

CHRISTMAS 2021

Message 3

Date: December 19 21

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Reading: Luke 1:57-80

INTRO: I am going to do a message this morning related to Christmas. I had wanted to do a few messages on mercy, but after writing a few messages, I was not quite prepared to go ahead. I believe an understanding of the word agapee love, grace, and mercy would change the Christian Church if they were rightly understood. So in the next series of messages, when I've had more time, Lord willing I will do a few messages on mercy and one on Romans 9.

Let me just add here that we will have a New Year's service. I plan to give the first message on the book of Hebrews on that day and give us some background information to the political climate of the time in which they would have become Christians. I am doing that to take two birds with one stone, as they say. It will be an introduction to messages to come, and I trust it will encourage us to face our present world situation in the year to come.

This coming Saturday we will commemorate the birth of Christ. In 2018 I started to go through the Christmas story in chronological order and simply commenting on passages that stood out to me. That is different from my usual procedure. So instead of doing heavy duty studying as I do throughout the year I would take things a little easier.

Since Christmas and Sunday were close together I did two messages that year. I didn't preach on Christmas day for two years after that and so it is some time ago that I gave those two messages. I will pick up this year where I left off. In the first year I covered Luke 1:1-38. I began with Luke 1 and the promise of the birth of John the Baptist. This is Luke 1:1-26. For 400 years God had been silent. He sent no prophets. And then when John was about to come on the scene, for the first time in 400 years God spoke once more. And John was the forerunner to Jesus the Messiah. John ministered, I think, around six months and his ministry was done. He was jailed, and eventually beheaded.

So in those two messages we looked at the promise to Zechariah, the priest on whom the lot fell to burn incense that year. This

was a privilege that may never happen to a priest in his whole life as they were chosen by lot and they only served at the temple twice a year. Well, while he was in the temple at the altar of incense, the angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him that he and Elizabeth would have a child and he was to call him John.

John would be born to Zacharia and Elizabeth, and he was to prepare the way for Jesus, the Messiah, whose birth is what Christmas is about. By the way, in German it is not called Christmas, but "Wienachten." Christmas means Christ's Mass. Wienachten, or the HG, Weinachten, means *holy nights*, speaking of the 25 and 26th.

In the same message we looked at the promise to Mary, the mother of Jesus. This is in Luke 1:26-38. We began in that message to look at the visit of Mary to Elizabeth. At this time she was with child already. We completed that in the second message which covered Luke 1:39-56. So we have the promise of John the Baptist, the promise to Mary, and the visit of Mary to Elizabeth. God was at work in the land once more, though politically things were not good.

We are now ready to look at what happened next chronologically and that is the birth of John the Baptist. So this is just six months before the birth of Jesus Christ.

IV. THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

A. The Birth of John (Luke 1:57-66)

We begin then in Luke 1:57.

57 Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son.

The promise had been made. We remember that this is a miraculous birth because Zacharias and Elizabeth were old and had no children. Look at verses 24-25 to see Elizabeth's response to the promise the Lord made to Zacharias and when it appeared it was being fulfilled:

24 And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

25 Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

And now in verse 57, the promise has been fulfilled. So we go to verse 58:

58 When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.

Now Zacharias was a Levite, and the Levites were scattered among the other 11 tribes. They were the pastors of the people, so to speak. And Zachariah and Elizabeth lived not far from Jerusalem at Ein Karem. Now you can imagine that being a priest, many people would have known that they were childless. And so this will have been big news. I suppose the fact that Elizabeth hid herself for some months caused talk in the community, and now they are saying, "We did wonder what was up."

Verse 59:

59 So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias.

60 His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John."

A boy was often named at this ceremony and the oldest son often went by the name of the father and since he would likely be the only son, everybody concluded he would be called Zachariah. But in Luke 1:13, the angel had told Zachariah that he was to call him John.

