

"The Benedictus" Luke 1:68–79

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[0 : 00] There's something deeply unsettling about darkness. What might otherwise be a normal room turns into a maze of obstacles, things to avoid.! You've got to be careful when you're walking through, especially an unfamiliar room.

! If it's really dark, you don't want to stub your toe, you don't want to bang your knee. You don't want to feel disoriented. Navigating a familiar space in pitch blackness is one thing, but what about living in a world of unfamiliar surroundings?

Living with the unknown as the standard to endure a constant state of blindness. I bring this up because the people of Israel, in the first century, 2,000 years ago, had lived in a perpetual darkness for some time.

In fact, for centuries. They had been exiled from the land of Israel to the farthest reaches of the known world. As far east as India, at least close to it.

By the second century, there were reports of Jews living as far east as India. In the west, all across North Africa. In the north, in the Caucasus. And in the south, parts of Yemen and Ethiopia.

[1 : 14] The people of Israel were not in the land of Israel. They were exiled to the farthest portions of the known world. There were some that lived in the land, but even those did not live as people that enjoyed the very pinnacle of Israelite rule that King David and King Solomon knew.

Rather, they were under Roman occupation. And they were led by many religious leaders who claimed to possess the authentic faith. So, to put it really bluntly, the people of Israel were walking in a perpetual state of confusion and spiritual darkness.

And yet, for the ears that listened intently, the scripture spoke of a sunrise after the darkness. A light that would pierce the shadow.

Some 400 years before Jesus came, in the closing sentences of the Old Testament canon, the prophet Malachi boldly proclaimed. This is from Malachi chapter 4, verse 2.

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

[2 : 32] You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And yet, 400 years is a very long time to wait for the dawn to break, is it not? Many generations had come and gone.

Israel remained in exile, in darkness. The promised sunrise had not yet come. There was no joy amongst the people. So, as we arrive to our second of four songs for the Savior, that are found in Luke's opening chapters, we find ourselves at the Benedictus of Zechariah, or the blessing of Zechariah.

He is the elderly priest and the father of John the Baptist. He had been told he would have a miracle son. That this miracle son would be used by the Lord to turn Israel back to him.

But he did not believe. He doubted. And was made mute by God. And although he was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem, and a spiritual leader himself, who should have been very, very familiar with the scriptures and a pillar and example of faith, he was also himself walking in darkness.

Very indicative of the people and their leaders. He, more than most, should have been familiar with the words of the prophet Malachi. But could they truly come to pass?

[3 : 59] Would the Lord do this? And through his line, would God keep his promise? Would he rescue Israel from darkness? Now, Zechariah lived in a completely different cultural reality than we do here in the 21st century in Canada, in the New World, in Ottawa.

And yet, the darkness of heart, the disorientation caused by hopelessness, the fear of the unknown, spiritual lethargy that comes by failing to be able to wait on the promises of God, they're actually shared not just by people in the first century, but by all humanity.

Shared by us today in this worship space. So the question of whether God would rescue Israel from darkness is actually a very poignant one and a very pertinent one for us this morning.

For all people, for all time, will God rescue us from darkness? The darkness that you might feel, the heaviness, the hopelessness, the disappointment, the disorientation, the confusion, the difficulty, the perpetual frustration of trying to change and there's no change, or to see the people around you suffer, that is the darkness that we need deliverance from.

And the question is, will God fulfill his promise in Malachi chapter 4 some 24, 2500 years ago? And like many promises God makes, there appears to be a remarkable son involved in some kind of way.

[5 : 40] Throughout the Bible, there's always, not in every case, but in a lot of cases, a son of promise that's connected to the promises that God makes to his people. Zechariah will notice this and so will we.

So to answer this question, and the question of will God rescue us from the darkness? We will look at four sons from Zechariah's song. We'll look at David's son.

We'll look at Abraham's son. We'll look at Zechariah's own son. And then finally, God's own son. Verses 78 and 79. If you have a Bible, follow with me. I think we still have some Bibles at the welcome table.

Grab it. Follow along. Please, it would do me a great service. It would do you a great service. We'll look at chapter one, starting in verse 68.

Zechariah's son, John, was born. This is just before Zechariah is praising the Lord. Zechariah's muteness was lifted and he broke into song. And this is how he opens it up.

[6 : 40] And this is where we get the title for this song, the Benedictus. It's Latin for blessed. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel. And before we go on, I want to stop here.

Because he opens up by saying, blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel. Very specifically, the God of Israel. He honors God. But specifically, in God's role as the God of Israel.

And this is a significant point to recognize. Because this entire song, which is actually one long prayer, one long sentence in the original language, it is absolutely full of Old Testament references. Some scholars say that there's up to 30 plus different references or allusions, scripture quotations from the Old Testament. And this is an important thing for us to think through.

