

Blessing, remembrance, and Deliverance

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 December 2018

Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 00] If you'd like to turn in your Bibles, please, to Luke chapter 1.

While you're doing that, may I say this evening that it's really going to be a service led by other people. The way this evening's service will go is that it will be led by singing to begin with, as we normally do, to open up a carol service, as you would expect.

But then some of the younger men in the church, some of the boys, to counterpart the girls' choir, they're going to be reading. They're going to be leading us through our readings this evening through the Gospel according to Matthew.

That's hugely encouraging to have these young men come up and read the Bibles. So as you look at them, please smile and just encourage them, okay? Don't look at them like you look at me.

You're like, oh, yeah. You know, I'll forgive you because it is a period of grace and forgiveness. Just wait until the new year. Yeah, just encourage them because it's, for me, it's a real pleasure to have these boys willingly under no, no, they weren't forced.

[1 : 19] They just said, would you like to? And every single one of them said, yes, I would like to very much. And they just did it. And that's a real indication to me of just a little bit of growth and maturity in young men.

And we must protect both the young men and the young girls that they grow up. You know, it may, I may come across as though I want to overprotect, but I can assure you it's not overprotection at all.

It is simply the correct measure given the type of world that we now live in. So, please encourage them. Just look at them and smile. That's all you have to do. Okay. Let's practice now.

I'm liking it. That's enough. That's enough. Okay. So, Luke chapter 1, beginning at verse 67, and we'll read through to verse 80. This is known often as Zachariah's prophecy, or rather Zachariah's declaration.

And we'll begin at verse 67. So, now hear God's word. And his father, Zachariah, 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.

[2 : 51] 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 of 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, and the forgiveness of their sins. Because of the tender mercy of God, whereby the sun rise shall visit us from on high, and 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 and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

Well, may God bless his word, and we'll come back to that after this next hymn together. Okay.

[4 : 11] So. Well, over the last few weeks, we've had, I think, a real privilege to be able to spend the time looking at the Advent, the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yeah, for many different reasons. Not only does it remind us of what God has done, and that's important to be reminded, dude. It's also important to, again, see things that perhaps we've forgotten, or to see things that perhaps we've never seen before, never witnessed before. And I guess, like anything, that the rereading of the text allows us to see things that perhaps we've missed or forgotten, and it just, again, enlightens our mind with the view of changing our heart. I guess all Scripture, it comes in through the eyes and it comes in through the ears, you know, but it has to make its way down to the heart. Why? Well, I think because if it doesn't, there's no change. You simply witness something like a nice scenery or a nice painting in a gallery, but the moment you move away from it, you're left without that in you. The Word of God is meant to drop, it's meant to permeate your whole being, including your heart.

Excuse me. Advent, then, is a period of absolute change for the world. There is no doubt about that, that as we read these words of Zechariah, it's true that Zechariah's prophecy is concerning John the Baptist, but Zechariah's prophesying the one who will prepare the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. You know, and this is the big difference between a sign and a destination. You know, many of you, perhaps, if you ever go to a beach or go to a place that you're looking for, you don't stop at the sign. You know, there's a beach that I quite like down in Dumfries and Galloway called Carrick. I get to the first sign of Carrick. I don't stop there and then get at the bucket and spades, because I understand there's a big difference between a sign that points to the beach and the beach itself. And in many ways, to stop with John the Baptist is a bit like to stop at a road sign, when the road sign is telling us to move on to the beach, move on to the final destination. And Zechariah's prophecy is giving thanks to God that there's going to be one John the Baptist who will move us on to Jesus, who will prepare us to meet Jesus. But here's the other thing I find striking about Advent, that I think we wait for Christmas, but we don't wait for Advent. I want you to think about it. Okay, we're going to say, well, that's a little bit unfair, Daniel, because the first coming of Christ has already happened. Okay, I agree that the first coming of Christ has already happened, but there is a second one. And that's a second Advent. I guess what I'm trying to say is, is that God's people throughout history ought to know that they live in a period of waiting. Zechariah is living in a period of waiting for the first Advent of Christ, and we live in a period of waiting for the second Advent of Christ. We all live in this period of waiting. And yet I don't think that we get that at Christmas. I think we wait for Christmas Day. I think we wait for meeting up with family. I think all of these things are good to wait for. But I think we lose the fact that Christmas is to remind us that God's people are a people who have to wait. We have to wait. We have to wait on the Lord as we wait for the Lord's coming. Now, that waiting period is extremely difficult, right? Because the trouble with waiting, you wonder, well, what do I do while I'm waiting? That's not so difficult for us because Zechariah is just about to tell us why we wait, or rather, what is the purpose that we now have because of the first coming of Jesus.

So, come the new year, you'll wait for Christmas to come around again, or perhaps not wait for it to come around again. It depends entirely on who you are. But Advent, how many of us here this morning live our lives in the spirit of Advent, waiting for Christ to return? In the same way Zechariah was waiting for the Lord to come. And I think this waiting is very, very important because I think it sets up your heart. It tells you where you are before the Lord. It tells you whether or not you think you've got time to do something else. Or, you know, Jesus told a couple of parables, didn't he, about, you know, what do you do in the time before Jesus returns? Are you going to be caught sleeping? Are you going to be caught distracted?

Are you going to be caught not waiting? So, I think this waiting period of ready to meet Jesus Christ is really, really important for God's people. And that's the second thing I want to point out here. That it is God's people who are waiting for the Messiah. Okay, you've got the exception of perhaps the wise men that came from the East, and you've got a few people like that.

[10 : 06] But nevertheless, it is God's people who wait for Jesus to come. In the first coming, and of course, we wait for his second coming. Why waiting? Well, in that waiting period, it's not as if God is inactive. It's not as if God is absent. It's not as if God isn't doing something. No, no, no. God is up to something all the time, consciously and forever attentive to the needs of his people. And the needs, no doubt, of the world. Hence, the reason for sending Jesus Christ into the world. One of the things that Zachariah's prophecy does, which is, it is a prophecy, but it begins with a blessing to God. And then it sort of moves into the prophecy when it speaks about the child who will prepare the way of Jesus. But it begins with this grateful thanksgiving to God, a blessing. Very similar to Mary's Thanksgiving in the Magnificat. We can speak on that in a moment, just how it unfolds. But more importantly, Zachariah gets to the purpose of life. You know, we hear a lot in the world about what is life's purpose. Well, it's not what you probably think it is. It's definitely not what the world thinks it is. But Zachariah also wants to make a keen distinction between filling your life with interests and having a life full of purpose.

Okay, I'm sure you have many interests, and I'm sure those interests are wonderful. And I'm sure you'll pursue them, and I'm sure you'll save money for them. And I'm sure you'll spend a lot of time doing them. But interest is not the same as purpose. What Zachariah is about to speak about here is about the purpose of life, not the life's interest that you may have. Here's a summary then of how it unfolds. Zachariah begins with blessing God in the same way that Mary begins with thanking God.

He then goes on to give the reasons for why God should be spoken well of. To bless God seems a very strange thing to do. But when you bless God, you are speaking well of God. And when a person speaks well of God, they have reasons to speak well of God. They know something true about God. They know something true about what God has done in the past, in the present, or in the future. So when a person praises God in words, in song, in prayer, it is because they are recognizing what God has done, what God is about to do, and what God is currently doing in the present. Mary's exactly the same.

Mary gives thanks to God, and then she goes right in to explain why God should be thanked. Okay, in other words, it's not an empty thankfulness. It's a thankfulness that recognizes why God should be thanked. I mentioned a few weeks ago, well probably quite a few weeks ago now, that I came across again the works of William Perkins. Just genius on every level. You know, this is back in the day where you kind of had no distractions, but you had to work by candlelight.

Okay, but nevertheless, his work is brilliant. Absolutely wonderful. And he reminded me of just, a Christian's greatest need is the need of God's grace. So important for a Christian to appreciate that. And the moment you do, then your life begins to thank God automatically into that fresh recognize, what you recognize all over anew. A fresh realization. How wonderful it is that when you recognize what God has done for you, it's not hard then to give thanks to God. But it begins with knowing what God has actually done for you in the first place. Okay, if you don't pay any attention, okay, I understand why your life doesn't give any thanks to God. Mary tells us why.

[14 : 21] The principle here in Zechariah's prophecy is that God is the giver of life. Understand that, that God gives you your life. And if God is the giver of life, then God is the giver of the purpose of life. We may give ourselves interest, we may find interest in other things, but purpose is quite different than interest. So I want to go through these four things very, very briefly. First, the blessing. Secondly, the remembering. Fourthly, the deliverance. And then we'll move on through that.

Here's the first thing, blessing. Zechariah blesses the Lord God. He speaks well of God because he recognizes. How does he recognize? Simply because of what's happening in his own life? Well, partly.

But also because he recognizes throughout history that God has been consistent with his people. God has taken care of his people. What causes a person to praise God? You could ask Zechariah, why are you praising God? Well, Zechariah could say because you need to understand that God has looked after his people in the past. He's going to look after his people in the future. And the way that he's going to do that is by bringing a saviour into the world. God sends a saviour into the world to seek and to save the lost we hear in the New Testament, to redeem people, to bring them into relationship with God. And that's the reason why we should give thanks to God. Zechariah praises God because he knows what God is about to do. He blesses God because he recognizes that God keeps his word.

You know, I'd like to think as a person, I keep my words. But I'm often pulled up by my children who say, but you said. But you promised. And suddenly I have to come to the sharp reality that, you know, I can't actually keep all the words that I've said because of other circumstances. I can't actually hold to everything that I've said. I thought that I could at the time of saying them, but then other things come along and suddenly the kind of semi-promise that I made can't be kept because I'm affected by other factors that don't allow me to keep that promise. You ever been in that situation?

Yeah, but you said. Yeah, but you said. Dad, but you said. Yeah, but you promised. I don't think I promised. You did. You promised. No, I really didn't. And 15 minutes later, but you said. What do you do?

[17 : 01] Well, you have to admit that my limitations are not God's limitations. What do I mean by that? Well, what Zachariah understands is that when God says words, he will back every single one of them up.

And there is nothing in the world that can stop him from fulfilling those words. Not so with me. I have good intentions and I speak those good intentions and then I'm caught out by a number of different factors. Could be anything from bad weather to not enough money. You said we could have an ice cream. I know, but I didn't think it's going to be seven quid. Right? And who hasn't been there?

You know? So those type of... God doesn't suffer from that kind of being called out. And this is what Zachariah understands. That when God says something, he will keep to it. And nothing in the world can stop that from happening. When God says he will send a saviour, the saviour will come. When God promises you life in the sun, he gives you life in the sun. When God speaks about sending his son again in the future, his son will come again in the future. Why? Because there's absolutely nothing in this world or outside of this world that can prevent God from fulfilling the words that he speaks.

And that's what Zachariah understands. That's why he blesses God. If God has said it, then it must be responded to. If God has said it, it must be taken seriously. If God has said it, then it's going to have a massive effect and change over my life. Why? Because God is spoken.

Zachariah blesses God because he knows that God keeps his words. And God can never be charged with one of his children coming to him and saying, but you said, but you said. If God has said it, then God will do it.

[19 : 10] Okay, here's the next thing then. Why God remembers. Remembering is one of those difficult things. Again, it's just another one of those things that we perhaps will get caught up in. Verse 72, it says, to show mercy, promise to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant. Again, this goes back to something that God has promised in the past that he has yet to fulfill in the future. And you are left in this waiting period. You know, when we use the word remembering, it's a less optimistic thing, isn't it? Will he remember? Well, it depends who it is, right? We often say to someone on the side, look, remind him because he won't remember himself. In other words, sometimes we have no confidence in a person remembering. Okay, and then we get further down the line and we're too afraid to ask whether or not they remember in case they actually do remember. Okay, so you want to go, have you forgotten?

No, no, no, I remember. I've just not got around to it yet. Waiting. Zachariah understands that God remembers. But his remembering is not like air remembering. Normally air remembering is a period of absence until we finally fulfill what we were asked to fulfill. Can you pick that up on the way home? Can you do that before the 15th? Can you make sure that that happens? And that period in between is almost a period of absence until it is finally completed. And only at the point of it being completed do we say, oh, he remembered. It's good that he remembered. God doesn't remember like that.

The way that God remembers is by a continuous attention to every part of life. When it says that God remembers you, it doesn't mean that he knows who you are and then forgets about you until the second coming. It doesn't mean that he knows who you are and then forgets about you until he sends his son the saviour into the world. No. When God remembers, it means that he has a continuous attention over your life and the affairs of your life, where you live, what you eat, what you do, what your future will be. For God to remember you, it is for God to care about every aspect of your life.

You know, I've sat in hospital with a few people that have passed away and they've had Alzheimer's. I can't remember a number of things. And yet, do you know what? I've spoken God's word to them, perhaps out of a just generally, or I've been reading to them. On one occasion, there was a lady with me and she started singing. And do you know what? Some of these people, not all, but some. One person in particular, I remember I was quoting a biblical verse out of the Psalms and he finished it for me.

And just that wonderful verse that God brings to our remembrance the things that are taught. Do you know, even the thief on the cross understood that it's not my remembering that counts, but God's remembering. Because what does he ask? Lord, remember me.

[22 : 22] Lord, remember me when you enter in. Okay. What does that mean? I mean, Lord, can I have your attention?

