

"GOD'S TENDER MERCY"

I. Introduction

- A. In a sermon on this text, John Calvin begins by saying, "When God is pleased to exhibit his wonderful works to us, we should be moved by a feeling of reverence, as if he himself appeared before us in all his majesty." [*Songs of the Nativity*, 65]
1. God did not appear to Zechariah in all his majesty, but he did convey through the angel Gabriel Zechariah that John's birth was an important moment in the plan of redemption.
 2. Here we see Zechariah responding to God's works by singing a song of joyous praise.
- B. Zechariah was blessed to see some extraordinary things.
1. He was visited by an angel.
 2. His barren wife conceived a child in her old age.
 3. Nevertheless, Zechariah saw less of God's wonderful works than we do.
 4. Because we live in the time after Christ has completed his redemptive work, we can see God's glorious plan in its fullness.
 5. In spite of this, we still have a tendency to lose sight of the greatness of what God has done for us in Christ.
 6. As Calvin points out, while we devote so much of our attention to the trivial things in life, "we forget the really important things which are meant to draw us to God and help us live as if in his presence — for we cannot flee from him!" [66]

7. The purpose of this text is to direct our attention to the really important things.
8. The Lord has given us this passage in order that we might pause and ponder the glory of the gospel.

II. God Fulfills His Word (57-66)

- A. The first part of our text relates the birth of John the Baptist, in which we see God fulfilling the word that he had spoken to Zechariah through the angel.
 1. Elizabeth had become pregnant in her old age, just as God had said.
 2. When the time came for her to give birth, she bore a son, just as God had said.
 3. Even the joy of Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives marked the beginning fulfillment of God's word to Zechariah that "many will rejoice at [John's] birth." (1:14)
- B. In first century Judaism, it was the custom to wait to give names to infant children until the eighth day after their birth, the day that the law specified for their circumcision.
 1. In our text, the people assumed that this couple would follow the typical custom by naming their firstborn son after his father, but Elizabeth said that the child should be called "John."
 2. This was the name that the angel had given to the child when he appeared to Zechariah in the temple.
 3. The people were confused by this since it was not a family name, so they asked Zechariah what he wanted the child to be called.
 4. Zechariah then responded by writing on a wax tablet, "His name is John."

5. Notice that Zechariah did not write, "I want to call him John" or "We have decided to name him John."
 6. He simply wrote, "His name is John."
 7. God had given this child this name, so it was a settled fact.
- C. Two things happened after Zechariah confirmed that his son's name would be John.
1. First, Zechariah's tongue was loosed, and he immediately started blessing God.
 2. As you will recall, his muteness came upon him as a chastisement from God for failing to believe the angel's message.
 3. But when Zechariah showed his submission to God's word by naming his child John, the chastisement was removed.
 4. Second, fear came upon all of the couple's neighbors.
 5. These people realized that there was something special about this child, and they wondered what would become of him.
 6. In this way, the Lord made these people expectant, preparing them for John's ministry as the forerunner of the Messiah, even though many years would pass before he would enter into this work.

III. God Delivers His People (67-75)

- A. This brings us to the song of praise that Zechariah sings in the remainder of the passage.
1. This song is known as the Benedictus, after its first word in the Latin Vulgate translation.
 2. Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit came upon Zechariah and empowered him to utter this prophesy.

3. While we tend to think of prophecy as predictive, this is not always the case.
 4. To prophesy is to speak as God's mouthpiece, to declare, 'Thus says the Lord.'
 5. By the power of the Spirit, Zechariah provides inspired commentary on the events that were unfolding around him, showing that God's great plan of salvation is beginning to move to completion.
- B. Zechariah praises God because he "has visited and redeemed his people."
1. This language recalls God's deliverance of his people from Egypt.
 2. The situation of Israel in the first century bore a key similarity to the situation of God's people at the time of the exodus.
 3. They were under foreign domination, and God's face appeared to be turned away from them.
 4. Yet the Lord had not forsaken them.
 5. He was about to visit them and redeem them.
 6. He was about to act for the sake of their redemption.
 7. He was going to do something far greater than what he had done when he brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt.
- C. Zechariah describes this redemptive work by saying that God "has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David."
1. The mention of David makes it clear that Zechariah is referring to Jesus, since John was not of Davidic descent.
 2. In the Bible, horns are often used as symbols of power, and this is clearly the meaning here.

3. In the first century, David's line was no longer on the throne in Israel.
 4. The house of David had no power at all.
 5. Yet the Lord would cause a shoot to grow from the stump of David, and he would bring salvation for his people.
- D. Of course, most first century Israelites had mistaken notions about what this salvation would look like.
1. They thought that their problem was their foreign oppressors.
 2. They were looking for political deliverance.
 3. What they needed to see was that their real problem was spiritual in nature.
 4. They needed to see that their great need was to be delivered from the divine judgment that hung over them because of their sin.
 5. John was sent to show them this by preaching a message of repentance.
- E. We too stand in need of salvation from our enemies, but like the Jews in Zechariah's day, we have a tendency to lose sight of the true nature of our plight.
1. What, in your estimation, is the greatest enemy, or obstacle, or problem that you face?
 2. The Bible tells us that as God's pilgrim people we have four fundamental foes: the world, the flesh, the devil, and death.
 3. The world pressures us to conform to its ways and sets itself in opposition to us when we refuse to do so.
 4. The flesh is constantly trying to deceive us into thinking that the way to find happiness is to gratify the desires of our sinful nature,

to go our own way rather than God's way.

