

## The Advent of a King

The Benedictus (Luke 1:67-80)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on December 19, 2021

### Introduction

- ❖ Some of you might know that I was involved in **Boy Scouts** growing up, which meant I went camping a lot. It was primitive camping, which means you would hike a few miles to a campsite, so that you're plenty far from your car, from roads, from sources of electricity, from restrooms or latrines. And we would sleep in tents and cook our food over open fires.
  - Now on rare occasions, we would go hardcore, ditch the tents, and sleep outside. Usually still with sleeping bags. But on one occasion, I remember without sleeping bags. It was in order to earn some badge. **I just remember it being one of the worst nights of my life.** It was so cold and uncomfortable that I couldn't stay asleep. I kept tossing and turning and shivering. Constantly checking my watch. Counting the minutes down. Waiting for the dawn.
    - **So you can imagine my excitement once the darkness all around me began to brighten, ever so slightly.** When a nearly imperceptible glow began to fill the night sky. The sun had yet to break the horizon. I had yet to feel its warmth. **My body was still shivering cold, but that glimmer of light before the dawn somehow warmed my heart.** Because I knew what was coming. What I had been longing for was literally on the horizon. So even before its arrival, my heart, my attitude, my outlook was beginning to change.
  
- ❖ I think something similar is happening in this morning's text. **The people of Israel are described as those who have been sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death (1:79).** They've been tossing and turning. Restlessly waiting for the dawn. The last prophet of Israel in the Old Testament was Malachi. And the span of time between Malachi and John the Baptist was roughly four hundred years.
  - For four hundred years, God was silent. For four hundred years, he sent no prophet. No one with a word from the LORD. **For four hundred long years, the people of God waited in silence, enduring a prolonged spiritual darkness.**
  
- ❖ We saw earlier in Luke 1 that Zechariah himself had to endure a season of silence. He was unable to speak for nine months – for the entirety of his wife Elisabeth's pregnancy. **His long silence was a microcosm, a perfect illustration, of the long years of silence that Israel had to endure.** And the root cause in both cases was unbelief.
  - Zechariah didn't believe God's word. And throughout their checkered past, the people proved they didn't believe God's word either. The consequence was divine silence. **They rejected God's word, so he withdrew it altogether.** And they would soon realize what they're missing. They would realize how good and gracious God is to be willing to speak to them in the first place. And they would soon grow restless. Longing. Yearning. For God to visit again. To bring a word. To send another prophet.
  
- ❖ Malachi offered a ray of hope in his own prophecy. At the end Malachi, in chapter 4:2, the LORD promises that *“for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.”* **In other words, do not fear, the silence will be broken.** The darkness will end. The morning sun shall rise again. God will visit his people once more.

- ❖ **In the Gospel of Luke, starting in chapter 1, we begin to see those glimmers of light before the messianic dawn.** Starting with the angel Gabriel’s annunciation to Zechariah (vv13-17). Then, the annunciation to Mary (vv28-33). Then, the leaping for joy by the prenatal John (v44). Then, Mary’s Magnificat (vv46-55). And then the birth of John the Baptist (vv57-66). **The sun has yet to break the horizon, but people can see the morning sky begin to glow.** It’s the light before the dawn.
  - And suddenly, with his tongue loosed, Zechariah was filled with the Spirit, and he broke out in song (much like Mary earlier). Now traditionally, this hymn is called *The Benedictus* because it begins in Latin with “*Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel*”. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.
    - So this song is a hymn of praise and blessing to God. So as we walk through it, let me show you the four ways in which the Lord is praised. He is praised for (1) his plan of salvation, (2) for his promise of salvation, (3) for his prophet of salvation, and (4) for his purpose of salvation.

### **For His Plan of Salvation**

- ❖ Let’s consider the first praise in the Benedictus – **Blessed be the Lord for his plan of salvation.** According to Zechariah, this plan of salvation has been a long time coming – having been prophesied by the holy prophets of old.
  - Look at v68, “<sup>68</sup>*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people* <sup>69</sup>*and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,* <sup>70</sup>*as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.*”
- ❖ **From the very beginning, God has a plan to reign over his people with benevolence. Ruling over them in love as their rightful king.** Adam and Eve were made in his image and were delegated authority as his vice-regents. They were given dominion over creation. They were to exercise authority – not for selfish gain – but for the glory of God and the good of creation. That was the plan. **God established a kingdom that took the shape of a Garden.**
  - But as the story goes, Adam and Eve were not content as vice-regents but sought the throne. They tried to be God. And for that, sin and curse entered the world. And God’s people were expelled from the Garden. Exiled from his kingdom.
    - But all was not lost. **All along God had a plan of salvation.** A plan to restore his people back into right relationship. To be restored under his loving, benevolent rule. To become vice-regents again, to serve his kingdom.
- ❖ **At the center of this plan is a Mighty Savior.** Zechariah refers to this messianic figure in v69. He says to bless the Lord for he, “*has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.*” Now, in Scripture, horns are symbols of great might. So “*horn of salvation*” is a figurative way of describing the Messiah as a Mighty Savior. As well, he’s a royal member of the house of King David. The Messiah is understood to be a kingly figure.