Now why would they be deciding what he would be called? Why would they not wait for Zachariah to say what his name would be? Well, the angel had told Zacharias that they would have a son. But look now at what happened in Luke 1:18-20:

18 And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

19 And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings."

20 *"But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."*

Because Zacharias could not speak, the mother named their son and said he would be called John. When John's mother said his name would be called "John" listen to what those who crowded around said. Verse 61:

61 *But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name."*

You say, "They must have been Mennonites!" No, they were Jews! So set were they that his name should be called Zacharias that they turned from her to the father, and because he could not speak they asked him in sign language what the boy should be called? Verse 62:

62 *So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called.*

63 *And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marveled.*

For nine months Zacharias was not able to speak and do you know why? Anyone? Well, the angel had come to Zacharias when he was offering incense. Look at verses 18-20:

18 *And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."*

19 *And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings."*

20 *"But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."*

Now you may ponder this question: Why would Zacharias be reproved for not believing the angel's words? Would they not have seemed too good to be true to anyone in

his place? Here he is an old man. All his married life he has waited for a child. And now that he and his wife are well advanced in age, all of a sudden an angel appears and says, "You will have a son," and Zacharias says, "How shall I know this. I have waited all my married life and now I and my wife are both old?" I ask, is it not right to ask that question?

May I propose that this may be why the Lord said the promised son should be called John? It seems to me that Zacharais had asked God for a son and trusted Him for one, and now that he is old he has given up. When Zacharias had entered the temple to pray and the angel came to him, look at what happened. We go to verses 11-14:

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

14 "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

Notice that the angel says to Zacharias, "Your prayer is heard." This son will be born in answer to Zacharias's prayer. When did Zacharias pray for a son? Was it now while he was in the temple, or many years earlier already? It could have been long ago. He may have prayed for a long time, but only now was it the right time to fulfill this request. So when the angel said he would have a son, he had trouble believing it, and he could not speak for six months.

And now when he is asked what his son should be called, he writes down that his name will be called John. And then something happens. We find that in verse 64:

64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God.

For nine months he had not been able to speak. How many times do you think he said to himself, "Why did I doubt the angel?" And we might ask, "And why did God change the tradition and say he was to be called John?" Why would tradition be set aside and God would decide what this boy would be called? Well, Zacharias means *Jehovah remembers*. The name "John" in Hebrew means something like "Jehovah has graced" or "Jehovah's gracious gift." Having studied the word grace, it seems to me that it may mean that Zachariah has asked God for a son in faith. But as he got old, he thought it probably would not happen. And by the name "John" the Lord reminds Zacharias that Jehovah has granted his request by grace. When Zacharias has publically acknowledged that the boy would be called John, we find what happened in verse 65:

65 Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea.

Ein Karem was in the hill country of Judea. And you can imagine the talk that was stirred up by this birth. Verse 66:

66 And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, "What kind of child will this be?" And the hand of the Lord was with him.

Well, how long do you think they kept these things in their hearts? Did it last for 30 years? John grew up to be an amazing man. He was out in the desert alone a lot. My wife and I watched a video that has no words. A man and his camera walked all around Qumran. When John was alive there was a community at Qumran. Looking north, Qumran is on the left side of the Dead Sea at its northern most end. The Dead Sea is some 1300 feet below sea level, the lowest place on earth. Qumran is some 400 feet below sea level. It is held that John spent time with this community at Qumran. This is not far from Masada, for those familiar with that.

So all around Judea people wondered what kind of child John would be. And it says the Lord was with him. Could it be that when he was thirty years old and

began his ministry, people had not forgotten? And when he preached many of them were baptized at his preaching of repentance.

B. The Prophecy of Zacharias (67-80)

In verse 67 we come then to the prophecy of Zacharias. Now consider this first. Some 4,000 years have passed since creation. Then some 2,000 years ago, Abraham was born and from him the Jewish nation came into being. Then we had the time of the judges of Israel, and then Israel began to beg for a king. They had begged prematurely, and they got king Saul and that didn't turn out too well. This was now 1,000 years before Christ. After Saul, they got the king God had planned all along, and David became king. After him Solomon reigned and after him the nation split into two. We now have the northern and southern kingdoms. This is about 930 years before Christ. Well, God worked through the nation of Israel, but again and again they failed Him. The nation split into two and 722 years before Christ, the northern kingdom went into captivity. God had warned them over and over again. Now He began to earnestly warn the southern kingdom. These warnings came through the prophets, but they too failed and in 586, they too went into captivity. This would last for 70 years.

