

A Father's Praise

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- [0 : 0 0] Festival Hall, North Melbourne. The scene of mortal combat over many decades. From Anglican synod meetings to World Championship Wrestling.
- I've actually been to both. I think they're different. As a young teenager, watching World Championship Wrestling on weekend TV was just, well, it was a ritual.
- Jack Little, for some of you in the audience, you might remember Jack. He was the host. And I wonder if you can remember names like Mark Lewin, Killer Kowalski.
- I can see small recognition, but not a lot. But then it is a rather civilised church community here, isn't it? Well, I even attended Festival Hall on a few occasions on a Saturday night.
- I mean, what action? There were chairs that were flying through the air, fake blood. There were knee drops from the top rope. People were being thrown out of the ring. And despite the obvious staging, one of the dominant themes of such sport is simply show no mercy.
- [1 : 1 4] Indeed, WWE no mercy is the name of an annual world wrestling entertainment event. The first one, the first no mercy event, was held in Manchester, England, back in the late 90s.
- And the no mercy event is now held every October. No mercy sometimes features its own produced theme song in between all of the bouts.
- And fittingly, the title of that homegrown song track is simply no mercy. These events are hugely popular.
- That should be hardly a surprise. They are a microcosm of the world at large. A fallen world that rarely displays mercy.
- So I wonder if you'd just turn with me to the passage read to us in Luke chapter 1, page 832. And we're looking at the passage from verse 57 on.
- [2 : 1 9] And as the passage was read to us, I wonder if you noticed a recurring theme. I might just get that turned down just a touch. Thanks.
- I wonder if you noticed a recurring theme in it. Look particularly at verses 58, 72 and 78.
- 58, 72 and 78. Do you see what the Holy Spirit is emphasising through the pen of the historian Luke?
- As we come to this last section of the first chapter of Luke, Luke has already presented to us the intertwined accounts of the birth announcements of John the Baptist and Jesus.
- You recall that the temple priest Zechariah had been told by God's messenger, the angel Gabriel, that Elizabeth, remember Elizabeth, no spring chicken and barren, that she would give birth to the long awaited and prophesied forerunner of the Messiah.
- [3 : 3 3] But Zechariah, the priest, applying human wisdom rather than simple trust in the all-powerful word of God, Zechariah doubted the announcement of the angel.
- And God gave Zech, that's what we've come to know him as, gave Zech some uninterrupted time to reflect on his lack of trust. God brought muteness on him for the course of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

And in contrast to the older Zech, the young teenager Mary simply trusted the word of the Lord, the word of the Lord through Gabriel, that she would give birth to the long awaited and prophesied Messiah.

A conception brought about by the Holy Spirit. Well, two weeks ago, we looked at that beautiful scene. You remember those two pregnant relatives. On the one hand, there was senior sit Elizabeth and young Mary.

And Elizabeth said that she was humbled that the mother of her Lord should come and visit her. And young Mary is humbled that God in his grace and in his mercy should choose such a lowly person as herself for this unique privilege.

[4 : 54] And in worship she proclaims, the mighty one has done great things for me and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

So now we come to the time for Elizabeth to give birth. And what a time of excitement. What a time of rejoicing. God is fulfilling his word.

And that shouldn't in the least surprise us. God is completely trustworthy and totally, completely faithful to his every word. God is a good thing.

And the arrival of any newborn baby is an exciting event. But when someone has been barren for decades, what a celebration.

I want you to sort of capture the scene in your mind. I mean, you can imagine Elizabeth and Zech, they're just going to be over the moon with joy and excitement. But also, look with me at verse 58.

[6 : 01] Neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her and they rejoiced with her. The Lord has shown great mercy to Elizabeth.

And throughout scripture, God is described as gracious and merciful. If you like, it's a basic characterisation of God. Back in the book of Exodus, Moses had asked to see God's glory.

And we read, the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

And so this little baby, this little baby is presented for circumcision on the eighth day. And the surrounding crowd, well, they're just getting in on the act.

I mean, literally, the Greek reads, they were wishing to name the child Zechariah. I mean, isn't that just delightful to have such concerned and interested neighbours and friends?

[7 : 09] But of course, naming of a child can be fraught with all sorts of difficulties. This week I came across a website from that revered institution, the BBC, who's actually got a series of webpages given to instructions on how not to name your children.

