

2. Benedictus: 'Son, it's not about you!'

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to be carrying on our studies in Luke's songs for the coming Saviour, looking this week at Zechariah's song, known as the Benedictus.

So do turn with me to Luke chapter 1, and we'll be looking at the end of the chapter. Luke chapter 1, verses 57 to 80.

That's on page 856 in the Blue Visitors Bibles. Luke chapter 1, verse 57. 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. But his mother answered, No, he shall be called John. And they said to her, None of your relatives is called by this name.

[1 : 02] And they made signs to his father inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, literally, John is his name.

And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth, that's Zechariah's 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 them up in their hearts, saying, What then will this child be?

For the hand of the Lord was with him. And 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 and raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

[2 : 11] To show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant. The oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High. For you will go before the Lord and 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.

And the child grew and became strong in spirit. And he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. Well, do keep your Bibles open and let's ask for the Lord's help before we unpack his word together.

Father God, we thank you for our time together now to quieten our hearts and listen to you. And we pray that as we open our Bibles, you would give us what we need the most.

[3 : 33] The knowledge of salvation and the forgiveness of our sins. Teach us, Lord, how to serve you without fear, holy and blameless before you all our days.

In Jesus name. Amen. Well, the scene is a little hill town in Judah where apparently the party of the year is in full swing.

Elizabeth, respectable wife of the local priest, has just given birth to their son. And I suppose that would normally be quite a big event.

But given that Elizabeth and Zechariah have been drawing their pensions for a decade or so now, the whole village seems to want to nosy in on this strange birth.

And so for eight days, verse 58, they've been rejoicing with Elizabeth at God's great tenderness and mercy. And now they're all here to celebrate the circumcision.

[4 : 36] Just like we might have a big family knees up after a baptism. The only problem is that dad isn't able to be much of a host.

Zechariah, the baby's father, hasn't spoken now for over nine months. Since the day he had his big chance to serve in the temple.

That was when things had all begun to go a little bit strange. An angel had appeared and promised him and Elizabeth a son. A boy they were to name John.

And he was to say, God is merciful or gracious. Now, Zechariah was a priest, a Bible teacher. And he must have taught similar stories from the Old Testament countless times.

Of God graciously giving barren women special children. But it's one thing to teach it. And another to believe that God is able to do it now for you.

[5 : 37] And because he didn't believe God's word, God stopped his mouth. Until the promise had been kept. The teacher was silenced.

Which is how he comes to be here, nine and a bit months later. In the middle of a classic family squabble. And unable to chip in and sort it out. At some point in the party, the conversation turned to the child's name.

And just like all of our big family occasions, everyone seems to have an opinion. The boy ought to be called something like Wee Zach or Junior after his father.

It seems fitting, especially given the circumstances. But to everyone's frustration, the mother isn't having any of it. Whether it's hormones or family politics, she seems to be insisting on a name that no one in the family has ever used.

And so the writing pad is brought out. And everyone turns to Zechariah Senior to make her see sense. And everyone watches as he scratches out the letters.

[6 : 50] Verse 63 is emphatic in the Greek. Not let's call him John. But John is his name. It's a name given to him already by the angel.

God is merciful. And Zechariah had learnt the hard way by now not to trifle with God's word. Well, the family and friends are puzzled.

And all over the valley, verse 65, word gets around. Not least when the moment he at last obeys God's word, Zechariah is able to open his mouth and begin to speak.

You see, they know that this strange, miraculous birth must portend something huge. God is clearly doing something, verse 66.

But who knows what? Well, what would you say if you're in Zechariah's shoes? You've had nine months to think about what your first words might be, while you watch God's promise coming true, and your elderly wife grows larger and larger.

[8 : 04] Do you think after nine months of silence, you might have something worth saying? Well, verse 64 tells us exactly what Zechariah wanted to do.

And the rest of the passage records how he did it. He blessed God. His song has come to be known as the Benedictus, from the Latin for the first words out of his mouth.

Blessed be the Lord. And this song answers precisely what everyone has been wondering. What does all of this signify?

What will this child be? His answer, though, is not quite what you'd expect such a clearly proud and tender father to say on an occasion like this.

We all know what he's supposed to do, don't we? He's supposed to cluck over the baby. That's what the neighbors want. That's what I did at my daughter's baptism. But instead, the message of Zechariah's song is, Son, it's not about you.

[9 : 09] In fact, baby John doesn't even get a look-in until verse 76. And even then, it's only two verses. His birth, though, pointed to something far bigger than any of them had dreamed.

And that is what the old man will bless God for. So for the rest of our time, let's look at his song, his blessing. And it falls into two halves. The first one begins with Zechariah's blessing of God.

And the second one with his blessing for his son. Firstly then, verses 68 to 75. Zechariah doesn't begin with John at all.

Instead, his song explains why this is bigger than my baby. Verse 68. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.

