

A New Dawn

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[0 : 00] The reading is from Luke chapter 1, Luke chapter 1, page 1027 in the Church Bible. Page 1027, Luke chapter 1, and at verse 67.

Zechariah sings of his newborn son, John, one day to be John the Baptist. John's father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he's come to his people and redeemed them.

He's raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he said through his holy prophets of long ago, Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham, to rescue us from the hand of our enemies and to enable us to serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

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, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

[2 : 10] Thanks be to God. Let's do this.

So, yes, Christmas number one's Lad Baby has done it again. Last year, we built this city on sausage rolls, was Christmas number one.

This year, he's replaced I Love Rock and Roll with I Love Sausage Rolls, and it's Christmas number one. It's extraordinary, isn't it? There was a time when I thought growing up that a song had to be good to be Christmas number one.

You think of Bohemian Rhapsody, of Band-Aid, the Beatles had several, Pink Floyd, Cliff Richard, even Leona Lewis. But it's been trashed, hasn't it?

And I'm even missing the years when it was X Factor every year. I miss those years now. Well, this morning, we're looking at one of the first ever Christmas number ones. Mary's song comes earlier in Luke chapter one.

[3 : 24] Maybe that's the first Christmas song. But here, written by Zechariah. And for most of the history of the church, and indeed most of the history of our church, St. Silas as well, if you came to church regularly, you would easily know this song by heart.

It's part of evening prayer in the Anglican church liturgy. Many churches would have said this very regularly. So you may be someone that knows these words off by heart, maybe to a tune, to a song. Or it may be that you've never heard them before. That's fine. But we do well to look at them together because it is a wonderful, profound, deeply thankful Christmas number one.

So what makes a good Christmas song? I think we like the Christmas songs that give us a sense of Christmas nostalgia. They get us into the Christmas spirit. And one of the bigger ones in the last few years was Coldplay's song about Christmas lights.

And when you hear the words, Chris Martin in Coldplay connects with us because he talks about some of the difficulties that any of us might feel as we approach Christmas.

[4 : 29] He's having a row with his partner in the song. This was before his conscious uncoupling. And he says, because of this row, it doesn't feel like Christmas at all. And then he sees the Christmas lights.

And they light up the street. And suddenly everything is fine in the song. It's remarkable. He says, those Christmas lights light up the street. Maybe they'll bring her back to me. Then all my troubles

will be gone.

Those Christmas lights keep shining on. So what's the message of the song? It's something like, I thought that coming up to this Christmas, you know, I thought I had too many problems in my life to really enjoy Christmas this year.

But then when I saw the Christmas lights, it just changed everything. So what do we think of that? It's just sentimentalism, isn't it?

It's superstition, actually, about Christmas symbols. And the reason for that is because Chris Martin, like many people at Christmas, is confusing the symbol for the reality.

[5 : 37] If Christmas lights don't actually symbolize anything, then they're useless for our problems. They're meaningless. But here in Zechariah's song, we discover why Christmas is light in the darkness.

If you look down at verse 79, the climax, the culmination of his song, as he turns to John in verse 76, his child, but then he turns to the one who'll come after him in verse 78, the rising sun who will come to us from heaven.

Verse 79, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. This is the Christmas light we need.

It's light in the darkness, dawn in the darkness. And that's what we're going to think about together. Just think about the story behind the song first. We meet Zechariah in verse 6 of Luke chapter 1. He's a man of faith. He trusts God's promises. He's a priest. He's living in Jerusalem. He's got a godly wife, Elizabeth. And they're childless. And just as childlessness is painful for many people today, it's often at Christmas people feel pained by that, it's painful for them as well.

[6 : 51] And they're both too old now to have children. But right through the Bible, when you meet a woman who is struggling to conceive, you listen up. It often means God is about to do something terrifically important.

Abraham and Sarah are old. They're childless. Epic things about to happen. Then it was Isaac and Rebecca who are struggling, and Isaac prays. Then it's the next generation, Jacob's wife, Rachel. Generations on Hannah in the land. And we hear at the beginning of 1 Samuel that the word of God is rare in the land. The word of God is rare among God's people. And we meet Hannah, and she can't have kids.

