

Prepare for God's Salvation

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[0 : 00] You know, we all want to belong to something that's bigger, that's more significant than ourselves. That's why we never want to miss out on such great experiences. You know, the human heart, it desires something weightier, something far more exhilarating than just living for ourselves. And the passage that we're going to look at today, we see that Zechariah, he recognizes, doesn't he, that he is a part of something momentous. This passage today is so much bigger than just a cool story about Zechariah and his kid, but it's actually all about God's grand plan of salvation. So we're going to see today, point one, that Zechariah gets it, he gets God's plan of salvation. Point two, he proclaims it. And point three, John prepares for it. So first let's see how Zechariah gets it. He gets God's salvation plan. Because remember before this, that Zechariah and Elizabeth, they can't have children, and they're both really old, so childbirth is off the cards. And even today, for people, we know how painful it can be for people, for families trying to have kids, but they just can't. But you see, even more than that, back then childlessness was seen as a punishment from God, which was really hard to reconcile. Because this couple was about as godly a couple as you could get.

I mean, they're both priests, aren't they? So some people might have thought that they secretly did something really, really bad to sin against God. There was probably disgrace in the community because of that. And if you flip back to verse 25, you'll see the word disgrace there. Which is why I think that God's promise of a child here is so wonderful. And more than that, this child, who's going to be named John, is going to play a major role in God's salvation plan. Verse 16 says that this child will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord, their God. And verse 17, in the spirit and power of Elijah, the prophet, he will make ready a people prepared for the Lord. But Zechariah, he doesn't really seem to get it, does he? In unbelief, he turns around and he asks for a sign. He asks for proof as if an angel standing right in front of him isn't enough. This isn't like a humble unbelief. Zechariah, he's not saying here, oh Lord, who am I that you should use me to do your work? No, Zechariah, he's saying, no, no, no, it can't possibly happen like this. So God gives him a sign, all right. He makes him mute and probably also deaf. So at this point, he can't hear and he can't speak. So picking up from our passage today, we see that this birth happens exactly as God promised. Elizabeth, she gives birth to a son at the appointed time. And she recognizes here that this was undeniably because of God's great mercy in verse 58. We've seen here again, that God has delivered on his promise. Okay. So it reaches the eighth day and this child is circumcised in accordance with the law. And then it comes time to naming this child. And you can imagine it here. It's a time of celebration. The whole family's there and they presume obviously that this child will carry on the family name, that he would be named after his father, Zechariah. Now you need to have at the back of your mind here that Zechariah, he's a priest. And not only is Zechariah a priest, but his wife is a priest too. So what do you think

John would have been growing up? A priest, right? You know, one of my good friends, his mom's a GP, his dad's a surgeon. So you could probably say that his fate was sealed from the very beginning.

You know, you can imagine the pressure this poor boy had growing up, but rest assured he defied expectation and he became an eye doctor just to prove everyone wrong, to show his rebellion, that he refused to, nah. Well, see, it was the same for this child, you know. See, what this name might have conveyed here is that by carrying on the family name, he would be carrying on the office of priest. Remember that here, priest is an inherited role, so it's passed down through a line of descendants. So what happens? Have a look at verse 60 in your Bibles. But his mother, Elizabeth, spoke up and said, no, he's to be called John. See, so for that baby not to be called Zechariah and to carry on the line of priesthood, well, that would have been shocking, wouldn't it? You know, if my friend turned around and said he wanted to study something other than medicine, heads would have rolled. His family would not have been happy with him. So, okay, so at this point, the rest of his family is having a mini meltdown and verse 61, they say, there is no one among your relatives who has that name.

So what do you do when the mother won't listen to you? You go to dad. And they ask him in some sort of sign language because presumably he can't hear, he can't speak. And they ask Zechariah, what is his name?

[5 : 16] Have a look at verse 63. He asked for a writing tablet. Incidentally, the word writing tablet in the original Greek literally means iPad Pro. lame joke, lame joke. Anyway, he asked for a writing tablet and to everyone's astonishment, he wrote, his name is John. Zechariah's statement is definitive, isn't it here? His name is John. He gets it. He gets it, doesn't he? See, it's so much more than just a name. The naming of this child is going to set into motion John's destiny. It represents a commitment that this child won't follow in the line as a priest, but as a prophet who speaks for God.