A time called the time of the Gentiles would rule over the Jews had now begun and to our day they have not yet ended. Israel now had kings that ruled under some Gentile overlord. Still the prophets prophesied. And then, around 400 years before Christ, Malachi penned the last words of the prophets and God spoke no more. Four hundred years dragged on. All kinds of atrocities took place. The Jewish nation had lost prominence.

And then, all of a sudden an angel appeared to Zacharias when he was fulfilling the highest honor he had ever had in the temple service. Then for nine months Zacharias had not spoken. Young Mary, who had believed the Lord, had already spoken. God was once more speaking. And now, the central event of all history was about to take place, and it came at a very dark time in Jewish history.

And now that Zacharias' tongue has been loosed, he prophesies and we begin in verse 67:

67 Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

68 "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people,

The NKJV says, "Blessed is..." I would agree with the KJV which says, "Blessed be..." I think the idea here is, "May the Lord be blessed..." The word blessed means "to speak well of." And why should the Lord be well spoken of? First, because He has visited His people! The word to visit here means He has looked upon. God had looked upon Israel with the prophets of the past, but that had come to an end for a long time. His people is a reference to Israel. After 400 years God has visited or looked upon Israel once more in John the Baptist. Think of it this way. Canada is 154 years old. Double that and you have 308. God had not visited Israel in 100 years more than twice the time of Canada's age! And now He has visited once more! And all over Judea they are wondering what John will be like in the future.

Not only had God visited His people, but He has redeemed His people! The word "to redeem" here means to release on payment of a ransom. It says He has redeemed His people. I think more accurately, "He has worked" or "made redemption for His people."

We were told that Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and these are God breathed words. John, as was prophesied, would prepare the way for the Messiah, and the Messiah would work the full redemption promised so often and so long ago.

Verse 69:

69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David,

When it says the Lord has raised up a horn of salvation for us, the horn, as used in Scripture, is the symbol of strength. Now look at the four Gospels, where do you see a horn of great strength in the

Messiah? He said Himself, He was meek and lowly in heart. When they took Him in Gethsemane they bound His hands and led Him like a criminal to the judgment. When He had been condemned they made Him carry His own cross to the place of crucifixion and nailed Him to the cross and left Him to die. Matthew 27:42 says:

42 "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him.

Doesn't look like much of a horn of salvation. How many, like the two on the road to Emmaus must have been sad and deeply troubled. They had seen His miracles and thought He was the Messiah. They thought He would be their King. But He was dead. But they failed to recognize that it would not be by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord. Later many would recognize Him as the Messiah, as we do as well.

There were glimpses of a horn of salvation in His life story. But the greatest evidence that He was a horn of salvation came when He arose from the dead and 40 days later ascended to heaven. So it was the cross before the crown, and when He comes back, we will see a King!

But what was clear from the prophecy from His lineage is that He was from the house of David. And both Matthew and Luke give His lineage and both trace Him to David. Of this there can be no doubt and He had to come through David to qualify as the Messiah.

Verse 70:

70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who have been since the world began,

From the beginning of time a Messiah was foretold. And we could go through a long line of prophecies beginning in Genesis 3 where man first sinned to the last chapter in Malachi. Here are the last two verses of the OT:

5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD:

6 And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Interpreting prophecy requires special tools. I used to work in the forest, cutting down trees, pulling them to a landing place, cutting them into lengths etc... And we would pack a lunch and for lunch sometimes we would have canned meat bought in a store. And on the can was a little tool and with it you unsealed and took the top off the top of the can. You needed the little tool to open the can. It was especially made for that purpose.

There are various kinds of prophecy, and each requires a special tool to understand it. There is one kind of prophecy that has a far and near fulfillment. It has a partial fulfillment earlier and a final fulfillment later. I see the last two verses in Malachi like that. Its nearer fulfillment came in John the Baptist. Its final fulfillment will come at the beginning of the tribulation.

So here we have a reference to John the Baptist who was the one born to the one who spoke the words we are looking at. John the Baptist was the forerunner for Jesus the Messiah, and the Messiah was sent with the purpose revealed in verse 71 and following:

71 That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us,

72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant,

73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:

74 To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear,

75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

The Jews understood that the Messiah would deliver them from their enemies. Before the birth of Christ and afterward until the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, Israel lived in all kinds of political

instability. They were hoping for the Messiah to come and deliver them.

