

God's love in zechariah's prophecy

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[0 : 00] Please, if you turn in your Bibles to Luke chapter 1 and verse 67. I'm going to read Zechariah's prophecy up to verse 79.

Well, we'll read up to verse 80. 80 is sort of an additional part, not to the prophecy, but explains further.

So now hear God's word, beginning at verse 67. And 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, 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 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, and you will go before 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 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.

[1 : 59] Verse 80, And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

Well, may God bless the reading of his word. We're going to look at this by keeping the context that we had this morning, and the context found here, that God is love.

And let me just explain what I explained this morning, just as a reminder, that if God is going to love the world, then God has to come to the world.

God has to come to the world because God is love. He can't send love without sending himself. His love cannot come down to us unless God himself comes down to us.

Now, this is different from loving actions. Human love is often linked to actions. Some are good, some are bad, and therefore we determine whether or not we are being loved or whether or not that is loving by what we link those actions to or how those actions are linked to what we think love is.

[3 : 27] But God is love, and therefore, if God is going to love this world, then God is going to have to come to this world. This is how the world enters into God's love and how God's love is felt in the world.

Zachariah's prophecy, however, explains sort of the outcome of God's love. He talks about the Lord Jesus Christ in the sense of the promises are kept by him, and then how John the Baptist is the one who will be the forerunner to him who actually brings the salvation.

So we're sat here this evening, and we shouldn't be able to measure God's love by necessarily what we're feeling or what we feel God is yet to do for us or has done for us.

All of those things matter. But what I was trying to get you to understand this morning is that if we truly appreciate God is love, then God's love for us cannot change because God cannot change. And therefore, God cannot be loving one day and not another day because God cannot be God one day and not another day. So we begin to appreciate the depth of God's love and, of course, the poor quality of human love.

[4 : 50] God's love is so deep and wide, as we often sing, that it just really cannot be compared to human love. And so we should never think of God's love being just a better version of ours.

It's not even the same. What we have here in Zachariah's prophecy is the actions of God, which, of course, are loving actions.

God's love is felt. It has an impact in the world in different ways. Redemption, salvation, mercy, goodness, knowledge.

All of these things include the nature of God themselves, which is love. Now, the main point or the main way a person, the only way, really, that a person actually comes to appreciate God's love is firstly through Advent, the Advent of Christ coming into the world.

And then, of course, as we finish this morning by saying through everyone else having their own personal Advent, where Christ comes to them personally, that it is a point of conversion.

[6 : 02] Now, this is where repentance becomes obvious and faith becomes obvious. Conversion is what we get after we have been regenerated by God.

It is those gifts. If a person has not received God, then they've not received God's love. If a person doesn't know God, then they do not know what love is.

And we can make that kind of strong statement because 1 John 4 makes that kind of strong statement. And it's a difficult one to make, I know, because human love exists.

And too often, people always think that whatever God has is just a God version of what humanity has. And that's not strictly the case.

God's love is very different than human love, but there is crossover. It would be like saying, well, God's fatherhood is like human fatherhood, only better.

[7 : 04] No, it's quite different. And quite different. And so we can't make those kind of parallels. Zachariah helps us to see the difference between someone who brings the message of salvation and someone who actually brings salvation.

He allows us to see the difference between someone who can speak words about the forgiveness of God and someone who can actually bring the forgiveness of God.

So we're back into the effectual love of God. The difference between us speaking of God's love and God's love actually being effectual in a person's life is quite different.

We can tell someone that God loves them and that may be a very loving thing to do, but it's actually the very love of God that will convince them.

We give them the knowledge, but the convincer comes from God himself by the power of the Holy Spirit. It's that inward witness of the Spirit where we have the assurance.

[8 : 10] This means that to tell someone to repent is an act of love. Repentance, if it is part of the good news, must be good. Repentance, if it's part of the good news, is an act of love.

When someone is repenting, they are doing something out of God's love for them. And yet too often we tend to think that all of this comes before God's love. No, God's love is effectual.

