

# Luke 1:67-79 // A New Dawn

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

He has 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.

[ 1 : 0 5 ] 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. To guide our feet into the path of peace.

Brilliant. Thanks, Rob, for reading. And thanks to all the other readers, too. It's brilliant to see you all. And if you're ever wondering what language angels spoke, well, now we know.

It's Latin. So let's keep our sheets open with the text in front of us. I'm going to pray as we get stuck into God's word. So let's bow our heads in prayer.

[ 2 : 1 1 ] Heavenly Father, we pray that your Holy Spirit would come and shine the light of your word. Living and active as it is into our hearts and our minds.

Would you reveal to us the good news about Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen. Well, Samuel Johnson, writing in the 1700s, said that when two Englishmen meet, the first thing they talk about is the weather, even though they know exactly what the weather is doing.

And if you've recently moved to the UK, you've probably noticed it's still true. Not just Englishmen, Scotsmen, Irish, the Welsh, too, presumably. It's how we do small talk.

It's our heritage, our national pastime. Well, in Glasgow, we don't just complain about the weather. We trauma bond over it.

It's pure Baltic out there, by the way. Or it's pelting it down this evening. About 20 years ago, the artist Olafur Eliasson decided to play on this national obsession with the weather.

[ 3 : 2 5 ] And he built an enormous artificial sun and suspended it from the vast cathedral-like space of the Tate Modern's turbine hall.

And people flocked to it. They lay down on the floor and meditated. They even took yoga classes, some of them, anything to bask in the glow of the sun.

And there was something instinctively spiritual, transcendental about it. Because when life gets dark, and that's about 3 p.m. in Glasgow this time of year, we are drawn to the light.

The BBC at the time even sent a weather presenter to the Tate to broadcast the forecast from there for the week. And each day he'd end with, and here at the Tate, the sun is still shining.

It was the happiest he'd ever been on the camera. Well, the Christmas story gives us another kind of weather forecast. It gives us a spiritual one.

[ 4 : 29 ] So listen again to what Zechariah says in Luke 1, verse 78. Because of the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness.

In the Bible, darkness pictures life under the shadow of death. Just as every day ends in darkness, every life ends in death.

But Zechariah announces a sunrise, a dawn breaking over a world that's grown cold and dim. God stepping into the darkness.

He's not talking about a literal sunrise. He's talking about Jesus. And it's a dawn. It's a long promised dawn.

This is God keeping promises he's been making for centuries. So verse 69. He's raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

[ 5 : 38 ] That stretches back a thousand years. God promised a great king from the line of David. Then verse 73. The oath he swore to our father Abraham. That goes back 1,500 years.

God promising the world a blessing through this nation. And verse 79 echoes Isaiah 700 or 800 years before Jesus.

That was our second reading this evening. The reading that Greg's new song was based on. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. A light has dawned on those living in the land of deep darkness.

So it's a dawn that's been gathering on the horizon for centuries. The light of every promise God has made finally breaking all at once.

So that's the first big contrast in this passage. From darkness to light. Now there is fulfillment.

[ 6 : 45 ] Where there was fear. Now there's hope. Because the sun has risen. Light is breaking into the darkness. And into that light a song begins to rise.

Now the part that Rob just read is a little bit of a surprising one perhaps for a carol service. You expect shepherds.

You expect a baby in a manger. A donkey perhaps if you're lucky. Instead you get this reading admittedly read with a jumper with Christmas robins on it.

Instead we get what looks like a bit of a spin-off series. A whole scene about Jesus' cousin John. So what's going on?

Well the birth of Jesus is so important that we're given the build-up to explain what's going on. To explain the significance. It's like the prequel episode before the main event.

[ 7 : 44 ] But maybe you're wondering why does this matter? I'm not sure I'm that bothered about it.

Maybe you're just here because you love the carols and the fairy lights. And nothing wrong with that gets us into the festive spirit. But Luke gives us this back story.

Because he wants us to know that Christmas isn't just cozy. It's deeply consequential. Now a couple of years ago my friend Phil, a minister at another church in Glasgow known to some of us here.

He was diagnosed out of the blue with a really aggressive form of cancer. A young guy, a wife, kids.

And he was confronted with the end of his own life. Incredibly unwell. At one point they weren't even sure he'd get out of hospital.

