

Luke 1:57-80

Zechariah's Song – The Benedictus

Prayer – Father, we come before you today asking that you would open up our hearts to you.

We confess that we grow bored with you, your Word and your promises. Our hearts grow hard and we are filled with unbelief. But we ask that you would fill us with your Holy Spirit this morning and cause us to tremble in awe because you have not forgotten us, even though we take you for granted. You have shown us grace and mercy even though we deserve condemnation. And you have given us forgiveness through your Son, Jesus Christ.

Intro – I had the privilege this week of finding out that my next child will be a son and even though he is unborn, my wife and I gave him a name. We named him Ivan Clark after my grandfathers because we want to cherish and remember their contributions to our lives. I quite literally wouldn't be here if it wasn't for those men, men I respect and love. Men who are a poet and a cowboy, and a soldier. Men who worked hard to provide for their families, financially and spiritually. We wanted to honor them.

And Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, at the end of their miraculous pregnancy are expected to the same. They have gathered everyone together for their son's circumcision. If you have any Jewish friends, you might know that circumcisions are still a big deal and when a boy is eight days old, the family gets together for a "brit melah", literally a covenant of the foreskin and it's a big all-bets-are-off, kind of party. And in Zechariah's day, when infant mortality was high and sonograms were...rare...it was when a Jewish family would announce the name of their new son, a son who they were adding to the covenant people of God. A son that they were sealing for God's possession, to be his and to worship him. Now, back then, the

uniqueness of a child's name was not on premium. People didn't get on Nameberry and scour the internet to see if they could grab up the rarest names they could find for their baby. They chose to honor their ancestors by choosing a name already in the family lineage. If Grandpa was a great man, you might reuse his name. Or a great-grandfather, or you dad, or a revered uncle. So when people came to Elizabeth and asked her what the child's name was going to be, they were surprised that she said that instead of naming him after his father Zechariah, the baby boy's name was to be John.

"That can't be right," they probably thought. "We don't have a grandpa named John." It was a common enough name in Palestine. In fact, in the Western World, John is the most common name. At its peak 1/5 of English speaking males were named John. There are 12 million Johns in the United States. And that doesn't include the Juans, Hans, Jeans, Evans, Jacks, Owens, Ians and Ivans of the world who have names derived from the Hebrew *Yohanan*, meaning "God is Gracious". Even ladies get in on the name with Joanna, Juanita, and Ivanka. But a John somehow was not in Zechariah's family line and the family was not about to let Elizabeth unilaterally adopt John as a family name, so they went to Zechariah and signed to him. Maybe they even talked loud and slow like that might help. "What do we name the baby?" And he signs back, "Get me a tablet." So they bring him a first generation iPad. And he writes, with no equivocation, "His name is John." Yahweh is Gracious. By doing so, Zechariah is agreeing with the command and promise God had given him about this son they would have, all the way back in verse 13. He is agreeing with God that his son, John, is not primarily called to be his son. Rather, John is a demonstration that **God is Gracious to His People** and his life is meant to be a pointer to a greater reality. Whether or not Zechariah realizes exactly what God

has planned for his boy, he knows that it's not going to be carrying on the family name. John is going to, Zechariah's song says, "go before the Lord to prepare his ways." John is going to show people how they can be saved by introducing the world to his cousin Jesus.

In some ways, this story parallels, Abraham and Sarah's. A very old couple is given a child by the grace of God and then God asks for that child back. In Abraham story, God provides a lamb in the child's place. But by turning John's destiny and purpose back to God, Zechariah is acknowledging that the physical benefits of a son are nothing compared to elevating God's True Son, Jesus. Theologian John Craddock says that "Luke is as much aware, if not more aware than most people, of the problem related to but not confined to John and Jesus: that is, persons whose work it is to point others to Jesus can themselves become the objects and centers of the attention, affection, and loyalty of many."¹ By reminding us who John is in God's redemptive plan, Luke is reminding us that John's life, isn't actually about John.