Why? Because it highlights to us that Christianity wasn't invented 2,000 years ago. It wasn't this dynamic leader, Jesus of Nazareth, who came onto the scene, started this new kind of version of Judaism, but really not Judaism, his own thing.

[7 : 54] And then his followers kind of perpetuated it across the known land. And rather, what we see here is the continuation of the story of God's interaction with mankind that goes right back to the beginning.

So for Zechariah to say, blessed be the Lord, God of Israel, it is for us to understand that this is the same one true God that has always existed, that has always dealt with humanity from the opening verses of Genesis chapter 1 all the way up into Leviticus, or Leviticus, sorry, Luke 68 on, and then all the way into the end of Revelation.

This is no cultic religion for a regional people, but the one true faith for all people for all time. So let's continue on. We'll start in verse 68 again, and we'll read down to verse 71.

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.

The Lord has visited and redeemed his people, Zechariah says. Like Mary's song, the future that Zechariah is prophesying, even though it is coming in the future, is spoken of in the past tense.

[9 : 23] It's a foregone conclusion. He is so sure that the victory that the Lord will do through this child Jesus, that he speaks of it like it's already happened.

The visitation and redemption, they have occurred because the Lord has fulfilled the prophecy given to King David, and this is where this connection of David's son comes into play.

The prophecy given to King David by the prophet Nathan, a thousand years earlier, so if Malachi is 400 years earlier, this prophecy goes back 600 years before that, a thousand years before Jesus comes on the scene.

King David's at the height of his power, and the prophet Nathan says to him the following. This is from 2 Samuel chapter 7. The Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.

[10:25] He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. You see, the promise is for David, but really it's for his son, one of David's line, who will establish a kingdom that will exist forever.

His enemies will be defeated because David's son, this mysterious ultimate king, will be a horn of salvation raised up for the Lord. The horn being this image and symbol of strength and vengeance, but it's also an ornament of beauty.

So we have here a symbol of complete victory, but also complete blessing. But here's the thing, David's son is Solomon. Solomon does indeed build a temple for the Lord, but Solomon very quickly falls into idolatry and abandons the Lord, and David's line that follows kind of ebbs and flows between like all right kings and absolutely horrific kings.

So it would seem that David's king, David's line, it is not a forever line. Eventually, exile happens to the people of God. They are taken away.

First, the kingdom splits into two kingdoms, the rival kingdoms, and then exile happens. And exile continues on for centuries. David's line is not given to worshipping the Lord or blessing the nations.

[12:00] Rather, it's given to extortion and infighting and violence, polygamy, dissension, even child sacrifice. They did not become an example to the people around them.

Rather, they became like the people around them. So you have to ask, I have to ask, who is the true enemy of Israel?

Is it Rome or Greece or Persia or Babylon or Assyria? I mean, they actually are enemies. I don't want to downplay the real geopolitical reality of the people of Israel, but the enemies of Israel, it's actually the heart of the Israelites.

They are bent towards idolatry, away from God, away from glorifying Him and being His chosen instrument to proclaim His goodness and kindness and mercy and love to the world.

But instead, they want to elevate themselves to the highest place rather than give glory to God who is in the highest place. So the enemy of Israel is Israel.

[13:15] And friends, the enemy of mankind for us today is our bent heart that is toward the self and will ravage and destroy and lie and cheat and steal as long as we are taken care of in some way, shape, or form.

So this mighty horn of salvation, this son of David who brings victory, must ultimately be not a geopolitical savior who brings victory for a season to defeat a certain empire only to struggle maybe with the empire to come, but rather, this horn of salvation, this son of David, seems to be some kind of spiritual savior, a victor, a king who is going to wage and win the war to end all wars, the war of sin and death and the corrupted heart.

The son of David will surely visit and redeem God's people, Zechariah says. The Davidic king will bring total victory, but maybe not in the way they thought.

Yet to be saved from one's enemy is one thing. But what one really needs is to be saved for something, for a purpose.

The promise made to David is not the only promise God made to his people, for it was built upon a promise made hundreds of years earlier to an old man who would become an improbable father.

[14:56] Somebody actually quite similar to Zechariah. And this brings us to our second point, Abraham's son. Look with me at verses 72 to 75. To show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant to 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 of our days.

So in the previous section, Zechariah reminds us that the Lord spoke through the prophets. Here, he refers specifically to the promise made to the fathers, that is the patriarchs of Israel, and specifically Abraham.

God initially makes a covenant with Abraham way back in Genesis chapter 12, but it's not until 10 chapters later in Genesis 22 and you start to see how much Old Testament is marbled throughout this prayer.

It's not until Genesis chapter 22 where God swears an oath, he swears an oath to Abraham. And the story is found, Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac, a very famous but also a pretty difficult passage, if we're honest.