Remember when the angel Gabriel said that John would come in the spirit and the power of Elijah? Well, Elijah was a prophet. So I think God there is redefining John's role. No longer would he be a priest meeting with God in the temple, but he would be a prophet who would prepare Israel to meet their God. So Zechariah gets it, doesn't he? He understands that this is all a part of God's grand salvation plan. And then in verse 64, his mouth is opened, his tongue set free. He begins to praise God.

Zechariah continues in point two to proclaim God's salvation plan. And ironically, the priest Zechariah becomes a prophet himself. Verse 67, his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. Now this is a bit of speculation, but remember that Zechariah at this point hasn't been able to hear, hasn't been able to speak for nine months. That would have been really, really frustrating, wouldn't it? I can't even shut up for like two minutes without exploding into speech because I don't deal well with silence. So what do you think Zechariah would have been doing during this time, this nine months? Well, I think he would have been reading and understanding the place of God's promise within the whole Old Testament. He would have been reading the law and the prophets where God had promised to save his people. And I think it dawns on him that God's promises are coming to pass before his very eyes. You know, he's filled with the Holy Spirit and he prophesies. And in the first half of Zechariah's song, he proclaims that the birth of John sparks the coming fulfillment of God's salvation plan, that God had come to his people to redeem them. And in particular, I think he sees the fulfillment of two very ancient promises. Firstly, the promise to David and secondly, the promise to

Abraham. Have a look at verse 68. Praise be 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, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. You know, in the Old Testament, there's this guy called David and David is chosen by God to be a king and to be a ruler over Israel.

And through David, God would then protect his people from their enemies. And if you look there, the horn of salvation means a weapon. So Zechariah, what he's saying is that the Lord would fight for his people and save them from their enemies through a king who would descend from the line of David.

[8 : 47] See, so the expectation here for the Israelites at this time was that God would give them a military victory through a future king. You know, the Israelites at this time, they were currently living under Roman occupation. So the hope for God's future king that's to come would be that he would drive out the Romans and establish Israel as a powerful nation once again. So when Jesus comes as the son of David, people think to themselves, yes, this is our guy. Bring the fire, Jesus, drive them out.

So it's kind of shocking, isn't it? That Jesus never gave Israel a military victory. Actually, rather than looking strong, Jesus kind of looked kind of weak. He even died through a Roman execution, let alone conquer the Romans. But what people had no idea about was that by dying, Jesus was truly being the horn of salvation for his people. Because on that cross, Jesus defeated an even bigger enemy than the Romans. Jesus defeated once and for all the enemy of sin, of our sinful nature. And Jesus, he would be enthroned as king, not on a throne made of gold, but on a cross made of wood. And that's how Jesus saved us. Because in many ways, our greatest enemy in our life, it's not anything external, but in many ways, the greatest enemy in our lives is ourselves. Think about it, you know, the bad decisions we've made in life. No one has hurt us more than ourselves. You know, sure, we've been hurt by other people before. And for many of us, how we've been treated by other people has been really hurtful. It's been really damaging. So I don't want to just ignore that.

But often, I think we're more willing to point the finger at other people, rather than acknowledge our own brokenness. And you know what, as I look at my own life, I know it's my own selfishness.

It's my own pride that has been my biggest enemy. And we see that in our own lives, don't we? Whether it's addiction, whether it's apathy or laziness, or our sinful thoughts that can consume us.

But you see, what Jesus has done for us is he saved us from ourselves. He's taken the guilt and the shame of our sin. And more than that, we are no longer slaves to our sinful natures. You know, I'm no longer controlled. I'm no longer crippled by those things. No, because of Jesus, the shame is gone.

[11 : 31] We get to walk now in the newness of life. But not only does Zechariah recognize the coming of God's king, but he also sees the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Have a look at verse 72.