And she prays. And God sends the prophet Samuel. He's bringing his word back to his people. So here in Luke chapter 1, we get a signal. Something big is about to happen.

And it's important we get that signal because God's people have been waiting over 400 years to hear from God. And we find Zechariah and Elizabeth trusting God, but childless.

[7 : 56] And Zechariah goes into the temple, and he is the one to go into the holy place to burn incense. And if you were a priest, there were lots of priests, this was literally a once-in-a-lifetime moment for a priest.

And then when he goes in, the angel Gabriel is there and says to him, Elizabeth's going to bear you a son. And you're going to call him John. And he tells him what John will do.

And Zechariah, even though he believes God, he doesn't believe this. It's too much for him to believe. And so he's not able to speak until the baby is born.

And when Elizabeth gives birth, they get to the naming ceremony. And in verse 63, Zechariah says, his name is John. And then we read in verse 64, immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.

So after nine months of reflection, unable to speak, this is the song, I take it, that comes out of his mouth. A song about light coming to the darkness.

[9 : 03] And we're going to think together about the need for the dawn, the promise of the dawn, the nature of the dawn, and finally, the light in the dawn. What we do about that, living in the light of the dawn. So first of all, the need for the dawn.

Christmas will only be light in our darkness if we recognize that we are in darkness without it. What Zechariah reminds us of here in his song is that our darkness is caused from having enemies. Enemies are not usually a big theme in our Christmases, are they? But if we forget we have enemies, we don't think that we need saving. Look at verse 71.

Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Then verse 74. To rescue us from the hand of our enemies and to enable us to serve him without fear.

For those believers waiting for the Messiah over centuries, it was no secret for them that they had enemies. They'd had nations around them who'd raided them, empires who'd come and plundered them.

[10:12] The temple had been destroyed and rebuilt. Their ancestors had gone through an exile, taken away from the land. And they're waiting for the Messiah who will save his people from their enemies.

And the same is true for us, that Jesus comes to save us from our enemies. It's just that our enemies are not physical enemies. Every Christian, if you're a Christian, we are engaged in warfare, in spiritual warfare.

Just as we read about the angels who announced to the shepherds about Jesus coming and announced to Zechariah and announced to Mary, and we read about these mighty, terrifying, good spiritual beings, angels, there are evil spiritual beings led by Satan, the evil one.

It was Satan who first tempted humanity to turn away from God. And Satan is very powerful. The New Testament calls him the ruler of the kingdom of the air.

That is the kingdom of the spiritual beings. Satan is very powerful. Jesus called him the prince of this world. The prince of this world. And he's very dangerous.

[11:30] The apostle Peter says the devil prowls around like a roaring lion waiting for someone to devour. He's a believer prowling around the church. He's the tempter and the accuser.

So he tempts God's people to sin. He tempts us to sin. And then when we do sin, he accuses us. He says, you can't be a real Christian if you did that again.

God can't forgive you for that. So he pulls people away. He wants to pull us away. And that line he used against Eve, he uses again and again today.

Did God really say that? Did God really say there would be a judgment day for sin? You will not surely die. We also hear in the New Testament that Satan blinds, spiritually blinds people.

The apostle Paul is describing his ministry of sharing Jesus with the world. And he says this, even if our gospel is veiled, it's veiled to those who are perishing.

[12:39] The God of this age, Satan, the God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

So all around us, as we speak about Jesus with friends, colleagues, classmates, family members, as we have friends come to carols, come to Christingle, when we see people failing to respond, failing to grasp God's grace, failing to respond to the news about our sin and our problem and that we can be saved, do we remember Satan has blinded the minds of unbelievers?

Are we aware of that danger for ourselves? That unless we're saved, we are blind. And because Satan incites our sin and our rejection of God, we have a wrecked world, don't we?

