

Light in the Darkness

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[0 : 00] Turn with me to the Gospel of Luke. Luke chapter 1, and we're going to read from verse 67, which is headed, Zechariah's prophecy.

Luke chapter 1, beginning at verse 67. Now hear God's word.

After his father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, 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, he, 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, and 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 in the forgiveness of their sins.

[1 : 42] Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sun rise 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. And the child grew up and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. Amen.

I've noticed over the years that if I drop what I want for Christmas into my sermons, then it eventually makes its way back to my wife, and I get the thing that I want.

Well, I can honestly say that I've never really dropped anything into my sermons. I've dropped it in before the sermon or throughout the evening service, but hopefully never into the sermon.

But the sermon here, or the message here, is to get us to look at one thing in particular, but in the context of everything that we have read.

Zechariah's prophecy is primarily about the coming of John the Baptist, but the coming of John the Baptist is the forerunner to the Lord Jesus Christ. And Jesus is seen in verses 78 and 79, in particular. John the Baptist is seen in verses 76 and 77, and you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High. John the Baptist, as you know, is the last prophet in the Old Testament.

[3 : 32] This is something that I frequently point out to students at the Bible College, that Jesus is still in the Old Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is still the Old Testament. The New Testament is the New Testament. The New Testament is the New Testament. The New Testament is the New Testament. The New Testament and all the references to the temple and the temple sacrifices only make sense if you're still in the Old Testament. And so because they're all there in the Gospels, it's quite clear to see that the Gospels are the Gospel message being spoken in the Old Covenant times, which brings in the New Covenant.

And so John is the forerunner to Jesus, and he's mentioned in verses 76 and 77, he's the one who will give a knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of sins. So John's purpose is to point to Jesus and to say, look, the way that you get ready for Jesus is not by relying on the Bible that you have in your home as sort of the anchor to think you're saved, but to repent and believe in Jesus. Then in verses 78 to 79, we have references to what Jesus will be and what he will do.

And so Christmas is all about the birth of Jesus. It's all about that God is finally with us in this sense, and that he has come to dwell amongst us, but to bring us a message, but also to do something for us that we cannot do for ourselves. The interesting thing is, is something that I've noticed over the years, the more I've thought about it, is that the Christmas that the world enjoys is based on the Bible.

It just so happens to be based on the wrong part of the Bible. In other words, they've taken a certain section of scripture and made a modern day Christmas out of it, and that modern day Christmas

has taken the focus off Jesus Christ. And the verse that they tend to focus on is, and they gave him gifts.

And they gave him gifts. So much of what the world enjoys to be Christmas, much of what Scotland enjoys to be Christmas, is based on the Bible, but the wrong part of the Bible. The focus is on the gifts that wise men gave to Jesus, and the world has reinterpreted that as, we've got nothing to give to Jesus, we just now give it to each other.

[6 : 20] And so what has happened is, and so what has happened is, all the focus, in quite a biblical way, or rather a misappropriation of the Bible, has been taken off of Jesus onto gifts. There's been a shift in the focus away from the sun to what the gifts were that were given to the sun. And so the Christmas that Scotland enjoys is not really the Christmas of scripture, it's not really the biblical Christmas of a God who came because he loves us, who sent his son because he loves us, to seek and to save us from our lost state, to forgive us of our sins, so that we can enjoy a real relationship with God.

That's Christmas. Or at least that's what Christmas is pointing to. And so what Zachariah's prophecy does for the reader, does for the listener, is it basically readjusts the lenses. It gets you from thinking how you would normally think, to thinking how you really ought to think. Not to concentrate on the wrapping, but actually to concentrate on the gift. And if we concentrate on all the other parts of Christmas, then what we're actually concentrating on is the wrapping more than the gift. The gift being Jesus, the wrapping being everything else. Jesus is the very thing that the world needs, and that is what Zachariah's prophecy is ending. Why the world needs Jesus. That's the Christmas message. It is God looking at the world in need, understanding what that need is, and recognizing that Jesus is who the world needs. It is, believe it or not, who my next door neighbor needs. It is who, believe it or not, the neighbors across the road need. It is who some of my family need. It is who some of my old workmates need. In other words, what are their needs? Well, they will come up with a list that I could never get close to, but their need is Jesus. But they don't see it. And Zachariah's prophecy explains quite clearly why they don't see their need being Jesus. Now, every now and then, and I want to point out that it is every now and then, not all the time, God's gift to children always outdoes the parents' gifts to the children. And this is seen on Christmas Day occasionally where the child opens up the present and they tear off the wrapping paper and they take the gift out the box. And suddenly the box becomes the thing that they're sliding down the stairs on. Okay. It becomes the thing that they're climbing in. Take me up. Take me up. I think, oh, this is a great Christmas. Take you up, put you in the other room and go on, go for it, Houdini.