There's about a dozen suggestions. I've just picked out two. They say this, if you must name the child after someone famous, make sure that the person actually is famous.

I mean, a daughter named after Gertrude Ederle might seem like a fine idea. But not many people will actually know who she is. You see, Gertie was the first woman to swim the English Channel in 1926.

And also try to make sure that the person won't become infamous. What might have seemed a good idea with a name like Mike Tyson loses some of its shine.

And they also suggest that family names, however bad, can always be forgiven. I mean, make sure that the child knows something important about the relative's namesakes.

[8 : 23] I mean, it's nice to be able to back up a Benton-Alastair-Fensker-Hudley VI with the fact that Benton-Alastair-Fensker II led a victorious march at the first battle of Dembert's left leg.

It could only be English humour. The crowd wants the child to be named Zechariah. And if they're Americans, I suspect they'd be sort of chanting something like Zechariah Jr. III.

But Elizabeth is not about to be pushed around. We read verse 60. No, he is to be called John. But the crowd, they're not about to be pushed around either.

And the text tells us that Zech had been struck not only with muteness, but also with deafness.

And he asks for this, he signals for a writing tablet. And Zech Sr. writes. His name is John.

[9 : 38] And I want you to capture the significance of this scene. You see, obedience to God was the pattern of Elizabeth's life. And Zech demonstrates his faith by his choice.

His response to the crowd is emphatic. His name is John. See, for Zech, the child indeed had been named at the time of the angel's announcement.

And immediately we read Zech's mouth was opened and his tongue freed. And he began to speak, praising God. You see, friends, this long silence had allowed Zechariah to reflect on what God had called him to do.

And now he's prepared to do it. Zechariah has learned that even a righteous man has something to learn from God.

So this is just a tremendous scene, isn't it? Just imagine this little baby, eight days old, in his mother's arms. Daddy is now sounding forth after nine months of silence.

[10 : 52] And the baby has been named. The baby hasn't been named according to the customs of that society. The baby's been given a special name, a special name for a special child.

Well, if we hadn't already read the passage, I wonder how we might have imagined the crowd to respond. Sort of, let's whip around and have another round of worship choruses.

Fear came over all their neighbours. Fear. Why fear?

Fear because the people crowding around with so many little suggestions to make realise that God is in their midst and doing a mighty work.

And words of these unusual events, these stunning events, spread throughout Judea. If you think about it, I mean, who needs the internet when you've got such an efficient oral culture?

[11 : 59] And those who were present, the text says they pondered what they'd witnessed. And literally the sense is, they set what they'd seen, what they were witnessing, they set it in their hearts.

And their response went very deep. What then will this child become? That is, what role will John have in God's plan? For indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

This story of Zechariah should cause all Christians much reflection. You see, here's a man of lifelong faith.

And here's a man, a Christian man, if we think of it after the time of Christ's resurrection, who still needed to grow. God graciously teaches him, and teaches him through discipline, some finer points about obedience.

About totally trusting God's word, even when trusting God's word, and what God says seems impossible to us, on a human level.

[13 : 07] And there'll be many here this morning, at this 10 o'clock congregation, who've been in relationship with Jesus Christ for a significant period of time, many, many years.

And I trust that you're still excited about your relationship with the Lord. I trust that you haven't stopped growing. Because even very solid Christian men and women can continue to be transformed and learn to walk in deeper and deeper trust with God.

Well, the crowd asks, what then will this child become? And Zechariah answers them in this hymn of praise. But before he focuses in on John, the child, he actually starts with a big picture.

And he does it under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And we read that his words of praise, in fact, are prophetic. That is, God's plan of salvation is beginning to move to completion.

And we read, blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He's raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

[14 : 33] Friends, just in those few verses, there's such rich theological truth. Let me just point out a couple of aspects. God is to be praised because God has looked favourably on the nation.

And literally what that verb is saying is God is going to visit. And God's visitation is going to occur through the visitation of the Messiah.

And the Messiah is described as a mighty saviour from the house of his servant David. It's interesting. Zechariah actually speaks in the past tense because the Messiah has already been conceived in the womb of Mary.

But Zech's focus is on what is yet to happen through the Messiah. And what's going to be the result of this visitation?

Redemption, deliverance, salvation. God is going to send a mighty saviour. And literally the words are a horn of salvation.

[15 : 38] And this is picking up Old Testament imagery. Old Testament imagery of an ox with horns that's able to defeat enemies with the powerful thrust of its protected head.

