

Joy for the Helpless: The Song of a Helpless Priest

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- [0 : 0 0] In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour 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.
- [1 : 1 4] And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth, in her old age, has also conceived a son. And this is the sixth month with her who was called Baron. For nothing will be impossible with God. And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. In those days, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah. And she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.
- [2 : 2 3] And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women. And blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Now, while he was serving as priest before God, when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

- [3 : 38] And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.
- And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.
- And you will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.
- And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.
- And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. And the angel answered to him, I am Gabriel.
- [4 : 50] I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent, and unable to speak, until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.
- Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her.
- And they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father.
- And they said to her, None of your relatives is called by this name.
- And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, His name is John.
- [5 : 59] And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue loosed. And he spoke, Blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors.
- And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea. And all who heard them laid up in their hearts, saying, What then will this child be?
- For the hand of the Lord was with him. Well, the first chapter of Luke's Gospel that we've been reading is full of human interest as it introduces to us some of these characters who appear around the announcement and then around the birth of Jesus and of John the Baptist.
- In the first reading, we heard a story of faith. And it ended with a great commendation of faith because Mary believed God's promise.
- Let it be to me, she said, according to your word. And she welcomed what the angel said. And we're told there at the end, Blessed is she who has believed that there would be a fulfillment of the words spoken to her from the Lord.
- [7 : 13] But poor old Zechariah is a total contrast, isn't he? Mary was just an uneducated peasant girl. Zechariah was actually a professor of theology.
- But verse 20 says he did not believe God's word to him, at least not at first. And he would be shown, wouldn't he, just how wrong he was when indeed everything God said would actually be fulfilled in its time.
- And I guess we might feel some sympathy with Zechariah. But God actually is saying to us, you know, don't. Don't be like him. Look and learn. And of course, in the end, he did learn to believe God.

His punishment at first was to be struck dumb. And actually, it was a very perfect judgment for him because as a priest, his job was to teach people the law of God, to speak God's word so that people would trust God's word and obey his word in their lives.

But you can't teach God's word to excite other people about it if you don't really believe it yourself, can you? If you do that, well, you just, you'll kill God's church completely.

[8 : 27] And by the way, that I'm afraid is why you see so many churches closed and so many churches empty today because pulpits have too often been occupied by those who don't really believe themselves what they're supposed to be speaking to the people in the pews.

And God won't bless that kind of unbelief. And poor old Zechariah discovered that here because God just turned his microphone off, struck him dumb. And yet the treatment worked because in the silent months that follow, it does seem that he started to take God's word more seriously.

And last, when his son was born, as we heard, as promised, miraculously to these aged parents, he shared in the faith of Mary, didn't he?

And he showed his repentance, his belief by naming the child just as the angel had instructed him. His name is John. John, not Zechariah Jr., it's what everyone expected, but John.

And he wrote it. And at that moment, of course, his mouth was opened and he gave voice to his renewed faith in that magnificent song, The Benedictus.

[9 : 39] And it's a very telling song, isn't it? Because it has two main emphases. What God says, he declares in his song everything that God says has been fulfilled. And he focuses on what God does, that God has acted to save helpless people.

And Zechariah's own experience helped him to see the real truth about what human life is all about. And he understood that the only help for the greatest need of every human being, the only help comes entirely and completely from God himself, from God alone.

And that God has intervened and that he's done as he's promised. The God of promises has fulfilled all of his promises and a God of deliverance has acted to save his people.

That's what he's singing about in this song. It's in your programs there. Let's read it together and listen. His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.

He's 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, from all of those who hate us, to show the mercy promised to our fathers, to remember the holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

[11 : 29] 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, 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.

It's a wonderfully vivid picture that he proclaims, a visitation from on high. Verse 78 there says, is like a wonderful sunrise that brings light in the darkness, that banishes every fearful shadow and that will bring lasting peace to human beings.

It's a picture of God turning his face, turning the light of his countenance upon this world in mercy. It recalls the words of God about his ancient people, Israel, in slavery, in Egypt, when he said, I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people and I've heard their groaning.

I've come down to deliver them in a visitation from on high to bring light, to bring warmth from the face of God himself.

Love is smiling from his face to strike for us now the hour of grace since the Savior is to be born. And that's what Christmas really is all about.

[13 : 07] It's a sunrise of God's smile of mercy upon our world. And I want to just point out this evening between our carols and choir pieces three things that Zechariah says about this visitation from on high.

And the first is this, it is a promised visitation. The first emphasis of his song is on all this prophetic expectation of salvation that is now being fulfilled in the coming one.