God has sent his son 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. Remember back in Genesis that God promised Abraham that he would establish the nation Israel to be his people. You know, he promised blessing. He promised peace that they would serve God as his people without fear from their enemies. But the problem is, as we track through the Bible, we don't, peace doesn't really happen, does it? Israel is constantly getting attacked by other nations. They're even taken into captivity by Assyria and Babylon. Why? Because Israel is constantly sinning and turning its back from God. See, peace couldn't be established without first dealing with the problem of sin.

So what Jesus does is he comes to be true blessing and peace for us. And what he did was he took the punishment for all of our sin so that now we are reconciled back into peace with God. No more fear of judgment or punishment because of our sin. See, because of Jesus, Christianity, it's not a fear-based religion, is it? You know, a lot of the other religions, they make you serve based on an ongoing fear of punishment. So we try and be so good because we're scared of stuffing up. But you know what?

Christianity is so much different. Because Jesus has already taken the punishment for us, we're not afraid anymore. But when we serve, it's completely out of gratitude. So serving God, it's not fear, but it's now that it's a thrill. It's the thrill of our hearts.

So what you need to take from this is that God has come to save his people through Jesus, just as he had promised all along. Verse 68, he has come to his people and redeemed them.

[13 : 49] Verse 71, salvation from our enemies. Verse 72, he has shown mercy. Verse 74, to rescue us from the hands of our enemies. See, Zechariah, he's declaring here that Jesus is the culmination of God's rescue plan for the world. And all these ancient promises of the Old Testament, some written about 1400 BC, are all fulfilled in him. See, the Bible, it contains 66 books, but it tells of one great story, the story of God's grand plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. That's what Zechariah proclaims.

And if you look at the second half of Zechariah's song, he talks now about his son, John, and point three, about the place that John will have in God's great salvation plan. Have a look at verse 76.

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. Again, Zechariah, he declares that John will be called not a priest, but a prophet of the most high. And this is really, really big because up to this point, Israel hasn't heard from God for 400 years. You know, I use WhatsApp a bit and I already get really nervous when I don't hear back from my friends within 24 hours on WhatsApp. You know, why haven't they replied already? What did I do to make them so mad? Why are they ignoring me? Can you imagine 400 years of silence? So when John comes as a prophet now, it's celebration time because God has intervened into his world to save his people. This is truly momentous. You can understand why there's now so much anticipation around this birth. And in verse 66, the people wonder, what is this child going to be?

See, John, he's going to have a very special role in God's rescue plan. It's going to be to prepare the way of the Lord. You'll remember in our first reading today from Isaiah, which was written about 700 years before this, that God promised a messenger. He promised a messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord. And John's task then as the fulfillment of that promise 700 years ago was to prepare the people.

And what John would do as the preparer would be verse 77, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of their sins. See, Zechariah, he knows that John isn't the answer, is he?

[16 : 22] But he knows his place in God's salvation plan, that he would point towards the salvation that was to come. And then it would be Jesus who would come in Luke 5, who would declare, friend, your sins are forgiven. And you see, Jesus would go all the way from the cradle, all the way to the cross to complete that forgiveness. So now for us, there is no condemnation. None of the things we have done in the past are held against us. Now we're forgiven. And that's news worth listening to.

You know what's amazing about Zechariah's song here? If you think about it, his baby has just been born and it's a miracle from God. And if this was me, if this was my child, I wouldn't be able to stop talking about him. You know, it'd be John this, John that, John did this, John did that, John said this, John did that.

He'd be all over my Facebook or all over my Snapchat. But you see, out of these 12 verses here, Zechariah only devotes two out of the 12 verses to John. Actually, if you think about this song, Zechariah, it's not about John at all, is it? See, he understands that there is something way bigger going on here. Sure, this birth is a miracle, but it's going to be nothing compared to what is coming.

He gets it, doesn't he? Zechariah, he understands that the whole of human history is going to converge around another birth, the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is God himself coming to his people to save them. And sure enough, we see that Jesus' birth, it splits the whole of human history into two, doesn't it? Into BC, before Christ, and into AD, Anno Domini, the year of our Lord.

See, it's all about Jesus. It's always been about Jesus. And I think that Zechariah's song here, it foreshadows the substance of what John's ministry will look like. All about Jesus. And Luke 3, when the people wonder what, if John might possibly be the Messiah himself, he doesn't talk himself up.

