

Thoughts From Other Minds:

We should notice, thirdly, in this hymn, *what clear views of Christ's kingdom Zacharias possessed*. He speaks of being "saved and delivered from the hands of enemies," as if he had in view a temporal kingdom and a temporal deliverer from Gentile power. But he does not stop here. He declares that the kingdom of Messiah, is a kingdom in which His people are to "serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him." This kingdom, He proclaimed, was drawing nigh. Prophets had long foretold that it would one day be set up. In the birth of his son John the Baptist and the near approach of Christ Zacharias saw this kingdom close at hand.

The foundation of this kingdom of Messiah was laid by the preaching of the Gospel. From that time the Lord Jesus has been continually gathering out subjects from an evil world. The full completion of the kingdom is an event yet to come. The saints of the Most High shall one day have entire dominion. The little stone of the Gospel-kingdom shall yet fill the whole earth. But whether in its incomplete or complete state, the subjects of the kingdom are always of one character. They "serve God without fear." They serve God "in holiness and righteousness."

Let us give all diligence to belong to this kingdom. Small as it seem now, it will be great and glorious one day. The men and women who have served God in "holiness and righteousness" shall one day see all things put under then. Every enemy shall be subdued, and they shall reign for ever in that new heaven and earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

We should notice, finally, *what clear views of doctrine Zacharias enjoyed*. He ends his hymn of praise by addressing his infant son John the Baptist. He foretells that he shall "go before the face" of Messiah, and "give knowledge of the salvation" that He is about to bring in, - a salvation which is all of grace and mercy, - a salvation of which the leading privileges are "remission of sins", "light," and "peace."

Let us end the chapter by examining what we know of these three glorious privileges. Do we know anything of pardon? Have we turned from darkness to light? Have we tasted peace with God? These, after all, are the realities of Christianity. These are the things, without which church-membership and sacraments save no one's soul. Let us never rest till we are experimentally acquainted with them. - Mercy and grace have provided them. Mercy and grace will give them to all who call on Christ's name. - Let us never rest till the Spirit witnesses with our spirit that our sins are forgiven us, - that we have passed from darkness to light, and that we are actually walking in the narrow way, the way of peace.

J C Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, Vol. 1, pp. 45-48.

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Pastoral Charge

11 December 2016

Sermon: "Preparing for the coming of the Lord # 3" (text: Luke 1:57-80)

Scripture: Isaiah 8:16-9:7, Luke 1:57-80

Sermon Notes

Introduction: In our 'leading up to Christmas' studies in Luke's gospel we have seen that the historical facts he records are able to give certainty in the Christian faith, and that this is especially relevant to us, for our culture rejects the miraculous.

You might think this no longer matters, for we have moved past the miraculous to an ordinary birth—but not so; when Zechariah wrote 'His name is John' his mouth, closed by unbelief (Lk 1:20) was opened, and he blessed God.

Zechariah also prophesied; he spoke for God, and of the future. Sadly, some even within the church do not believe in predictive prophecy. Luke records prophecies and their fulfilments, partial fulfilments guaranteeing full fulfilment in due time.

Zechariah spoke with God's priorities, giving first place to God's interests. Instead of speaking of his son, he speaks of Messiah and his coming and kingdom; when he speaks of John it is of him as going before Messiah to prepare his way.

1. Mercy for Elizabeth

In speaking for God Zechariah gives God's perspective on his salvation; it is of mercy, not merit. Zechariah and Elizabeth were exceptionally godly people (vs. 5-6); we could easily suppose they deserved the blessing of a son—but it was of mercy, not merit (vs. 57-58).

Mercy and grace are key gospel words; some say 'grace is God's giving us what we do not deserve, while mercy is God's not giving us what we do deserve' - but grace is opposed to works and emphasises the freedom of salvation, while mercy is more than restraint; we deserve wrath, but receive blessing!

At the very beginning of salvation, at its dawning with the birth of the messenger who would go before the Saviour to prepare his way, God declares that the salvation he will bring is of his mercy, not our deserving. Mercy is the key to this passage, for John means 'God is merciful'.