[ 8 : 48 ] Well he was interviewed about it on a podcast. You can find it on YouTube. It's well worth watching. He said something very honest. He said, Death had never been so real in my mind.

And he said, Coming this close to death was sobering. Humbling. It made everything suddenly very clear.

Now Phil's a Christian. He's staked his whole life on this being true. And the big questions that we normally push aside.

Life, death, the future. They don't stay on the sidelines when you're standing where he was. What if Christmas really means something?

And that's why Christmas needs explaining. Because if it really means something. It really matters. So back to Zechariah. John's dad.

[ 9 : 53 ] His back story. He and his wife Elizabeth had longed for children. But it never happened. We were thinking and reflecting on how difficult that is this morning.

But then one day the angel Gabriel shows up and he says, You will have a son. Call him John. But Zechariah, the old man, doesn't believe it.

And the man who doubts God's words loses his own words. Literally dumbstruck by doubt. He's unable to speak for nine months.

Total silence. For nine months. Just imagine it. Some of you thinking, Nine months. I don't think I'd manage to not talk for 90 minutes.

Others of you thinking, Honestly, nine months of peace and quiet sounds like total bliss. But then the baby is born. And when Zechariah writes down his name, John, just as God said, his voice returns.

[ 11 : 01 ] Nine months of silence explodes into praise. The very first words out of his mouth are the song we just heard. Praise be to the Lord. Praise be to the God of Israel.

But it wasn't just his silence breaking. For centuries, God had been silent too. No prophets. No fresh revelation.

Just waiting in the dark. And now in these events leading up to the birth of Jesus, The silence finally cracks. So this is the second big contrast Luke gives us.

From silence to song. Zechariah is mute. God's people are waiting. But now something shifts. Hope rises.

And you can almost hear it. The first notes of dawn breaking into the silence. Next contrast. My wife is Latvian.

[ 12 : 01 ] Her English is perfect. My Latvian, well, let's just say it's a work in progress. And my wife assures me that each year it gets progressively worse.

But I can still recognize the repeated words. And when we were first, marriage would be on the phone to our mom and it would be, Te star?

Te star? Te star? Exactly. Exactly. And then towards the end of the phone go, But protons. But protons, of course. And then when our daughter was born, the dominant word changed to smoky.

Smoky. Cute. And then our son arrived and the new favorite word became capets. Capets. Why? Why are your toys everywhere? Why is your food on the floor?

Capets. And it became so popular a word that it was actually his first word too. Capets, mummy. Capets. And then he started walking and climbing and a new favorite word suddenly came.

[ 13 : 06 ] Usenigs. Usenigs. Be careful. Still hear that. Well, you don't need to understand every single word to hear the ones that keep coming back. The words that carry the whole conversation.

And Zechariah's song is a little bit like that. Even if you miss some of the Old Testament references, one theme rings out again and again and again. I wonder, did you notice it when Rob read it?

Well, listen to the repeated lines. Verse 68. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he's come to his people and redeemed them.

Redeemed, it means to set them free. In verse 69, he's raised up a horn of salvation for us. Verse 71, it's salvation from our enemies.

Verse 74, to rescue us. Verse 77. You will go before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

[ 14 : 08 ] You get the idea. This is the language of rescue, the language of salvation. This child, this Jesus who is about to be born, is coming to save.

Maybe you've heard Christians say something like that. I've been saved or she's been saved and you've thought, saved from what? What on earth are they talking about?

Well, here's the thing. Jesus' mission is all about rescue. And I guess that for some of us here this evening, that raises a question.

Why would I need to be rescued? What do I need to be rescued from? Well, Zechariah's answer, salvation from our enemies, from all who hate us.

And you know, for some in the world, that isn't abstract. Just ask our mission partner in Ukraine, Josh Williams.

[ 15 : 11 ] And he sends us updates, his prayer updates, a list of names, his friends and colleagues. Some of them missing for months. Some of them missing for years. It's a sobering read.

They know what it is to long for rescue. They don't need that explained to them. But actually, we all need rescued.

All of us need rescuing. Because Zechariah points to an even greater enemy. In the enemy, verse 79 at the bottom of the page. Those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

The shadow that hangs over every life. The enemy that none of us can outrun.