When we think of the Christmas story, when we see so many nativity scenes and we see a little baby in a manger, let's not think of this baby as some wimp.

This is a picture of great power. This is a picture of great strength. Well, Zechariah's focus would certainly have been at one level political, to see Israel freed from the domination of the hated Romans.

But for righteous Zechariah, there would have been a spiritual dimension to this salvation. And for us, that is certainly the case as we look at progressive, cumulative revelation of God in Holy Scripture.

You see, the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, we read, came to seek and to save the lost. The spiritually lost. Those outside of a relationship with the living God.

[16 : 58] Friends, the Bible is just so clear on this. The Bible says that we exist in either one of only two kingdoms. We're either in the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of the devil, of Satan, or we're in the kingdom of God.

And the Messiah, God's son, the one whose birth we very specifically remember at this Christmas season, came as a man, died on a cross for our sins, rose again, defeated the devil and defeated death.

The two great enemies of all mankind. And so that anyone, regardless of our race, our gender, our age, anyone can enter God's kingdom.

Anyone can enter God's kingdom through faith in God's son, the Lord Jesus. That's God's promise. That's God's gift. It's the greatest gift in the whole of the cosmos.

And it can be our reality this Christmas season. We see also that the coming of the Messiah, the Savior, is in total and full accordance with what God has spoken.

[18 : 18] Spoken down through the centuries, we read through the mouth of his holy prophets. And don't miss the use of the singular there, mouth.

You see, the prophets are God's agents. They speak from God with one mouth about the Messiah. The message is unified.

And they're described as holy. That is, set apart. Set apart unto God. Indeed, for all of us who've put our faith in the Lord Jesus, that's what we are. Set apart unto God to worship and serve him.

We're holy. And the basic prophetic promises are the two that are actually alluded to in this psalm, in this hymn.

Firstly, it's the promises made to David. You'll see the mention of David in verse 69. Promises recorded in 2 Samuel 7. Promises of a future king in the line of David who would have an everlasting kingdom.

[19 : 18] A kingdom without end. And secondly, it's the promises made to Abraham. Mentioned down in verse 73. Promises that start to be unfolded from Genesis 12 on.

Promises made to Abraham that have a very special fulfillment in Mary's son Jesus. Abrahamic promises made thousands of years ago.

Promises about people, about land, about blessing. Promises that one day will be totally fulfilled in the new heaven and the new earth. That wonderful future to be ushered in at the return of Christ.

Well, Zechariah continues in praise. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant. The oath that he swore to our ancestor, Abraham.

So, in sending the Saviour, God has kept his promises. In sending the Saviour, God has displayed his mercy.

[20 : 24] God's salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ displays his mercy. God's salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ displays his faithfulness. And so, in the busyness of this Christmas, let's be sure that we don't forget to thank God, to praise God for his mercy.

His mercy in sending Jesus, the Son of God. God in Christ to redeem us. To redeem us by his death and resurrection.

I was interested to read this week a newspaper story titled, No mercy, San Antonio football fans want Terrell Owen a no-go for Christmas Day.

Now, I mean, you can put your hand up if you saw this article. I doubt it. I mean, this has been a week of media worship of Shane Warne. And it would have been easy not to have seen this article. Particularly so, given that it's an article concerning the American National Football League and not the Australian cricket team.

This Terrell Owen is a famous footballer. Arguably the best wide receiver, if you know what that is, in the current NFL game.

[21 : 38] Not only is Terrell famous, he's infamous for his behaviour on the gridiron field and his behaviour off the field. And he was described by opposing San Antonio fans as disgusting and disrespectful.

After he admitted to spitting in the face of an opponent, D'Angelo Hall. And how do the fans think the T.O. should be treated?

Rub him out on the hugely popular Christmas Day match. Show Owen no mercy. It's an ironic story, isn't it?

I mean, what is uppermost in the minds of the American sports fans on Christmas Day? Football. And they want Christmas Day to be a demonstration of no mercy.

And yet, on Christmas Day, we especially remember the greatest act of mercy of all time. When God visited mankind, men and women, us, who in our rebellion have metaphorically spat in the face of the living God.

[23 : 04] And what was God's response to our rebellion? He sent the Lord Jesus as Saviour. For God himself to take our punishment for our rebellion.

For our sinfulness on the cross. Himself. And this extraordinary gift of salvation is freely available.

