

“The Tender Mercy of Our God” (Luke 1:57–80)

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Christmas can be an exciting time. It’s a time of celebration and joy. But it can also be a time of depression for many. Depression can be caused by many things. Perhaps it’s due to loneliness, or the sadness in remembering a loved one who has died. But perhaps that depression comes from broken promises.

So many people break promises. How many times have politicians broken their promises? Too many times to count, I’m sure. Do you know how you can tell a politician is making false promises? His lips are moving. Think of all the marriage vows you’ve ever heard recited. How many people have kept their promise to live as a lawfully wedded couple “for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part”? Think of all the times that parents or siblings or friends have broken promises, both small and large. Think of how many times we have broken our promises to others.

There are other broken promises, too. So much in life promises joy, satisfaction, fulfillment, and happiness. Advertisers make us feel like if only we get the newest gadget or some other product, then we’ll feel complete. Sometimes we come into the holiday season hoping to get a certain feeling. That happens with milestones in life, too. We think, “If only I get that job, I’ll feel accomplished,” or, “If only I could retire, then I’d be happy.” Those goals and dreams promise so much, but when they arrive we’re often disappointed. It’s as if we believed those things promised us something great, but then we find out it’s all a lie.

But there is someone who always keeps his promises, and that is God. God never lies. But God’s promises aren’t always fulfilled the way that we expect them to be. When God makes a promise, we often start to imagine how he’ll fulfill that promise, and our imagination is often wrong. Though God doesn’t always give us what we want, he always keeps his promises and he always gives us what we need.

We’ll see this today as we continue to look at the Gospel of Luke. Today, we’ll see how God kept his promise to Zechariah and Elizabeth to give them a son in their old age. And we’ll see how their son, John, will prepare the way for the salvation that God promised in the Old Testament.

Before we look at today's passage, I just want to remind us of what we've seen so far. Luke begins his Gospel by explaining that it is an historical account of what God has done. Luke used eyewitness testimony to write his history.

He begins his history with the story of a priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth. They were old and unable to have children. Yet God promised Zechariah that they would have a son named John. The angel Gabriel told Zechariah that John would "turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God" (Luke 1:16).¹ John's role, as we'll find out, was to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of their anointed king, the Messiah.

Zechariah found this hard to believe, so he questioned what the angel said. In response, Gabriel said, "you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time" (Luke 1:20). And from that time, Zechariah could not talk.

Last week, we found out that the angel Gabriel made an even more amazing promise to Mary. Though she was a virgin, she would conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. That child would be called Jesus. He would be the son, or heir, of King David, but he would also be "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32). Mary believed this message and later she praised God with a hymn known as the "Magnificat" (Luke 1:46–55).

Today, we'll see that Elizabeth gives birth to the promised child, John. When that happens, and when Zechariah responds in faith, he is able to speak and he, too, praises God.

Let's begin by reading Luke 1:57–66:

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ 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.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Elizabeth gives birth to the child that God had promised to her and Zechariah. As you might expect, this birth was received with great joy. (Joy is one of the major themes at the beginning of Luke's Gospel.) John's parents had him circumcised on the eighth day, as Jewish law required (Gen. 17:10–12; 21:4; Lev. 12:3). Circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God had made with Abraham, the patriarch of the Jews. It taught them that they were consecrated to God, special, to be holy. It also taught them that the Messiah would come from their people. (I don't want to be graphic, but there was a reason this sign was etched onto a procreative organ). And it taught them that they needed to have their old selves "cut off" or removed in order to be God's people. Even in the Old Testament, there are times when circumcision refers metaphorically to a change of heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; cf. Rom. 2:28–29; Phil. 3:3).

The child wasn't officially named yet, and the people who witnessed his circumcision wanted to call him "Zechariah," since sons were often named after their fathers. But Elizabeth says, "No; he shall be called John." The people don't understand, because no one in the family had that name. So, they ask Zechariah. Apparently, he wasn't just mute, but he was also deaf, because they had to make hand signals to communicate to him. Zechariah agrees with what Elizabeth said and what the angel Gabriel had told him. The child's name is "John." This may not seem like a big deal. But it represents Zechariah's faith in the message he heard months earlier. We know that because when he affirms that the baby's name is "John," he is able to speak once again. The name "John" means "Yahweh [God] is gracious." Zechariah knows and believes this message, and when he responds in faith to God, he is able to praise God.