It chases us. It causes us to turn. And of course, men and women, boys and girls must receive the knowledge of this and God is at work all the time.

Now, if it is the case that God is going to love us, which he does, and it's the case that God must come in order for that love to be felt, which is what happens, then if forgiveness is an act of God's love, which it is, it can only be completed by one person.

It can only be completed by one person. And that person is God himself. And this is why Zechariah makes a very clear distinction in his prophecy between John who will prepare the way, in other words, getting people ready, lining them up, ready to meet the Messiah, and the Messiah who actually is able to do all the things that John is speaking about.

[9 : 33] And hopefully we can all see the difference between John the Baptist and Jesus. And we can all see the difference between us telling someone that God loves them and demonstrating as much as we can by telling them about everything that God did, all those actions.

But the focus of our attention this morning and partly this evening is to focus on how that love is effectual, that it brings that person to the place where they ought to be.

And unlike us, God is incredibly patient. God is incredibly patient. He is, he's slow to anger.

He's abounding in steadfast love. And we ought to remember this as we have prayed for the lost this evening. We really need to remember that when we think that God isn't answering our prayers. Because the way that God answers prayers is consistent with the way that God loves, is consistent with the way that God is. So if we can say things in one breath, that God is slow to anger and that he's patient and that he's abounding in steadfast love, it would be very difficult for us to then say, well, he's not answering my prayers.

[10 : 53] Because what we're doing is we're putting a time frame on it, saying, well, I expected it to be here by now, and it isn't. And I've said that one of the things that really brought this home to me

of how God works, and doesn't always take into consideration other people, is the amount of people I've known that have come to faith after their parents have died, and I've known their parents pray for their children, or their cousins, or whatever, for years and years and years, they go to glory without ever seeing those family members come to faith, and the moment they pass away and go to glory, guess who turns up in church?

I can't tell you how many times this has happened. And you feel like saying to the Lord, it would have been nice, Lord, if it was a month earlier, or two weeks earlier, it would have been nice if you could have just, but this God works with people individually.

That's how his love is patient towards each and every one of us. So, Zachariah's prophecy then works like this. The promises can only be fulfilled by one person, the Lord Jesus Christ, and John the Baptist is not that person.

John the Baptist prepares the way for the Lord Jesus Christ, but he cannot do what only the Lord Jesus Christ can do. Now, the world needs to know that it needs Jesus, because the world doesn't know that it needs Jesus.

Jesus coming to this world is what God says the world needs, but the world doesn't look at Jesus thinking, I need you. And John's job, as it were, his responsibility, as it were, is to get people ready to meet Jesus, to say, no, you really do need this person.

[12 : 48] You really do need to come to him for the forgiveness of sins. And so John's responsibility, as we see in this prophecy, is not only to prepare the way for the Messiah, but also to prepare people.

That's how he's preparing the way, to listen to the Messiah, telling them, look, this is the one whom God promised, and now he has come.

God knows what the world needs. The world doesn't know what it needs. And John is bridging that gap with information, with knowledge that he's taking out to the people that he is speaking to.

Jesus is the promised cat. He knows what people should look like. He knows what people needs, because he is God come down.

This is what it means for God to love the world. He has come. Verse 73 then makes it very clear that this is a promise kept, that the oath he swore to our father Abraham to grant to us that we've been delivered.

[13 : 52] Well, there's more to that promise than just that one thing. But what Zechariah is understanding that is that God at this time is keeping his promises, that Jesus Christ is a blessing to the world, and John the Baptist is a forerunner to Jesus.

Verse 77, that John the Baptist will go out, the last Old Testament prophet, will go out, and he will give a knowledge of salvation to people in the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of God.

He will go out and tell what Jesus can do. But you've got to remember that John is a signpost pointing to Jesus, and signposts can't do anything but point you to the real location.

And this is why none of you, if you're heading off to a beach that you've never been before, and suddenly you see the sign for the beach, you don't stop at the beach and get out your buckets and spades.