Difficult because God is asking Abraham to take his son who is a miracle child in his old age, Abraham is to take his son to go to Mount Moriah, to go onto a mountain to build a pyre, to sacrifice his son and burn him, burn him as an offering to the Lord.

[16 : 32] And it's difficult for us because, well, it's a child sacrifice, but also it goes against everything up till chapter 22 that we've seen of God. God is a God who is slow to anger.

He is not like the other gods. He is a loving God. He is about life. He gives life. He punishes those who take away life. And here we have a very difficult situation.

We're not going to get into kind of the nitty-gritty of the binding of Isaac, but it's a difficult one. And Abraham, as he's about to slay his son, the knife is stopped and God sees that Abraham loves the Lord even more, even more than his own son that he's been waiting his entire life for.

Old man, his hand has stayed. And then God swears an oath to him. And here is the oath, starting in verse 16 of Genesis 22.

By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.

[17 : 48] And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed because you have obeyed my voice.

So, with David, his son will rescue God's people from their enemies. Here, the blessing of God will go through Abraham's son.

Abraham's son will possess the gate of his enemies and the Lord has declared it. Zechariah is simply recalling this oath and what's interesting is that this oath is the only time in the Bible where God swears by himself.

It's a very intense oath that God swears. The highest level of oath he swears and it is bound to happen because of it. And once again, deliverance is described as being so thorough and certain that it's referenced in past tense.

So, it's a settled matter. God has declared it. It is as good as done. But we see that the salvation described here serves a purpose. The Lord saves us out of his mercy.

[19 : 01] Why? So that we can serve him. Now, we see this at the second part of verse 74 if we go back to Luke chapter 1. That we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

That we are saved by God so that we may serve God. He blesses us so that we may be a blessing. And he does it in such a way that the fear that we might have will begin to subside and we will be made holy and righteous not because of the things we do but because of the blessing that God bestows.

in other words true Christianity the true faith of the Bible it not only delivers us from our enemies but it infuses us with lives of purpose and meaning that are directly connected to God himself.

Not a project that lasts for a year or ten years or even this life but a purpose tied to him that continues on into eternity.

Much of what we talked about in our Ecclesiastes sermon series was about finding a purpose beyond this life rooted in God and here we see this reality go back to Genesis chapter 22 and continue on into the New Testament in verse 74 and 75.

[20 : 30] To be delivered from fear and evil and selfishness it is a wonderful thing but it is lacking ultimately if we cannot use this gift for the benefit of others.

So you see the very high point of human existence is to serve God for in doing so we proclaim his glory and his goodness he is the only true and worthy God and this actually ties back to the commissioning that God gave David for David himself he was to create a house for the Lord or his son was rather and that house was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations that the religion of the one true God Father, Son and Holy Spirit was to stretch out all over the world for all people through God's servants like you and I.

God so he gives us an eternal purpose one that is not faddish or self-serving but one that gives us ultimate meaning in this life and the life to come so we see that with the Davidic covenant and now with the Abrahamic covenant!

the child of David the child of Abraham that God saves us from and saves us for and yet as good as this may sound salvation as wonderful as it is we find ourselves still on this side of salvation of this side of putting our faith and trust in the Lord still continuing to have dark hearts struggling with sin

struggling with the problem of evil struggling with lives given to self-exaltation so how will God help us?

where is the hope? and this brings us to our third point where we look at John the Baptist Zechariah's son verses 76 and 77 this is Zechariah speaking to his son now 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 in the forgiveness of their sins what is remarkable about these two verses is the placement in Zechariah's song listen okay Zechariah like Abraham he is an elderly man whose wife is barren a lot of shame in the ancient world with that a lot of kind of divine displeasure was thought of for people in Zechariah's shoes I would think that the moment his son is born I would break into song about my son about God doing this miraculous thing for me and yet it's not until many many verses down many many lines of the song does he then look to his son he addresses not his son first but the son of David the son of Abraham it's not that

[23 : 37] Zechariah doesn't love his son at all rather he is understanding the purpose and place of his son in salvation history John a child of blessing is ultimately not the child of blessing John the baptizer was not the fulfillment of a covenant promise like the offspring of David or Abraham but he would fulfill a prophecy found in both Isaiah and Malachi that spoke of this again mysterious person that would go before the Lord and prepare the way for the Lord very specifically that he would turn people's hearts towards the Lord and then towards each other he would call God's people back to himself to the Lord in repentance so by the time Luke 3 comes about there's quite the fast forward the narrative jumps quite ahead and we see John a grown man and he's doing just this he is calling people to humbly admit that they are without hope apart from God that both the self-righteous and the self-condemned need to surrender themselves to God's mercy repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins trust yourself entrust yourself to the Lord here we see that John's main role will be to make this clear to his fellow