The fact that Zechariah and Elizabeth name their child an unexpected name, and that when they do, Zechariah can once again speak, causes the people to fear God and wonder what this child was going to do. Luke tells us that they "laid [these things] up in their hearts." He will later say this about Mary (2:19, 51). The only way that Luke could know what these people were thinking is if he talked to them, or to those who knew them. This shows that Luke had written his account based on eyewitness testimony.

This story is a bit unusual, but it's very significant. Zechariah and Elizabeth were previously unable to have children. She was barren. Her barrenness reflected the spiritual state of Israel. They were barren, lacking spiritual life. Between the Old and New Testaments, it seems that prophecy had stopped. In the Old Testament, the prophets said, "Thus says the LORD . . ." But for centuries, it seemed as though God was silent. The Jews were waiting for a word from

God. They were waiting for God to come and rescue them from their enemies. The birth of this child, John, is a sign that this period of barrenness and silence has come to an end.

It's no accident that Zechariah's name means "Yahweh has remembered." God remembered his promises made hundreds and even thousands of years earlier, and now he was making good on those promises.

We see this clearly in Zechariah's words of praise. Like Mary's "Magnificat," this is written in Luke in the form of a hymn.² We're told that Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit when he said these words. We're also told that Zechariah prophesied these words. This is a message from God, delivered for the sake of the people who wondered what God was doing by giving Zechariah and Elizabeth a son.

So, let's read the whole passage, and then I'll go back and dissect it a bit. Here are verses 67–80:

⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,
⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
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."

² This hymn is known as the "Benedictus." Like the "Magnificat," that word comes from the Latin translation of the first Greek word. In this case, the word is "blessed." (The Greek word is related to a verb from which we get our word "eulogy." A eulogy is literally a series of "good words" said about the dead.)

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.

Not only are Zechariah's words prompted by the Holy Spirit. Not only are they words of prophecy, telling the people what God was doing by giving the world these special babies, John and Jesus. But Zechariah's words also represent the Jewish hope for their Messiah. This is important, because without this understanding, it's hard to appreciate the significance of Christmas. You can't appreciate the birth of Jesus without having some idea of context. Fortunately, Zechariah's words give us that context, and they show that God keeps his promises.

Let's look more carefully at his words. In verse 68, John begins this hymn with a blessing. In the Bible, God is often blessed for great things he has done for his people (Ps. 72:18–19). Zechariah's words echo King David's in 1 Kings 1:48. When David was about to die, he knew he would be succeeded by his son, Solomon, and he said these words, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who has granted someone to sit on my throne this day." Zechariah now blesses God for a greater Davidic King.

Zechariah blessed God because "he has visited and redeemed his people." Notice that these words are in the past tense. Zechariah is so certain that God will do this work that he says it's a done deal. It's as if it's already been accomplished. The language of "visitation" often refers to God delivering his people. It's used in the book of Exodus when God "visited the people of Israel" (Exod. 4:31). The Israelites were slaves in Egypt and God redeemed them. That is, he freed them from slavery. God was now doing something similar.

In verse 69, Zechariah says that God "raised up a horn of salvation" for Israel. Horns were a symbol of strength. Think of animals that have horns and attack with them, like bulls, buffalo, or oxen. Their horns are their strength. In one of King David's psalms, he calls God his "horn of salvation (Ps. 18:2). God is raising up a figure in the house of David who will have the strength to save his people.

The mention of the house of David is important because God had promised David that he would have an offspring, a "son," who would inherit his kingdom and who would reign forever. God made this promise to David about a thousand years before Jesus was born. God told David, "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:12–13).

