what that means is that John did not enter the stage of salvation history until Jesus was about to begin his ministry.

Why? That's why John came. That was his purpose. He came to prepare the way of the Messiah. and John ministered just for a few short months and then he was imprisoned and he was beheaded. And now, even though we sing songs that remind us of the Savior's birth and it could almost seem like it just happened yesterday, you know, it happened almost 2,000 years ago.

[36 : 35] Now, both John and Jesus have finished their earthly ministry and the fruit of Christ's ministry is a reality today. Salvation and the forgiveness of sins are now available.

Light is given to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. And those who formerly did not know peace can be guided in the way of peace.

And so, in light of this fulfillment, let me close by asking you some questions. You don't need to answer them out loud. You just need to think about them in the quietness of your own heart honestly before the Lord.

And the first is, do you know the salvation and the forgiveness of sins that Zechariah prophesied about? The salvation and the forgiveness of sins that he prophesied about that's now available to repent and sinners?

Are you this morning enjoying the light and the life of Christ? Or are you sitting in darkness and spiritual death?

[37 : 57] Are you enjoying the peace that comes only from the Prince of Peace? Or are you in turmoil and unrest because you know it is not well with your soul? And here the peace that is being referred to, the peace that is being offered is not the absence of conflict.

It's not the absence of trials. The peace that comes through Jesus Christ is a peace that holds in the midst of the conflict, in the midst of the trials.

You see again, we who have trusted Christ, we are not exempt from the effects of the fall. We experience the same things that happen to everybody who lives on this fallen earth.

But those of us who have come to know Jesus Christ, we can know peace in the midst of it. We can have a perspective in the midst of it. We can have the sunrise to come and shine in on our dark days on this dark earth.

We can know that peace. It doesn't promise us we will never know the trials of sin and fallenness. We will. But we can know peace that is above and beyond circumstances and beyond comprehension.

[39 : 30] But the answer to those questions is yes. And you should rejoice because you have much to rejoice about and you should celebrate this season of the Savior's birth because you received him as your Lord and Savior.

You can celebrate in an informed way. But if he answered no, if your answer to these questions was an honest no, then I say to you this morning, turn to Christ.

Turn to Jesus Christ. Turn from sin. Turn to Christ. He is the only one who can forgive our sins. He is the only one who can cleanse our consciences.

He is the only one who can remove our shame. He is the only one who can give light and life in this dark and decaying world.

He is the only one who can give lasting peace no matter what the circumstances are. And all of these benefits of salvation are available now.

[40 : 45] What Zechariah prophesied that God was going to do in that very embryonic prophecy that he made when Jesus was six months old in Mary's womb.

That has long been a reality. That forgiveness and that mercy from God is available to whosoever will come.

And so I pray that if you're here today and you don't know Jesus Christ as your Lord and person Savior, that you will come to him today. You will turn from sin. You turn to Christ.

You cry out to him. You receive the light and the life that only he can give. Let's pray. God