

Zechariah's Benedictus

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Preacher: Walt Alexander

[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Luke chapter 1, if you look with me in verse 57. This is the word of God.

It says,

It's more religious than at Christmas. Now, I know we all go to church a bit more around Christmas, but that's not what I'm talking about.

It says,

[5 : 05] It's more surprising. Each year we do the same things. The same things we've always done, the same traditions. And it's precisely because they're the same that they help us.

They remind us that Christmas has gone by and prepare our hearts for the wonder of Christmas again. But while our Christmases are filled with so many of the same things, wonderfully predictable.

It's important to remember that that first Christmas was anything but predictable. The people of God was suffering under Roman rule. They were longing for the good old days, the days of David and Solomon.

They're longing for a king. Suddenly, God comes in a way that few imagined. The coming of God at Christmas doesn't begin in a palace or a temple or among the religious elite.

It wasn't a plan concocted by the men in power. The coming of God at Christmas begins with two ordinary women living in the hills and their babies.

[6 : 12] The coming of God at Christmas begins with songs of wonder and praise from two ordinary people about the salvation of God breaking into the world through the birth of these babies.

Last week, we studied the humble song of Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus. This week, we will hear the dumbfounded song of Zachariah, the aged father of John the Baptist.

This song is a blessing. It's a blessing to God. It's a blessing of praise to God. It begins, bless be the Lord God of Israel. And for this reason, Zachariah's song has traditionally been called the Benedictus, which is just the Latin word for blessing because of how it begins.

This morning, though, we're not just going to hear Zachariah sing. We're going to be invited in to join him in blessing the Most High God for his surprising visitation and full salvation taking place.

Jesus Christ, where we're going to the word is, blessed be our God who has mercifully come to save the lost. Blessed be our God who has mercifully come to save the lost. We're going to break this out in three points.

[7 : 24] First is the crisis of faith. Zachariah's crisis of faith. The story of Zachariah begins nine months before this day. Zachariah is a godly priest of the people of God, but he and his wife are old and without children.

One day, while burning incense in the temple, as a priest would often do, an angel of the Lord appears to him and says, his wife, Elizabeth, will soon give birth to a son.

But not just any son. The angel says, this son will be filled with the spirit and will make it ready a people for God. Zachariah cannot believe what the angel said.

He's old. His wife is old. He's advanced in years. And Zachariah does not believe what the angel says.

So the angel of the Lord makes him deaf and unable to speak, perhaps unable to spread his unbelief. Until all that's promised takes place.

[8 : 28] Nine months later, as the cycle goes, his wife, Elizabeth, gives birth to a son. Our text takes us into this wonderfully vivid and beautiful scene.

There are few circumstances in life more distressing than being unable to conceive. And all the hill country around Judea know all about Zachariah and Elizabeth. They know they see him in the temple.

They know that they're righteous walking in the commandments of God. But they also know that they're old and that they have not had a child. And they're unable to have children. And so when Elizabeth gives birth, they all gather in to celebrate with her.

Look at verse 57. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her.

And they rejoiced with her. These neighbors and relatives hear that the Lord has shown this mercy. But it's not enough for them to hear. And they make their way to Elizabeth to see this baby, to take in.

[9 : 33] And they make their way to celebrate with her. Such a wonderfully vivid and powerful scene. As you know, in life, there are a few things, a few greater kindnesses we can do to those around us.

And to weep with them when they weep. And rejoice with them when they rejoice. And so here we have this beautiful scene where the baby finally arrives.

But Zachariah is still unable to speak. The scene shifts in one verse to eight days later when Zachariah and Elizabeth bring their son to be circumcised.

After the procedure, a discussion arises as to what his name will be. Presumably they waited until after the circumcision to decide.

It shouldn't feel so bad if you come home from the hospital and still don't know what that chap's name is. Zachariah is unable to hear or speak. And so the people ask Elizabeth, what is his name?

[10 : 36] What is this wonderful little boy's name? And she says he shall be called John. Now the people assume that he'd be named after his father, particularly this first and only son.

So they respond, John, why wouldn't he be called Zachariah after his dad? They think surely Elizabeth has this all wrong.

So they begin making signs to Zachariah because he's unable to speak, unable to hear. So they begin making signs as to what they should call this son. And now if you remember, the angel said to Zachariah that he wouldn't be able to speak until all that is promised takes place.

So we naturally assume that he'd be able to speak as soon as this baby arrives, right? All that is promised takes place when this baby comes into the world. But he doesn't.

He doesn't get his voice until this very moment. Look down at verse 16. Three. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, his name is John.