This promise came to David through the prophet Nathan, who was one of many prophets who delivered God's promises to his people. That's what Zechariah acknowledges in verse 70. God spoke a consistent message through these prophets. That's why we're told that he spoke by the one mouth of his holy prophets. God had revealed these promises through different prophets across the centuries. One of the reasons I trust that the Bible is God's word is that it tells a unified story. It gives us one message of God and his salvation of his people. This was written by dozens of people over the span of centuries. Yet all of them bear witness to the same truth.

In verse 71, Zechariah says that God's promise was to save his people "from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us." In the Old Testament, the promises of David's offspring, the anointed forever-king, the Messiah, often talk of salvation for God's people and judgment for those who oppose God. In last week's Advent reading, we were told of a special child, a son, who would be born. The government would rest upon his shoulders and he would be called "Mighty God" and "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6-7). This morning, we heard that the people who walked in darkness had seen a great light, which brought them joy (Isa. 9:2-3). Sandwiched between those two passages are these verses:

- ⁴ For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
- ⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire (Isa. 9:4-5).

The Messiah would put an end to oppression. That was good news, because Israel often had enemies who oppressed them. Pharaoh enslaved them and was so threatened by them that he wanted to kill their male children. In later years, they had been in exile in Babylon, then under Persian rule, and under Greek rule. When Jesus was born, they were under Roman occupation. Israel waited for the Messiah to deliver them from all their enemies. And often, these enemies seemed to be foreign nations. God had delivered the Israelites in the exodus, about fourteen hundred years earlier. The Jews were waiting for God to deliver his people once again.

The expectation was that this would be done through a Davidic king. We don't have time to look at this passage this morning, but if you read Isaiah 11, you can get that idea.³ We also see a promise of a righteous king in Jeremiah 23:5–6:

⁵“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”

They were waiting for a righteous king would bring about justice and security. They needed a king to save them and to crush their enemies.⁴

But this hymn of Zechariah shows that Israel's own enemy was its own sin. In verse 72, he mentions “the mercy promised to our fathers.” In verses 76–78, he says that John's job would be to “go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of sin, because of the tender mercy of our God.” Mercy can mean kindness or compassion. It also has the sense of sparing someone something they deserve. God promised to be merciful to Israel. He promised to remember his covenant. When the Israelites were in Egypt, God remembered his covenant with Abraham (Exod. 2:24).⁵ Of course, it's not that God forgot that covenant. God knows everything. But that language means he acted based on the covenant he made with Abraham.

³ Clearly, Isaiah 11 refers to the Messiah. He is “a shoot from the stump of Jesse,” David's father (verse 1). He is anointed by the Holy Spirit (verse 2). And He will rule with righteousness (verses 3–5). He will usher in an age of peace (6–10). And he will bring about a second exodus (verses 11–16).

⁴ The Jewish expectation at the time that Jesus was born was that a Davidic king would rescue Israel by defeating its enemies. See the non-biblical text, Psalms of Solomon 17:23–27, which was written in the second or first century B.C.:

²³ See, O Lord, and raise up their king for them,
a son of David,
for the proper time that you see, God,
{to rule over Israel your servant}.

²⁴ And undergird him with strength to shatter unrighteous rulers.

^{25–26} Cleanse Jerusalem from the nations that trample it in destruction,
to expel sinners from the inheritance in wisdom, in righteousness,
to rub out the arrogance of the sinner like a potter's vessel,
to crush all their support with an iron rod;

²⁷ to destroy lawless nations by the word of his mouth,
for Gentiles to flee from his face at his threat,
and to reprove sinners by the word of their heart.

⁵ See also Mic. 7:18–20 for the hope that God would act on the covenant promises to Abraham.

A covenant is like a binding pact between two parties. But it's not just a legal document. It's more personal than that. It combines the law with personal obligation and relationship. It contains promises. It expects certain behavior in return. God promised Abraham he would bless him and his offspring, and he would bless the world through his offspring (Gen. 12:1–3). But Abraham had to obey God by circumcising himself and his son, and all subsequent Israelite men had to be circumcised (Gen. 17:1–14). God made great promises to Abraham, but he expected obedience in return.

