

Luke 1:67-79

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[0 : 0 0] How are your Christmas preparations going? Now, even as I pose the question, I can maybe imagine a number of contrasting responses to that question. Maybe for some of you there's a sense of satisfied smugness because everything is under control. It's all organized and everything is just heading smoothly to the day. Others, I imagine, would be more dismissive of the question, Christmas preparations, bah humbug, what's that about? And maybe some of you, or perhaps most of you, are just bemused as to why I would be so perverse as to even mention the subject on a Sunday evening. As for myself, I'm just happy that Santa duties are over for another year. I think it's time to find an apprentice Santa, or even better, a replacement Santa. But anyway, moving swiftly on.

This evening, having resisted the pressure, not from any of yourselves, I should stress, but just the general pressure on the first three Sundays of December to head to the Nativity passages this evening, I will be preaching on a Christmas theme, if we wish to call it that, drawn from Zechariah's song of prophetic praise recorded for us in Luke chapter 1. And our focus will be on the closing part of this hymn, of this prophetic song, and particularly the final four verses where we find reference to three things that I will be talking about and that our thoughts will revolve around. Three things that we find spoken of in these final verses of Zechariah's song. First of all, we'll notice that Zechariah speaks of Christmas preparations, Christmas preparations. But he also speaks of a Christmas visitor, and then he also provides for us and launches towards us what we might call a Christmas challenge. So, Christmas preparations, a Christmas visitor, and a Christmas challenge. Let's think, first of all, of Christmas preparations, or more specifically, the one who prepares for the Christmas visitor. Then in verse 76, that's really where we're beginning our consideration of this part of Zechariah's song. There that verse begins with these very tender words, and you my child, and you my child. Zechariah is the one who is singing. Zechariah has just named his new and firstborn child. In verse 63, we didn't read from that far back in the chapter, but there we read, Zechariah asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment, he wrote, his name is John. And then, filled with the Holy Spirit, and I imagine with his hands and eyes, raised to heaven, he erupts in prophetic praise. And then, during this prophetic praise, tenderly, his eyes move downwards, and they rest on his newborn child. And he speaks to him. He addresses this newborn babe, and you my child. And the child, of course, is John. And John is the one commissioned by God to prepare the way for the Christmas visitor. And what does the song say about John?

Well, I think we can notice two things that it says about John. It speaks of both a privilege granted to John, but also a task entrusted to Zechariah's child. First of all, then notice what we could say concerning a privilege granted. What does Zechariah go on to say in that same verse? Verse 76, And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High. You will be called a prophet of the Most High. Now, it would be possible to maybe read that and not really appreciate just how huge a declaration this was. We think of prophets and we say, oh, well, the Bible's full of prophets.

And yet, remember that when Zechariah spoke these words and, filled with the Holy Spirit, declared that this newborn child would be called a prophet of the Most High, he was declaring that for the first time in four long centuries, there would be a prophet sent from God to speak from and for God. For these many and long years, no prophet had walked on the dusty soil of Palestine, no voice from heaven for a wayward and oppressed people. But now, now is born one, privileged to bear this title, a prophet of the Most High. John did not become a prophet because he grew up a devout child. He didn't become a prophet because God saw in him the attributes required of a prophet. It was not something that he earned through a long and pious life. No, he was born, a newborn child. And yet, here, his father, filled with the Holy Spirit, is able to declare this great privilege that would be his. He will be called a prophet of the Most High, a privilege granted. But also, and they're very much

intertwined, the task that is entrusted to John. And this really is an extension of the privilege. What is the prophet to do? What message will he bring? Well, we find the answer to that in our passage. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

