

2. The First Christmas: The Nature and Need of Salvation

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[0 : 00] Well, we continue, in fact we conclude our study in Zechariah's prophecy in Luke chapter 1. This can be found on page 856 of the Church Bibles, beginning at verse 67 and reading to verse 80.

And Zechariah, of course, the father of John the Baptist.

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 has 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, 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 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.

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. And we thank God for this inspired word.

[1 : 58] Last week, a very prominent English churchman was quoted in the front page of the Daily Telegraph. He was critical of the government's approach to religion.

He said this, The trouble with a lot of government initiatives about faith is that they assume it is a problem. It's an eccentricity. It's practiced by oddities, foreigners and minorities.

Faith, in a secular age, is an eccentricity. And I don't know if that's been your experience of speaking to people who aren't Christians.

I often get asked what I do, and when I explain they say, That's very nice for you. Or, how wonderful that you can pursue your hobby. Or, so long as you're happy.

That's the main thing, isn't it? Faith is an eccentricity. But as we study Zechariah's prophecy, we have to ask the question, What is the gospel actually about?

[3 : 00] Does it have any relevance to us? Two thousand years after the first Christmas. What is its meaning today? We studied last week the prophecy of Zechariah, and we saw in it that God fulfills his promises.

Zechariah learned that God is faithful to his word. What he promises, he brings about. God had promised to David he would raise up a son who would sit upon his throne.

He'd promised to Abraham the entire world would be blessed. And he promised to Zechariah that he would have a son in his old age. And he learned that God fulfills his promises.

And this son was to go before the Christ. And the question we ask today is, What is the Christ going to do? And I want to look under two headings at that question.

Between verses 68 to 79, we see that the prophecy is divided into two parts. Verse 68 to 75 is Zechariah blessing God.

[4 : 02] And verse 76 down to verse 79, is Zechariah speaking to his young son. And there are certain words which reoccur in both halves of the prophecy.

In verse 68, we're told that God has visited his people. In verse 78, we're told the sunrise shall visit us from on high. Verse 70, we're told God's purpose was prophesied by his holy prophets.

Verse 76, we're told that John the Baptist will be a prophet of the Most High. Verse 69, we're told a horn of salvation will be raised up. And in verse 77, we're told this Christ will give a knowledge of salvation.

God's purpose was prophesied. Christmas didn't just drop out of a clear blue sky. God had a plan. God will visit his people and bring them salvation.

And in verse 68 to 75, we have the pattern of salvation. And in verse 76 to 79, the particulars of that salvation.

[5 : 10] And salvation is a wonderful thing, isn't it, when we see it in the world around us. In September, a British journalist by the name of Steve Farrell was kidnapped by the Taliban. He was working for the New York Times in Afghanistan.

And he was taken away to this desperate province, locked in a house, no communication with anyone he knew. And his life was in very real danger. And then one morning before dawn, the sound of helicopters could be heard.

And within minutes, soldiers were on the ground. Steve Farrell was taken into safety, flown back to base and ultimately back to Britain. That is a picture of salvation. And that seems to be something of the picture that Zechariah is telling us.

Verse 71, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Salvation meaning rescue from those who oppress us, who imprison us.

And of course, Zechariah's reasons are very obvious because that is precisely how the Old Testament Jews thought of salvation. Because that is how God had saved them. In Exodus, we learn that they were themselves in a foreign land.

[6 : 17] That they had been oppressed. They had been forced to work as slaves. They had been the victim of ethnic cleansing. They were in misery. And God says to Moses in Exodus chapter 6, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel, whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant.

Say therefore to the people of Israel, I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burden of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.

I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession.

I am the Lord. His people were slaves. He promised them freedom to serve him. They were building storehouses for Pharaoh. He promised them houses they had not even built themselves. They were strangers in a foreign land.

He promised them their own home. God rescued his people from the hand of their enemies. Is that what Zechariah meant? Some people thought he did.

[7 : 27] For centuries they'd been oppressed by the Romans. They'd been invaded. They were colonized. And there were various freedom fighters who tried with limited success to give freedom. Would Christ be the one to give them freedom?

And some people thought he did. There were occasions when they tried to make him king by force. But that wasn't what he'd come to do. His kingdom was not of this world. And he hadn't come simply to establish freedom for Israel.

So we must be very careful if we only think of the gospel in social terms. In Latin America, some decades ago, they had the liberation theology. The theology that says the gospel is about freedom.

Political freedom. But it's more than that. We mustn't think of the gospel only in terms of what it accomplishes visibly. In terms of freeing people from illiteracy. Giving them education.

Freeing people from sickness. Giving them health care. These things are wonderful fruits of the gospel. But they are not the particulars of salvation. And so Zechariah goes on in verse 76 to 79.

[8 : 32] And John Calvin has a wonderful summary of what he says. Calvin, in a book I recommend to you, the Songs of the Nativity, which we have in the book room, in one of his commentaries says this, We know that Christ's kingdom is not of this world.

But Zechariah is thus speaking about spiritual enemies. And about the soul's condemnation. In effect, that he declares that until God took pity upon us.

And appointed his only son to be our savior. We were completely in our enemies grip. Unable to flee. Without hope of relief. Still less of rescue.

Nevertheless, God took a hand. And by an act of infinite and unforced mercy. He freed us and received us as his children. Though before we had been mortal enemies.

As a result, we now have victory over sin and the devil. We can even boast that God has honoured us. By making us members of his only son. Our enemies are not simply temporal enemies.

[9 : 33] They are spiritual enemies of sin and death and the devil. And these are the particulars which Christ came to save us from. The doctrine of sin is never a popular doctrine.

But it is the one you can prove just by travelling around and looking at the world. And last week in Norway, President Obama gave a speech.