Later, after God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, he made a covenant with the nation at Mount Sinai. He gave them his law and he said that if they kept it, they would be his “treasured possession,” “a kingdom of priests,” and “a holy nation” (Exod. 19:5–6). But the Israelites were never perfectly obedient, or even close. They continued to rebel against God, and they often worshiped other, false gods.

Years later, God made a covenant with David, promising him a King who would reign forever, as we saw earlier (2 Sam. 7). But in order for there to be a forever kingdom of people ruled by this forever king, there had to be a way for Israel's sin to be removed. The mercy that the Israelites needed wasn't mercy from foreign enemies. They needed deliverance from their sins. They needed forgiveness. They needed God to remove their sins.

God promised that. He promised a new covenant. Under the terms of this treaty, God would write his law on his people's hearts, by means of the Holy Spirit. He would give all his people direct knowledge of himself, so they wouldn't have to have priests mediate that knowledge. Instead, all of God's people would be priests. He would forgive his people of their sins. And, most importantly, they would be his people, and he would be their God. (See Jer. 31:31–34 and Ezek. 36:35–27.)

This is what the Israelites needed. It's what all of humanity needs. We all need to be rescued. We all need to be saved from our enemies. But our true enemies are not political enemies, or foreign nations. That's what people think about today. We think our enemies are “those people” on the other side of the political aisle. We think of enemies as people of different religions, or people from different countries. We may think our enemies are problems like health problems and a lack of money. But the real enemy is our sin. In a way, we are our own enemies. The Bible also says there are spiritual forces that are our enemies, too. Satan is an enemy, but so are our desires. The power of sin, which corrupts God's creation, is what causes all those other

enemies, such as wars, poverty, disease, and even death. So, what we really need is a Savior who can rescue us from sin.

Fortunately, God promises to save his people from sin. He promises forgiveness. But the only way a just God, who is a perfect judge, can take away the consequences of sin is if someone else would pay for these sins. Zechariah looked forward to a political rescue, and perhaps a spiritual rescue. But he didn't realize that this Son of David, the one his boy John would point to, would have to die in order to achieve that salvation. That's what Jesus would do. He would live the perfect life that no human being besides him has lived, yet he would die to take on the sins of everyone who turns to him in faith. All the covenants of the Bible are connected, and all of them are fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus died to take the penalty of the old covenant, the one that focused on the law, and his death inaugurated the new covenant, the one marked by the activity of the Holy Spirit. On the night before he died, he took the cup of wine that was drunk in the Passover meal and he said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20).⁶ Everyone who trusts that Jesus is who the Bible says he is and that Jesus has done what the Bible says he has done receives the benefits of that new covenant. We can be forgiven for all the wrong things we have done.

Zechariah probably didn't know this or couldn't have imagined it, though in a famous passage in Isaiah 53, there is a servant of Israel who suffers for the sins of the people. But Zechariah knew, as he says in verse 78 and 79, that "the sunrise [of God] shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." He knew that he and everyone else was in darkness, living under the long, looming shadow that death casts. It seems that death swallows up everything and that the world is a dark place. Nothing within the world can stop death. Nothing in the world lives up to the promises the world makes to us. We hear a lot about "peace" at Christmas, yet we often don't feel peaceful. We see beautiful lights at Christmas, but those electric lights don't penetrate the depths of our soul. They don't remove our sadness or loneliness. They certainly don't remove our sin. Neither do the gifts we give, or the food and drink we consume.

We need a light from outside, a light from outside this world, outside this universe. And Jesus is that light. He is the Lord, who is God, but he also became man. In perhaps the greatest

⁶ Read Jeremiah 33:14–26 and notice the language that connects the covenants made with Noah (a so-called "covenant with creation"), Abraham, Israel, and David.

miracle, Jesus was and is the God-man, uniting the two parties of God and humanity that had been separated by sin. He saves those who turn to him in faith. As another prophet, Malachi said, “But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings” (Mal. 4:2). Jesus is God’s light, the light of the world (John 8:12), who shines on our darkness, revealing our sin, but also bringing life and healing to those who will confess their sin and their need for a Savior.