Not with youth. Not with success. Not with any kind of privilege. I'm conscious that for some of us here this evening, that's very raw.

[ 16 : 16 ] Some of us feel that shadow very sharply this Christmas. Some of us feel that empty chair at the table.

That empty void in our hearts. And it's into that darkness that Zechariah says, A dawn has come in the Lord Jesus.

I was catching up with my friend Phil this week. By God's kindness, he's recovering now. But as he reflected on his time in hospital, he said something very striking.

He said to me, you know, people can be so deluded. He said to him, you know, people can be so deluded. Sitting around in hospital waiting rooms, people waiting for chemo.

All of them telling each other, don't worry. It'll be all right. You'll get through this. And he thought to himself, on what basis?

[ 17 : 18 ] On what basis will you be fine? On what basis will you get through this? Sure, some of them will recover from their illness.

But then what? We all face the same ultimate enemy. We all face the darkness of death sooner or later.

The question is simply when and how we face it. And so when we look at life through the lens of one day I'm going to die, one day I'm going to stand before the God who made me and I haven't always lived the way he'd want me to, and what's that going to be like?

Suddenly, the one question that becomes unavoidable is this. On the final day, will I be rescued?

Am I going to be rescued from the greatest enemy? That's the third big contrast in Zechariah's song. Not just darkness to light, not just silence to song, but unsaved to saved.

[ 18 : 30 ] Or to put it another way, from guilt to forgiveness. That's really what we're being saved from. And Zechariah sees that.

He realizes that Jesus has come to help with that, come to rescue us, come to save us, come to bring the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins.

Sin, that's the Bible word for things we've done wrong, ways we've fallen short. Jesus doesn't just save us from death. He saves us from the reason that death terrifies us, our sin, our guilt.

Imagine every bad thought you've ever had put on the projector screen up there for all to see. If we could see what each other is really like inside, none of us would be staying here for the end of the carol service.

Because our problem isn't just that life ends. It's that we're not ready to meet the God who made us. And for Phil, confronted by death in the hospital, these kind of things, you know, really mattered.

[ 19 : 46 ] And when he was at his weakest, a counselor asked him, Are you scared about the end? Do you know what Phil said?

He said to her, We're all going to die. And the only question that really matters is do you know Jesus? And I know Jesus.

He is someone who sees clearly. He is someone who sees that death is real and that Jesus can rescue us from it.

Maybe tonight you are realizing how much you need rescuing from. And this is why Christmas is such good news. Because the dawn has come.

And this little baby in Zechariah's arms, John the Baptist, he would grow up to tell people the plain truth about it. To say to them, You're not living the way that you're meant to.

[ 20 : 51 ] You need to return to God. And there's a day coming. You need a Savior. You've got to return to God. That's exactly why Zechariah's song matters.

It points to Jesus, the Savior who rescues us from the deepest darkness, who forgives our deepest sins and brings a dawn that even death can't stop.

Maybe you've never heard or thought of Christmas this way. But this is really what makes Christmas such good news.

Not the nostalgia. Not the sentimentalism. But the rescue. The dawn has come.

Remember that giant sun in the modern? People flocked to it, drawn to the light, drawn to its warm glow.

[ 21 : 47 ] But it wasn't real. It was man-made. Zechariah says something astonishing. Because of the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Not a man-made sun, but the God-made man, God-made man's sun. The Lord Jesus, the Son of God. A real dawn. A spiritual sunrise.

Light breaking into darkness. Joyful song breaking into silence. It's a Savior who's come to rescue. If you're here this evening, you put your trust in Jesus, you have no fear.

No need of fear of the end. It's Christmas. Why don't you step into the light of the one who's come to rescue you?

The rising sun has come and he's still shining today. Thanks be to God. And let's pray. Father, in your tender mercy and compassion, please bring a new dawn this Christmas to all here this evening, to all in our city of Glasgow and our nation, to all who are stumbling in darkness, to those living in the shadow of death.

[ 23 : 17 ] Lord, would you comfort those who are grieving and hold close all for whom this season is heavy or hard.

Fill our hearts with the light of your gospel and let your glory shine once again across this land. May we bask this Christmas in the radiance of your love and reflect that light to those around us.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, the rising sun who shines on all who dwell in darkness. Amen.