This is the message that he will bring. This is the task that he has been given to prepare the Lord, to prepare the way for the Lord. And how will he do this? Well, he has to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. Now, if we had to try and draw the essence of what is involved in this task or the content of the prophetic message, we could maybe focus on two overlapping tasks or messages that John had to bring to the people. The first thing that he had to do was to demonstrate to the people their need of a Savior, their need for the forgiveness of sins, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. For the people to respond to that, for that message to resonate, there needed to be in the people a sense of the gravity of sin and of the reality of their own sin. And John had this message to bring, that his message would be used of God to convict people of their sin. And maybe it's important to notice the significance of the language that is used through the forgiveness of their sins. For the people, the big problem that they faced was their sin, their own sin. John was to disabuse them of the all too common misconception that their plight was all somebody else's fault. Now, that's something that succeeding generations fall into. It's a mistake that succeeding generations fall into. All our problems, all our difficulties, the plight would end. It's all somebody else's fault. And that certainly was true of the people of Israel in John's day. It was the Romans' fault. It was the fault of their own gutless and godless leaders.

[8 : 43] That's why they were suffering so. But John's task, John's message was to demonstrate, was to be used by God to demonstrate to the people their sin and their need of a Savior.

That's one aspect of what John had to do as he prepared the way. But of course, having identified the problem of the people's sin, having his message used by God and owned by God, bringing the people to a sense and a conviction of their own sin, of course, what he then needed to do was to point them to the Savior, point them to the Savior, point them to the one who enjoyed the power to forgive.

John was to point them to that Savior. It was not John's task to forgive. It was not John's task to save anybody. But what he had to do was to point them in the direction of the coming Savior, of the coming visitor, Christmas visitor that we'll be moving on to think about in a moment. And of course, just as his father had given John's job description, if you wish, in this song, so it was as John grew and performed the duties that he had been given by God. This is precisely what John did. His baptism is described as a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And what of his message? What was John's message? Well, it's summarized for us in its essence in Mark chapter 1 and verse 7. And what we find in

Mark chapter 1 and verse 7 really is an echo of what Zechariah sings in this song of praise to God. And this was his message. This was his message. This was his message. This was his message. After me. Maybe these are the most important two words of what is said by John. After me. Don't look at me. After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. And he goes on.

After me. John came to prepare the way. John came to be used of God to bring to the people a sense of their own need, of their own sinfulness, of their great need of a Savior. And in so doing, to then point them to the one who was coming after him. And when Jesus did come and was seen by John, what did John do? Well, we know what he did. He cried out in prophetic excitement and certainty, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John then was given this privileged task of preparing for the Christmas visitor. Now, as we think of what John did and the preparations that he was entrusted with in the Christmas story. In one sense, as we consider John's ministry in the context of the whole swathe of redemptive history, we can and must declare that John's task was unique and unrepeatable. No other prophet would enjoy this privileged task of preparing the way for Messiah

[12 : 24] Jesus. In one sense, in one very real sense, his ministry was unrepeatable. And yet, I think we can legitimately say that in another very real way, we can join with John in similar Christmas preparations, preparing the way for Jesus and his gospel. We too are prophets of the Most High. We too, as we share the gospel message in word and deed, can endeavor to

demonstrate to others their need of a Savior and point them in the very same direction that John pointed to Jesus, to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. I wonder if this task has been part of your Christmas preparations this year. If it has not as yet, well, it's not too late, even in the days that follow, that this task might be an important part for us as Christians as we prepare for Christmas. So, Christmas preparations.

But in Zechariah's song, or in this part of the song that we're looking at, there's also a description of, a reference to, a reference to, a Christmas visitor. Now, who is the visitor that we are referring to? Now, in a sense, it's not a very difficult question, but we can explore the matter just a little as we explain why we're using the language of a visitor. Maybe even the word is one that you're thinking, well, why describe the one who was to come as a visitor? Well, the reason we've used the word visitor is that the verb that Zechariah employs on two occasions in his song of praise literally means to visit. In verse 68, we come across it, first of all, praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and has redeemed His people. In the NIV, the verb that they choose to use is the verb to come. He has come. But the verb, more literally, it would be translated to visit. That is what we find in some of the other versions. Because He has visited His people, because He has come, or He has visited and has redeemed His people. And then we come across the same verb again in verse 76.