Okay. And they love the box. The gift that is taken out is put to one side and they just love a big box. If there's anything, you know, that you've bought that's big and they sit in it, they just spin me around in it, push me in it, do whatever you like. They love it. And all of a sudden you begin to realize that as a parent or as an adult that is given a gift to a young child, that I should have just bought a box and wrapped it, you know, a good heavy duty box and they would have loved it. And you begin to realize at that moment that the gift that God gives of imagination to children outdoes almost every gift that parents can actually give their children. I have a wonderful book on my shelf called 10 Ways to Destroy a Child's Imagination. The book is not encouraging you how to do it, by the way, but actually it's written from the point of view of how the world is destroying the imagination of children. And so God has gifted us for so much and so much of it goes missing, but we see it in children and that imagination. Well, in many ways, God's people could have only imagined what the coming Savior would have been like. And the trouble with imagination is that in reality, if it appears in a different way, you don't always see it first. And that was certainly a case for some people. But what will it actually look like? Not the imagination, but what would it actually look like when God's or God himself comes on earth? Well, Zachariah's prophecy explains what it'll be like.

Now, I want to point out something that you'll get immediately. Most people can tell the difference between a picture of a beach and the beach itself. And many people can explain the difference between a picture of a house and the house itself. But when it comes to Jesus, we tend not to be able to do that.

[11 : 27] We get it all mixed up. The difference between the picture of something and the reality of something is quite easy when we're looking at pictures on the wall and understand that that's a picture of a reality, but it's not the reality. But when it comes to Jesus, we tend to mess it up big time.

So God here, according to Zachariah's prophecy, is both the gift and the giver of the gift. But people end up missing Jesus because of what he comes like. You see, when Jesus comes, he looks like us, he talks like us, he eats like us, he sleeps like us, and so on. In fact, at the beginning, he's wrapped up in cloths. He's probably feeding off his mother's breasts. He looks like any other baby. Whether or not he cries, I think crying is not necessarily a sin. So I'm just going to assume that babies do what babies do. And many people miss it. They miss it. Now, I want to point out that Jesus' humanity, the fact that Jesus became human, is incredibly important to understand how Jesus saved us. But at the same time, it was because God became a human that many humans missed him, because he looks just like us. Most people are expecting God to be so much different than us. But here we have God coming in the flesh, and don't miss him.

Jesus points out quite frequently that there's a big difference between the wrapping and the soul. Your body is the wrapping to your soul. Your body is the very thing that gets you around on earth. When you present your bodies, you present this blood, this bones, this flesh. As you present yourself tonight, you're doing it with your body. You can't do it any other way. Those who tell me, they are with me in spirit.

Present your bodies, Jesus says in Romans. And so God here is sort of not disguised, but actually taking on the form of human man, of a human being. And for some people, they just can't get their head around the fact that God would actually come in that way. And you need to get to the cross to actually fully understand why Jesus had to be human. And so don't miss that this is God just because he looks like us, sleeps like us, walks like us, talks like us. Well, Zachariah's prophecy includes John the Baptist, and John the Baptist gets us to look at Jesus. That's his role. He gets us to see why we need Jesus. He begins by affirming in the prophecy, Zachariah, that Jesus was always promised by God, verse 73, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies. In other words, Jesus was always a promise, and now the promise is realized. Now I can actually see what God's promise looks like firsthand. God is a promise keeping God because the world needs Jesus. Now when the promise is made, people are waiting for the promise to be kept. And John the Baptist, in many ways, it was sort of a minor promise that he will go forth and prepare the way for Jesus. And that is exactly what he does. He gives knowledge of salvation as we read. But then as we read that the knowledge of salvation that he gives includes when we listen to him, that we are to repent and believe in Jesus. Now stop right there.