[18 : 30] He's all about Jesus. He says, I think I've got on the slide, this is what John replies with. He says, I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie. See, it's Jesus, isn't he? That's the rising sun, come to us from heaven. Jesus is the light of the world. John simply gets people to look. See, God's grand salvation plan. It centers on Jesus. You don't need to look anywhere else. You know, God sent John into this world to get people ready for their salvation, to prepare the people for this coming Messiah, and that you would know that when you see him, that you would run to him. You would recognize that it would be this child Jesus, who is the savior of the world. You know, I'm absolutely amazed at Zechariah's humility here. You know, even though you would think all the attention was on him and his miracle child, he completely defers, doesn't he, to the coming Messiah. He knows that John is nothing compared to Jesus. Yet for so many of us, we make life all about us, don't we? You know, it's all about our plans, our goals, our dreams, our career, what we want. See, God has declared in his word the purpose of life, Jesus Christ. But we ignore him. We choose our own way.

And what I find is when I live for these things that I want, when I live for my own goals, my own dreams, I'm never satisfied. You know, before I was a Christian, life was fine. Life was okay.

Basically, all I lived for was playing sport, getting a good ATAR score. And when I came to visit church for the first time, thought Christians are a bit weird. But there was one thing that was undeniable. One thing that was undeniable. I saw they had a deeper joy than I'd ever experienced.

And at that time, I couldn't understand what that joy was. But one thing I knew, I knew I wanted that. So I guess I had FOMO, didn't I? But now I know what this is. It's the joy of being a part of God's salvation plan for the world. You know, the world, it tells you to seek joy from within, to look within ourselves for joy, trying to find something really great within us. When really, true joy, it's not experience within us, but it's by being a part of something way bigger than us.

You know, God is doing something profound in this world. The reason we aren't satisfied by just living for our own hopes, our own dreams, is because we weren't created for that. So if you're here today, and if you haven't placed your trust in Jesus, I promise you that you will never be able to tap into your deepest joy. You'll never be satisfied until you understand and you get this truth, that you were created for so much more than just the fleeting pleasures of this world.

[21 : 34] No, you were created to join in and participate with the creative universe and what he is doing in his world, being a part of God's kingdom and extending that kingdom to the world.

So we need to repent, don't we, that we have gone our own way, that we've lived entirely for ourselves. And as we believe in Jesus, we join in with what he's doing in this world. And Jesus' work, it continues, doesn't it, on this earth. And we join in him, join with him in spreading this good news of Jesus to the nations. So like John, our role now is to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

But you see, Jesus has already come once, hasn't he? To die for our sins, to rise again for our new life. But we know that Jesus is coming again, no longer in humility, as a suffering, as a humble king, but as a glorious and as a powerful king who will judge the whole world. And on that day, he will save those who believe in him, but he will also judge those who reject him.

So this day could either be the greatest day of our lives, or it could be the worst day of our lives, depending on how we prepare. So our role as Christians now is to prepare the world, not for Jesus' first coming, but for his second coming. We need to be bold, don't we, in proclaiming the good news of Jesus to our friends and our family, so that they would be ready for that day. See, if we are truly gripped by the gospel, if we truly get it, we'll share it, won't we?

So let me ask you this question. When is the last time that you shared the gospel with someone who doesn't know Jesus? When is the last time that you cared for someone enough to share the gospel with them? You know, you'll never get a better opportunity at Christmas than to share your faith with people. You know, Christmas is such an easy way of just inviting people to the church, maybe even to the carol service next week, so that they can hear the gospel proclaimed.

[23 : 42] Why? Because God is doing something incredible in this world. He's reconciling the whole world back to himself through his son. Let's not miss out. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for what you are doing in this world. We thank you for this grand plan that you thought up even before the creation of the world, that you would save the world by sending your son into it, to love us, to die for us, and to rise again so we could live.

We pray that, Lord, now we would get on board with what you are doing in this world, that you would place in our hearts a deep passion to know you and to make yourself known to others. In Jesus' name, amen.