Israelites but he was quite the character if you know anything about John we won't read about him he was a bit of a wild man he wore camel's hair he lived in the desert he ate locusts he ate honey he had long hair he was not exactly a conventional religious leader but he was Israel's first prophet in centuries and what's really interesting here is his demeanor the way he went about things he completely bypassed the conventional religion of the time and what he did by doing that is he forced the various religious sects those that claimed to have the corner on biblical faith to drop their pretense of religiosity and seek a genuine and authentic walk with the Lord so John's words in ministry they're significant and worth considering especially for people quite frankly like us who enjoy a pretty high level of self-sufficiency being put together is something that is something we pride ourselves on and by the way

I will just say this being put together is totally fine the Bible doesn't condemn it wealth is not evil later in the Gospels we have a very very prestigious member of the religious elite who will risk reputation and income to give Jesus an honorable burial some of the earliest patrons of the church were wealthy people of high society so the Bible doesn't oppose such people however such people often mistake their wealth for their own doing that they are the masters of their own destiny and the scriptures consistently condemn this kind of heart this kind of self righteousness they're hypocrites John calls such people a brood of vipers and Jesus will call them whitewashed tombs so John's message is very pertinent for us because we can at a moment presume that we cannot save ourselves and we throw ourselves at the mercy of God and then the next day that self righteousness comes back in with full force and the darkness seems to return and what John's ministry is is to call us to repent and to look back at the Lord and to always be about confession not presuming our own righteousness but asking humbly for the Lord to make us righteous and to forgive us of our sins that's a nature of repentance so as we reflect on these short verses verses 76 and 77 what jumps out is an exhortation to us to be people of repentance to not presume that the darkness is far away from us but that the darkness is ever encroaching that the shadows they seek to cover us up but rather we would turn our hearts to the Lord so we have considered David's son Abraham's son and now Zechariah's son we now turn to the final section which does not mention a son explicitly but points to the very son of God in fact the entirety of the Benedictus Zechariah's song is just that look with me though at verse 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 the darkness will be gone for the sun will drive it away but not because the sun shines

interestingly instead it's because the sun will come to us it will visit us and now we see that Zechariah's song is bookended with God visiting us and then also the sunrise visiting us which is in a way a very strange kind of way to describe sunlight what isn't strange if we dig in a bit deeper is that this idea of visitation it shares the same root word as the term we use for bishop or episcopate this idea of someone who examines and cares for others an overseer with authority concerned with one's overall well-being it is a position and function of a loving care the light that shines into the darkness is both this expression of God's mercy but also

[30 : 16] God himself it is God who will visit us it will be God who oversees us God who is concerned with our well-being who cares for our souls so that we will no longer sit in darkness and that death will not overshadow us so Jesus Christ born in Bethlehem it's proof that God has indeed visited his people and shone light to dispel darkness once and for all and if you remember at the beginning we talked about Malachi chapter 4 it is a prophecy that the sun will rise and we see that it is fulfilled in Christ the sun of righteousness that rose with healing in his wings the sun has dawned the morning has dawned the sun has shone and yet and yet there's a lot of and yet and yet it seems that darkness still exists okay darkness still exists the sun has shone he shone 2000 years ago he continues to shine but darkness still exists death still overshadows so many across the world and once again we find that we cannot speak of the first advent of Christ without thinking about and speaking about the second advent

I'll wrap up with this because the day followed the night because the Lord had visited us and redeemed us being born in Bethlehem and especially because Jesus crucified died and was buried did not stay in the ground but rose to new life we can be sure that he will come again because the promise made to Abraham and to David and to Israel through Malachi came true 2000 years ago we can trust that it will happen when we don't know but that Jesus will come again and that when he comes he will fulfill the sure victory that was a foregone conclusion 2000 years ago we can have a great confidence that God has visited us that his desire is to oversee us and shepherd our souls friends trying to say is this is the life of faith we don't understand why the darkness persists in the degree it does now but we can be sure that because the light has shone in the past it will shine again and that darkness will be dispelled forever the beautiful thing about the end of the Bible is this picture of what the new heavens and the new earth will look like and I'm sure it'll be even better than how we can even imagine it as we read about it but one of the key characteristics about it is that it will always be sunny it will always be the sun will always shine that God himself will be the source of light so we put our faith in the shepherd of our souls the one who oversees the one who visits us that with him the light of dawn the bright morning star we will never walk in darkness but have the light of life and then we go back to the beginning of the benedictus and if we're thinking about this and dwelling upon this and considering it and wrestling with it and then by faith take it that it is true then the result will be not like a that is nice interesting information but ought to result in us like

Zechariah breaking into song and praise blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people our response is praise ultimately one of the beautiful things about Christmas is the richness of the hymns and carols we sing and on that note I'll close us off by reading a section from O Holy Night that is just so wonderful and connects so beautifully with the benedictus long lay the world in sin and error pining till he appeared and the soul felt its worth a thrill of hope the weary world rejoices for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn