

After Darkness Light

*And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”
(Luke 1:30–33 ESV)*

*And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
(Luke 1:46–49 ESV)*

*“to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
(Luke 1:79 ESV)*

The Benedictus

December 19th, 2021

Luke 1:67-79

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I'd love for you to open it now to Luke 1:67-79. This morning we are looking at something that is often referred to as “The Benedictus”. I mentioned that many of these Advent stories and songs have fabulous names that have come down to us over the many centuries of church history. We looked at “The Annunciation” a few weeks ago; we looked at “The Magnificat” last Sunday, and this morning we are looking at the song of Zechariah that is traditionally known as “The Benedictus” because of the first word in the Latin version of verse 68, translated in our English Bibles as “Blessed”. Like any good Baptist hymn it has 4 verses or stanzas and one over-arching theme. The over-arching theme is praise and thanksgiving for the salvation that is coming into the world through the birth of Jesus.

This really is one of the most important passages in all the Bible. It is often referred to by Bible scholars as: “the last Prophecy of the Old Dispensation, and the first prophecy of the New”¹. It is a hinge passage – it is THE HINGE PASSAGE – this is the last prophetic word given BEFORE the birth of Jesus Christ. So it STANDS LARGE in the biblical canon. I. Howard Marshall explains why that is, he says:

“What we have here is initially a psalm of praise giving a divinely inspired commentary on the significance of the events which have begun to take place.”²

I like “divinely inspired commentaries” – it makes understanding things a lot easier. So we’re thankful for this song and once again we will take some time walking through it and appreciating it – but then having done that, I want to use this song, as we used The Magnificat last week, to correct and TUNE our hearts as we make our way toward the Christ of Christmas. I’ll begin reading at verse 67. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

67 And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people

69 and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,

70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

71 that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us;

72 to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,

73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us

74 that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear,

75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

¹ **No need to display as a slide.** This is for formal citation purposes only: F.W. Farrar as cited in Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 96.

² I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel Of Luke in The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 90.

**76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:67–79 ESV)**

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

I mentioned that this song of praise has 4 verses or stanzas to it – each offering thanks to God for a specific aspect of this great salvation.

A Song Of Praise And Thanksgiving:

The first thing that Zechariah thanks God for is the gift of a strong Messiah.

1. For The Gift Of A Strong Messiah

The first section in this song runs from verse 68-70. Look specifically at verse 69 – Zechariah uses an interesting phrase there, he says that God:

“has raised up **a horn of salvation** for us in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:69 ESV)

A HORN in the Bible is a symbol of power. So in Daniel 8 in the vision that Daniel had predicting the coming of the Greek Empire over the Persian Empire he says:

“As I was considering, behold, a male goat came from the west across the face of the whole earth, without touching the ground. And the goat had **a conspicuous horn** between his eyes.... And there was no one who could rescue the ram from his **power**.” (Daniel 8:5–7 ESV)

So in the Bible, HORN – equals POWER, metaphorically speaking. It can refer to a kingdom OR a particular leader. Zechariah appears to be using it here in the sense that it is often used in the Psalms of David. So in Psalm 18 for example, David says:

“The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and **the horn of my salvation**, my stronghold.” (Psalm 18:2 ESV)

God is like a WARRIOR – an OTHER WORLDLY POWER - who takes the field with us against our enemies, David says. Well, that is exactly what Zechariah is saying here. He is saying that in Jesus, GOD is taking the field against our enemies.

Hallelujah!

He has come to defeat our adversary and to restore to us all that has been taken from us – as he promised by the mouth of his prophets long ago. VERY long ago, in fact. All the way back in Genesis 3:15, God identified our enemy AND promised that a redeemer would come and triumph over him. He said to the SERPENT – our ancient foe – in the hearing of Adam and Eve:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15 ESV)

So God says that a hero will come – born of a woman – who will defeat our enemy, though not without cost to himself. The people of God had been waiting for this Warrior to come for many years – and in the birth of Jesus Christ Zechariah understands this prophecy to be fulfilled and so he gives thanks to the Lord. He gives thanks to God for the coming of a strong Messiah and he gives thanks as well for long awaited victory and freedom. That’s the focus of the second stanza.

2. For Long Awaited Victory And Freedom

You can see that in verses 71-75 of your English Bibles. The Messiah has come, according to Zechariah:

“that we should be saved from our enemies” (Luke 1:71 ESV)

“that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” (Luke 1:74–75 ESV)

The Old Testament believer understood that we had a life, we had a dignity, we had a calling that our enemy took from us. He deceived us into an act of rebellion, he led us down a path that led to diminishment and ruin. He wielded weapons over us that kept us in fear, subjection and cruel bondage – but Jesus came to defeat that enemy and set us free.

That was the mission!

The Apostle to the Hebrews says:

¹⁴ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,
¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (Hebrews 2:14–15 ESV)

According to the Bible the devil exercises two great powers against fallen men and women: the power of guilt and the power of fear.

The devil says to men and women: “You are sinners! You are covered in your own filth and shame! You cannot draw near to God – you must run away!” That is why in the Bible he is called the accuser of the brethren. He wants you to feel unworthy. He wants you to live and die outside in the dark. He whispers your sin and your failure. He tells you that you can never go home. He stands like a shadow and a threat astride the road and the bridge that leads to life.

His second power is the power of fear. He is constantly reminding men and women of their mortality: “You are weak and fragile” he says. “You cannot be what you were made to be. You cannot do what you were made to do. You are small now and you must be very careful. You must grab at whatever petty pleasures you can. You must live your best life now. There is nothing for you on the other side. This is all you get and what you have is fading fast.”

With this lie he makes us small, petty and dangerous to everyone around us.

But the Bible says that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ both of these weapons have been knocked out of the devil’s hands. The Apostle Paul says:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ **He disarmed the rulers and authorities** and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Colossians 2:13–15 ESV)

Did you hear that?

Your enemy is a naked fool.

He has the power of whisper and rumour only – he has no actual power over you – not if you are found in Christ.

If you are in Christ the devil can never again wield the sword of guilt against your soul. There is no RECORD OF YOUR WRONGS for him to use against you – Jesus set it aside forever, nailing it to a bloody cross.

As far as the east is from the west so far has he removed your sins from you. Your guilt is gone. Your debt is paid. And since that is the case, then you will never die; not in any real or ultimate sense. Jesus said:

“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:40 ESV)

So if you look to the life and death of Jesus Christ – if you cling to that in faith – if you identify with that through public proclamation and baptism - then you will have eternal life. Your body may fade and die, but it will be raised again new on the last day and you will see God in the flesh and enjoy him forever.

Thus the devil stands before you empty handed. He is a dog on a chain whose teeth have been pulled, and whose days have been numbered.

Thanks be to God!

That’s what Zechariah is singing about in this song. He is thanking God for a strong Messiah and for long awaited victory and freedom. He is also giving thanks here for the one who goes before – that’s the focus of the third stanza in this song.

3. For The One Who Goes Before

In verses 76-77 he is singing about his own son – he is singing about John the Baptist. You can see that – you can hear that – in the change of address. He says:

“**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” (Luke 1:76–77 ESV)

Now at first glance, we might wonder, if that’s appropriate. This is a song about Jesus, is it kosher to stick a verse in there about your own son, even if your son is John the Baptist? I think it is.

John the Baptist was actually a pretty big deal. Leon Morris says here:

“There had been no prophet among the Jews for centuries, so the words should not be taken too calmly.”³

It is a big deal that after 400 years of silence God was about to speak again. I could get excited about that – and I think it does warrant a verse in this song. The silence of God is a major theme in the latter half of the Old Testament story. It was predicted by prophets like Amos who said:

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, “when I will send a famine on the land— not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.” (Amos 8:11–12 ESV)

How many of you have experienced an extended season apart from the Word of the Lord? When you didn’t look for it, when you didn’t find it, when you didn’t hear it? Nothing good happens in that darkness.

The Word of God is LIFE in a broken and fallen world like this one. There are so many noxious winds and fumes blowing around at ground level that if you don’t have the Spirit of God speaking to you IN AND THROUGH the Word of God then you are heading for disaster.

There is no hope for a person who has lost the sound of the Word of the Lord.

So if you’ve been neglecting that – my friend, get that sorted out. Do what you need to do to put yourself under the sound of God’s Word. If you’ve ever been without it – then you know how much you need it. The Word of the Lord is life – and it was breaking back into the world through the birth of John the Baptist – so yeah, people were singing about that as well they should.

Now, as with every voice in Scripture, the job of John the Baptist was to point people to the person and work of Jesus – and Jesus said that he did a really great job of that. In John 5:35 Jesus says about John:

³Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 97.

“He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.” (John 5:35 ESV)

John brought the Word of God – and as David said a long time ago, the Word of God:

“is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105 ESV)

That was John the Baptist. He came to light the way to Jesus – thanks be to God!

So, Zechariah is singing about that – he is giving thanks for the one who goes before – and then lastly, in the final stanza we see him thanking and praising God for leading us back to the life we were originally created to enjoy.

4. For The Life We Were Created To Enjoy

In verse 78 Zechariah speaks about 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.”
(Luke 1:78–79 ESV)

The language is a little bit confusing there – most scholars think that Zechariah is drawing on the prophecy recorded in Numbers 24:17 which says:

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17 ESV)

So if you remember that story, Balaam the prophet was hired by Balak the king of the Midianites to put a curse on the people of Israel – but he couldn’t do it. Every time he tried to curse them words of blessing and promise came rolling out. Here he says, “I can’t curse Israel because God is planning to do something amazing through them. I see HIM – but not now – I see far out – many days, many years from now – I see a STAR rising out of Jacob, out of Israel – a SCEPTOR – a ruler will come and work salvation.”

It appears that Zechariah is praising God for the fulfilment of that very old prophesy in the birth of the child born to Mary.

This BRIGHT LIGHT – this RULER FROM HEAVEN – has come to bring about a whole new day. To inaugurate a whole new creation. To lead us out of darkness and to bring us into light. To take us by the hand, walk us up out of the dungeon and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

The word “peace” in the Bible means much more than merely the absence of conflict. William Barclay for example says here:

“It does not mean merely freedom from trouble; it means all that makes for a man’s highest good”⁴

I like that. All that makes for a man’s highest good. It means HUMAN LIFE as it was always meant to be lived. It means PURPOSE, it means PROSPERITY, it means DIGNITY, it means WORSHIP, it means SERVICE, it means COMMUNITY, it means WHOLENESS.

That’s peace.

And we can only find it in Jesus Christ! J

The Venerable Bede in the 8th century said in his sermon on this passage:

“He visited us as a doctor visits an ill patient, and, in order to cure the ingrained sickness of our pride, he gave us the example of his own humility.”⁵

⁴William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The Daily Study Bible (Saint Andrew Press, 1967) as cited in Morris, 89.

⁵The Venerable Bede, *Homilies On The Gospels* as cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture Volume III* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 32.

I like that. Now, to be clear, I don't think that Bede is downplaying the atonement as if to suggest that we are saved MERELY by the example of Christ – in fact in the same sermon he goes on to say:

“He redeemed his people by giving us freedom, **at the price of his own blood**”⁶

So it's both/and and the two are interconnected. To live the life we were created and intended to enjoy we need to be REDEEMED and we need to be HEALED. You've got to break the chains on the prison door and teach us how to live again as human beings.

That's what Jesus came to do. He came to redeem us, heal us and lead us again in the path of peace.

Thanks be to God!

Zechariah had a lot to sing about in his inspired song, but as I mentioned I want to do more than hear the song, I want to use the song – as we used the Magnificat last week – to test and tune our faith as we make our way toward Christmas.

Tuning Ourselves Against Zechariah's Song

As I listen to this beautiful tune – and the faith and the values it reflects – it suggests to me a couple of urgent and necessary adjustments. The first one is this:

1. We need a better understanding of our enemy

The Bible is very clear about the identity of our ultimate adversary in this life. We meet him very early on in the Bible – in the third chapter of the Bible - and in case we forget there are many

⁶ The Venerable Bede, *Homilies On The Gospels* as cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture Volume III* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 32.

reminders and corrections offered after that. The Apostle Paul was careful to remind his people, saying:

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, **against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.**” (Ephesians 6:12 ESV)

That’s our enemy right there.

So let’s be clear church: the government is not our enemy. The government is just people – people we are supposed to love and share the Gospel with. Let’s not forget that. When we treat the police, the Premier or the Prime Minister as our enemy we have lost the plot and abandoned our mission. The government is not the enemy.

And our “COVID adversaries” are not the enemy. Somehow the devil has managed to get us to turn our guns on the people who think differently than we do about masks and vaccines and safety protocols – what absolute nonsense! The devil would love to divide us given the difficulties that appear to lie ahead. Brothers and sisters, let’s not fall for that.

We need better clarity in the church as to the identity of our ultimate FOE and I would argue that we need a better understanding of the FREEDOM that is ours in Jesus Christ. That’s the second adjustment that I would argue is suggested by this song.

2. We need a better understanding of our freedom

The freedom that is ours in Christ is not freedom to do whatever we want – nor is it freedom from all life’s challenges and cares – rather the freedom that is ours in Christ is freedom from GUILT and freedom from FEAR – and I believe we need to be reminded of that – particularly the second half of that.

While I have been consistent in recommending against civil disobedience throughout the course of this pandemic, I do believe that far too many Christians have begun to live in fear.

I'm not denying the challenge of this virus. It spreads very quickly and even though it is relatively low consequence for most of the people who get it – because it spreads so quickly if even a small percentage of people become seriously ill it can overwhelm our health care system – so we have to take precautions. We have to be wise – we have to be smart – we have to be considerate – but there is absolutely no reason for us to live in fear.

What is your goal here brothers and sisters? To live forever? Well, if you are in Christ, that's going to happen anyway – so there is nothing COVID can do to affect that. So live your life – the life you were created for and called to – which according to Zechariah is all about serving him:

“serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”
(Luke 1:74–75 ESV)

So I really don't understand people not coming to church to worship and serve the Lord – because of this virus. Now if you are a health worker or a personal support worker – ok I get that – but beyond that, the goal of our lives is not to absolutely minimize risk – the goal of our lives is to worship and serve the Lord – so let's do that. There will never be ZERO RISK of illness when you gather together with other people to worship and serve the Lord.

Ever.

So let's take reasonable precautions – let's wear our masks and maintain physical distance and wash our hands and let's get back to business. Because we were made for this – and we are not to live in fear.

And then lastly, as I listen to this inspired song it occurs to me that:

3. We need a better understanding of our destiny

‘To guide our feet in the way of peace.’ ‘To lead us out of darkness into a NEW DAY OF BRIGHTNESS, GLORY and LIGHT’ – is that how you think of the salvation that is yours in Christ? Because I worry that we make too little of our redemption.

I’d rather we make too much. We worry sometimes about some of the language that the Church Fathers used when they spoke about our redemption. Gregory of Nazianzus says here in his sermon on this passage:

“What greater destiny can befall man’s humility than that he should be intermingled with God, and by this intermingling should be deified, and that we should be so visited by the “dayspring from on high”?”⁷

Are you comfortable with that language? I wonder if we should be. 2 Corinthians 3:18 does say that we are being changed into the very image of Jesus – so is it ok to talk about our being deified?

I don’t know – but I know that I would rather make too much of my salvation than too little.

We have a tremendous future ahead of us, brothers and sisters. A never-ending experience of joy, peace, prosperity, purpose, blessing, community and love.

Do you see that?

Can you feel the warmth of that future rising in your hearts as you sing about and celebrate the child who was born to Mary? Because that is the future. That is the inheritance. That is the destiny of all those who put their faith in Christ. Thanks be to God! Let’s pray together.

⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 30.3, On The Son* as cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture Volume III* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 34.