[15 : 21] Every now and then you get those bracelets that say, what would Jesus do? And people put them on their wrists. The trouble is, you're not Jesus. I'm not Jesus. Now what Jesus would do is very different than what I can do. I can't do what Jesus can do. So there's a much more important question to ask, and that is, what would Jesus have me do? Okay? Because I can't do what Jesus does. So what would Jesus have me do? And I think at this point, he would have us be like John the Baptist, pointing to Jesus. He wants us to point to him just like John the Baptist does. John the Baptist can't save anybody. He can only point to Jesus who can save people. Now how important is that? Well, John the Baptist says that the way that you point people to Jesus is by calling them to repentance.

It's very difficult, isn't it, over a Christmas dinner table where you've got auntie or uncle, you know, who raises, you know, the... And so what about this predestination then?

Well, God planned that you would say that. And then you sort of make a joke and you move on. But there is one thing that we always need to say. And that is, you can understand the first thing about Jesus Christ for salvation until you repent and believe.

believe. We have not gone, we have not shared the message of the gospel unless we have shared that people need to repent and believe. I know, listen, I know it's hard. I know it's tough. I know what it's like to have people not speak to you because you've said it. Even family members. But if you really love them and you really want to point them to Jesus, then you are called to tell them to repent and believe.

So what would Jesus do? Well, Jesus is Jesus. But what would Jesus have you do? Well, I think he'd have you be like John the Baptist of telling people how Jesus is their need.

[17 : 56] Jesus, rather, John, is nothing more than a signpost. I've often said that I'm nothing more than a postman. My job is not to make up the message or even to write the message.

It is simply to deliver the message. In other words, I'm not led to say anything that God hasn't said. I'm to give God the microphone and I'm to keep my big mouth shut. And John, in many ways, is the

signpost. He's not allowed to do anything other than point to Jesus. He can't save anyone. He can't forgive anyone's sins. But he knows who can. And so while John the Baptist is prophesied here as being the forerunner, he is pointing us to verses 78 and 79. The whole point is not to focus on John, but to understand that we're to focus on Jesus. But this is what he says in verse 78. That John, verse 77, is to give the knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of sins. Here's the reason why. Because of the tender mercy of God. Now, mercy is similar to a pardon. But this needs to be understood carefully. Imagine for a moment I received a prison sentence. Would you come and visit me? I said, no. You sinner. [19 : 23] Repent. Imagine I received a prison sentence and just before the sentence is drawn. I receive a pardon.

Now, you understand that if I receive a pardon instead of the sentence, it means that I don't go to prison. The trouble is, that's not mercy. We tend to think, for instance, that if I was stood in a court and I'm on trial and someone from the gallery comes up and shoves me out the dock and stands on trial for me and they get sent to prison instead of me as, you know, they're my substitute and I get to go free, that that's mercy, that that's pardon. But that isn't mercy, that isn't pardon, and it doesn't reflect the cross or Christ, even for a moment. In fact, it's very unjust. Because I'm still guilty. And the person that's taken my place is not guilty. And the judge is pronouncing a judgment on somebody who's not guilty, why the guilty go free. Well, that's not mercy. [20 : 35] It's not pardon. That is completely unjust. And so the mercy, the tender mercy of God, is found in Jesus, who knew no sin but became sin, became the guilty one, so that you could go free. Because God can't bypass his own justice. He can't let guilty people off. It is a non-negotiable. All sinners must die. Now, you can either die in Christ with the prospect of resurrection, or you can die outside of Christ with the only prospect of eternal separation from God. But substitution, the tender mercy of God, is God giving us Jesus to become the guilty one, so that we who are guilty can be set free, declared no longer guilty in Christ Jesus. That's mercy. That's what it means by Jesus being the tender mercy of God. It is not a, right, I'll let you off.

That's not mercy. That's wrong. It's injustice. And so we must be very careful when we're explaining pardon and mercy, because that is often the way that we explain it. [21 : 57] We explain it in terms of substitute, but the substitute is getting blamed for something that he's done nothing wrong. That's not what the gospel is about, even for a moment.

And so the tender mercy of God is Jesus. And the reason why it's tender mercy is because he becomes the guilty one, why we who are guilty become innocent and free and forgiven. See, only at the cross can you explain God's mercy and his justice and judgment of sin. And the only way you can explain it is in Jesus, who became our guilt, who became our sin. Jesus died so that you could die, but so that you could die with a prospect of resurrection. That's why it's so merciful, because all sinners must die. It's a non-negotiable. And so you will notice that the tender mercy of God is for those who sit in darkness. And you'll notice that there are two darkness here in verse 79. [23 : 06] First, there is the darkness that you sit in, and then there is the darkness of a shadow, the shadow of death. And so there are two types of darkness here in Zechariah's prophecy.

