

## **Sermon 5: Luke 1:57-80: The Benedictus**

### **OUTLINE**

Zechariah's silence  
Zechariah's song

### **INTRODUCTION**

There are two ways in which God faithfully parents us with suffering. Think of these as two different types of parental discipline. There is the use of suffering in our lives in general which acts to refine our faith, we can think of 1 Pet. 1:6-7, 'In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.' Here God uses suffering as a gymnasium to stretch and strengthen us. Sadly, because we are sinners who have sin so deeply ingrained this is God's strong detergent to help sanctify us. The second way in which chastens us is where He reacts directly to our particular sins and as a faithful Father reacts to discipline us. 1 Peter 3:7 is a great example of this, 'Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.' Liberty in prayer, and answers in prayer are put on hold until the sin in your marriage is dealt with. You can categorize these forms of discipline as proactive and reactive discipline, proactive discipline is like when a parent gets a child out of bed every morning, gets them to make their beds, puts restrictions on their time and who they hang out with, etc. all in a bid to grow their character. There is no particular sin being addressed but rather sin in general is being worked on. Then there is reactive parental discipline which is when a parent has to respond to the specific bad behavior of a child.

Throughout our lives you and I will undergo both. In the portion before us we have that familiar saint, Zechariah. The angel Gabriel visited him and gave him a prophecy about a son born for the purpose of preparing the way of the Lord, whose name is to be John. Where Mary trusted in the word of the angel and believed that God could do impossible things, this priest, who we would ordinarily credit with a better theology did not believe the word of God through Gabriel. Even though an angel was the messenger Zechariah asked for a sign, and God disciplined him. Zechariah was under reactive not proactive discipline. Luke 1:20, 'And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.'" Some have suggested that not only was Zechariah mute but that he was also deaf, in our text v62 we see that those present at John's birth had to make signs to Zechariah to communicate with him, this is possible.

This time of silence, suffering and discipline was a time that Zechariah used for learning and reflection. It is said that there are three types of people, those who learn from others suffering, those who have to learn from their own suffering and those who don't learn. Zechariah is a common believer like you and I who often has to learn the hard way. As we look at Luke 1:57-80 we will look at the birth of John in v57-66 and think about Zechariah's silent suffering and how the Lord used this in his life, and secondly, we will look at Zechariah's song, famously known as the Benedictus from the first word of the Latin translation. A particular focus for us in this song is salvation.

## **Zechariah's silence**

The story of John's birth is well known to us. We see in v57 that at full term Elizabeth gives birth to the prophesied son. In verse 58 we see that the community rejoice with her because this was a unique event for them. Just as a son was prophesied so was the joy at his birth. The narrative centers around the naming of the son. V59, 'And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father.' The expectation from the community was that the child would get a family name, of either the father or the grandfather. V60-61, 'but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John."'<sup>61</sup> And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name.'" the name John was given to Zechariah by the angel, somehow Zechariah must have communicated this to Elizabeth, and in obedience to the angel she wants the boy to be named John. This is when they call in Zechariah, v62-63, 'And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called.'<sup>63</sup> And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered.'

Now names in the bible are loaded with meaning, they speak of a person's faith and family. For example, Zechariah's name means God remembers, Elizabeth's means God is faithful, and John means God is gracious. God remembering His promises, God being faithful to those promises and fulfilling them on the basis of grace, the names themselves capture well what God is doing in this text.

Now of concern to us is Zechariah. He was the one who originally received the message that a son was to be born who would be a prophet and that his name was to be John. He did not believe it, he asked for a sign, and he was given a sign, he was struck dumb until these things would come to pass. What happened to Zechariah during those nine months? We learn from v63 that God taught Zechariah faith. We see that he wrote on a tablet, 'His name is John.' The literal meaning is something more like, his name is already John. It is emphatic and it is a given. Family traditions and conventions must give way to God's word and Zechariah has learnt his lesson. In obedience to the word of God he names the child John.

Here is the lesson for us, some of us learn the word of God and believe when we here it, but others of us only believe it through suffering. Think on the gospel. Some hear about the message of the Bible that God has sent His Son to save us from our sins and return us to Himself and they believe it as soon as they hear it. They gladly trust in Christ and are mercifully saved. But for others the road is harder, they are more like Zechariah who wants more proof. It often happens that when difficult circumstances come into their lives and they hit rock bottom, now they are no longer interested in playing intellectual games but need a rock for their lives and for their eternity. Through difficulty and pain they come to faith.