You're able to tell the difference between the sign and the reality. And this is something else that comes out of this prophecy. Too many people in this world stop at the shadow of things rather than the reality.

[15 : 12] They live in the shadow of almost everything instead of its reality. They live at the signs of almost everything instead of its reality. And this is what John is convincing the people, it's not me, it's Jesus that you're looking for.

So the tender mercy of God is, of course, God himself. It's not just an action, but it is God himself who is the tender mercy. When we read, for instance, John chapter three, as we sort of bypassed this morning, at least reflected slightly, that God so loved the world that he gave his son.

Well, that's the tender mercy. Okay? And that's the tender mercy of God. It's not the tender mercy of the wicked. Okay? Do you remember how in Proverbs, you know, the tender mercies of the wicked are evil?

Because what they do is that they can make you feel tremendously good or not bad about the bad things that you do.

And it's a tender mercy. They ease your guilt as a way of, you don't need to feel bad about that. You don't need to feel guilty about that. And it's a tender mercy of the wicked because what they're not telling you is that one day you're going to have to give an account for all of that.

[16:34] So while it may come across as though they're being your friend and they're being friendly and you're hearing things that you want to hear because it gives sort of like the necessary easement and comfort at the time, it's the tender mercy of the wicked which is actually evil.

Because you're withholding from them the truth that can set them free, the truth that can actually forgive and justify and bring them to God, God's truth.

And so what we're learning here is, no, this isn't the tender mercy of the wicked which exists in the world. It's a bit like someone saying, you don't need to repent for that. In other words, you know, Christ died for a lot of things.

He didn't die for that. Only he did. You know, and the trouble is is that when the church begins to function in a way where they commit certain sins which they believe it doesn't require Jesus' death to atone, I mean, that's really quite serious.

No, this is the tender mercy of God. Everything is included, but everything is dealt with in light and in love. And this is where the difficulty is found.

[17:50] Because when we experience God's love, we experience God's light with it. Light exposes. And this is why people hide themselves in John 3.

Because they don't want their evil deeds to be exposed. But God's light comes with God's love and love covers. This means that when God exposes your sin, he doesn't do it in front of everyone else. He's simply showing you what he sees all the time. That's all that God is doing. When God exposes our sin to us, he's simply showing us what he sees all the time.

And that love is the love that then purifies us. It's the love that sent Jesus. It is the love that forgives us from our sin. So light in love in verse 79, you'll notice that John, and of course, ultimately, the Lord Jesus Christ gives light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet to the way of peace.

John, of course, leads us to Jesus, but it's Jesus who really leads us out of those shadows, out of that darkness. Jesus is the one who is the light.

[19:07] And the darkness here is not a physical darkness, but it's the fact that there is such a thing as a spiritual darkness where people do not know about the things of God.

They do not know what God requires. They do not understand what God's love is. They do not see anything that is of God properly understood.

They do not see the desperate condition they are in because they live in a world where they have the tender mercies of the wicked. There's enough people in this world to make you feel good about yourself at the expense of your own salvation.

Okay, there's enough people in this world who can say plenty of good things and the way that they get away with it is by convincing the world that nothing doesn't have to last forever anymore.

People aren't too concerned about eternity. What they are concerned about, however, is will it at least last for my lifetime? That's the area of focus.

[20:12] When people consider the decisions they make, who they marry, where I go, money, house, all of these type of things, when they're not convinced of eternity, the one thing that they are convinced about or that really bothers them is will it at least last the amount of time that I have to live on this earth?

And here we are trying to teach them that actually what really matters is eternity. What really matters is the light and the love of God because beyond your life is a reality that you're not yet ready for.

And it becomes very, very hard to proclaim this message in a world where people are quite happy not knowing or wanting eternity but they are definitely wanting for things to last as long as they live. And therefore it becomes incredibly difficult to witness to people who have things that will last for the length of their lifetime. They are what you called settled. And John, you've got to remember that there's people in John's day who might be in that category but there's a whole host of people who don't have their daily bread.

