

## THE SONGS OF CHRISTMAS: The Benedictus<sup>i</sup> Luke 1:57-80

### WELCOME:

Good morning, Trinity! It is so good to see you this morning. And I want to say a special welcome to those of you that are our guests. We are thrilled you have joined us today.

We love to connect with guests. You can help us know about your time with us today in a couple of different ways. You can text the keyword, TBCMP, which stands for Trinity Baptist Church Mt. Pleasant, to the number 94-000. When you send that keyword to that number, you will be sent a link back that is safe to click on. It will take you to a short form. When you fill out and submit that form, it notifies us and we look forward to the opportunity to connect with you.

Or you can stop by Guest Connect located in the main lobby just outside the worship center. We have a team of people that would love to meet you and give you a small gift as a token of thanks for you being here with us today. Even if you text in, stop by Guest Connect and pick up your gift. We are so glad you are here today.

### SERIES INTRODUCTION:

We are in a teaching series that we are calling “The Songs of Christmas.” And while the Christmas season is filled with all kinds of great music, we are not looking at modern day carols. We are studying the original songs of Christmas, songs written over 2,000 years ago surrounding the birth of Jesus. Last week we looked at Mary’s Song, also known as the Magnificat. Today, we are looking at Zechariah’s Song, often called “The Benedictus.” Like Mary’s Song, the name “Benedictus” comes from the first word in his song meaning “To bless.”<sup>ii</sup>

So, I want to invite you to turn with me to Luke chapter 1. We are going to look at several verses in the chapter but primarily zoom in on verses 67 to 80.

### **OPENING ILLUSTRATION: Marvin Gaye<sup>iii</sup>**

You know, throughout the decades, there have been certain songs reach iconic status. And certain artists that seem to set music style. In the 60s and 70s, soul music came thundering on the scene and artist like Marvin Gaye rose to fame with songs like, “How Sweet It Is to Be Loved by You,” “I Heard It Through The Grapevine,” and “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.”

But music changed into the 70s and Marvin Gaye released a string of hits that were more focused on political and social issues of the day. Songs like, “What’s Going On?,” “Inner City Blues,” and “Mercy, Mercy Me.” And what made those songs so popular is that the lyrics seemed to capture what many people were feeling at the time. And really, they were more prayers, when you think about it, where people expressed their desire to see resolution to life’s difficulties and challenges. And songs birthed out of questioning and even painful experiences seemed to really resonate with people.

Well, in our Christmas song of study this morning, we can label it a prayer rooted in a painful experience. And just like some of the best hymns of the faith, Zechariah’s song is birthed out of a season of suffering. Let me give you some background to the song.

### BACKGROUND:

We learn more about Zechariah and Elizabeth in the opening verses of Chapter 1. Look at verses 5 through 7. ***5In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah [Ah By Juah]. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. 7But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.***

We learn here that Zechariah was a priest, serving in the temple in Jerusalem in first century B.C. And we read that both he and his wife, Elizabeth, were righteous people who walked blamelessly. Now, this is an important detail because in those days, people were skeptical of the religious elite and their financial gain. But the text distinguishes Zechariah from those type of leaders.

Another reason the detail about them being righteous is important is because of their situation. We read in verse 7 that they had no child. Now, those of you who have had or maybe are currently walking through fertility challenges, you understand the pain that Zechariah and Elizabeth were experiencing. And their pain was accentuated because of the cultural view in their day and time. The inability to have a child was considered God’s judgment on sin. So, not only did they struggle with their own feelings about their predicament, but they were also looked down on by society as if something was wrong with them, or they had done something especially sinful.

We also learn, from verse 7, that they were advanced in years. So, this was a struggle they had dealt with their entire married life. I'm talking many, many years and coming to the point that they would just not have children. Now, we know that God does not judge sin like that. He punished our sin on the cross, but I just want you to try to feel what they were feeling. It's painful.