We have problems all over the world. That's why we live in darkness. It's why we have conflict. It's why we have suffering. So do we see the world like that as Zechariah sees it so that he can see with relief light coming because he knows that there's darkness?

In August 1914, as the Great War began, the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Gray, said, he used this phrase, he used it with a friend, apparently, he said, as he saw the lights being lit that evening at dusk, he said to his friend, the lamps are going out all over Europe.

[14:21] It was just his picture of the next four years. And of course, over those four years, good things did happen. For some people, life went on. But the war that was going on over Europe, it cast an overwhelming darkness over the whole of Europe.

And in a sense, as Christians, that's how we should see the world today as we look at it through God's eyes. It's how we should see the world ever since Genesis chapter 3. But of course, good things happen in our world, really good things.

And for many of us, life just goes on. But sin and Satan and suffering cast a shadow over our whole world, over our whole lives.

And Christmas is news of a mighty king born into titanic spiritual warfare. And we see that, don't we, in Jesus' life as Herod slays the baby boys around the area he's born and his family, to keep him safe, have to take flight.

He's a refugee in Egypt. And then, as he starts his adult ministry and he goes into the wilderness and Satan viciously tempts him to doubt God's word and to disarm the devil so that he can free us as the people he loves, he has to endure rejection by one of his followers and desertion by his

friends and being strung up on a cross to die, bruised and beaten.

[15:50] It is a dark world and so we only appreciate Christmas as light in the darkness if we accept there is darkness. That's our first point that we needed dawn, the need for the dawn.

Secondly, the promise of the dawn. In God coming to be with us, he is remembering his promises. That's such a big theme in Zechariah's song.

It's not that he's ever forgotten his promises but when it says he's remembered them it's that he's decided now is the time to act on them. Centuries of promise.

If you look at verse 69, Zechariah says that for us. He, God, has raised up a horn of salvation, that's a mighty, strong salvation for us, in the house of his servant David as he said through his holy prophets of long ago.

He promised it through the prophet Nathan to David in 2 Samuel chapter 7 that this is in 1000 BC that in David's line God would set up a king who will reign forever.

[16:51] And those promises were the follow-on to his promises to Abraham that God is going to reverse the effects of sin in our world by establishing his kingdom through Abraham, through Abraham's seed, his offspring.

So verse 72, Zechariah says that, to show mercy to our ancestors, Jesus is coming, not just to us but to our ancestors, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham, to rescue us.

God's promises to Abraham, they direct the whole course of human history. You know, with the new Star Wars movie, if you, I don't know whether you've seen it yet, but people talk about story arcs with the Star Wars trilogies.

This is the end of the third trilogy and they say there might be future Star Wars movies. I guess there will. But this one is a clear end to the current story arc, to this trilogy and in some ways to all nine movies that have been in the trilogies.

We talk about the end of the story arc. But when it comes to human history, there is only one story arc in the whole of human history. Our great and gracious God is keeping a promise he made to Abraham.

[18:12] That's the story arc. We wrecked God's good world by sin. In Genesis 12, God calls one man Abraham. He says, through Abraham's descendants, there will be a great nation of God's people.

He will bless them and all peoples on earth will be blessed through them. Then he tests Abraham and his faith and in Genesis 22, he promises Abraham, because he trusted God, his children will be as numerous as the sand on the shore or the stars in the sky.

And he says, through your seed, in other words, through one of your offspring, all peoples on earth will be blessed. And for God's people, ever since that promise was made to Abraham, it's just been a time of waiting.

Before Jesus came, it was generation after generation waiting, born, living, dying, waiting for the fulfillment of those promises. And when the people were brought back into the promised land after the exile, the holy prophets that Zechariah mentions here were saying to them, this is not the fulfillment of what God promised.

They'd had a temple, but the prophets promised, as you read the prophets, there's going to be a better temple, a greater temple will be built. They'd had great King David, but the prophets say there's going to be a greater king.

[19:35] They'd had a great rescue, the Exodus, but the prophets said there's going to be a better Exodus, a greater Exodus. And now, Zechariah knows, as this baby John is born, the waiting is over in a sense.