5. The devil tempts us to doubt and disobey God's Word.
 6. And death rears its ugly head in all our sufferings, infirmities, sorrows, and losses.
 7. Yet the gospel assures us that in all these things we are more than conquerors through the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
 8. Our God really has provided us with deliverance from all our foes.
 9. While he calls us to trust him amid the trials and temptations of this life, he also promises us that nothing can separate us from him.
- F. Zechariah's song also reminds us that God extends his mercy to us in Christ in remembrance of his holy covenant.
1. As it says in verse 72, God saves us "to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant".
 2. God is not pleased to save us because of anything that he sees in us.
 3. He saves us because of his faithfulness to what he has promised in his covenant of grace.
 4. When God revealed that covenant to Abraham, he wanted him to know the absolute certainty of what was being promised.
 5. It should have been enough for God to give Abraham his word, but he did more than that.
 6. As Zechariah points out in verse 73, God also swore an oath to Abraham.
 7. He swore on his own name for the sake of our weakness and our slowness to believe.

8. God's love for us causes him to give up his right to be taken at his word.
 9. He accommodates himself to our weakness by guaranteeing his promise with an oath.
- G. The first part of the Benedictus concludes with a statement that explains God's purpose in saving his people.
1. In verses 74 and 75, Zechariah says that God delivers us so that we "might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."
 2. God does not save us from his judgment so that we can go on living however we please.
 3. He saves us so that we might serve him.
 4. He saves us in order that we might live holy and righteous lives, in order that we might walk in his ways.
 5. And this service that we give to God is rendered "without fear."
 6. This reminds us that we have to have peace of conscience before God before we can truly worship and serve him.
 7. We have to know that God fully accepts us on the basis of Christ's atoning death and perfectly obedient life.
 8. Otherwise, any service that we render to God will actually be done for ourselves, because it will be an attempt to win God's favor by our works.
 9. True service to God is rendered out of love, not fear.
 10. And as Edward Fisher explains, "it is impossible for any man to love God, till by faith he know himself beloved of God." [*The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 205]

11. We love because he first loved us.

IV. God Sends His Light (76-80)

- A. This brings us to the second half of the Benedictus, where the focus turns to the ministry that will be carried out by John the Baptist.
 1. In verse 76, Zechariah says that his child will be the prophet of the Most High and will go before him to prepare his ways.
 2. John will give God's people knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins.
 3. First century Jews stood in need of instruction about salvation and the forgiveness of sins.
 4. Of course, the gospel message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone had been set forth in the Old Testament.
 5. But by the first century, that message had become corrupted and obscured.
 6. Most Jews in that day believed that their salvation depended on two things: the merit accrued through their good works and the penal satisfaction that they made for their sins through their sufferings. [see James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, 56]
 7. John was sent in order to show them the error of that way of thinking.
 8. He came to call them to repentance for their sins.
 9. He came to confront those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous so that they would cry out to God saying, "be merciful to me, a sinner!"
 10. Our hearts have to be instructed in the same manner before we can come to Christ.

11. We have to see that there is no way to obtain a righteous standing with God except through faith in Jesus Christ.
- B. Zechariah says that it was “the tender mercy of our God” that motivated him to send Jesus into the world, with John as his forerunner.
1. The word translated as “tender” literally refers to a person’s innermost organs or bowels.
 2. This conveys that God was moved with deep compassion to provide this great salvation for us.
 3. God extended his tender mercy toward us even though we did absolutely nothing to deserve that mercy.
 4. He looked upon us in our miserable estate and had pity on us.
- C. Mankind really is in a state of misery in this world.
1. Wherever we look, a deep darkness prevails.
 2. Human existence is characterized by godlessness, selfishness, hatred, strife, anxiety, violence, hopelessness, meaninglessness, exploitation, addiction — and the list goes on and on.
 3. Yet God has not abandoned us to the darkness of sin and error.
 4. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” (Isa. 9:2)
 5. For those who fear God’s name, the sun of righteousness has risen with healing in its wings.
 6. Jesus Christ guides our feet into the way of peace, the way of reconciliation with God.

V. Conclusion

- A. Don't let your life be consumed by frivolous diversions, by the desire for material things, by the cares and anxieties of the world.
- B. Think about the things that Zechariah sings about, the really important things, and give glory to God.
- C. For in Jesus Christ, God's light has come into this world, giving light and life to all who will receive him.
- D. As he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12 ESV)