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for Him. And there, too, the language of visit is... No, I've got the wrong verse, sorry, there. Verse 78. We're there in verse 78. We read, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven. There, the verb employed is this verb, to visit. The rising sun will visit us from heaven. And who, according to Zechariah, is visiting His people? Who is, if we just backtrack there to verse 68, who is the He of verse 68? Because He has visited and has redeemed His people. Well, the answer is there for all to see in that same verse. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He, the Lord, the God of Israel, has visited and has redeemed His people. God Himself, and this is really where I was getting to, God Himself is the visitor.

[16:15] But He visits His people in the person of His Son, the eternal Son of God, that He appropriately named Emmanuel, God with us. God in Jesus is the Christmas visitor. And what can we say about this visitor from heaven? What can we say about Him? What does Zechariah say about Him in his song? Well, the very fact that we can say that the visitor comes from heaven is worthy of note. There in verse 78, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven. The one who comes, the Christmas visitor, He is the one for whom heaven is His home, heaven is His throne. But such was the human condition and plight that a suitable Savior could come from no other place than from heaven.

As we consider what Zechariah says about Him, perhaps three questions that we could pose and answer to guide us in considering the one who visits us. Why does He visit? How is the visitor described, and what has He come to do? Why does He visit? Well, there in verse 78, in verse 76, Zechariah addresses His son, describes the name that He is going to be given, through to verse 77. He speaks of John's ministry, what John will do. And then from verse 78, He moves on to speak of the visitor who will come, the one whose visit has been prepared by John. And He answers the question, why? Why will there be this visitor from heaven? And the answer is given there in verse 78, because of the tender mercy of our God. Because of the tender mercy of our God. And this really is the heart of the matter. God's saving work is born of and flows from His mercy. His tender mercy, the word tender as it is used here, carries the idea of that which is from the very heart of one's being, the very essence of one's being.

God's mercy, God's love is essential to His very nature. As the Bible very eloquently puts it, God is love. God is a mercy. Mercy carried the Christmas visitor from heaven to earth. That is why He comes to visit. But how is He described in this song? Well, there's one name that He has given, a very intriguing name, that Zechariah employs to speak of the one who will come from heaven, because of the tender mercy of our God by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven. The rising sun. That is how the visitor is described. Now, many suggestions are made as to a possible Old Testament source for the language that Zechariah employs, of course, filled with the Holy Spirit to declare what he declares. It's not a requirement that he would make use of Old Testament language, though it would not surprise us had he done so. And so, it's not surprising that many seek to find some Old Testament source for this language, or certainly some Old Testament

parallel for the language employed. Now, this evening I'll limit myself to one possible source, or certainly parallel to the language that Zechariah uses here to speak of the Messiah who would come from heaven as the rising sun. And the one reference that I'll draw your attention to are the words of God spoken, perhaps very suitably, through the last prophet before John. We've already made reference to this great period of silence between the last of the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist. And if we turn to Malachi in chapter 4 and verse 2, we read this language being employed, but for you who revere my name, the Son of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings, or his wings. And it seems legitimate to match that prophetic announcement in Malachi with the words of Zechariah here in his song. And just how beautiful is that language of God through the prophet Malachi. Jesus, the Son of righteousness, or to use his own words, the light of the world, visits his people, and all who seek refuge under his wings find healing for their souls.

This is how the one who would visit is described, the Son of righteousness. And what has he come to do, the one who would visit? What has he come to do? Well, we've already, even in what we've said thus far, we've already encountered the language of salvation, of forgiveness, of healing. But note what is specifically said of the rising sun. What will the rising sun do for his people? Well, we find the answer to that in what follows in verse 79. The rising sun will come or visit us from heaven to shine, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. He comes to shine on us and to guide us into the path of peace. Perhaps what would be most helpful for us as we just think of these two verbs and the meaning of them, it would be helpful to have in our mind or construct in our mind the picture that may well lie behind the language employed here. The picture of travelers who are traveling through the wilderness, and they're overtaken by darkness on a dangerous wilderness path. And they can't continue to their destination. They can't continue home. The light is gone. Darkness has enveloped them. And they shiver and cower through the long night, fearing, attacked by wild beasts or bandits, unable to move in any direction should they try to do so. Then morning will find them irretrievably lost. But then, to their profound delight and relief, the sun rises, and its light illumines their path to the warmth and safety of home. And so,

[23 : 37] Messiah Jesus, the Son of Righteousness, comes to bring light to our darkness, to point us and to guide us home to the warmth and safety of His Father's house. Jesus, the Christmas visitor, the living Word of God.