They know that they're to trust God on it but it really has to be a trusting environment. And so this is the tender mercy of God to say wake up people and know that Jesus is both the light and the love of God in the flesh.

[21 : 43] Death of course is not natural. Death is penal and this is not something again that we're too interested in hearing. But the reason why people die in the world and that it's always been this reason is because they're sinners.

People don't die for any other reason. People may die in different ways but all people die because they are sinners. the wages of sin is death.

Everyone dies for that one reason. Everyone dies. It's a non-negotiable. Everyone has to die. What the Christian message is is you can either die in Christ with a prospect of resurrection or outside of Christ with no prospect of resurrection and eternal life of God.

We all die. That's the message of the gospel. The message of the gospel is how in Christ we overcome the wages of sin which is death. That's what it is.

That's the love of God in action. It causes us to die in Christ. It's the only way to die safely. It's the only way to die with a prospect of new life because we all have to do it because the wages of sin is death.

[22 : 59] Everybody dies for that reason. I understand that people leave this world in different ways. Some are accidents. Some are terrible atrocities.

Some are ill health. There's a number of different reasons. But at the end of the day we all leave this body. We all live this life for one reason and one reason alone. And that is the wages of sin is death.

But the Christian message is a simple one or at least it really ought to be understood to be this simple. That you can either die in Christ with a prospect of resurrection or you die outside of Christ with the fear of only meeting God to give an account for your life.

All sinners die but they either die in Christ or out of Christ. And so when John is saying preparing people this is the kind of reality that people have to be faced with.

Will you have your own advent? Will God come into you in the same way that he has come into this world? And so we all notice the difference between passing through a shadow which we're able to do and not able to pass through the reality of that shadow.

[24 : 14] So we all live in this world though different for us because we belong to Christ but we live in this world in the same way people sunbathe in a garden. That as they sit there enjoying the blessings around them the shadow of the objects around them over the course of the day begins to unfold over them.

The shadow is growing over the people in this world. Everyone lives in the daylight and the shadow of death is creeping over men and women boys and girls and soon it'll be everybody's night time.

Soon it'll just be and then you're hit with death itself. And so we all know the difference between having the shadow of the tree cover us and the difference of actually the tree hitting us.

And what is being said here is to give light to those who sit in darkness in the shadow of death to guide our feet to the way of peace. In other words what the message here is that this what does salvation look like in practical terms it's removing you out of the looming shadow over your life into the eternal light where there is no shadow or variation due to change there is just light and love of God.

But I want you to consider that as you think of those who you know and love who are not saved as someone sitting in the garden with that shadow over the course of the day coming over them until they're ultimately in complete darkness and then one day they'll be gone.

[25 : 52] You know when I was in Dumfries with my father-in-law we were out and he told me to pay great attention to the clouds and I asked what do you want me to look at the clouds for?

I needed a reason to look at the clouds and he says well just tell me which direction they're going in and I said well they're coming from there and they're going over here and he said yeah now he says now tell me where do you feel the wind?

I said the wind is blowing right against my back forward and he said well put the two together does it make sense that the clouds going in one direction and the wind is coming in the opposite direction I said actually now you pointed that out doesn't make any sense at all he says in the next five minutes there'll be a thunderstorm and in the next five minutes there was a thunderstorm he was able to read because he loves weather he was able to read you could say the signs of the times and anticipate what was coming next growing up in Cornwall I spent huge amounts of time in the sea as you might imagine you know ten months of the year we would go surfing and I've stood on enough shores to know that the tide goes out and it comes back in and I know that the further it

goes out the further it's going to come back in and so when I saw those terrible pictures on TV of a tsunami of that water disappearing from the shoreline I knew what was coming next because I've seen it so many times it doesn't make me smarter than anybody else it just means that I've lived with that reality so long that