Can you give me some of your attention that I may not be lost? Can you take care of me? Can you remember me? Can you place your care upon me? And so when Zachariah says here that God remembers his holy covenant, it's not just about a promise once made that has to be fulfilled sometime in the future when I've got time to do it. No, not at all. It means that the holy covenant must be fulfilled throughout all of time. Every little detail must be taken care of. So many things need to come together in order for God to fulfill what God said he was going to fulfill. And then God fulfills it.

Why? Because when God remembers, it means that you have God's continuous attention over your life and the affairs of your life and the future of your life. This is why on a, if I can flip it, on the other side, why Christians can get so terribly frustrated with the way God treats them.

I know what it feels like to have my will rub up and collide with the will of God. It's called not getting my own way. And no doubt you know what it's like to have your will and your love and your desires and all your feelings to collide with the will of God. And it is because of God's continuous attention over your life that that collision happens. Because it's not as if God remembers you and then you can do what you like in the meantime. No. God is continually working through your life, steering you, directing you, guiding you, and leading you to the place where he wants you. God remembers his holy covenant. The covenant is not just making good on a promise made.

It's about direct involvement with your life, directing you through everything. And the next thing that Zechariah highlights then is the fact that because God remembers, because God speaks, God also delivers. Zechariah understands that they live in a time, God's people live in a time, where they are oppressed, they are persecuted by political powers, by spiritual just bankruptcy. They have nothing in them that can get themselves out of the situation that they are in. And when the Messiah comes, when the Savior comes, he will deliver them.

[24 : 57] out of the bondage they live in. Out of the spiritual darkness and the bankruptcy that they have to contend with. Out of the political oppression that they live within. It's no different today for some of God's people. You know, we live in almost absolute freedom. Some other of God's people throughout the world don't. What does that mean? Well, it means that God's promise is still being fulfilled.

It doesn't mean that God is forgotten about anyone. Remember, continuous attention. What it means is, is that God's promise is being fulfilled throughout everyone's life throughout the whole of time.

Let me put it a slightly different way. If you read the Bible carefully, you don't even have to read it that carefully, but if you just read it from beginning to end, what you'll know is this, that Noah knew more than Adam. Abraham, okay, knew more than Noah. Moses knew more than Abraham. King David knew more than all of them. And as you go throughout time, as God unfolds his plan, he reveals more.

He makes more promises. He tells you how it's going to fulfill. And so throughout time, you have this waiting period where God's people live within the framework that they have been given to live faithfully before God. And as they live faithfully before God, they do so with the revelation that God has given them until, of course, Jesus comes. And there is nothing more to be said because when Jesus comes, that is the final revelation. God has nothing more to say. Everything is said and promised and kept in the Lord Jesus Christ. What does that mean? It means this, there is nothing beyond Jesus.

There is nothing beyond Jesus. Okay, I've tried Jesus and I've moved on. Well, you've moved on to bankruptcy. You've moved on to darkness. Well, I've listened to Jesus, but there's nothing there for me. I'm moving on. There is nothing there. There is nothing there. Jesus is the final revelation.

[27 : 10] Jesus is the promises kept of the yes and amen to every promise made by God. There is nothing beyond him.

Zachariah understands that John the Baptist isn't even the final revelation. But John the Baptist will lead people to Jesus, who is the final revelation, who will deliver his people. Let me put it a slightly different way. You know as well as I do that in the past, God raised up prophets the moment he wanted to speak to his people. He raised up a prophet to do it. A prophet, excuse me, is someone who speaks to God, speaks to God's people on God's behalf. A priest, when God raised up priest, a priest is someone who intercedes to God on the people's behalf in order that communion be established. When God raised up judges, it was because the land needed laws and those laws had to be enforced. When God raised up kings, it was because there were nations to lead and take care of. But none of those were sufficient to solve the problems that the world have. So God raises up here the horn of salvation. He raises up salvation in the person of Jesus Christ. Why? Because that's what the world needs. Okay, fourthly, why? Why does God do any of this?

And why does it make any difference to me? Well, I'm saved. Okay. But what difference does it make? Well, notice what he says, verse... Excuse me.

Verse 73, 74, sorry. And we being delivered by the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear. Verse 75, in holiness and righteousness before him all of our days.

In short, the meaning of life, the purpose of life that all of God's people have been looking for and waiting for is to serve God without fear. Not to do their own thing. Not even to have their own way.

[29 : 47] Not to fulfill their own interests. But to serve God without fear. It seems then that the greatest purpose that your life has is not even found in you.

It's found in God. That your life only begins to experience the fulfillment that it longs for as you fulfill your purpose in serving God in whatever capacity he has given you.

If you're a farmer, then you serve him as a Christian farmer. If you're a businessman, then you serve him as a Christian businessman. If you're a nurse, a doctor, a policeman, a fireman, a pastor, a school teacher, then you fulfill that purpose.