He had received the Nobel Peace Prize. And he gave a speech detailing his views on the world and various issues affecting peace. And he said some very interesting things. He said the capacity of human beings to think up new ways to kill one another proved inexhaustible.

He then goes on to say we are fallible. We make mistakes and fall victim to the temptations of pride and power and sometimes evil. Even those of us with the best intentions will at times fail to right the wrongs before us.

We are fallible. We make mistakes. We fall victim to pride and the temptations of power and evil. There is a problem in the world that all the Nobel Peace Prizes cannot solve.

[10 : 45] And yet Zechariah is saying that Christ will deal with this problem. It is not an external problem of society. It is an internal problem of man. As one writer says, the heart of the problem is the human heart.

And where the Israelites of the Old Testament were enslaved to Pharaoh, we are told that the whole world is a slave to sin. That anyone who sins is a slave to sin.

That people offer themselves, presenting their members as slaves to impurity and lawlessness, leading to further lawlessness. That sin is not a bit of fun, something to be trifled with, as the nightclub called sin would have us believe.

Sin is deadly. And yet there is hope. Because we are told in verse 77 that the Messiah comes to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.

He offers to break the stranglehold of sin on their lives. And it is not hard to see that stranglehold in Glasgow. If you walk out the front doors, you'll see bookies, you'll see pubs, you'll see shops where people spend each and every day shackled to their sin.

[11 : 57] Sometimes it is more deadly though, isn't it? Pride or greed or ambition or lust. Much more pernicious. But Jesus Christ offers forgiveness of those sins. Freedom from the power of sin.

Freedom to be rescued from it. And to serve God in holiness and righteousness all our days. Liberation from sin. And of course, that isn't an easy thing.

It's not a cheap thing. The journalist Steve Farrell might have made it away safely, but a special forces officer was killed. He gave his life in order to rescue that journalist. And the salvation that Jesus Christ offers is not cheap.

It is a free gift, but it cost him an awful lot. Because 30 years after these events were written, Jesus gathered with his disciples in the upper room. And as they shared a Passover meal, he poured a cup.

And he said to them, This is the blood of the covenant, the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus Christ gives his life in order to save and rescue people from their slavery to sin.

[13 : 09] And to purchase their forgiveness. So as we approach Christmas, we have to ask the question, Who are you serving? There is an idea that if you're not serving God, actually you're free.

But that is an absolute myth. We have to say, Are we serving God in holiness and righteousness all our days? Or are we simply slaves to sin? Toiling away under the hard, thankless taskmaster, whose wages are death.

Who are you serving? That is the first particular of salvation. But Zechariah doesn't stop there. He continues.

He says in verse 78, Because of the tender mercy of our God, the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

You see, the Bible says we have another enemy. A last enemy. And that is death itself. There is, we're told in Isaiah, a shroud which covers all nations.

[14 : 16] In the wisdom literature, we're told the grave is never satisfied. It has an insatiable appetite. There's a familiar statistic. We used to quote it in hospital. One in one people die.

I'm glad that wasn't true of patients while they were under my care. But it is true in a general sense. And yet Zechariah says, There is hope. Not just at Christmas time.

There is hope when facing the grave. The sunrise shall visit us. There is light shining for those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. By his death, Jesus Christ purchased the forgiveness of sins.

And by his resurrection, he destroys the power of death. He destroys the one who has the power over death, that is the devil, our enemy. And he delivers all those who through fear of death are subject to lifelong slavery.

We're told that if we are united with Christ in his death, we die to sin. Have you died to sin? Are you crucified to sin?

[15 : 20] We're told that if we're united with Christ in his resurrection, we will one day share a resurrection like his. That we will hear the voice of the Son of God and like Lazarus, live.

We are freed from sin and from death. So at the beginning of his Gospel, Luke tells us of what is going to happen. He tells us of the need of salvation, that all have sinned and all face death.

And he tells us of the particulars of that salvation, that Christ offers forgiveness and cleansing and new life and hope when staring into the grave. And at the end of the Gospel, he picks up again these two familiar themes.

And after his death and resurrection, he is speaking to his disciples and he says to them as they are gathered, thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.

That is the message of the Gospel. Forgiveness of sins, light for those in the shadow of death, freely offered to all nations. Not simply some eccentricity, not simply some spiritual candy floss for those that way inclined.

[16 : 38] The axe is laid at the very root of the tree, the problems facing mankind, sin and death, conquered by Christ. And he offers us a share in the salvation which he freely gives.

So as we close our studies in Zechariah's prophecy and the Gospels, Luke, let us remember that God is faithful. As we said last week, there is a living God, quoting Hudson Taylor.

He has spoken in the Bible and he will bring about everything which he has purposed. God can be trusted. And in Christ Jesus, there is salvation from the vicious, merciless grip of Satan, from the pointless slavery of sin and from the crushing fear of death.

Not an eccentricity. Not a problem. This is the glorious good news of the Gospel. And this is the very heart of what we celebrate at Christmas. So I do pray that as you go back to your workplaces and your homes, you might have an opportunity to dwell on these things, but especially to share these things with your friends.

And please do invite them to our service. Bring them along. Let them hear something of this message that they too might share in that wonderful salvation given by a wonderful Savior.

[17 : 56] Let's pray together. Father, we thank you, Lord, that you have provided for our deepest needs in giving us new life, in giving us eternal life.

And we ask, Lord, as we gather now, we might share encouraging fellowship and go from this place full of that life and desiring, Lord, to share it with others, to pass it on, that they in turn might come and know you and love you for themselves.

We thank you that you are a God who saves and redeems and that you are a God of such amazing grace. So we ask you to bless our time in the strong name of your Son. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.