Now Zechariah had obviously learned his lesson because he's telling everyone here that God does have a plan and he does keep his word. He keeps his promises and he comes to be a God who will visit his people.

And that's what Zechariah had learned himself. And that's what Luke is very determined that all of his readers including us will grasp as well. And it's a repeated emphasis all through his stories.

He picks up on whether people really are trusting or distrusting the words that God has spoken. So everything that happens to Elizabeth happens just as God had promised.

[14 : 18] She bore a son. And to Mary everything happens just as God had promised. She bears a son. Chapter 2 if you read on and the shepherds they go and see the newborn Christ child and we're told everything happened just as it had been told them.

And that's what the whole of Luke's gospel his little book about Jesus is about. And it's about the issue of whether people believe the word that God has spoken or not.

in the very last chapter of his gospel chapter 24 he shows us the risen Lord Jesus challenging some of his erstwhile disciples and he says to them oh foolish ones slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken.

And he teaches them all over again what he said I've been teaching you all through my ministry that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms the whole Old Testament must be fulfilled because God has a plan and God always keeps his promises so you can trust God is what he's saying to us his readers and you must trust God because to not trust when God has spoken to disbelieve is sinful it's an insult to God and that's what Zechariah learned but in God's mercy you see his chastisement brought about a great change of heart for old Zechariah and he learned to trust God's promises and he learned to rejoice in trusting God's promises my goodness Zechariah really did get the message and he shows here in his song how he had actually already grasped what Jesus was all those years later going to say to those disciples on the road to Emmaus on the day of resurrection because his song proclaims to us that God did indeed fulfill all the promises of the whole of the Old Testament scriptures the law and the prophets and the Psalms look at verse 69 there in the coming of Jesus he says

God has raised up a horn of salvation in the house of his servant David well that is the promise of the Psalms in many places but here he's he's quoting from Psalm 18 the Lord is my deliverer the horn of my salvation and now the Lord who is the horn of salvation has raised up a king a son of David the Messiah whom so many of the Psalms longed for and sang of the Psalms look at verse 70 there's the prophets he's done it as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets of old and then verse 72 there's the law of Moses the mercy promised to the fathers the holy covenant that goes all the way back to Abraham way back in Genesis the first book of Moses you see Zechariah really has got the message our God has a plan he gives promises and every single one of these will be fulfilled always forever and his promise is for the world that we live in and for the future of this world and his promise also is for our lives for your life and mine if we will trust him you know that is a very great lesson to learn because to know that you can really trust God to know that God's word really is right and best that his instruction for human life his commands for how to live really is the way of true human flourishing to trust that is to discover the way of life and of fullness and of real joy and you can rely on the words of

[18:18] God he will never let you down not ever God has never ever messed up he's never forgotten he's never let me down he's never failed me and I can tell you that but I can also tell you that rather sadly like Zechariah often I've had to learn that the hard way maybe that's just me maybe it's just me and Zechariah who are stupid and stubborn like that but perhaps there's some others here tonight who have discovered that as well I've also had to discover like Zechariah that sometimes God has had to take things away from me to help me to really trust him and to learn as Zechariah did that God's way is best and that God really is a God of tender mercy it's a wonderful phrase that isn't it there in verse 78 the tender mercy of God and maybe that rings true for some of you here tonight as well the tender mercy of God may at times have to work well some chastisement on us to bring us like

Zechariah so that we will really see his goodness and trust his mercy but God is true to his word and not only did Zechariah discover that and believe it at last but he rejoiced in it he rejoiced in God's great faithfulness he sang about it because when you understand about God's tender mercy you want to sing so we're going to sing now about what Zechariah sings to us telling us to come with all for our hearts to be wrapped in wonder for our souls and our spirits to be stirred so that we will see all that God has spoken all that the prophets have heard was born in flesh and behold in him the eternal word come now with all Zechariah's song is very clear that this visitation of God is a promised visitation that God's word was proved true always and forever in the coming of Jesus but secondly he's equally clear about the nature of this visitation it is a powerful visitation

Zechariah gives us a powerful explanation of the saving work that God came to do in Jesus Christ and his message is equally clear God has power he not only keeps his promises and comes but he comes with power to save look at verse 71 that we should be saved from our enemies he's coming to bring deliverance from a people who are helpless and who are oppressed he comes to bring redemption verse 68 he comes verse 69 as a horn of salvation he has power to save his people from their greatest enemies now we have to be careful here because we might be tempted to think well what he's speaking about here is some sort of political deliverance or military even power over Roman oppressors or whoever but look carefully at verse 74 because what you see is that this deliverance from enemies is a promise that goes all the way back to