- ❖ By the way, I know it's a bit confusing when Zechariah speaks in the past tense about events that have yet to occur – like the birth of Christ in this case. **He's speaking in what's known as the prophetic past tense.** It's common in prophetic literature. Prophets would speak this way to convey the idea that what has been prophesied is as good as done.
  - So the *visiting* and *redeeming* and *raising up* of a Mighty Savior are, for Zechariah, events to take place in the future. But they're as good as done. Because the holy prophets of old have been predicting these matters for centuries.
  
- ❖ That's what it says in v70. The prophecies go all the way back to the Garden, after the Fall, after sin and curse entered our world. God promised that the offspring of the woman would one day defeat the serpent, the great enemy to God and to his people (Gen 3:15).
  - Then the prophet Nathan spoke to David in **2 Samuel 7** the words of the Lord saying, *"I will raise up your offspring after you . . . and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."* Ancient readers recognized that that prophecy was partially fulfilled in David's son Solomon who did end up building a house for the Lord. He built the temple. **But they also recognized that the prophecy still pointed forward to a future offspring of David through whom God will establish a forever kingdom.**
  
- ❖ The prophet Isaiah captures this messianic hope in **Isaiah 9**, which is often read this time of year, *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given ... Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom."* (Isa 9:6-7)
  - This is how the holy prophets of old spoke of the coming Messiah. He would have a government and a kingdom because he would be a king. And he would establish a never-ending peace on earth. That's his plan of salvation.
  
- ❖ **Now what does the Messiah save us from?** The stock answer for most of us would be – from our sins. From the consequence of our sins, which is death. And the song definitely goes there in v77. The forgiveness of sins is central to God's plan of salvation.
  - But that's not all that his salvation will accomplish. Look back at v71. It says God will raise up a Mighty Savior for this purpose, *"that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us."*
    - **Notice the very this-worldly nature of the salvation.** Notice the political overtones. It's focused on physical deliverance from enemies and those who hate us. Zechariah was no doubt thinking of the Romans or of any foreign powers that have historically oppressed the Jews. He's hoping for a Mighty Savior to deliver them from foreign rule, from physical and political bondage.
  
- ❖ Now that sounds strange to us. We're not use to speaking of salvation in such terms. **When we talk about salvation we tend to focus on spiritual deliverance from sin – not physical deliverance from human enemies and foreign powers.** But the prophets of old and the New Testament authors had no trouble holding both views – seeing God's plan of salvation in terms of both spiritual *and* physical deliverance.

- ❖ **But what Zechariah most likely did not recognize – what the apostles themselves did not initially recognize – is that God’s plan of salvation takes place in two phases.** The Messiah’s visitation occurs in two phases or two comings. In his first coming, the Messiah fully redeemed us from our bondage to sin. The emphasis was on the spiritual. But not until the second coming will the Messiah fully redeem us from bondage to all other forms of oppression – from bodily decay and death, from abuse and injustice, from conflict and war.
- ❖ **The failure to discern a distinction between these two comings is what led so many in the Gospels to miss the identity of Jesus.** They were so focused on a Messiah saving them from their enemies that they failed to recognize a Messiah who taught us to love our enemies. They chafed at a Messiah who refused to pick up the sword and resist the Romans. Who fell on the sword instead, allowing the Romans to kill him. **Many walked away from Jesus because he failed to meet their messianic expectations.** But it's usually because they made the simple mistake of failing to discern the difference between his two comings.
- ❖ Friends, I’m deeply concerned that none of you make that same mistake. **If you’re dealing with deep disappointment towards God, could it be that you’re expecting to experience right now an aspect of your salvation in its fullness – but which won’t be fully accomplished until the second coming?** You became a Christian. And now you’re expecting good health, a happy marriage, a fulfilling vocation, joy-giving relationships, etc. To be fulfilled and satisfied. To no longer suffer or shed anymore tears. **And, as a Christian, you’re totally in the right to expect those things – those expectations all yours in Christ – but only after his second coming.** After he comes again to make all things new.
  - If you don’t understand this distinction in God’s plan of salvation – if you don’t discern the difference between the two comings of Christ – then you are bound to experience deep disappointment with God and with your faith.