But it is the same for believers as well. Some of us hear the word of God and believe it and go and do it. But many times we hear the word of God and we don't trust it, we don't believe it, and we don't go and obey it. This brings that reactive discipline we spoke about at the beginning. Pain we know is God's megaphone to bring you to your senses. Think on Zechariah. He would not have been able to go to work, he would have been cut off socially, his situation would have affected his marriage, and he would have had a lot of time on his hands to meditate, to think on his faults, and to ponder the truth of God's word.

His sufferings producing change are not only seen in the emphatic way he names his son but in the praise that he offers to God, v64-66, 'And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.'<sup>65</sup> And fear came on all their neighbors. And

all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, <sup>66</sup> 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.' While Zechariah was under the hand of the Lord he turned that time into a time of reflection and praise. The song, the Benedictus which we will unpack shortly is probably a reflection of Zechariah's new faith in God through this time. A question that should come to your mind is this, at what point did Zechariah come to believe in God's word? At what point did he begin to appreciate all that God was doing towards bringing the Messiah and salvation to the world? It is possible that Zechariah was a 'convert' early on, but the lingering consequences of his doubt stayed with him.

We learn from Zechariah that God is a faithful Father who disciplines His children. We learn that God uses this discipline to improve our faith. These times of suffering are times that we can use to meditate and reflect and be brought to faith and worship. We learn that the consequences of our actions can linger long after we are sorry for our sins.

Now I want to issue a warning here. It is my experience as a pastor that whenever I speak on suffering and God's purpose in it that many can overinterpret what I am saying. Please remember that proactive and reactive discipline are only two of many purposes that God has in our suffering, this may or may not be what God is doing in your present suffering, there are many more reasons beside. Let me say that as earnest as you may be to know exactly why you suffer, you may never know. However, the scripture encourages us to take all suffering as discipline from a loving Father, and this is my advice to you. Let your suffering be a school of obedience as it was for Christ, as it was for Zechariah.

### **Zechariah's song**

V67, 'And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,' we move now to the famous Benedictus. And as we begin we can see that this is not merely a private reflection but a prophecy given under inspiration of the Spirit. The OT prophets prophesied in two ways. Firstly, they were aware of what they were talking about, or secondly, they did not know what they were talking about and speaking about things beyond their horizon. God uses the thoughts, emotions, culture and experience of the prophets to bring His word to His people, or God can use the prophet to talk about things beyond their experience and knowledge. I think Zechariah's prophecy is of the first type. The song is full of reflections on God's coming salvation, a salvation that was prophesied in the OT, and from the details of Gabriel's message to Zechariah v13-17, we can see that Zechariah has come to accept what time it is and what God is about to do.

The song has two main parts to it, v68-75 is worship and praise towards God for what He is doing, and v76-79 is about John, his message and the One he is preparing the way for. As we go through this song, I want to draw your attention to the all the ways it talks about God as Savior and the salvation He is bringing about.

V68, 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.' Zechariah begins by blessing God, this is to exalt and praise Him. Specifically we are told that identity of this Savior God, 'the Lord God of Israel.' And He tells us why he is blessing God, the word 'for' indicates the reason and we are told that God has visited and redeemed his people.' Please notice the prophetic past tense for things that are present and future. This is the common way of speaking of things that are certain. This whole song is Israel centered. Luke will bring in God's concern for the Gentiles later on, but Zechariah's song is specifically concerned about God's faithfulness to Israel and many of the ideas must be understood in light of Israel's history. Visitation, or God in the camp means blessing, if God

is not near or has departed that is bad and judgement. Redemption is an exodus motif where God redeemed His sin from Egypt. It speaks of being set free from slavery at a price. Little does Zechariah know what that price will be. All of us are unable to bear the expense to be set free God has to settle the debt, but it is a blood debt, for the wages of sin are death, and Christ pays for our freedom at the cost of His life.

V69 speaks of the coming of the promised Davidic King of 2 Sam. 7:12-13, 'and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.' A horn is as someone has called it, 'the business end'. When a fight is fought between two male animals the horn is the weapon that brings victory.

V70 indicates that this coming Savior is the promised one of the OT, 'as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.'

V71 outlines some of what is involved in this salvation, 'that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.' Many in the first century would have read this politically thinking that the Romans were the enemies being spoken of. However, we know that the enemies of satan, sin and death are the great enemies Christ over comes and at the end of time will put all enemies under His feet.

V72, 'to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant.' Not only is the coming of the Savior a fulfillment of prophecies, but the fulfillment of promises.