But Zechariah's situation worsened. The opening of chapter 1 of Luke goes on to tell us that one day, when it was Zechariah's rotation to perform his priestly duties, an angel of The Lord visited him. And Gabriel, the angel, tells him that his wife Elizabeth was going to have a son, and they were to name the child John.

Well, as you can imagine, Zechariah had doubts about all that because of he and Elizabeth's age. So, he questions the message. He struggled to believe because I am sure this was the subject of countless numbers of prayers he prayed with no answer.

As a result of his doubts, God caused Zechariah to be both mute and deaf. Talk about adding insult to injury. For a priest to be unable to speak or hear created more pain and heartache; he couldn't even do his job now.

Did you know that sign language is in the Bible? It is, and it is demonstrated in this story. See, God ultimately has mercy on Zechariah. God blesses he and Elizabeth with a son. And when their son, John, is born, we see the use of sign language.

Flip over to Luke 1:57 through verse 64. *57Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 59And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child [as was the custom]. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, 60but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." [Remember what the angel said to name him]. 61And they said to her, "[But] None of your relatives is called by this name." 62And they made signs to his father [there's sign language], inquiring what he wanted him to be called. 63And he [Zechariah] asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. [Now look what happens]. 64And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.*

God restores Zechariah's speech and hearing and gave them a son. And what he walked through becomes the basis of his song. In light of God's mercy toward them, he composes The Benedictus. It is a beautiful song birthed out of questions and painful experiences. And the overall message to us is that God redeems the broken situations we experience, and He is worthy of praise because of His mercy and goodness.

So, let's look at a few aspects of Zechariah's song. In his incredible song we see that Christmas reveals God's mercy, salvation, and faithfulness. That will serve as our outline this morning.

### **MESSAGE:**

Let's begin by looking at how Christmas reveals God's...

#### **1) Mercy**

Zechariah's song can be broken into two parts. But both parts have the same theme, God's mercy. And really and truly, Zechariah and Elizabeth's life story is a story of God's mercy and goodness.

Now, mercy is often confused with grace. And while the two theological truths are closely related, they do not have the same meaning. God's mercy has to do with Him showing kindness and compassion. God's grace certainly includes kindness and compassion, but also carries the idea of bestowing a gift or favor.<sup>iv</sup> I've heard it said this way. Mercy is NOT getting what you DO deserve, and grace IS getting what you DON'T deserve.<sup>v</sup> So, the focus of Zechariah's song is God's mercy.

The Bible uses several different words that are translated as God's mercy. But in just about every instance, mercy is an action God takes that demonstrates His faithfulness and love. For example, God shows mercy when He withholds punishment that is deserved. Or God shows mercy when He relieves suffering. But the greatest display of God's mercy is at the cross. It is mercy that led to the greatest act of love the world has ever seen that resulted in God treating Jesus as we deserve to be treated and withholding punishment from us. That's mercy. Grace is God offering the free gift of salvation in light of the mercy He has shown. Make sense?

Let's read the totality of Zechariah's song. And as you follow along in your copy of God's Word look for the theme of mercy to emerge. *67And his father*

*Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, <sup>68</sup>“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, **for he has visited and redeemed his people** <sup>69</sup>and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup>as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, <sup>71</sup>that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; <sup>72</sup>**to show the mercy** promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, <sup>73</sup>the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us <sup>74</sup>that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup>in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. [Then Zechariah shifts from talking about Jesus to talking about his son, John, in the second section of the song]. <sup>76</sup>And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, <sup>77</sup>to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, <sup>78</sup>**because of the tender mercy of our God**, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high <sup>79</sup>to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”* So, we see how the theme of mercy shows up in both sections.

Think about the ways Zechariah and Elizabeth experienced God’s mercy that would then serve as the motivation for this song. God was merciful toward Elizabeth by giving her a son. As a result, God relieved her suffering. That’s mercy.