But you do so for the glory of God. And as you do it, you do it by serving him without fear. But more importantly, over all of those occupations that you may have, and serving God in all of those areas for his own glory, to truly serve the purposes of God, is to do what John the Baptist did.

Lead people to Jesus Christ. To show them the Savior that God has raised up. There is nothing more enjoyable, nothing more fulfilling, and you know what it's like to perhaps sit down with someone and share the gospel with them, and you come away absolutely on cloud nine.

[31 : 24] Just the joy of being able to share with them the eternal truth of Christ the Savior. Zachariah understands that the purpose of life in this world is to serve God without fear.

And let me finish by saying a few things then, as the exhortation. One of the things that we get to appreciate by belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ is that there is a difference between happiness and joy.

There is a difference between purpose and interests. There is a difference between being stuck and being free. There is a difference between having a future from not having a future.

But all of those differences can only be seen if your eyes are opened to them. And one of the things that Scripture clearly teaches us is that before salvation, we are blind to the things of God.

We are deaf to the things of God. We do not feel them. We do not see them. We do not hear them. And it takes the Lord Jesus Christ to open us up to realize everything that we miss and everything that God gives us.

[32 : 34] So as you're sat here this morning, what are you thinking? Well, I'm just waiting for Christmas Day to come. Or I'm waiting for Christmas to be over. What if you're waiting for the wrong thing?

What if you're waiting here thinking, well, I hope I have that for Christmas. Or I hope I have that. In other words, another thing just to fulfill your interest. In other words, one of the reasons I think disappointments happens is because we have a bar of expectation.

When those expectations are not fulfilled, then disappointment creeps in. In fact, disappointment is nothing more than expectations unfulfilled. That's all that they are. And so the reason why this is repeated year on year, Christmas after Christmas, amplified by a new year, the disappointment kicks in, is because the interest that we have wear out.

And the novelty wears off. And as Thomas Chalmers says, he was a brilliant theologian, Scottish theologian, pastor, also mathematician, said this, that everybody lives their life in light of the expulsive power of a new affection.

What does that mean? It means this. The novelty of a new thing loses its power over you the moment something else comes along.

[34 : 00] How long do you think, parents, that those toys that you have bought your children will last? How long will the excitement last? You know, we'd be hopeful if we said a week.

Is it going to be a couple of days? Is it going to be a morning? And you all know that children are just a smaller version of adults at this stage. That the thing that they thought that they've wanted for so long, when they finally get it, just doesn't do it for them.

Just doesn't make the difference that they think it's going to make. There's a people who think that they'll go, and if they read this book, this book is going to make all the difference. And they read the book, or they don't even get finished with the book.

Because they realize halfway through, it's not making the difference that they thought it was actually going to make. God's people can live like that as well if they bypass Jesus.

But the world definitely lives like that. So here's the reality. Here's the reality. What are you waiting for? What are you waiting for?

[35 : 09] Because the thing that you should be waiting for, you have no need to wait any longer. Christ is already given him in the person of Jesus Christ.

The fulfillment that you long for, the purpose that your life lacks, is in the person of Jesus Christ. So I'll finish with this. Christians, this is a real challenge to you to serve God without fear.

This is a real challenge for you to drop your novelty interests, okay, and find your ultimate affection in Christ Jesus. In other words, the reason why you said those other things are so hard to let go, is because you haven't really engaged Christ.

And the reason I know that, it's like anything. We let go of anything if we find something better. I want to assure you that Christ is better, Hebrews 1.

Better than the angels, better than anything. He is better. And when a Christian understands that and gets that, everything else, all those other interests, they just go.

[36 : 19] They're not held on to. Okay, they may be enjoyed from time to time, but that's not where the purpose lies. Okay, so that's a challenge to you Christians this morning, isn't it?

It's a challenge of whether or not you find your enjoyment in interests or in purpose. I'll leave the challenge with you. Okay, but what about those amongst us who may not be saved?

Well, believe it or not, the challenge is no different. It's the same thing. You will simply go from one thing to another thing. Until you find the ultimate fulfillment in Christ Jesus.

And only in Christ Jesus will that searching, that longing, and that disappointment end. Only in Christ Jesus. Listen to the words of Zachariah as we close.

That we should be saved from our enemies. Sorry, I'll go back. as he spoke by the mouth, by the mouth, as he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of our servant David, as he spoke 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 to the promise of our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.

[37 : 35] to the oath he swore to our father Abraham to grant us that we be delivered from the land of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

That's the purpose of your life. To live for God the way God would have you live. Amen.