

Text: Luke 1:57-80

Title: John's Birth and the Benedictus

Truth: John's birth foretold that God was keeping His promises and reminds us that God delivers us to serve Him.

Date/Location: Sunday August 27, 2023 (rev. and exp. from Dec. 24, 2006 and Dec. 27, 2020 (rev) at FBC

I. Background to Zacharias's Speech: John's Birth

- A. We have seen the angelic announcement of the birth of John, and then of Jesus. We arrive now at the fulfillment of the first of those announcements, the birth of John who was later called "the baptizer."
- B. The happiness that was present at the birth must have been something to behold. Just imagine it with me this elderly woman Elizabeth who has never been able to have children has not only become pregnant but has now brought a child to full term and delivery. The labor...the delivery...the first cry...first feeding...what a marvelous blessing that all was. But how tired would mom be? And how much help would she need?
- C. By the way, just how old was Elizabeth? "Well advanced in years" is the Bible's answer. I tend to think of that as 80 years old or older. But Zacharias was likely not able to serve as priest beyond his 50th year, at least if the priesthood operated as instructed in Numbers 4 starting in verse 3. So, if Zacharias married close to his age, perhaps Elizabeth was approaching 50 herself. I'm sorry to have to say that this age may well have been considered, at that time and place in history, as "well advanced in years." Even today, having a baby in your late 40s is a tough thing.

The good news is that we can stretch the "advanced in age" idea a bit because the average life expectancy of women may have been 35 years, and of men 45 years. Infant mortality was extremely high. Other sources put the expectancy at just over 30 years, some at 25! The number depends greatly on whether you factor in infant mortality or not. Without it, life expectancy was more like 35-40 years. A God-fearing lifestyle would undoubtedly raise that age ("that you may live long on the earth", Eph. 6:3 and Deut. 5:33) because of God's blessing and natural health that comes with being a good steward of your body as a follower of God. Back in that day, if you were nearing 50 or even over, that was quite old. Anna, whom we will meet in Luke 2:36-38, was 84 years old, if not more.

We might chuckle about the old age thing, but on a more serious note, this reality points out that our young people seriously need to plan to grow up long before they are 25 years old. Longer life does allow for a more relaxed timeline, but we must become lax!

- D. God's law given to Moses specified that a male child was to be brought on the eighth day of his life to be circumcised. The text here also indicates that is the day that the child received his name. Perhaps many children died before that young age and did not ever receive a name, as sad as that is. Both Zacharias and Elizabeth were primed by the angel to name the baby *John* (Luke 1:13).
- E. The relatives wondered why the name was to be John. Because God said so! But why did God instruct to name the boy—why not let the parents do so? For one thing, this child belonged to God. We name our children because they are under our parental authority; they are “our” children, after a manner of speaking. All children belong to God, and in this case, God steps in as authority to name the child how He wishes. Additionally, the etymology of the name is notable. It means “the Lord has shown grace” or “God is gracious.” This corresponds to the Old Testament Hebrew name of Yohanan, with a couple different spellings or variations. What a perfect word-picture of how John was a minister of God's grace. He called people to turn from their sins, which is *good* for them to do, and gracious of God to so call them.
- F. Those there wanted to confirm with the father what the boy's name would be, and he wrote “John” on the tablet. At that moment, “Gabriel's curse” was lifted (Luke 1:20) and Zacharias was able to speak once again. In the ensuing moments, he praised God.

II. Introduction to the Benedictus

- A. The term *Benedictus* is used to refer to Zacharias' prophecy after he regained his ability to speak when John the Baptist was eight days old. Like the *Magnificat*, the title comes from the Latin of the first word of his proclamation, which means *blessed* is the Lord God of Israel.
- B. It had been three months since Mary pronounced her Magnificat, and another six months would pass before Jesus was to be born. But Zacharias picks up seemingly right where Mary left off. She spoke about Israel and the promises to Abraham which God did not forget. Zacharias mentions the same promises, showing that the events he was witnessing were the fulfillment of earlier promises made to Abraham and King David.