Abraham's time long long before the Romans were ever heard over any other oppressors for that matter and notice what the goal of this deliverance is in verse 74 that we might serve God without fear in holiness and in righteousness it's a deliverance from a life of fear into a life of holiness and righteousness in other words a life that is totally right in every way with God the enemies that Zechariah is singing about here are the ones that hold all human beings in bondage and makes them unable to serve God without fear it's our spiritual enemies that he's talking about isn't it that's what keeps us in a bondage of fear but he comes God himself comes he says to banish fear to banish all enemies of human beings fear not is the great refrain of the

Christmas story in all these chapters fear not says the angel to Mary fear not says the angels to the shepherds and here again no more fear is the message it's another one of the great promises of the prophets of old when the king of Israel the lord is in your midst you shall never again fear evil pronounced the prophet Zephaniah on that day it shall be said to Jerusalem fear not oh Zion the lord your god is in your midst a mighty one who will save he comes with power to save from all the enemies that make us fear well what is the greatest shadow of fear that tyrannizes the peoples of this world that holds people in in bondage that brings darkness that we really are all ultimately utterly helpless to protect ourselves from what is that fear well it's there look in verse 79 it's the darkness of the shadow of death death is our great enemy as human beings death is the tyrant isn't it that robs us of the things that are most precious the dearest things in all our human lives in all the world the people that we love that we cherish the people that we live for death is the great enemy of humankind and at this time of year that's the shadow isn't it so often that's the darkness that saddens even even our times of joy and festivity that'll be so won't it many of our homes this Christmas but you see friends in the

[24 : 49] Lord Jesus Christ God has visited this world with power to destroy our enemies all of them even the greatest enemy of all to take away our fear even of death why is death our great enemy why does it have that power to rob us to destroy what is precious well the Bible tells us you see that the sting the real sting of death is sin sin's the disaster that underlies everything it goes right right back to the beginning when our our first ancestors rebelled against God our maker on the day that you rebel against my authority like that said the Lord you will die you will know death and so the apostle of Christ tells us that when sin entered the world that way as a result death reigned death reigned as a tyrant enslaving us all because as long as sin is counted against us death has a vice like grip upon our lives and we're helpless we're slaves living in the fear of death but you see in Jesus almighty

God himself has come with power to destroy our great enemies even death and to save us from that fear forever he came says the apostle that he might destroy the one who has the power of death that is the devil and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery and that's what Zechariah understood that's why he's singing you see verse 77 he knows that God is coming to help the helpless to give salvation at last because he comes to bring what forgiveness of their sins forgiveness he comes with power over all enemies to destroy death and the cause of death sin through forgiveness forever the apostle Paul put it this way to the church in Colossae he has delivered us from the domain of darkness and has transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have redemption liberation the forgiveness of sins he comes with power to deliver from all our greatest enemies sin and death and that's the real wonder of

Christmas you see the tender mercy of God releasing captives from the chains of their sins and it's a wonderful picture isn't it that that Zechariah paints here in verse 78 it's a new sunrise he says for the whole world one of my favorite paintings is of a beautiful sunrise and it's got the bright glow radiating out from the center of the rising sun over the sea and it casts beautiful varying light all over the sea and brings to light the contrast with the land as it rises up from the sea it's actually the isle of skies that happens I know some people here think that probably is heaven but it's rather a heavenly picture all the same and it's picking up this picture of the sunrise it's picking up another of the words of the ancient prophets the prophet Malachi the last prophet of the Old Testament and he also spoke very clearly of a new Elijah who was going to come to prepare the way of the coming Lord and that was the one that

Jesus himself said was fulfilled in Zechariah's son in John the Baptist that he was singing about and in that day of God's coming says the prophet for you who fear my name the son of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings and now Zechariah is singing and saying that day has dawned at last verse 78 that's what he's saying it's been fulfilled that sunrise has visited us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness to those who are in the shadow of death it's what the prophet Isaiah also foresaw now coming to pass at last you know the words the people walking in darkness have seen a great light and upon them the light has shined a visitation from on high with power to save that's what Christmas is about a truly new dawn for this whole wide world and it began just like a sunrise silent imperceptible to everyone apart from a few watchers while the rest of the world was sleeping how silently how silently the wondrous gift is given but that coming birth in Bethlehem was to be the decisive rising of the sun it was the beginning of the climax of everything in