[11 : 43] They all wondered. Immediately his mouth was open and his tongue loosed. What a vivid description. And he spoke, blessing God. I just love this.

He doesn't get his voice back until he names his son John. Only then does the promise come true. We can put it this way. God waited to keep his promise until Zachariah acted in faith.

For nine months, Zachariah's been unable to speak, unable to hear. For nine months, he's been alone in his thought. For nine months, he's been seeing this baby grow and this baby kick and pondering what the angel said.

And now he's here to say, his name is John. Now, unless we be confused in saying his name is John, Zachariah is not merely believing that this son is a gift of God.

Now, certainly he is. This son, after years of infertility and barrenness, this son is a gift of God. But what Zachariah is saying by naming his John is that this son is the gift of God to prepare the way for the Savior.

[12 : 52] So he emphatically writes his name is John. Not shall be, not will be, but is. Zachariah's faith is tested by fire and found to be genuine.

Now, I find it striking that one of the main characters of Christmas story is a man who wrestles with fear and doubt. Christianity is filled with many things that are hard to believe.

There's nothing harder to believe about Christianity than the story of Christmas. Dr. J.I. Packer says, well, real difficulty, the supreme mystery with which the gospel confronts us does not lie in the Good Friday message of atonement, nor in the Eastern message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of incarnation.

The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth is God made man.

The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic. So unbelievable. As is this truth of the incarnation.

[14 : 13] Now you may be a bit like Zachariah. Kind of difficult to believe the story of Christmas.

I mean, there's Jonah and the whale, and it's a resurrection. Did it all come from Adam and Apple? But God becoming man.

Maybe you have a hard time celebrating. Maybe you just have a hard time believing God is real at all. Remember, as a seventh grader, unable to sleep because of the fear of what would happen when I die, it just ceased to exist.

And all the things that wrapped up in the life that I call life, were they nothing? After I die. Maybe you have a hard time believing that all the Bible is true.

That there's a glorious heaven on the other side of this life. You may struggle to believe. You may struggle with doubt. Doubt is not unbelief, but wrestling with belief. Kind of hanging between unbelief and belief.

[15 : 23] But you don't have to stay there. I think this little story is tucked into our Christmas story to remind us that God comes for all who are far off.

Even those who find it hard to believe. So how do we come to believe with certainty? We may come to believe with certainty when we're brought under suffering by the hand of God like Zachariah made deaf and dumb.

But that's not the main way. The Bible's prescription for how to believe with certainty is being persuaded by the promises of the Bible.

You know, some people say faith is a blind leap in the dark. Or believing even when you don't understand. I think I know what they're saying, but in some ways I don't know what they're saying. Or faith is just to believe even when there's no evidence.

But Christianity is not a faith without evidence. Christianity is a faith based on a word. On the promises of God. Faith comes by hearing, Romans 10, 17 says, and hearing through the word of Christ.

[16 : 29] And I think that's what happened to Zachariah. For nine months, the promise of God played through his mind until he came to the certainty that we call faith.

That's what can happen to you. Obviously, faith is not found within. But in the word of God, there you'll find ample footing. To stand on all that the Bible says is true.

Point two, Zachariah's blessing of God. So Zachariah's blessing of God immediately after his tongue is loosed, as we just saw, Zachariah began blessing God.

And the rest of our text unfolds that blessing, unfolds that song that he sings, immediately sings with his newfound ability to speak.

But Luke tells us, look at verse 67. He said, his father, Zachariah's filled with the spirit and prophesied, saying. So Luke is telling us, he's not merely blessing God, not merely singing to God like we did this morning, but he prophesied.

[17 : 38] What that means is he's declaring a spirit-inspired commentary on all that's taken place. That's what the prophets did. They came after the great works of God and said, this is what all that means.

So that's what Zachariah has done. The people have gathered to celebrate an old barren woman suddenly able to conceive, but filled with the spirit, Zachariah is calling them to celebrate the salvation of God that's breaking into the world.

This day of celebration in his song is not about a woman being able to have a baby again. It's wonderful what it is. It's about God breaking into the world and keeping his promise to save.

Look at verse 68. He says, blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, raised up the more of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from above.

Note, already Zachariah is all in the past tense. He's visited. He's redeemed. He's raised up. Hey, I thought this was the beginning of the story.

[18 : 44] What are you talking about? He's visited. He's redeemed. He's raised up. He's not using the past tense because everything that has, has to happen has already happened. He's using the past tense because everything that has to happen is now certain to happen with the birth of John.

God is doing what he promised from of all, as we'll see from Malachi 3 and other places. These verses are littered with references to the promise of God. It says, this horn of salvation will be in the house of his servant David.