- C. Whereas Mary’s Magnificat called God her “Savior,” Zacharias focuses on God’s provision of the Messiah in fulfillment of His promises. Messiah would be the “horn of salvation” to fulfill God’s promised mercies. Mary gave some attention to her own situation and how God helped her as well as all those who fear God. Zacharias gives attention to John the Baptist and the entire nation.
- D. Zacharias’ speech emphasizes the idea of salvation—it uses the terms *saved*, *delivered*, and *redeemed*. To an Israelite, salvation would naturally be thought of as multi-dimensional. It includes physical and spiritual aspects, as well as individual and national aspects. We can see all these aspects of salvation in Zacharias’ prophecy.

A faithful Jewish person would realize that the deliverance from Egypt was a physical deliverance from bondage. It also drew them out of a pagan and idolatrous situation, but it did not “save” them in the spiritual sense that we use “saved” in Christian circles today. With many of them God was not pleased, and they died in the wilderness because of unbelief (Heb. 3:16-19; 1 Cor. 10:5). The most important kind of salvation is spiritual, whether on an individual level or national level. When the physical aspect of salvation is over-emphasized, spiritual salvation recedes and is often completely forgotten.¹

- E. Notice the highlights and underlines below which are a technique to study the passage based on its keywords to find out what it is emphasizing. Note the implied subject of many verbal ideas here.

68 “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,
 For He has visited and redeemed His people,
 69 And [he] has raised up a horn of salvation for us
 In the house of His servant David,
 70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
 Who *have been* since the world began,
 71 That we should be saved from our enemies
 And from the hand of all who hate us,
 72 To perform the mercy *promised* to our fathers
 And to remember His holy covenant,
 73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:

¹ This is the problem with the focus on modern political movements. They only promise physical salvation (better living conditions, health care, economy, jobs, peace, etc.) They do *nothing* to provide for the deep need of the human condition, which is sin and salvation from sin into a reconciled relationship with God, wherein is true happiness.

- 74 To grant us that we,
 Being **delivered** from the hand of our enemies,
 Might serve Him without fear,
 75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.
 76 “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
 For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
 77 To give knowledge of **salvation** to His people
 By the **remission** of their sins,
 78 Through the tender mercy of our God,
 With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;
 79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
 To guide our feet into the way of peace.”

F. You can observe that verses 68-73 focus on God’s promises and corresponding actions. Verse 74 opens a section that speaks about how God’s people would respond: with holy service all their lives. Verses 76-79 record Zacharias speaking about how his son was going to be a prophet to prepare the people and to give saving knowledge.

III. The Promise-Keeping God, vv. 68-73

A. Zacharias introduces his speech by speaking of this in general terms in vv. 68-69. Notice that Zacharias speaks in the past tense—God “has visited” (Gen. 21:1; Exodus 3:16, 4:31, 13:19, 20:5) His people. To “visit” is OT language not just meaning “to come and see” but to actually **do** something for someone (see also 1:68). God also has “redeemed” His people (Exodus 15:13) and “raised up a horn of salvation” (2 Samuel 22:3; Psalm 18:2).

Jesus would not be born for another six months. Nevertheless, Zacharias knew by the Spirit (v. 67) that these things prophesied so long ago were now happening. The house of David would rise once again to prominence out of its current obscurity. It was future, but it was as certain as if it were present or past. God was fixing to rescue His people from sin and oppression.

B. In v. 69-70 and 72-73, the phrases “as He spoke” and “mercy promised” and “remember” and “oath” tell us that God keeps His word. He said through the prophets that he was going to provide salvation for Israel, and now He was going about to do it!

1. Prophecy of the House of David. 1000 years before Zacharias, God promised to David a dynasty, people, and everlasting peace (2 Sam. 7:8-16).