The first darkness is the spiritual darkness. Here's the reason why people can't see God, because they're living in a dark world. They are spiritually in a dark room where they cannot see anything of God. And so they need the light to come into the world in order to see God, the light being, of course, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the light to give light to those who sit in darkness. We cannot see God clearly without Jesus Christ. But then, of course, the shadow of death, which is also dark that we all sit under. We tend to forget that all sinners must die, even Christians, sinners. But we die with the hope of resurrection, because we die in Christ. [24 : 11] And so what you're meant to see here, what John actually wants you to see is this, that sin is connected to death. Sin is connected to death, and the forgiveness of sins is connected to life and peace with God.

I think we tend to forget, because we've lived with it so long, that death is actually very unnatural. Death is not a natural part of the life that God created.

Death is penal. Death is a judgment. Meaning that the reason why people die is because of sin. Now, I was speaking with someone just the other day, whose wife is a doctor, and we were having this conversation over that doctors still can't figure out why people die.

The cells in people's body do not explain the reason why people die. In fact, the cells are designed in such a way where they could live forever, but we don't.

So when you're trying to ask a medical person, why do we die? They just can't tell you. But we have come to believe over the years, because so many people die in so many countries for such a long time, that death is natural.

[25 : 32] But death is not natural. Death is penal. The wages of sin is death. That's why people die. And so the reason why forgiveness is connected to life is because it's the forgiveness of sin.

And the reason why sin is connected to death is because the wages of sin is death. Don't ever forget that. That the reason why people die is because the wages of sin demands it.

And the only reason why people live is because the forgiveness of sin gives them their life back. That's the tender mercy of God.

Now I've said at the beginning that most people are able to tell the difference between the picture of something and the reality. The trouble is that most people can't do this when they get to Jesus and the darkness and the shadow.

Now if you've ever been sat out in the sun, which I assume you have been, and you've been sat still long enough, you might have experienced shadows crossing you. That as the surrounding buildings or the surrounding walls or whatever it may be, the surrounding trees, as you sit there in the sunlight and as the day goes on, the shadow of the tree or the wall or the building or whatever it may be begins to encroach on you gradually but surely until it finally covers you.

[27 : 09] And that's what it means here that we all live in the shadow of death. That that shadow of death, that future death, is creeping over my life.

And more of that shadow covers me now than when I was first born. And more of that shadow covers you because you're older than me. And so we all live with this looming shadow of death. But the trouble is, you can't feel a shadow. We pass through shadows. It's one thing to be hit by a shadow.

It's altogether another thing to be hit by the reality of the shadow. It's one thing to be hit by the shadow of a bus. It hurts a lot more if you're hit by the bus.

And so here we have people sat in the world while the shadow of death is encroaching upon them and they don't feel a thing. But they will feel the death and it'll hurt.

[28 : 16] But the prospect here for those who belong to Jesus means that they will pass through death like they pass through shadows. That's what it means.

That those who belong to Jesus will pass through death itself in the same way they pass through the shadow of death without feeling a thing.

Oh death, where is thy sting? It's gone. So every single one of us here sit in the shadow.

But will every single one of us here pass through death in the same way we pass through the shadow? So the forgiveness of our sins is absolutely central to us enjoying fellowship with God.

Death is completely unnatural but it happens because sin is real. The wages of sin is death.

Salvation is real but salvation is only found in Jesus.

[29 : 25] It's not found in church. It's found in Jesus in church but it's not found in church. It's not found anywhere else. It's only found in Jesus.

And so the message here is why is Jesus my greatest need? Well because it's only a matter of life and death. Jesus is your greatest need because it is the difference between life and death.

So it seems that while Christmas is looming upon us that most of the world do not enjoy the forgiveness of sins and do not see that the real meaning of Christmas is the tender mercy of God to release people from the darkness, the spiritual darkness that they live under and the approaching shadow of death with death on the other end.

And yet, because of God's tender mercy, Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness and Jesus is the light that shines in the approaching shadow of death and Jesus is the one, the only one that can forgive men and women, boys and girls of their sin.

That's the message of Christmas. That's the message that you'll be telling people if people ask you what is the message of Christmas. That God who is rich in mercy, incredibly rich in mercy, has given us his son to save us from death itself.
[30 : 59] Amen.