Our danger is to imagine that we deserve good from God, or to hope for good from God by being good. Many people hope to be good enough for heaven; in times of tragedy or disappointment many ask, "Why did God do this to me?" or "Why does God hurt the innocent?"

Not all suffering is for personal sin (Jn 8:2-3) - but no one is innocent; all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory and deserve to die. Christmas is a solemn yet glad reminder that 'it's from the mercy of our God that all our hopes begin; his mercy saved our souls from death, and cleansed our hearts from sin' (Rejoice 384, v. 4).

2. Mercy for us

This emphasis on 'mercy' continues in Zechariah's prophecy; 'mercy' is the key word (v. 72, 73). Zechariah looks beyond the birth of John to the Saviour he would announce, and speaks as Mary spoke, in the past tense, to indicate the certainty of the fulfilment of what God had said through him.

Mercy is often used in the Greek version of the Old Testament to translate the Hebrew *chesed*, a word closely associated with God's covenant and his faithfulness to that covenant; 'God's *chesed* is his faithful and merciful love'

In the first part of his prophecy he praises the Lord for the coming of Messiah as the fulfilment of his covenant promises in his showing promised mercy; he has visited his people to redeem them; 'visited' has a rich OT history (cf. Gen 21:1). Why visit? Perhaps to contrast with his 'dwelling with' as Emmanuel (Ex 29:45, Rev 21:30).

God visits with salvation to dwell with us forever; a 'horn of salvation' is a strong or mighty saviour ('horn' being the place where an animal's strength is concentrated); this mighty Saviour was 'of the house of David' - not John, but Jesus—his birth was according to prophecy; the Bible is the history of salvation (from Gen 3:15).

Some say that v. 71 presents the kingdom as earthly and political, the same mistake the Jews made—but the eternal kingdom will be of this earth, only not as it is now, but transformed (2 Peter 3:13). It's possible to focus on heaven and forget that salvation includes the physical world; cults make us of such imbalance to deceive.

Clearly the kingdom is no mere earthly kingdom of this present order, but the fulfilment of God's covenant promise on oath to Abraham, the victory of Christ (vs. 72-75, and Gen 22:16-18—best in AV; the apostle Paul identifies the 'seed' as Christ; see Gal 3:16, again in the AV).

The salvation deals with salvation from that which make our world what it is, our corporate and individual rebellion against God; as we are by nature and practice we do what we know we ought not do—can you imagine a world where everyone serves the Lord 'in holiness and righteousness'?

This is God's plan, but only through his tender mercy in salvation, in saving sinners and in transforming them into saints; then, after he has removed all who have refused his mercy from the earth and from the earth every trace of sin and sin's consequences in will be their (our!) dwelling place for all eternity.

John's mission was to go before the Lord, and his message was of salvation in the forgiveness of sins because of the tender mercy of God; Malachi had predicted 'the Sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings (Mal 4:2); John would announce his coming.

He was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel; there God revealed to him that the salvation he promised would be through the sacrificial death of the Lord he had come to announce, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29); this is the mercy of God and the joy of Christmas!

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My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. Reflect upon the prophecies recorded by Luke in the first chapter of his gospel and their fulfilment, in part or in whole. How does this help us reject scepticism of real predictive prophecy? What does the partial fulfilment of prophecy confirm?
2. How and why is mercy a key word/theme in Luke's prophecy? What is the distinction between mercy and grace? What is our danger, and how does understanding our need of God's mercy guard us against it?
3. In the Old Testament God visits his people for blessing or bane (e.g. (ESV) Gen. 21:1, 50:24-25; Ex 4:31; 20:5; 32:34; 34:7; Lev 26:16—use a concordance to find more). Reflect on and contrast this with Emmanuel (Isa 7:4, 8:3, Matt 1:23) and Rev 21:1-3.
4. Some fault Zechariah's picture of salvation in this worldly terms of 'we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear'; how is this 'worldly' aspect of salvation important, and how does the prophecy set it apart from a present earthly political kingdom that the Jews expected?