We just sang that. Precious son of David. You remember God's promise to David? You remember if God said he would have a son who would sit on the throne?

I will be to him a father. He will be to me a son. In 2 Samuel 7. Isaiah 9. Literate throughout the Old Testament. Zachariah is saying that son has arrived.

It begins in the house of David. It is God remembering his holy covenant. Look at verse 72. He continued to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.

[19 : 58] The oath he swore to our father Abraham. His covenant is holy because it's reserved for the people that he set apart.

It's not anybody's covenant. It's the people of the Lord's covenant. It's holy because it's reserved for those to whom he swore an oath through Abraham.

In Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22. Now we have to remember for hundreds of years, the people of Israel assume that God's left.

They assume God has forgotten them and forgotten his covenant. There are no more kings. There are Herod and his cronies, but they're puppet kings.

They act like they're people of Israel, but they're not. There's no more prophets to reassure them. They're in their own land, but they're under Roman rule.

- [21 : 02] Zacharias says, God has not forgotten. I love that phrase. His mercy promised and his holy covenant. Mercy promised, holy covenant. The wonder of wonders is not that God remembers and thinks of us.

Sometimes we text people, thanks for your thoughts. You know, I like that. That really moves the needle. You are thinking of me. You know, the wonder that God remembers is not that he thinks of us or has kind thoughts on us.

But then in remembering, he moves to act. That's what's going on here. God is moving to action. So what's the purpose of God remembering his covenant and keeping his promise?

Look down there in verse 71. He just says bluntly that we should be saved. That we should be saved from our enemies.

And there's obviously a reference to political enemies there. But as taught by the prophets, the people know that their main enemy is not outside them any longer, but inside.

- [22 : 08] Their main problem is not idolatry. A bell or aster or something like that. The main problem is the idols that have crawled into their heart.

Their main problem, our main problem is slavery to sin and the punishment sins deserve. One of the albums we love to listen to at Christmas.

I also often listen to it on the way back from wherever we are for Thanksgiving. To prepare my mind for Christmas is an album by Andrew Peterson called The Whole the Lamb of God. He has one song in there that captures their cry and indeed our cry wonderfully.

We have a few. I'll resist the urge to sing it. But he says our enemy, our captor is no Pharaoh on the Nile. We're no longer in Egypt under Pharaoh.

Our toil is neither blood, mud, nor brick, nor sand. Our ankles bear no calluses from chains.

- [23 : 14] Yet, Lord, we're bound. In prison here we dwell in our own land. 2nd verse. Our sins, they are more numerous than all the lands we slay.

Our shackles, they were made with our own hands. Our toil is our atonement.

It's the only thing we can pay. The toil of suffering under this and our freedom yours to give. So Yahweh, break this silence if you can.

The chorus goes, deliver us, deliver us, O Yahweh. Hear our cry, gather us beneath your wings tonight.

That's the cry of the human heart. Describe everyone who sins because everyone who sins is a slave to sin, as our Lord said, and unable to free themselves of sin.

- [24 : 23] But Zachariah is saying, God is breaking his silence. For 400 years, the people have been crying, deliver us, deliver us.

The only answer is the silence of God. But now, breaking the silence, God is saying, as it were, I have a way to rescue you. I have a way to set you free.

I have a way to break the bonds of sin and death. God is saying, I have raised up the horn of salvation. Those words are literally to me. I'll tell you, he raised up many deliver us.

But this time, he's raising up the horn of salvation. The horn picture is an ox with a hornet. Pushes out above his head. He's able to thrust into any of his enemies.

He's able to defeat anyone who's standing against him. And so, this horn of salvation then will deliver us from all our enemies, including sin, slavery, and death. This horn of salvation is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 22] So much so, Luke would go on to say in the book of Acts, there is salvation in no one else but this horn. But there's no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

So, he comes. He keeps his promise that we may be saved. But he continues. If you look down there in verse 74, that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear.

God doesn't save us so that we kind of hang out in that saved posture, but that he might set us free to serve him.

God is working a salvation that those who trust in him might be completely free from all the bonds of sin, guilt, punishment, and curse that might serve him without fear. How can we be without fear?

How can we who are slaves of sin, unable to free ourselves of sin, serve the holy God without fear? How can we be free of all fear and worry and anxiety and apprehension to serve the living God?

[26 : 33] How can we be like Kevin in Home Alone? It's kind of a rotten movie, but that's not an endorsement. He walks outside, you know, towards the end.

I'm not afraid anymore. I'm not afraid anymore. I'm not afraid. How can we who've been crying deliver us, deliver us, deliver us, say I'm not afraid?