At one level, you might ask, is that really grace? God is giving someone to Zechariah, only to use that person to bring himself glory? But the Protestant Reformers used to remind us that the "chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." By surrendering himself and his son to God's glory, Zechariah gets to enjoy God's gift of salvation from his sins, and know that rather than preserving the family line of an obscure family on the far edge of the world, his son will elevate God's. And God is going to bring glory to himself with or without John. It is as much a fact of his being that the sun will shine. God's grace rests in that he lets this old, bitter, priest and his wife take part in that venture.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 32.

And at that moment that Zechariah surrenders the fate of his son, John, to God, miraculously, Zechariah regained the voice he lost when he disbelieved God's promise that he and his elderly wife would have a son. Zechariah had been on a nine-month time out since he met an angel in the temple who told him that he and Elizabeth would have a son and he responded not in worship but disbelief. He had not been able to hear or say anything. The modern equivalent of this would be losing Internet access and not posting anything on Facebook. God gave Zechariah 9 long months to spend in prayer and meditation with little input from the outside world and no opportunity to grumble and complain.

I expect that if God pressed mute on us for any length of time, we would be bitter. Take away our Instagram accounts, we'd go in shock. For a little bit anyways. But when God gave Zechariah speech back, Luke tells us that in addition to freaking out the neighbors a little bit, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and burst into song. Now, it's easy to ignore or skip over songs in the Bible, especially if you're like me and you want the action. But as was pointed out last week, the songs that people sing in the Bible actually explain for us what is happening and they deserve our full attention. This isn't that different from Sunday. Do you ever think about the words you sing? Do you think about the theology of the songs you sing and what they teach about God? It can be easy for us to sing a song and not think much of the lyrics, but I know Aaron, the deacon over the worship team here at Redeemer gives a lot thought to how the songs we sing for our hearts. Luke tells us that Zechariah's song is not just some diddy, but

comes from the Holy Spirit and is prophetic, meaning his song brings to bear God's words about the birth of John.²

And after 9 months of being silent, Zechariah's prophetic song has a lot to show us.

God Remembers His People – First his song shows us that God remembers his people.

Zechariah, whose name literally means, "God remembers", begins by working backward through Ancient Israelite history. It is from the house of David that God is raising up his "horn of salvation." When reading this text, I wasn't sure if that meant a musical horn or an animal horn, but the Greek word means an animal horn. We have a saying in West Texas: "Mess with the bull, you get the horns." God is demonstrating his strength and might by fulfilling the promise that made to the Ancient Israelite King, David. God has not forgotten that he promised David to raise up an offspring that would rule David's kingdom forever.

Now, when Zechariah sings this part of the song, he knows full well that he is not singing about his son, John. John, like his father, is a Levite. He is not going to be the restoration of this ancient Judahite king. But Jesus is descended from David. He is from the tribe of Judah. Again, and again, Zechariah acknowledges that his boy's life is not about John, but about Jesus. And Jesus is the demonstration of God's long memory in keeping his promises. But it's not just God's promise to one king in one narrow slice of history that he has remembered. God has remembered the words he gave the ancient prophets to deliver his people from their enemies and "the hand of all who hate them".

² Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament*, vol. 3, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, ©1994-©19), 1.

I don't think we feel the weight of this promise in American Christianity in the way a first century Christian might, as they endured marginalization and persecution in the Roman Empire. When Luke writes his Gospel, some 70 years later, localized persecution has broken out in several areas of the Empire, including the capital city of Rome. And when Zechariah's audience heard Zechariah's proclamation, they were a people in bondage, conquered by Rome and before that, the Seleucid Empire, and before that Alexander's Empire, and Persia, and Babylon, and Assyria. They were a people long awaiting their deliverer to rescue them from the hands of the enemies.

We don't know what it means to be conquered people in this context. We enjoy a vast amount of freedoms, that though challenged, are still available and we often take that for granted. But there is a sense in which we face our enemies every day. We wake up and we face the enemies of Satan and self. We have a demonic enemy that opposes us, attempting to deceive us and lead us into temptation. But we can't blame everything on Satan. We are our own worst enemy. We lie to ourselves more often than anyone else, just by sheer volume of how much we speak to ourselves. We justify our sin and excuse it, allowing it dominate us, even though we have been freed from the consequences of sin. We will even spend a sermon series next year talking about the types of temptation that we face and how Jesus has defeated those temptations from our enemies one by one in the Wilderness.