So far we have seen, Who is saving us, the Lord God of Israel, what this salvation entails, God's presence with us and redemption and saving from our enemies. How He does it, by raising up a horn of salvation from David's house. And all of this to fulfill the promises and prophecies of salvation in the OT, but the next thought tells us what we are saved to, '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.'

Here is one of the reasons why God saved you, so that you could serve him. We all serve someone, or something. We may not be experiencing political oppression here in NZ, but we are still a slave to something. The enemies that we are saved from is the enemy of being our own gods, we are creatures not Creators. This slavery has been aggravated by being oppressed by the devil through his deceptions and temptations. Think on what it means to be a sinner, the bible paints a terrifying picture, you are a willing slave to self-destructive pleasures, and the end of that path is judgement. We will hurt our bodies, our minds, our jobs, our families, our consciences, our relationship with God to have our sins. We believe lies and by our own choices self-destruct. God has come to set us free from this slavery in order to make us His servants.

Ironically we think the first freedom and the second bondage but it is the other way around. We are delivered from the hand/power of our enemies, sin need no longer enslave you, the devil need no longer have dominion over you, you can be free.

Zechariah lists one of the benefits of serving Him, 'without fear.' The language of service might suggest the wrong impression about God and us serving Him. Unfortunately we taint all service as bad and have connotations of slavery and oppression, but in God's service we can be without fear. How? On account of Christ paying for every sin securing our eternal life, and because we receive a new standing as children of God and God treats with us as sons and daughters, we need have no fear. No fear of hell, no fear of our futures, no fear in our sufferings, God is for us who can be against us.

But notice as well that service to God includes holiness and righteousness. This means that we walk and talk purely, that we are striving to be holy as He is holy, that we strive after the love that fulfills the law of God. And we do this as Zechariah says, 'all our days.' Christianity is a life where we get more from God because He gives to us an inheritance and reward we could never earn worthy of Christ. And it is a life where we give more to God than any would give to their gods, for He is worthy of it all, and we are His. In light of all He does for us, it is a small thing that we give our all to God. And once we have given all we cannot think we have done God a favour, but count ourselves as unprofitable servants wishing that we could do more for the one who has done so much for us.

The second part of Zechariah's song is about John and his message.

V76 shows us that John is the one prophesied to prepare the way for the Messiah, 'And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.'

V77 tells us about John's message of salvation, 'to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.' You might think that salvation as forgiveness of sins is an obvious definition, but not anymore. Today there are many challenges to the traditional view that salvation is firstly about being forgiven. Many today want to talk about political and social emancipation. There is some truth in this, it is true that God will make all political systems perfect, that all pollution will be done away with, that all social evil will come to an end, and Christians should be seeking to show the love of God in concrete ways that agree with these things, but let us remember that this is not the same as the gospel. Your most important need, is this. Are your sins forgiven? Do you have this of salvation in knowing that your sins are forgiven? Do you know that God has given His Son in payment for your crimes and by trusting in Him you can receive a full pardon? This is a perfect summary of salvation.

V78 tells us the motive on God part for our salvation, 'because of the tender mercy of our God.' Zechariah has amplified God's mercy here, he has taken the ordinary word and put another word which means deep feeling, which we have translated as 'tender.' God does not choose to save us in an indifferent way but has deep feeling, compassionate, tender mercies towards sinners. How can I know that my sins will be forgiven if I turn to Christ? You can know because of the character of God, He does not lie, and He has tender mercy.

The last part of v78-79 are talking about the coming of Christ, '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.' God in His tender mercy sends a sunrise/Sonrise the book of Malachi speaks of the Sun of righteousness rising with healing in His wings. He gives light to those in spiritual darkness, and life to those in the shadow of death, life and truth and guides our feet into the way of peace. I do wonder whether this verse ties in with Jesus own saying that He is the way, the truth and the life.

What do we learn about God our Savior? So far we have seen, Who is saving us, the Lord God of Israel, what this salvation entails, God's presence with us and redemption and saving from our enemies. How He does it, by raising up a horn of salvation from David's house. And all of this to fulfill the promises and prophecies of salvation in the OT. He saves us in order that we might serve Him, that we might live without fear, that our whole lives might be given to Him in holiness and righteousness. This salvation involves a knowledge of the forgiveness of our sins, because of the tender mercy of our Savior, and this salvation

involves the coming of Christ to bring truth, and life in order to guide us into the peace that our hearts are longing for. This certainly is reason to worship God.