It's unthinkable. It's only possible if God clears away all the judgments against us once for all. And that's exactly what God is doing in Jesus Christ.

God has cleared away all the judgments sent against you. God has hushed the law's loud thunder against you. God has quenched the fire of wrath against all the ways that you have strayed.

Zeppaniah 3 says, The Lord has taken away the judgments against you. He's cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord is in your midst. You shall never again fear evil.

[27 : 38] Now, just think about this. Think about who this is coming from. Do you remember the first thing the angel said to Zechariah? Do not fear. That was his immediate response to this angel coming to him.

And now he says to us, There are no more reason to fear. The Lord will never, ever, ever give you evil.

The Lord will never, ever give you what you deserve. The horn of salvation, Jesus Christ, was raised up on a cross so that his horn might be crushed under the wrath you deserve.

So that all you'll ever receive from God is grace. Point three, Zechariah's blessing of John. So he blesses God, and then he turns to his son.

It's not hard to wonder what's going on in John's, or in Zechariah's heart, as he turns to bless his son that he's longed for and prayed for.

[28 : 49] He begins by telling his son that he'll be a prophet. Look in 76, he says, A new child will be called the prophet of the Most High.

The prophet of the Most High God. This title for God has already been used in Luke chapter 1, when the angel said of Jesus that he will be a son of the Most High.

So Jesus will be a son of the Most High. John will be a prophet of the Most High God. But he's more than a prophet there. Verse 76 again, For your child will be a prophet of the Most High, but for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.

Jesus thought highly of John, as we know all throughout the gospel. And in Luke 7, as he's teaching about John, he's telling us that he's more than a prophet. Look there with me. He says, What did you go out into the wilderness to see?

A wreath shaken by the wind. What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing. Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in king's courts.

[30 : 08] That was not John, as we know from the description of his clothing. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you. And more than a prophet. This is he of whom it was written.

This is Malachi 3. Behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you. Jesus' point that he's making may seem not as important.

The questions, though, make it clear. He doesn't say, Who did you go out to see? He saw somebody in the store. Who did you go out to see? That's not what Jesus says. He says, What did you go out to see?

He's underlining something other than John. He said, What did you go out to see? Then he quotes Malachi 3. He said, God will send a messenger. Jesus said, John is a prophet, but he's more than a prophet.

John is the promise of God to prepare the way. So when you begin to talk about the identity of Jesus Christ, Jesus said, Look to John, because he's the prophet who has promised to prepare the way for me.

[31 : 13] And Zechariah goes on to say, You will give knowledge of salvation and the forgiveness of sin. Look at verse 77. You'll go for the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of God.

Salvation, although this passage is all about rescue from slavery to sin, securing for us forgiveness of sin, rescuing us from sin.

Now, we've called this series of messages from Luke 1 and 2, our Advent series. Now, I don't know if you grew up using that word, Advent.

I had to be introduced to that word several years ago. It's just a word that means coming or arrival. Over the years, the church has used the four weeks before Christmas as a time of preparation to anticipate and celebrate the coming of Jesus.

Jesus. One way you could use this Advent is to meditate on the reality that you needed a Savior.

[32 : 32] Meditate on the fact that your sin and your slavery to sin was so great that the only answer was the sin and your sin was so great.

The sin and your sin was so great. John Piper says it well. Meditate on the fact that we need a Savior. Christmas is an indictment before it is a delight.

If you don't need a Savior, you don't need Christmas. Christmas will not have its intended effect until we feel desperately the need for a Savior.

Thomas Watson says, the old Puritan says, until sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet. So I want to commend to you getting more acquainted with your need for a Savior.

I began a book just over my vacation called Of the Mortification of Sin and Believers. Not exactly your most exciting reading, but it's a wonderful book designed to help me see the reality of my sin.

[33 : 55] So I would ask you, have you grown numb to sin? Have you grown comfortable with sin? Gossiping about your neighbor?

Lashing out a family member? Neglecting prayer without a thought? Putting your interest above others? Are you still grieved by sin?

When's the last time you wept over your sin, not the sin of others to you? You can ask your family or friends, if you dare, whose sins and failures do I seem most aware of?

Mine? For others. Advent can be a gift. Because before Christmas would be a delight, it must be a delight.

You may need to face this for the very first time. Congregation this size. You may need to face to really face the reality.

[35 : 11] Christmas was not just about God saying, you're a pretty good person. Christmas was about God saying, you had no way to heaven unless life came from there.

You will not know you're found until you know you're lost. This could be a wonderful time to meditate on these things.