2. Oath to Abraham. This was over 2000 years before Zacharias. God promised Abraham a nation and blessing to and through him (Gen. 12:1-3). The oath included land (15:18-21) and a great posterity with the sign of circumcision (17:1-16) as well as salvation for the entire world (Gal. 3:8).
 3. Zacharias informs us that what was happening with John the Baptist and Jesus was an integral part of these promises.
- C. In vv. 71 and 74-75, the freshly un-muted prophet mentions their enemies and those who hate them. The Romans were the occupying power at the time, in conjunction with the Idumean family of Herod the Great. The Israelites keenly felt their oppressive rule. Still today there are many who hate Israel. The Jewish nation must look beyond themselves and their security service and their nuclear capability to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the one who can deliver them from all their enemies.

IV. The Holy Service of God's People, vv. 74-75

- A. In v. 74-75, Zacharias says that this deliverance is not just for deliverance's sake, but that the Jews might serve God in peace and in holiness and righteousness. This is God's desire for His people throughout all the ages. "Serve God?" Yes, that's right. You are invariably going to serve someone or something—far better to serve the Lord. Notice the accompaniment—in an environment of peace from enemies and holiness. It is an environment that is first-rate, second-to-none, better than all others. It is a blessing to serve God because eventually you will do so in perfect bliss.
- B. To do that, they (and we) need to be brought into a state of holiness and righteousness. Without that, people are disqualified from doing every good work. They might do things that are decent and nice, but they are disqualified from being on God's team, so to speak. They are not following the prescribed order of things or rules. Without holiness, no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). But it is hopeless to try to achieve that yourself, so give it up and receive the right standing offered in Christ.

V. The Future Message of the Baby Prophet, vv. 76-79

- A. This section opens with a couple of verses about John, the one who would be called "John the Baptist" later in his life. He was a *prophet* of the Most High (1:76). Contrast that with Jesus who is called the *son* of the Most High (1:32).

Think of John as the last in the long line of Old Testament prophets. That line extended from Enoch (Jude 14) through Samuel (Acts 13:20), Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 13), through Jeremiah and Isaiah and Ezekiel, to Malachi and Zechariah. The prophetic ministry resumed with John after the long intertestamental hiatus. God again spoke to His people through John, and then again through Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:2) and His apostles. By the way, this notion is a clue as to how to look at God’s program—not as two separate testaments but as one unified Bible.

- B. John the Baptist had a job to do—to call people to repentance (go before to prepare His ways) and tell them about the knowledge of salvation (1:77). He was to go before the Lord and prepare the paths for him by preaching repentance. He was the herald of the coming King and kingdom. We too must tell others about repentance and salvation. But before doing so, we need to experience those things ourselves.
- C. In v. 77b, salvation comes through the remission of sins. Therefore, in Christ, sins are paid and forgiven, and we can know that they are removed as far from us as the east from the west (Psalm 103:12; see Isaiah 38:17 and Micah 7:19). Without Christmas, there would be no fellowship with God, no heaven, no eternal life, no hope. Sins had to be “paid,” for if it were not the case, Christ would not have had to come (like Gal. 2:21).
- D. In v. 78, Zacharias tells us that God has tender mercy toward his people. These mercies are brought by Jesus Christ. He is from heaven. He came down to visit mankind on the earth.
- E. Jesus is the Dayspring from on high. Verses 78a-79 teach us that Christ brought light and guidance for us (somewhat like Ps. 119:105). We need that, as those who sat in darkness and under the pall of death. We had no release from those bitter enemies. Sin held us in its grasp. God has given light for those who live in darkness. For those who do not have Christ, it is no surprise that life seems dark.
- F. God guides us in the way of peace—peace with God and with fellow man.

Conclusion

The focus of John the Baptist and of his dad is on CHRIST. Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.” Zacharias said, “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel.” They explained why they said these things. Like those blessed saints of old, we too should be worshipping God in holy service.

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