Zechariah is a model of faith. At first, he doubted God’s message and he was made deaf and dumb for a while. But he eventually came around and trusted God and acted on that faith. And then he was able to speak and praise God. Notice that Zechariah says, in verses 74 and 75, that God delivered his people “from the hand of our enemies,” so that this people “might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all [their] days.” Why does God save a people? Why does God save anyone from sin, from death, from condemnation? He does it so that they would serve him. God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt so that they could serve him (Exod. 3:12; 4:23; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7; 12:31). And God rescues people from slavery to sin so that they would serve him. Jesus is not some “insurance policy” we use once we die to get into heaven. He’s not a golden ticket or a lottery ticket. He’s certainly not a genie. Jesus is not just a Savior, he is also a King. And those who trust him will serve him.

Now that we’ve looked at this passage, I want us to think of two ways that it applies to our lives. One, salvation and faith lead to service. We see this in Zechariah’s life. He trusted God and then praised God. His son, John, would serve God by calling Israelites to turn from their sin and to the Messiah, to receive forgiveness. Salvation should lead to changed hearts, hearts that love and praise God, hearts that are thankful, and hearts that are ready to serve. That was true for the Old Testament Israelites and it’s true for us.

It seems that Zechariah thought salvation was for the Israelites, and his hymn focuses on God’s promises to his Israelite forefathers. But Gentiles are included in the new covenant. In the Old Testament, male Israelites had to be circumcised to be part of God’s covenant community. In the new covenant community, you have to have your heart “circumcised” by the power of the Holy Spirit. You have to be born again, and this is a gift of God. If you trust in God, you have received that gift. The apostle Paul said of Christians, “we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). If you worship God by the power of the Holy Spirit and glory in Jesus, you are part of God’s people. If

you put no confidence in your “flesh”—your strength and abilities—then it shows you are trusting only in Jesus to make you right with God.

If you have been reconciled to God through Jesus, are you living for Jesus? Do you serve Jesus by serving his church? Do you serve Jesus by obeying him in your whole life?

The second thing I want us to see is that God’s salvation is not always what we imagined it might be. Many Israelites seemed to think that when the Messiah came, he would bring about a political deliverance. He would destroy the enemies of God and God’s people and establish a visible, political kingdom. They didn’t realize that he would come in two stages. They didn’t realize that first the Messiah would come and live a life of righteousness and then die an atoning death for his people. They didn’t realize that he would rise from the grave, ascend into heaven, and come back in the future to put an end to all enemies and establish a new creation. But that’s what God did and will do through Jesus. Jesus came once to save us from sins. But he will come again in the future to judge. And, for those of us living in the in-between times, life is not always easy.

Some people may wonder think things like, “If Jesus is real, then why is there still evil in the world?” Or they may ask you, “If your Jesus is real, why is your life not better?” Of course, most people won’t say that to you, but they may think it.

Salvation is not the promise of a “good life” now. Yes, Jesus rescues us from the condemnation that comes with sin. But after we put our trust in Jesus, we still wrestle with our sin. We still must be on guard against the powers of darkness. We will still die. God never promises an easy life. In fact, he promises a hard life. Jesus told his disciples the world would hate them and that they would face tribulation (John 15:18–25; 16:33). But Jesus said he overcomes the world (John 16:33) and he promises his followers the Holy Spirit, the “Helper” (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). In other words, God gives us his presence, he gives us himself. And though life is sometimes hard, he gives us comforts and joys along the way. And the final promise is eternal life in a perfect world with him and all his people. In that new creation, there will be no more enemies, not even the enemy of death.

The reason why that promise hasn’t come true yet is because when Jesus returns to destroy all of God’s enemies, he will remove all evil from the world. He will judge everyone who has rejected him and he will cast them out of the world and into hell. God removes evil by removing evil from people who trust him or by removing evil people who reject him. But when

Jesus comes to make all things new, to remove all the bad of the world, it will be too late to turn to him for salvation. So, why hasn't Jesus come again? Because God has given us time to turn to Jesus. A life of following Jesus is not what we might always imagine. It might not be what we want. But it is most certainly what we need. Turn to him and serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness all your days.