### **For His Promise of Salvation**

- ❖ Let’s look back at the Benedictus and consider a second praise – **Blessed be the Lord for his promise of salvation.** In vv72-75, God is being praised for his mercy; which he promised to their ancestors; which he enshrined in a covenant; which he secured with a sworn oath; which he is keeping to this day. *“<sup>72</sup>to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, <sup>73</sup>the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us.”*
  - Previously, Zechariah was focused on the prophecy given to David. Now, he draws further back to the covenant and oath God swore to Abraham. This brings us back to Genesis 12:1-3 and the first time the Lord makes a promise to bless Abraham. *“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”* (Gen 12:2)
    - And then the Lord reiterates that same promise in Genesis 15:5 telling Abraham that his offspring will rival the number of stars in the night sky. **And then, in chapter 15:17, the Lord enters into a formal covenant, unilaterally binding himself to Abraham and his offspring, under a willing obligation to fulfill all his promises.**

- ❖ **The way the Lord enters into this covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 is quite telling.** We're told that the Lord instructed Abraham to cut a number of sacrificial animals in half and lay them across from one another.
  - Typically, you would expect the two parties to walk through the middle of the cut-up, bloody carcasses. **And essentially you would be invoking a self-curse, as in, "Let the same bloody mess occur to me if I break covenant with you."** That's what you'd expect to happen when a covenant like this is made.
  
- ❖ But what happens instead? It goes on to say, as the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abraham. He completely passes out. And in **Genesis 15:17**, it says, *"<sup>17</sup>When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. <sup>18</sup>On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram."*
  - So God – represented by that smoking fire pot and flaming torch – passed between the bloody pieces *without* Abraham. Abraham slept through the whole thing. **Now by passing through those pieces alone, God was communicating his unilateral commitment to keep his promises.** Even if Abraham or his offspring were to eventually break covenant, God won't. God remains committed, even willing to bear the entire penalty for our covenant-breaking.
    - **And that's essentially what happened on the cross of Christ.** That was God proving how committed he is to his promises – willing to suffer the penalty of our covenant-breaking. So that his promises can stay true.
  
- ❖ Now you would think that making a promise to Abraham and then enshrining it in a covenant would be more than enough to prove how committed he is. But God goes even further. In v73, Zechariah mentions an oath that God swore to Abraham. That's referring to Genesis 22 after Abraham was willing to obey and sacrifice his only son Isaac. **The Lord responds in Genesis 22:15 by reaffirming his covenant promises, but then in v16, he reinforces his commitment to that covenant by swearing by himself.**
  - Typically, when people swear an oath, they swear by something greater than themselves. But since God has no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself (Heb 6:13). **There really is no stronger way for God to prove his everlasting commitment to his covenant than to swear an oath by himself.**
  
- ❖ I hope you're encouraged to hear this. Perhaps some of you are struggling to believe God or to trust in his promises. Years of unanswered prayers can do that. Years of frustrated efforts and unmet expectations can result in a subtle hardening of your heart. Perhaps you've given up on God. And you're thinking God has pretty much given up on you.
  - **If that's you, I hope you can see, in Zechariah, a great example of God's faithfulness to his promise of salvation in spite of our faithlessness and struggle to believe.** Zechariah began chapter 1 struggling with doubt and disbelief. But he ends the chapter in worship and praise, blessing the Lord for his everlasting commitment to his promises.

- ❖ Perhaps you began this morning struggling with doubt and disbelief. **I pray you end this morning praising the Lord – who has promised to save to the uttermost those who draw near to him in faith.** And he secured that promise through a New Job Covenant and bore the entire penalty of our covenant-faithlessness through his death on the cross. So when he adds to that a sworn oath – when he says, “On top of that promise, on top of that covenant, I swear by myself – on my own immutable nature – that I will save all who trust in me.” – what more can you ask for? You just need to draw near to him in faith.