Likewise, God was merciful toward Zechariah by restoring his speech and hearing. God would have been justified to cause Zechariah’s deafness and muteness to be permanent, but God was merciful toward him.

Really what happened is that God responded to Zechariah’s faithfulness. When all their relatives wanted the baby to be named after him, Zechariah was obedient to the command of the angel when he said, “His name is John.” And at that moment, God lifted his punishment. And that display of mercy resulted in a song of praise.

What is also interesting is the praise that Zechariah erupts in was contagious. Verse 66 tells us, *“<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.”*

This experience begs the question of us, “In what ways should we praise God for His acts of mercy toward us?” God is merciful toward us by offering forgiveness, providing unconditional love when we fail Him, showing

compassion when we go through life’s struggles, and by sending Jesus. In my sin, I do not deserve the love that God has shown me. Yet He is compassion toward me.

So, Christmas reveals God’s mercy. Secondly, Christmas reveals God’s...

## 2) Salvation

Not only does Zechariah talk about God’s mercy, but he also speaks of God’s salvation. In verses 68-72, he says, *“<sup>68</sup>Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, **for he has visited and redeemed his people** <sup>69</sup>and has **raised up a horn of salvation** for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup>as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, <sup>71</sup>that we should be **saved** from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; <sup>72</sup>to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.”* In these verses Zechariah preaches the gospel, and he shares both the plan and the purpose of salvation.

The first thing that Zechariah says is that God is to be blessed because He has visited His people. The word translated as “visited,” in the original language means to come to, to comfort, and to provide help.<sup>vi</sup> And quite literally, Jesus visited, He came, God in flesh, Emmanuel. And why did He come? To comfort and to provide help. And the help that The Lord Jesus provided was salvation. When we could not save ourselves, Jesus came to save us.

And Zechariah continues by saying that God has redeemed His people. That word translated, “redeemed,” can also mean ransomed.<sup>vii</sup> The idea here is that of being delivered from something. By saving us, God ransomed us, He delivered us, from the bondage of our sin. In other words, when we come to faith in Jesus as Lord of our lives, we are freed from the penalty of our sin.

Zechariah further says that God, *“has raised up a horn of salvation.”* The depiction of a horn in Scripture points to strength. The horn is a symbol of the animal’s strength and therefore it is a symbol of strength in general.<sup>viii</sup> Well, in Zechariah’s song, what is it that is strong? Salvation. And it is more specifically pointing us to the person of our salvation being a strong Savior. And all of this was drawing upon Old Testament language.

So, the plan of salvation. That God loves us. Regardless of what you might think, God loves you. He does. But even though God loves us, we are still sinners. And because God is a holy and perfect God, He cannot fellowship with

that which is sinful. Therefore, our relationship with God is broken because of our sin. But God, being rich in mercy, provided a way of redemption. Jesus came, lived a perfect life, died a sinner's death, a death we deserve, was buried and then rose from the grave, doing that which was impossible for us. And by faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior of our lives, we are forgiven of our sin and brought into a relationship with a holy God. That is the plan of salvation.

But in addition to the plan of salvation, Zechariah also sings about the purpose of salvation. The purpose of salvation is worship. The goal of being delivered is not just freedom, the goal is worship. God saves so that we might worship Him.<sup>ix</sup>

So, we see that Christmas reveals God's mercy and His salvation. Thirdly, finally, Christmas reveals God's...

### 3) Faithfulness

The first part of Zechariah's song is about God's mercy in providing salvation through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The second part of Zechariah's song is about God's mercy in being true to His promises. In verse 76, Zechariah shifts from talking about the unborn Jesus to his newborn son, John the Baptist, or more accurately, John the Baptizer, or John the Immerser. That is the literal expression here. And in his singing about John, Zechariah sings of God's faithfulness.

Not only was God faithful to Elizabeth and Zechariah by giving them a son, just as the angel Gabriel said. But God was faithful the prophecy He spoke through the prophets long ago. Let me show it to you.