I was able to notice what was happening people are living with a shadow creeping over them and they have no idea what's coming next it's the shadow of death death is coming next and it's only God's light and love that leads us out of that to guide our feet into the way of peace Jesus Christ not only is the light and love of God that leads us out of the shadow he is the one who actually absorbs the death itself on the cross but here's a few considerations as we close we began by considering this evening what we considered this morning that if God is going to love this world then God is going to have to come to this world because God is love if God is love and we experience God's love then God is going to have to be here we also learn in John 3 and John 5 that God declares his love for his son this is my son with whom

I am well pleased God declares the love for his son and Jesus on the cross before the cross explaining in John 14 verse 31 says that I do everything that the father has commanded me so that the world may know I love him in other words when Jesus forgives sinners as he does his public ministry the lesson you're meant to get from that is this is what love for the father looks like when Jesus comes to storm in the boat and sort of rescues his disciples what we are meant to understand from that is this is what love for the father looks like when Jesus is quiet before his accusers this is what love for the father looks like when Jesus is tortured and when he is crucified this is what love for the father looks like Jesus out of his own mouth says everything that I do everything that I do I follow all the commandments of my father so that the world may know [29 : 41] I love him in other words Jesus wants us to understand what the love of God actually looks like in actions and that's what we see in the life of him we have hopefully seen then that when God's love is communicated to us in whatever way it is communicated to us primarily through the Lord Jesus Christ but of course now it stretches out into the world in different ways we're meant to understand that it's effectual it causes change in this world the Christian life is not one where we reciprocally where we reciprocate to the love of God but it's one where we are caused to love God back consistent with how he has loved us and we can never do it to the same degree this is why a reciprocal love couldn't work because we could never match God's love for us we couldn't even get close to match it notice then how in Zachariah's prophecy verses 73 through to 75 he says this that God has made a promise he swore it to

Abraham a long long time ago that one day would come when we would be delivered from the hand of our enemies so that verse 74 at the end that we may serve him without fear verse 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all of our days Zachariah understands what the love of God means he understands what it means for God to keep his promise it means that this will result in me serving God so remember Jesus as you think about that who says I do everything that God commanded me so that the world would know that I love him well Zachariah is saying the same thing God's love for me results in me loving him in this way well here's the exhortation as we close we might just think mightn't we that with love being as good as this that nobody would have any difficulty in receiving it that if love truly is this good and this great that it doesn't condemn and that it doesn't expose but it covers our sin and takes our sin away then why could anybody have trouble accepting it but a careful reading of the gospel will show that they did reject it that it was difficult to receive and if we truly believe that God is love as we are told that God is love and we know that God loved this world by him coming to this world then we're able to understand different things one of those things is this that it wasn't just Jesus who his own received him not his own people did not receive the love of God it wasn't just Jesus who was despised and rejected it was the love of God that was despised and rejected it was the love of God that was full of sorrows and acquainted with grief when we consider that God is love and therefore God came we don't consider that it's just God who's being rejected but actually love that is being rejected it is love that is being pushed aside so we live in a world where we think it's easy to receive love it's incredibly difficult to receive love sin causes us to reject love not just God but love because God is love so here's the final thought we proclaim that Advent is God loving the world and we proclaim this because we've said time and time again this evening and this morning that God is love if the world is to know God and to know God's love then God must come God the other thing that we recognize is that because God's love is God then God's love for us does not change and it cannot change God isn't going to love us

today and not tomorrow and therefore we have complete assurance that he's not going to love the world today and not tomorrow we can go out into this world knowing that God still loves it we can go out into this world knowing that God's love still has its value and its quality and can still be met by men and women boys and girls we're still here giving a voice to say how it happened so as we sit here this evening or as we stand here this evening recognizing that we are reciprocants of God's love that here we are being affected by God's love right now in all the hymns that we are singing in all the prayers that we are praying and how we're listening to God's word we are the outworking of God's love for us we ought never to think that we're able to do this all by ourselves we are actually doing this at this very moment because God's love is at work within us God's love is effectual causing us to love him in this way we love God as 1 John says because he first loved us amen that again is friend oh many person■■■■enia or other being oh