### **For His Prophet of Salvation**

- ❖ So far in this hymn of praise, Zechariah is blessing God for his plan of salvation and his promise to keep that plan. Now he narrows his focus and gets personal. He turns his attention from the coming Messiah to his newborn son. Here is the third praise – **Blessed be the Lord for his prophet of salvation.**
  - Look at v76. “*76And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.*”
- ❖ **Remember, up to this point, there had been no prophet in Israel for roughly four hundred years.** And now suddenly, a prophet of the Most High has been born. And he has a singular mission. To go before the Lord – before the Messiah – and prepare his way. To give knowledge of salvation.
  - Now fast forward thirty years, in Luke 3, we find John the Baptist at the Jordan river, “*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (3:3) Crowds were flocking to him to be baptized – not because it conferred the forgiveness of sins or because it expressed that you had already been forgiven. **John’s baptism served a preparatory function.** It was a way to acknowledge your sinfulness and your desire to change. To turn away from sin. It was a baptism of repentance.
    - But John told the crowds that while he baptizes you with water, “*he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*” (3:16) So he knew his job was not to bring salvation itself – but to pave the way for the One who would.
- ❖ **John prepares the way; while Jesus is the way. John proclaims salvation; while Jesus accomplishes it.** John understood this clearly. He knew his life purpose was to prepare people to follow someone else. So when own followers began to abandon him to follow Jesus, he said that made his joy complete. “*He must increase, but I must decrease.*” (Jn 3:30)
  - **But even as his life mission was to decrease, we’re told that John lived a life of greatness.** Later in Luke, in chapter 7:28, Jesus told his followers that “*among those born of women none is greater than John.*” **Because in the kingdom of God, the great ones are those who live their lives pointing away from themselves and directing people to Christ.** No one did that better than John.

- ❖ Friends, take encouragement in this. After Jesus said that none who came before ever achieved the greatness of John, he went on to say, “*Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.*” (7:28)
  - **In other words, a life of greatness is still obtainable for you.** A life that matters – that carries eternal significance and honor – is not out of reach for you. Perhaps some of you are struggling with your purpose in life. Life has not turned out as planned. So you fear you may not be living a life that really counts.
    - It's a wonderful life – that could be true for you. But it won't be achieved by endless self-promotion. By using people to advance yourself. **No, a great life – modeled after this great prophet of salvation – is experienced when you die to self and live your life directing people to Christ.** Like John, make it your life mission to prepare the way of the Lord by sharing the knowledge of salvation. Greatness in the kingdom of God looks like service.

### **For His Purpose of Salvation**

- ❖ That's what we're saved for according to our text. Which leads us right into our last point. The fourth praise in this song – **Blessed be the Lord for his purpose of salvation.** We see in a couple of places what God's plan of salvation is purposed to accomplish.
  - Now we already touched on this earlier – the spiritual and physical dimensions of salvation. And we talked about how the Messiah will bring about the forgiveness of sins and deliverance from the hand of our enemies. Just not all in one visit.
- ❖ **But look at vv74-75 and notice how salvation leads to service.** “*74that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*” Notice how the Lord's salvation results – not just in deliverance from our enemies – but deliverance from fear. In those days, the people of God served their foreign rulers out of fear of punishment. **But now they are saved to serve their Messiah, their king – not out of fear – but out of holy and righteous desire.**
  - That's what salvation is for. For the forgiveness of sins? Yes. For deliverance from our enemies? Definitely. For a life of comfort and convenience? Certainly not. We are saved to serve. To be restored as vice-regents. Exercising dominion for the glory of God and the good of others. Serving the Lord – not out of fear – but out of love.
- ❖ Has your salvation led to joyful service? Or has it resulted in empty ritual? **A lot of Christians feel like their faith has gone dry and their growth has been stunted.** They feel like they're just going through the motions – going to church, singing the songs, listening to another sermon. Now there could be a number of factors contributing to their spiritual dryness. **But the majority of cases that I've observed, in my years of ministry, has a simple explanation. They stopped serving.**
  - Now they might have pulled back from Christian service for legitimate reasons. They were burnt out. They just started a family. They just moved to a new city and had to find a new church. **But after things settled down, sadly they never reconnected and reengaged in using their spiritual gifts to serve the Lord and his church.**

- ❖ It's no wonder they feel frustrated in their faith. They were saved to serve. **As new creations in Christ, we have a natural instinct to serve. But if you suppress that part of your new nature, then it's like preventing a bird from flying, or a rabbit from hopping, or a deer from leaping.** It's no wonder if you feel frustrated; if you're lacking in joy. Find a way to serve God and serve others. Because, as a Christian, that is part of your new nature. You were saved to serve. That's a clear purpose of salvation emphasized in our text.
  
- ❖ Now let's consider one more purpose. **Look at vv78-79 and notice how salvation brings a great light.** *"<sup>78</sup>because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high <sup>79</sup>to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*
  - The imagery here is of God's people lost in the dark. Wandering aimlessly in the valley of the shadow of death. Then suddenly the light before the dawn begins to glow. **And when the sunrise finally did break the horizon – when the Son of God was born, when he visited us from on high – the darkness fled.** In Jesus was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (Jn 1:4-5).
  
- ❖ He is the light of the world. Whoever follows him will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (Jn 8:12). The shadow of death will flee from his presence. **And Christ will guide our feet in the way of peace – granting peace with God and peace with man.**
  - As you celebrate Christmas this season, may you experience the tender mercy of God and may the light of Christ fill you and your home with gospel warmth and peace.