But Israel made a fatal error. They rejected the Messiah. They were within a few years from when the Messiah was to deliver them, but they rejected Him. This led to the formation of the Church, an intervening time in which God is taking out of the entire world a people for His name. This Church is made up of Jews and Gentiles. We learn this in the NT.

But very shortly now the Church will be complete, the Lord will lift the Church out of this world, and Israel will once more be God's major work on earth and this will take place in the darkest 7 years this world will ever know. Even now, last minute things are falling into place. Soon and very soon, one of the greatest events in mankind ever to happen, will happen, and the Church will be removed. At the end of those seven years, the prophecy Zachariah gave here will be fulfilled and Israel will be delivered from their enemies and serve the Lord without fear in holiness and righteousness!

But when this prophecy was given, John the Baptist had just been born. He would reach the age of 30 before he began his ministry. In my understanding he ministered for only a few months, maybe six, and then he was killed. The ministry of prophets is dangerous.

At this time God has begun to break the 400 year silence, but it will still be some 30 years before Israel will have another prophet.

We go on in verse 76. Zacharias prophesied:

76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,

77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins,

He is speaking here of John the Baptist. He would go before the face of the Lord; that is before the face of Jesus Christ. Jesus would be born just a few months later, and He is the central figure of history. He is

the One the whole OT points to. Every sacrifice in the OT pointed to Him. He was the hope of Israel. He was the hope of mankind. And John would go before Him and prepare His ways. This would take place 30 years later.

Now tell me John's message in one word. Repent! This is how he would prepare the way for the Lord. There is in mankind one big problem. It is not a failure to understand the love of God, it is a failure to recognize and deal with one's own sin! Sin is the central problem. Repentance is the central message. No one can truly understand the love of God who has not experienced repentance!

May I ask you, how costly is it to preach the pure Word of God? John was poor in the years he received his education. He lived in the desert. His clothing was made of camel's hair. He had a leather belt around his waist and his food was locusts and wild honey.

It is thought that John might have spent time with the Essenes. There were four groups of Jewish religious people in that day. There were the Pharisees, the Sadducees. We are most familiar with these. Then there were the Zealots, and the Essenes. The Essenes were a very religious group and lived at the northern end of the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is some 1400 feet below sea level, and Qumran is just above that.

You would benefit from going on youtube and checking out the Qumran caves and the Essenes. In 1948 one of the most important years in the last 2,000 years, one of the greatest discoveries of the last 2,000 years was made at Qumran. Here they found what are referred to as the Dead Sea scrolls.

Let me show you some pictures. We'll begin at Jerusalem:

1. Road map from Jerusalem to Qumran
2. Topographical map
3. Qumran
4. Caves and area around it - arid desert

Well, it is thought that John might have spent time with the Essenes, and it is well possible. It is even speculated that Jesus spent time here. The Essenes were a thriving community at that time. They have not been back here from the time the Romans took Masada in 73 AD.

Well, John came preaching repentance and he prepared the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. It is my view that John ministered for as little time as 6 months. When he reproved Herod for taking his brother Philip's wife, He took his life in his hands. Herodias, the wife John reproved Herod of had one opportunity to do away with John and she did it. Herod promised Herodias daughter whatever she wanted up to half the kingdom and she consulted her mother who immediately asked for John's head in a platter.

John accomplished two great achievements. He prepared the way for Jesus by preaching sin and repentance; and He baptized the Lord Jesus Christ.

So verse 76 says that John would be called the prophet of the Highest because he would prepare the way for the Messiah, and He began to preach a few months later, after John had baptized Him.

We continue Zacharias' prophecy in verse 77:

77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins,

Here is the central key issue for all of mankind. Here is the central key issue for you and for me. It is sin. Here we can go back to Adam and Eve and discover the whole problem of mankind. It is all wrapped up in one word, sin!

And here in this verse is the greatest hope of all of mankind. It is remission of sins! Oh you can stress grace and love as much as you want, you will never affect someone for good until you bring them to a knowledge of sin. As long as we are a little good, we will not see our need for salvation. As long as there is any hope that we can achieve anything of any value before God, we will never be saved.