In verse 76 of Luke 1, Zechariah says, *"**76**And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; **for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.**"* There are two primary Old Testament texts that are prophecies about the coming Messiah that mention a, quote, forerunner. That being a prophet that would go before the Messiah and prepare the people for his coming. In Isaiah 40, verse 3, it says, *"**3**A voice cries: **'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'**"* And also in Malachi, chapter 3, verse 1 that says, *"**1**Behold, **I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.**"* Now, what is unique in Malachi's

prophecy is a timeline. He says that the Messiah will visit His temple. The first temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The second temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. There has not been a third temple. So, according to Malachi's prophecy, the Messiah would come sometime between his prophecy and 70AD. But ultimately, the point is that, Zechariah, in his song, is saying the fulfillment of the prophecy of a forerunner is John the Baptizer.

Now, there are some amazing intricacies that are mentioned in Zechariah's song that point to John the Baptizer being the foretold prophet preparing the way for the Messiah. Look at verse 80. *"**80**And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and **he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.**"* I want you to see the detail by which God fulfills His prophecies. Isaiah 40 said that the voice will cry from where? The wilderness.

There are over 300, what are called, Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament.<sup>x</sup> That is to say that there are over 300 predictions about the Messiah. Jesus fulfilled every one of those prophecies. If you have any doubt as to whether or not Jesus is indeed the Son of God, the mathematical probability of accomplishing this is impossible. A man by the name of Peter Stoner, in his book *Science Speaks*, calculates that the probability of one person in the first century fulfilling just 8 of the Messianic prophecies is 1 in 10 to the 17<sup>th</sup> power.<sup>xi</sup> That's a 1 with 17 zeros behind it.

Of course, the point being that God is faithful. He is faithful to fulfill at the details of what He has promised.

### CONCLUSION:

Zechariah's song is an incredible song of praise. And in it, Christmas reveals God's mercy, salvation and faithfulness.

How has The Lord spoken to your heart as we studied this song? Perhaps He has revealed to you your need for salvation....

INVITATION.....

## ENDNOTES:

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<sup>i</sup> Works consulted in preparation for this message: Thabiti Anyabwile, “Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Luke,” Holman Reference: Nashville, 2018; David Guzik, “Enduring Word Commentary: Luke 1 – The Birth of John The Baptist,” accessed online: <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/luke-1/>; John MacArthur, “A Jewish Priest Testifies to the Messiah,” sermon published by Grace to You, December 22, 2019, accessed online: <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/81-63/a-jewish-priest-testifies-to-the-messiah>; Skip Heitzig, “Expound: Luke 1:26-80,” message taught at Calvary Albuquerque, July 9, 2014, accessed online: <https://connectwithskip.com/teachings/#/series/186/sermon/2488>; Brad Nelson, “Proclamations of Christmas: Zechariah’s Song,” published by Walking The Text, accessed online: <https://walkingthetext.com/episode-182-proclamations-of-christmas-pt-2-zechariahs-song/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Nelson.

<sup>iii</sup> Illustration adapted from Thabiti Anyabwile, “Christ-Center Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Luke,” Holman Reference: Nashville, 2018, pages 35-36.

<sup>iv</sup> Excerpt from a Got Questions article, “What is the Difference Between Mercy and Grace?,” accessed online: <https://www.gotquestions.org/mercy-grace.html>.

<sup>v</sup> Unknown source.

<sup>vi</sup> Strong’s Concordance, 1980, episkeptomai.

<sup>vii</sup> Strong’s Concordance, 3085, lutrosis.

<sup>viii</sup> Heitzig.

<sup>ix</sup> Anyabwile, page 40.

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.about-jesus.org/complete-chart-prophecies-jesus.htm>.

<sup>xi</sup> Peter W. Stoner, “Science Speaks,” Moody Press: Chicago, 1958.