Why is it so important to Zechariah that this child isn't simply called Wee Zach? Well, because his birth is about far more than Zechariah and Elizabeth.

[10:19] His name shouldn't just explain what God is doing for them. His birth is a sign that God is about to show grace and mercy, not just to them, but to all of his people.

And the angel had said that John's whole life would be about making the people ready for that coming mercy and grace.

So that is what his father sings about first. Not the baby born to him, but a baby born in the house of David. Verse 69. He and his son were from the priestly tribe, Levi.

But Elizabeth's cousin, Mary, she was pregnant with a son for the royal tribe, Judah. And the son they would raise up, he would be a horn of salvation.

One who would be strong to save. As a vet, I've had a few chances to testify that animals with horns tend to get their way. And sometimes rather painfully.

[11:22] And Zechariah sings about a strong and mighty king who has come bent on saving his people. And how will that happen?

Well, by the Lord God stooping down to man, visiting and redeeming his people. For salvation to come, the king must become man.

And then redeem man at his own expense. He would graciously enter into our own flesh to spend his own blood with a costly redemption.

And that's what Zechariah has understood is happening now. It's far bigger than him and his child. It's the humbling of the living God.

That's what he's learned through those nine months of God's discipline. And so out from his lips, he pours nine months worth of pent up joy.

[12:25] But how is it that old Zechariah has come to see all of that? How has he understood what so many Jews never did?

Well, as he ponders the angel's words in his forced silence, he must have come to see what he sings about in verse 70. That what God is about to do is the fulfillment of everything God has ever said he would do.

The Christ child on the way is the fulfillment of the promise to David, verse 69. He's the Messiah spoken of by the mouth of the prophets of old, verse 70.

In fact, this royal king is the mercy promised all along by that holy covenant of grace. The promise which stretches right the way back to Abraham.

So just think about what Zechariah is telling us here in his song. He's giving us the final definitive footnote on the Old Testament.

[13:32] The birth of his baby child, John the Baptist, has brought us right up to the cliff edge of human history.

He will be the final prophet, the final voice in that great chorus of verse 70. And now in God's grace, it fell to a silenced old preacher.

To sum up what the entire message of scripture had been about. And it was this, that God would graciously stoop down to man and rescue his people through Jesus Christ.

That's what God had promised. But it's not just doctrine which makes this old man sing. The first half of his song ends with the so what, with the purpose of all of God's ancient promises.

Everything God has been working towards for all eternity, verse 74, was so that his people, being delivered from the hands of their enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all of our days.

[14:47] That is the goal of Christmas. It's why Jesus came, to free you and me, to serve our father without fear.

Again and again. That is how God spelt out his ancient covenant. He wanted a people of his own to love and possess. Yes, you will be my people and I will be your God.

You'll be holy, set apart to belong to me. You'll be righteous, unspoiled by anything that ruins our relationship. Blameless and belonging to the God of grace.

That is what God has always promised for his people. And that is what Jesus came to achieve for them. And it's because God is sworn to it that all through this song, Zechariah has been talking about it as if it's already done.

Did you notice that? He has visited. He has redeemed and raised up. Even before Jesus is born. No one else can speak like that, can they?

[16:00] When the oncologist wants to cushion bad news, he'll talk to you about the good outcome your surgery might have. He might talk to you about your good prognosis.

But until he knows how it will turn out, the one thing that just is not in his power to say is consider yourself cured. The chancellor just gave his autumn statement and he was desperate to tell us that the plan is working.

But as much as he might promise growth and prosperity, it's always just out of his grasp. And so the one thing he can never say to us is, trust me, the job is good as done.

But Zechariah looked back at a promise God made 2,000 years ago to Abraham. That was as far back to them as all of this is to us now. Then he looked back to a promise made 1,000 years ago to David.

And then he looked forward to a child not yet even born. A child who, if he survived the cradle, would still have the cross to endure before this promise would be accomplished.

[17 : 18] And yet God had promised it. And now this old man knows at last that God's promises can be taken as signed, sealed, and delivered.

It thrilled him even more than the birth of his own son. I wonder what would have been the first thing on your or my lips after nine months of silence.

All Zechariah could think to say was, blessed be the Lord God of Israel. Those are good first words, aren't they?

Well, secondly, in verses 76 to 80, the old man at last turns to his own little boy. And with enormous fatherly pride, he sings about what it is that makes my baby great.

Now just consider again how strange it is that he's waited this long to talk about his own son. John the Baptist was surely the greatest prophet that we know next to nothing about.

[18 : 25] Think about what we do know of John's life. We know he lived like the great wild prophets of the Old Testament, out in the wilderness, in odd clothes, on a diet of locusts and honey.

Apparently today that's called the paleo diet, and it's all the rage. If you live somewhere like London, and you want to impress the beautiful people, you have to be a hunter-gatherer these days.