Because God has not forgotten his promise even to Abraham to deliver his descendants – both physical and spiritual – from ALL their enemies, we might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness. You might say, “But Jacob, today Christians are killed for their beliefs, and today I'm being tempted by sin. How has God remembered his promise?” Zechariah

is so confident that God will come through that he has spoken of a future reality as being past tense. Some of God's promise has not yet been fulfilled in completion. But the downpayment has been made.

Fundamentally that is what Advent is about. We know that with the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has done all that needs to be done to secure our holiness and our peace. God has come through on his promise, but one day, the second Advent will happen. Jesus will return to consummate, to complete his promise.

You might feel forgotten. Maybe you struggle with temptation or depression. Perhaps you have hurt by someone and carry the scars, physical and emotional. Maybe you came to church today wondering if there was anything here for you. Well, this I can say: we, like Zechariah, can be thrilled that God has remembered David, Abraham, and the prophets of old because that means he will not forget us. He has not forgotten you.

God Saves His People - In fact, God saves his people. He has given us Jesus, whose name literally means "God saves." In all of Zechariah's song, he only addresses John once. He tells him. **"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, because of the tender mercy of our God."** God's grace for his people and his remembrance of his people result in his salvation of his people. He has sent His Son into our world to secure our forgiveness for sins. Jesus pulls us out of the darkness into the light. And Zechariah's son has the honor of giving God's people "the knowledge of salvation." John will go on to serve as a pointer to Jesus who reminds people of their sin and telling them to follow Jesus. John will baptize Jesus, an event that signifies God's identification of us, who he

commands to be baptized. And ultimately, John dies because of his commitment to God's righteousness. But yet this John knew he isn't worthy to untie Jesus' sandals. As Richard Phillips puts it: "John said that when it comes to serving Jesus, this lowest task was not merely beneath him – in reference to Jesus it was actually far above him, so great is the glory of the Son of God, our Lord."³

We have been forgiven our sins. The Sunrise has visited us. We have been given salvation from God, through Jesus. And we, like John, have the opportunity to lift Jesus' name up and give others the knowledge of that salvation. But that will require us to be humble enough to admit that our own lives are fundamentally about us. I would wager that if we took a poll in this room no one would say that their lives are about themselves. But I believe that we often do live as though all that we encounter, and perhaps God himself, should be the things that we want when we want them. It is easy for us to develop tunnel vision that focuses all our attention on our desires, felt needs, hopes, and dreams.

Yet, the story is so much bigger than we often imagine. God saves his people not toward their desires, but toward himself and his will and his story. He does so at the great cost of his Son. And when we begin to understand that, maybe we can break out in song in song like Zechariah in such a way that the neighbors are awestruck and ask, "What kind of people are these?", in such a way that they the news spreads: God has offered us rescue! The good news is, while this is not our default mode, it wasn't Zechariah's either. The reason he could sing this song about Jesus was because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

³ Richard D. Phillips, *The Masculine Mandate: God's Calling to Men* (Sanford, Florida: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2016), 197.

Conclusion So, Redeemer, may we a be a people who know that God has been gracious to us and has not forgotten us, nor will he forget us. And out of those two truths, may we be a Holy Spirit filled people who spread the news of God's salvation to our friends, family, and neighbors.

Let's pray.

Prayer Ministry – All Stand

I want to invite you to come forward for prayer today. Maybe there is a situation in your life that causes you to wonder if God has forgotten you. Maybe its hardship at work, health, or maybe the Advent season does not live to the Hallmark hype for you and this time is difficult to bear. We do not have to bear those things alone. We are commanded to pray for one another and we want to pray with you today. Grab a prayer leader up at the front or in the back and let them know what you struggling with and let them and the Holy Spirit join you in your pain, rather than walking through it alone.

Discussion Starters

1. What has God given you cause to celebrate? What has he done for you or in your life that prompts you to sing his praises?
2. What situations in your life can tempt you to believe that God has forgotten you? What are your "enemies"? In what ways has God begun to give you victory?
3. How does seeing your life as being not primarily about you, but instead about Jesus, change the way you live your life? Does it affect the way answer the first two questions? If you're honest, how often do you think about Jesus as being the primary focus of your life?

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