God has remembered. It's even what the name Zechariah means. Zechariah means God remembers. Luke starts and ends his book urging us to see Jesus through the eyes of the Old Testament.

In the first few verses of Luke, as he tells us that he's written the gospel so that we can know the certainty of the things we've been taught, he says, verse 1, that the things Jesus did, the things people saw Jesus do, verse 1, they are the things that have been fulfilled among us.

and then Zechariah in some ways embodies the whole Old Testament as a priest waiting at the temple, steeped in the scriptures, and he knows at last what was promised is coming, the Messiah.

And that makes Zechariah a great model for us today. He's an inspiration because the Christian life today is one of waiting, waiting for Jesus coming again in glorious majesty as he's promised, and putting the world right, judging and bringing a new world.

[21 : 01] The opposite of faith in the Bible is sight. It's very striking that we live by faith and not by sight. I used to think that that verse, because I'd only ever heard it and not read it in context, I used to think it was about how we, we weren't there to see Jesus.

So we have to kind of take it on other people's testimony, who Jesus is and what he did. And in that sense we live by faith and not by sight. And that is true, but actually when you read 2 Corinthians and see that we live by faith not by sight, it's much more about how every day is a day when we have to choose, today I'm going to live by faith in God's promises and not by what I can see.

Because if I go by what I see I might not think God is keeping his word. What I see around me is a world that's still going on in the same way as it has for generations.

A world where sin and death reign. We look at our own bodies and we see, what do we see? We see messed up attitudes, messed up desires, bodies that aren't quite working the way they used to, bodies that are on their way to the grave.

But we're called by God, live by faith not by sight. God says to us through Zechariah's song, trust me, I've kept all my promises so far, they were worth waiting for for Zechariah.

[22 : 32] Will we persevere in trusting God's words? God is a faithful God, he remembers his promises, he can be trusted, God is a faithful God.

So that's our second point, the promise of the dawn. And what does that dawn bring when it comes? Our third point, the nature of the dawn. Have a look with me at verse 77.

Zechariah turns to the baby John in verse 76 and in verse 77 he tells us about his role. He says in verse 76, 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 because of the tender mercy of our God by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the path of peace.

So the rising sun is the Messiah himself. In verse 78, the word actually that's translated rising sun is literally just one that shoots up and in Numbers 24 in the Old Testament the prophet Balaam had a vision of God rescuing his people through his Messiah and the prophet Balaam says that the forever king is a star coming out of Jacob and he says a scepter will rise.

It's this one that shoots up is the Messiah. And then if you've been looking at, if you've been with us in recent weeks as we've done this series in Isaiah, Zechariah clearly has in mind here that promise in Isaiah chapter 9 that people walking in darkness have seen a great light on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

[24 : 21] Jesus is this long awaited rising star. He is the son of righteousness casting away the darkness in our world. At last here is the one who can take on the evil one and win.

Who can defeat our great Goliaths of sin and death. Our great enemies that stand over us. Why does he do that for us? Why did he come?

Why did he visit us? Well verse 78 is brilliant, isn't it? Verse 78 it's because of the tender mercy of our God. All these words about powerful salvation raising up a horn of salvation visiting us entering our world defeating our enemies it's because he's a God of tender mercy.

And the child's name John Zechariah means God remembers John means God has been gracious. It's because of God's tender mercy and his grace that he has come to his people and in verse 68 he has redeemed them and in verse 74 he has rescued them.

And what is that salvation? I don't know if you saw on the news last month that an athlete was running in a race and he had the phrase Jesus saves on his running vest to encourage people who were watching to think about Jesus and he actually got saved by Jesus in the race.

[25 : 50] He put Jesus saves on his bib and he had a heart attack while he was running collapsed and another runner who was a nurse called Jesus Bueno used CPR to save his life.

It was a dream for the tabloids. Man who wears Jesus saves on his vest is actually saved by Jesus. How does Jesus really save us?