God's plan and purpose for the universe from before its beginning our God is a God with a plan and you can trust his promise he came as promised and he's a God with power to banish fear because he came to save his people from their sins there's one more brief thing I want to say about the song but let's pause and ponder that the wonder of God's saving way and his eternal plan dawning on the world like a silent sunrise we're going to listen to the choir singing about the child of the stable secret birth who is in fact the Lord of all the Lords of Earth the coming of Jesus into the world is just like the sunrise of a new day dawning for the world but not just for the world out there but also for the world in here that is

[31 : 18] Christ's coming is not just a promised visitation that fulfills all the prophetic expectation of salvation it's not just even a powerful visitation that gives a profound explanation of that salvation as liberation from the fear of death through forgiveness of sins it is all that and more but perhaps most wonderfully of all the coming of the Lord Jesus is a personal visitation from God it brings personal experience of salvation our God is personal he came yes right into our world he came with with power to save yes he did but he came with power to save you and me and God's visitation from on high in the Messiah in Jesus is a personal one for everyone who will believe him and trust him and find in him the joy of that wonderful salvation that once for all visitation from on high notice that phrase there in verse 78 that is just the beginning of a vast outpouring from on high of repeated visitations of Christ by his spirit into the hearts of men and women

Mary had that Zechariah had that they trusted they received the Christmas message and that's the real triumph of his saving work that that now is shed abroad to the whole wide world the very end of Luke's gospel again you you see Jesus risen and ascending to the glory on high and he tells his followers that they will be clothed soon with power from on high there'll be another glorious visitation this time when the Holy Spirit of the risen Lord is sent upon his church at Pentecost and Luke wrote a second book we call it the Acts of the Apostles and that is the story of that wonderful visitation of the power coming from on high to the church and from that moment on the age of God's personal visitation of men and women and boys and girls all over the whole world began and it has never ceased since then and won't cease until the

Lord Jesus returns in Acts chapter 15 the Apostle James speaks about how God has now visited the Gentiles the non-Jewish people the pagans those who had nothing to do with the history of God before and he says he gave them these total outsiders which is people like most of us in this room he gave them the same Holy Spirit he cleansed their hearts by grace just as he had first of all cleansed our hearts says this Jewish apostle God visited them to give light in the darkness to guide their feet into the way of peace and friends God visits people today like you and me in the message of wonderful salvation in the forgiveness of sins through the Lord Jesus Christ in the gospel of Jesus our God is personal he's not distant he's not dark he's not unknown and unknowable as some ideas of

God are among people who think that they worship God but in fact they are totally in the dark about who God really is he is personal and he brings the sunrise of light and of joy to everyone who will receive it where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in and his sunrise fills people's hearts with light because as we come to him we find forgiveness of our sins that liberates into joy don't miss that in verse 77 do you see that's what finding forgiveness means it means coming into a personal knowledge of salvation because we come into a personal knowledge of God the Savior himself it is deeply personal that word knowledge in verse 77 in the Bible means real personal intimate relational knowledge of a person to know

God's forgiveness by believing and trusting in his word of grace to us is to come to know him it's to know the tender mercy of our God whereby his gracious sunrise visits us and gives light to our lives and life to our lives and that's what happens when you put your trust in the message of the Christian gospel God himself will visit you and where faith receives that gospel word he imparts the very breath of life he gives you the pledge of eternal life his own spirit within your heart that's the message of Christmas it's a promise kept by God for us it's a great power worked by God for us and in us but it's a personal offer held out from God to us to every single one who will believe and receive him held out to everyone here tonight who will do that a personal offer of the knowledge of

[36 : 58] God and his salvation and the forgiveness of your sins however huge however terrible those sins may have been and friends to know that to know him is to know the beauty the wonder of a sublime sunrise in your life that will fill your life with the light of glory that will banish every darkness every fear even that terrible fear of death banish it forever verse 76 here says that the task of Zechariah's son to be born John was to be a prophet to go ahead of the savior to proclaim the way to him to show people how to find salvation in Jesus and that's still the task of our church here it's a wonderful task to proclaim that there can be and that there is joy for the helpless that there's joy for fearful people in the light of

Jesus Christ the savior so I want to urge you all tonight to come to that sunrise to rejoice in the light of Jesus Christ this Christmas let him guide your feet into the way of peace let him do that now and one day you'll also be able to say with old Simeon another one of those characters that we meet in the next chapter of Luke you'll be able to say now in the face of death I can depart in peace because I have seen your salvation shining to the world in the face of Jesus Christ the Lord Amen