It is only in the exposure of sin to us that we will begin to see our need of God. Ephesians 5:13 says that whatever makes manifest is light. Whatever can shine the light on my sin and expose it to me, that is light. Only when my sin is brought to light can it be dealt with. It is my view that no one can be brought to salvation until they have become thoroughly lost. When they know they are doomed to hell and there is no hope in themselves or any works of their own, only now they might consider salvation.

And let me say this, when anyone experiences the remission of sin, then and there they begin to have an understanding of salvation! What should be the central theme of Christmas? God came into this world in human flesh. He came to save man. He came to give His life a ransom for many. He came to save me from my sin.

I wish I was eloquent to explain how huge forgiveness of sin is. To have one's slate wiped clean, simply on the basis of repentance is phenomenal. But then, repentance is the hardest thing there is in the world. I have pondered why God chose repentance and faith as the two things man must do to be saved. And the key is this: both humble man. Oh how we fight humbling. Oh how we fight repentance. I know this is true of you and I know it is true of me. Many are in the church who say we are not saved by works and we are saved by grace through faith, but they have never truly repented!

Now the verse says that John came to give a knowledge of salvation. The name Jesus means *Jehovah is salvation*. When John was baptizing, one day He saw Jesus walking in another place and he said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He is salvation, and John was making known this Saviour. And in forgiveness of sin, they got to know this Savior.

So let us read now from verse 76, through 78:

76 *"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,*

77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By
the remission of their sins,

78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which
the Dayspring from on high has visited us;

He would give the knowledge of salvation by the
remission of sins, "through the tender mercy of our
God."

We have studied this word in our Bible study and I
have received great help from the class. Some day I
plan to preach on this great word. But for the class,
who wants to guess what the original word translated
"tender mercy" in this verse is? Even the KJV gave up
its literalness here. It is literally "bowels of
mercy." When you deal with the subject of mercy, the
word *bowels* as related to the soul one must
understand.

We learned in those studies that God's compassions are
exceedingly big. James 5:11 says:

11 Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have
heard of the perseverance of **Job** and seen the end
intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very
compassionate and merciful.

The words "very compassionate" is *much bowelled*. It
means He has a great capacity for compassion. And it
is through this great compassion that the Dayspring
from on high visited this world when Jesus Christ was
born. This Dayspring is Jesus Christ. On this day we
commemorate His birth is the day we draw our attention
to the time when He came into this world. But He is
the Dayspring. Like the rising of the sun, He is the
bringer of light. And light brings a knowledge of sin
and without a knowledge of sin we all rush headlong
into hell. He came to save us!

And why did this Dayspring, this bringer of light
visit us? Verse 79:

79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the
shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of
peace."

Who are those who sit in darkness? Why, it is all of mankind who does not know salvation. And they are in the shadow of death. All of lost mankind walks in the shadow of death. That shadow may turn to night at any moment.

Every unbeliever walks on a slippery slope every moment of every day. On July 8, 1714, Jonathan Edwards preached that famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." He said:

"O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment."

Jesus Christ came to give light to all those who sit in darkness and that is all of lost mankind. There is no word of promise that we will have a tomorrow in all the Bible. Today is the day of salvation.

C. The Pre-ministry Life of John

All we know about John the Baptist for the next 30 years is found in verse 80:

80 So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

CONCL: So we conclude. The first words God spoke to man after Malachi finished his book were to Zacharias. The first word He spoke to man through a prophet was not until John began to preach thirty years later. That was for a brief time, and then God spoke to man through Jesus Christ. His life and words changed the whole course of history, and even today, they have a great impact on the world.

But it all began in the time we call Christmas. It all culminated when Jesus hung on the cross, and then rose from the dead. Here, in a brief 30 years all of humanity was affected. Today the world trembles in fear of covid. It is because they do not know the Savior. We tremble in fear for all the wrong reasons. If man would learn to fear God, their other fears would dissipate, at least for the most important matter in life.

Jesus came to save us from sin. He came to make us righteous. And this can only be accomplished through fearing God and knowing His Son, Jesus Christ. John had the great privilege of introducing Him to the world.