Is Christ, yes, he's a great savior, but is he your savior? J.C. Ryle helps us. He says, the life of Christianity, says Luther, and this is Ryle quoting Luther, Martin Luther, consists in possessive pronouns.

You understand what he's saying there? It is one thing to say, Christ is a savior. It is quite another to say he is my savior, the possessive pronoun.

He is my, the Lord. The devil can say the first, the Jewish Christian alone can say the second. So can you say it? The Bible says today could be the day of salvation.

[36 : 31] You'll humble yourself and come to Jesus receive forgiveness of your sins and new life through his death. Zachariah concludes with a breathtaking picture of how desperately lost in sin they were.

Look at verse 78. He says, because of the tender mercy of 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 tender mercy of God comes like a sunrise on those who sit in darkness in the shadow of death. How beautiful is the sunrise after a long, cold night and the mercy of God is like that.

The tender mercy of God is like a sunrise that pierces into dark, deep shadows to places under the shadow of the fall.

wherever the curse is found, the sun is coming to rise on all who are lost and ruined by the fall. Just a few days ago, my wife and my two eldest kids got back from a two-week trip to Vietnam.

[37 : 46] You might say, why would you go there? Our family was privileged to visit a number of relatives of my wife's still in Vietnam. It was a truly remarkable trip.

I ate my way through the country, I can tell you the details of all the meals. There were other things we did, but mainly ate. One day, we were able to visit Hanoi, which is the capital of Vietnam in the north.

We were most of the time in Saigon in the south. And we were able to visit the Hualo Prison, the infamous prison called the Hanoi Hilton by POWs and the Vietnam War.

Not for its plush setting. It was filled with propaganda about how well the Americans were treated in that prison.

I've read enough to know that's not true. Walking through those walls and into the rooms where they were mistreated was chilling. As my daughter said, it was intense.

[38 : 58] The solitary confinement cell was especially chilling. On one side of this tiny room, maybe four by seven, something like that, the big iron door, where stocks on one side of the room were stocks.

for the feet of prisoners. And then the floor declined away from the stocks. So that when the prisoner's feet were bound, when he tried to lay down to rest his lower back, all the blood rushed to his head and rushed into excruciating pain.

The prisoner there would receive two measly meals a day. But worst of all, he was unable to see anything but pitch black darkness.

Only allowed to be in this confinement for one month because that condition is enough to not only break a man's body, but a man's whole constitution.

can you imagine being released from the torment of that prison? I remember years ago reading the story of how Kushner, an American POW, who spent five and a half years in the Hanoi Hill.

[40 : 32] In God's kindness, unlike many who were there, he did not doubt it. He was released, and I want you to hear his words of what it felt like.

While standing in custody at the Hanoi airport, he says, and I quote, they called out our names, and I walked out into the sunlight.

The first thing I saw was a C-141 with an American flag emblazoned on the tail. I was overwhelmed. I almost fainted.

I can't describe the deep emotion that I felt when I saw it. There was a table with Vietnamese and American authorities on one side, and there was an Air Force Brigadier General in a Class A uniform on the other.

He looked magnificent. I looked at him, and he had a thickness that we didn't have. He had his hat on his garrison cap, and his hair was plump, moist, and our hair was like straw.

[41 : 39] And I went out and saluted him, a courtesy that had been denying us for so many years, and he saluted me. I shook his hands, and he hugged me.

He actually hugged me. Just imagine, you know, touch for so long, and he said, welcome home, Major. We're so glad to see you.

The tears were streaming down his cheeks. It was a powerful moment. And then this officer came out and got me and escorted me onto this C-141. He continues, they had these flight nurses on there, and we got into this thing, and we sat on the stage, and one nurse said, we have anything you want, what do you want?

He said, I'll take a coat with some crushed ice and some chewing gum. See all that saying. He never imagined you'd get out of that prison, but the darkness and the shadow of death you and I were under is so much greater.

The sun has risen. Isaiah told us the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them this light shone.

[42 : 53] John declared, in him is life, and the life was the light of man. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And so we bless, we bless our God who has mercifully come to save the lost in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for the privilege of sitting under your word. Now, Father, we offer ourselves to you sincerely and completely. We don't want to know you just as a Savior, but as our Savior.

We don't want to know you as just a Lord, but as our Lord. Or even as a treasure, but as our treasure.

we offer our hearts to you. We pray that you would come to clean house and draw all those who are far off to Jesus.

And all of us, come and prepare us for Christmas. We thank you and praise you. In Jesus' name. you've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

[44 : 15] For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com. to you to see you in a in little