It's freely available to all who would believe. It's great to think about, isn't it? What a Saviour.

But why has God sent his own son to be the rescuer? Look at the end of verse 73. We read, To grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

You see, friends, God is redeeming people. He's saving them from spiritual darkness. He's saving them from eternal separation from the living God.

[24 : 11] And he's doing it in order for them to serve him. To serve him fearlessly. The sense is, regardless of the opposition around us.

Whether that's opposition from people, from institutions, or the devil, and his army of fallen angels. And the word that Zechariah uses for serve, in fact, describes the total service that we give to God.

Think of it, if you like, as whole of life worship. It's not just an activity. But importantly, it's our character as well.

You see, we're called to serve God all our days in holiness and righteousness. And the way I simply think about that is, we are to reflect the character of God to the world around us.

And many years ago, when our oldest son, Matthew, was just starting prep school, we were living in New Jersey. Or if anyone's been there, New Jersey. And we would drive some weekends.

[25 : 20] It was the most magnificent little part of New Jersey that we lived in. And we would drive westward, cross the border into Pennsylvania, and into the Amish area. And on the morning of October 2nd this year, 2006, a troubled milkman named Charles Carl Roberts barricaded himself inside the West Nickel Mine Amish School.

And he ultimately murdered five young girls and wounded six others. Roberts committed suicide when the police arrived on the scene. It was a dark day for the Amish community.

But it was also a dark day for Marie Roberts, the wife of the gunman, and her own two young children. And on the following Saturday, after those gruesome murders, Marie experienced something truly amazing while attending her husband's funeral.

You see, that day, she and her children watched as Amish families. In fact, they represented about half of the 75 mourners present, came and stood alongside them in the midst of their own blinding grief.

And despite the crime that this man had perpetrated, the Amish came to mourn Charles Carl Roberts, himself a husband, himself a father.

[26 : 47] And Bruce Porter, a fire department chaplain who attended the service, described what moved him most about the gesture. He says, it's the love, the forgiveness, the heartfelt forgiveness they have towards the family.

I broke down and cried, seeing it displayed. And he added that Marie Roberts was also touched. He says, she was absolutely deeply moved by the love shown.

As God's people, we're called to reflect his character to the world around us. Well, as Zechariah nears the end of his hymn of praise, his focus narrows in.

This little baby in their arms, eight days old, will in fact be God's prophet. He will go before the Lord, the Lord, the Messiah, the Son of God, very God and very man.

And John is going to give knowledge of God's salvation and his focus will be on forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness through a repentant heart.

[28 : 01] And I wonder this Christmas whether that's your certainty. That your sins, indeed all of your sins, have been forgiven. Because that very assurance can be yours.

One word characterises God's plan of salvation. Mercy. Verse 78.

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us. By the tender, the sense is by the compassionate mercy of God.

The dawn from on high refers to the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, will break upon us. And it's the same verb that's used back in verse 68, translated there as looked favourably.

You see, Zechariah declares God himself will visit us. And that's what God has done. 2,000 years ago.

[29 : 09] In all of the lowliness, in all of the humility of being born in an animal feeding trough. And the promise is that he will return.

And we can absolutely count on it because that's his word. Why did God come in Christ 2,000 years ago?

Verse 79. To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. To guide our feet into the way of peace. Jesus Christ came to lead people.

To lead people like me, like you, like us. To lead us to God. Those like us who were in darkness.

Those like us who were in the shadow of death. He came to lead us to peace. Peace with God.

[30 : 08] So wonderfully expressed in that Hebrew word, shalom. Total well-being. This Christmas.

Don't take Christ out of Christmas. And don't take the M out of Christmas. In God's mercy.

He sent the Lord Jesus. To be our saviour. What should our response be? Well, if Jesus is not our saviour. The call is to turn to him in repentant faith.

To come out of that kingdom of darkness. Where death is indeed a final and fearful reality. What should our response be if Jesus is our saviour and Lord?

Response should be one of worshipping him and serving him with our whole life and indeed for our whole life. Praise God daily. And especially this Christmas season.

[31 : 19] For his infinite mercy. For his infinite mercy. Oh, the mercy of God. The glory of grace. That you chose to redeem us to forgive and restore.

And you call us your children chosen in him. To be holy and blameless. To the glory of God. Amen.

Amen. .

Amen. Amen.