How does he do that? What is he saving us from? There's a lot of confusion about that in our world. Partly because we're not honest enough about our sin.

Zechariah gives us two sides of Jesus' salvation. First of all it's global. Salvation from our enemies. One day this king will bring a world where we won't fear enemies anymore and we can get on with

serving God without fear.

But it's personal as well and we see that in verse 77. The knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. peace. So that at the end of verse 79 we have peace with God.

[26 : 56] He guides our feet into the path of peace. It's a great thing to be forgiven. To have everything that we've done wrong forgiven.

So when we look back at the things we really wish we hadn't done we know they have been dealt with and we can come back to God and make peace with him.

Christmas is light in the darkness. So what do we do about that light? That's our fourth point the light of the dawn. Three things briefly light to take hold of light to make known light to walk in.

First of all light to take hold of. Have you taken hold of this salvation? Have you put your trust personally in these promises so that Jesus can give you hope in the darkness?

Hope that death can't take away? So that you can experience the peace of God walking in the path of peace. Would you be willing to receive that gift for yourself if you haven't before?

[28 : 05] It's up to every one of us personally to take hold of that light. Secondly, light to declare his praises.

So in 1 Peter 2 Peter uses this language of darkness and light and he says that we've been saved by God to declare the praises of him who brought us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

That's our privilege as God's people to make known the light. And for that great privilege John is our forerunner. In verse 77 John brought people home to God by giving people the knowledge of their salvation.

That was John the Baptist's role and it's our role today as God's people. We're not all going to be like John the Baptist. He was a pretty unique guy and we can't all be the great evangelist that he was.

But do you have two or three friends who you have really committed to? Two or three friends that you're praying for every day that God would save them?

[29 : 14] Friends, you're looking for opportunities to love and serve day by day. And let's remember that for John it was a very costly privilege to bring people back to God.

I remember talking to an older Christian and he said to me I always feel for John. He got such a hard deal, didn't he? It was a great privilege for John but he did end up persecuted and imprisoned and terribly discouraged and then one terrible night he was brought out and beheaded so that his severed head could be brought in for Herod on a platter.

Telling people they can be saved by Jesus if they repent for the forgiveness of sins is a costly privilege and we might not face a threat anything like John had in Scotland today but maybe it's just that we're having to face up to the cost of having to speak up and admit to friends that we're a Christian and invite them to hear more to read the Bible with us to come on Christianity Explored with us and we feel that's costly for us that we might feel like an idiot because of the way they look at us or it might harm the friendship in some way and we have to remember that we've been given this light to declare God's praises and it is a privilege it's a costly privilege Finally this morning it's light to walk in Zechariah tells us why God rescues us in verse 74 it's to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days so maybe you could ask yourself where do I need to hear that for the next couple of weeks where are you going to be where you need to hear that the reason Jesus came to save you was so that you would be enabled to serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness before God all your days it's Christmas a time when you'll be away with non-Christian family or non-Christian friends or you'll have them over at yours and the temptation will be strong just to look exactly the same as they do with sex drink greed gossip slander rage resentment unforgiveness wherever we go as children of light we have a new master to serve now and he's present with us and he has saved us he is our light in the darkness so let's resolve we'll serve him in holiness and righteousness that we'll be people who walk in the light let's pray together just a moment of quiet to reflect perhaps a look back over

Zechariah's song and think about how God is speaking to us to cover Luke you ■ who how God will beão and don't be because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Lord Jesus, we praise you that you are the day spring from on high, that in you, God has visited us. For the glory of your name, enlarge our joy this Christmas, we pray, convicting us of our need for the dawn because of the darkness all around us and in our hearts.

[33 : 34] Heavenly Father, reassure us by these words of Zechariah that you are indeed a faithful promise keeper, that you are good for your word so that we live by faith and not by sight.

Holy Spirit, help us, we pray, to take up your costly challenge that we would give others knowledge of salvation to bring them back to God, that we would walk in the light, serving you in holiness and righteousness as we were saved to do.

We ask these things for the glory of your name, Father, Son, and Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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