In John's day, though, it marked him out as a man like Elijah, a great prophet. And he was a man of extraordinarily bold character, willing to preach truth, even when it was inconvenient to kings and tyrants.

We know that eventually that lost him his liberty, and before long his life. An extraordinary man. And yet according to his father, it's not really any of that which would make his child great.

Instead it was who John would point to. His child would be a prophet of the Most High God. At long last, his voice would break those 400 years of expectant silence, and he'd prepare the way, verse 76, for the Lord himself.

[19 : 50] He wasn't only the last prophet, but the forerunner of Christ, the one promised by Malachi on the very closing page of the Old Testament, who would prepare the hearts of the people for the Lord Jesus.

And that was to be John's enormous privilege. If Jesus was the climax of everything God had ever promised, it was John who makes sense of what Jesus came to do.

John existed to make sure we understand what Zechariah was singing about in the first half of his song. What does it mean to be saved?

How are we delivered from our enemies? Which enemies? And what does it look like to serve God without fear? If that is what Christmas is all about, then John was sent to make sure people understood it.

And so the last three verses of the song explain the what, the why, and the how of John's message. Firstly, what, verse 77.

[21 : 04] What is this salvation? What was Christ coming to deliver his people from? You see, many look at the first half of this song and imagine a purely political rescue, as if Christ came to free Israel from the tyranny of Rome or the fear of oppression.

That's often all we're looking for, isn't it? Get a bit more political independence, a slightly more democratic government, and all our problems will melt away.

But that just wasn't good enough for Zechariah. His son's mission will be to bring people the knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins.

That's what we're rescued from. The real enemy we need deliverance from is the one which leaves us guilty and ashamed and condemned, which holds us back from that great destiny God has sworn for us.

Next, the why, verse 78. God rescues us because he is a fundamentally good and gracious God, a God of tender mercy.

[22 : 25] That's what John's name was all about, remember, the name which was so important to Zechariah. God is merciful. It's a word which runs through this chapter of Luke.

God treats us better than we deserve. But in his song, Zechariah ties it to another word, doesn't he? It's God's tender mercy.

Literally, it's the mercy he feels down in his guts. That's why he's committed to caring for you and me, lost in our sin and filth.

It's simply the sort of person he is, a God who stoops down to dark, undeserving people. And finally, verse 79.

How will John go about preparing the way for that rescue? Well, he'll urge people to come out of the darkness and into the light shone by the Lord Jesus Christ.

[23 : 28] He'd give knowledge of Christ's salvation. He'd point to the rising sun, the day spring prophets like Malachi had been waiting for. Now, Zechariah's imagery here isn't very flattering, is it?

He was telling those neighbors at the party, those last Old Testament Jews, that they were sitting in the dark. They were busy squabbling, weren't they, about a name for John.

But what matters is the light about to dawn in Jesus. And his message to us would be just the same, wouldn't it? The dark is a dangerous place to be.

He calls it the shadow of death, where you never know when the enemy might pounce. And yet the light has risen already, the light which shows us the way to peace and safety.

Jesus, according to this song, lights up our path out of danger and into God's care. It's through his light and his salvation that we're freed to serve our father without fear.

[24 : 42] What made Zechariah's baby great was that he would be the one to show humanity what it most needed. If we want the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of our sins, well, then we need to look where John is pointing.

If we want to serve our father without the dread of condemnation, then we need Jesus to help us out of the darkness. Now, I know perfectly well that most of us feel that our real needs are something other than that.

We probably wouldn't express our great desires in quite the way Zechariah sings about them, would we? But this old man was absolutely convinced that history's goal was this, precisely this, that you and I serve God without fear, blameless and belonging in Christ.

That's what we were made for. And that is the gift God has to offer us at Christmas. No matter how deep you dig into your stocking, you'll not find something more precious than that.

We might think that we're looking for something more, but deep down, I'm not really sure that's true. What does every Christmas advert have in common this year?

[26 : 15] Think about all the ads on your telly right now. All of them show warm, relational families, don't they? Happily belonging to one another.

There's not even a single product on show in John Lewis' famous advert. Just a bear and a hare who have each other's friendship. That's all we really long for at Christmas, isn't it?

Warmth and belonging. And in God's tender mercy, that is precisely what we can have if we'll only come out of the dark and into Christ.

That's the difference that his holiness and righteousness make. Suddenly, we're not in need of fearing the foe.

There's no need to fear anymore. Instead, we can serve our God as Father. We can belong to him and be blameless before him all of our days, living in his love, and in his light.

[27 : 26] It's what all of history's been about. And it's ours this Christmas if only we will trust his promise.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you so much that the redemption you promised in eternity was accomplished at last by the Lord Jesus.

Thank you that we can trust your promises as signed, sealed, and delivered. That we can serve you now without fear. So help us, Father, through the Lord Jesus to live lives of blameless belonging before you, walking in the way of peace.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.