He is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path, and He guides us safely home. So, we have a Christmas visitor following the Christmas preparations. But then finally, I just want to highlight for us this evening a Christmas challenge. And I refer here to the challenge that is laid before those who are visited. What is the challenge? What are we to do?

Now, it's right, and it's true that the whole emphasis of Zechariah's song is on God's saving initiative. God visits. God redeems. God saves. God forgives. God shines. God guides. All of these things that we are told of in this song. But when we think of that last thing that is said of God in the song of the Messiah that He guides, we can maybe just pause there and consider where He guides us to.

And of course, the song gives us the answer to that question, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. He guides our feet into the path of peace. God, in the person of His Son, guides our feet into the path of peace. But once there, we are to walk. We are to walk along that path where He places us. As I was thinking of this picture of what God does for us, it brought to my memory the words of Isaiah. There in chapter 30 of the book of Isaiah and in verse 21, where the prophet is urging his people to listen to God's voice as God speaks to them. And he does so in very memorable language when he says, this is the way, walk in it. God speaking to His people, this is the way, walk in it. As if God is saying, well, here's the way. I've prepared the way for you. I've placed you on the way. Now walk in it.

And this is a challenge for us. God has sent His own Son, Jesus, the rising Son, who visits us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and to guide us into the path of peace. And He places us on the path of peace, and then He whispers in our ears, this is the way. Walk in it. Walk in the way of peace. We're placed on the path of peace by God. We're accompanied on the path of peace by God, and we are to walk on the path of peace before and for God. But what does that look like? What does it look like to walk on the path of peace? Perhaps this very song helps us to describe what that looks like, because in the first part of the song that we haven't been really focusing our attention on, we have really a description of what it is to walk in this way on the path of peace.

When Zechariah, in the first part of his song, is speaking of God's redemption of His people and then speaks of its purpose, of its end, a goal. We read there in verse 74, to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, but then listen to what Zechariah says, and to enable us to serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. Is this not a very helpful description of what it is to walk in the path of peace, enabled by God to serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before

[27 : 56] Him all our days. And this is your Christmas challenge. Serve your merciful God without fear. Serve Him in holiness and righteousness and righteousness and do so all of your days. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You that You are a God who is indeed characterized by tender mercy. We thank You that it is because of Your tender mercy that You sent Your one and only Son, Jesus, to be our Savior. We thank You for Jesus, the Son of righteousness who shines His light in the midst of our darkness and leads us in the way that we should go. We thank You that we have indeed been brought to Yourself, that we have been placed on the path of peace. We pray that we would hear the voice of God as He would exhort us and encourage us and challenge us. Here is the way. Walk in it. Help us so to do.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's close our service this evening by singing from Psalm 16. Psalm 16, and we'll sing verses 8 to 11.

It's on page 17 in our psalm books. Psalm 16, verses 8 to 11. We'll sing to the tune Milan. Before me constantly I set the Lord alone, because He is at my right hand. I'll not be overthrown.

Notice how the psalm closes. You have made known to me the path of life divine. Bliss shall I know at your right hand. Joy from your face will shine. Psalm 16, verses 8 to 11. We'll stand to sing.

[29 : 56] Before me constantly I set the Lord alone, because He is at my right hand.

I'll not be overthrown. Therefore my heart is glad. My tongue with joy will sing.

My body too will rest secure. In hope on wavering.

For you will not allow my soul in death to stay.

Nor will you leave your holy world to see the tombs decay.

[31 : 26] You have made known to me the path of life divine.

Please shall I know at your right hand. Joy from your face will shine.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.