

What Child Is This? the Benedictus

by J. Glyn Owen

Zechariah's song, the Benedictus, celebrates God's visitation, salvation, and redemption through the birth of Jesus Christ.

Duration: 21:49

Scripture: Genesis 18:10, Psalm 23:6, Psalm 107:10, Isaiah 9:2, Isaiah 60:2, Luke 1:67-80

Topics: "Benedictus"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the prevailing conditions of desolation and darkness in the world during the time of Zechariah. He emphasizes the need for salvation from enemies and the importance of serving God without fear. The speaker also highlights the concept of divine visitation, where God visits his people both in grace and judgment. The sermon references biblical passages such as Exodus 20:5 and Psalm 89:32 to support these ideas. Additionally, the speaker mentions the metaphor of God visiting his people to save them and the unusual imagery used by Zechariah to describe God's salvation through the conception and birth of Jesus.

Transcript

Let us turn in the word of scripture to St. Luke's Gospel, chapter 1, verses 67 to 80, where we have the famous Benedictus of Zechariah the priest, or if you prefer a different title, we should refer to it as the dumb priest who spoke again, or who sang again. Now, the background will have become familiar to most of you, to all of you I trust. We've referred to it already, and we're simply going to say now that following his period of being dumb, struck dumb by an act of God, this dear man began to speak again in the house of God.

There in his arms, or in the arms of his wife, was the child that God had promised that they simply could not believe could possibly be theirs. But John was there in the arms of either father or mother in the temple. And Zechariah begins to speak again, but you notice he does not simply speak, he sings.

Neither does he simply sing, he sings as a man who is filled with the Holy Spirit. We need to notice that. Last Lord's Day morning, in the previous passage here, we were being reminded that his wife Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

So too was Zechariah. If we would bring children into the world and bring them up as John the Baptist was brought up, we too need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. That's just a passing comment, but it is not the

least important of what we have to say this morning.

We need the grace of God in all its glory and in all its fullness. But when the dumb priest spoke again, he had much to say, much to sing about. I suppose there are two strands that we might choose from the Benedictus this morning.

One I'd simply want to refer to in order to remind you that it's there. He speaks, first of all, of the prevailing conditions that were so evident in his day and age. And if I were to choose two words with which to express those prevailing conditions, I suppose I would use the two words, desolation and darkness.

Listen to these words, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. And then again, later on, verses 74 and 75, God has acted, he says, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our lives. Those words refer to a background of sheer desolation politically, morally, and spiritually.

Even if they wanted to, people were afraid to live a life of godliness and righteousness before God. Then it was also a time of darkness. He speaks in verse 79 of those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

When this term darkness is used metaphorically in scripture, it generally refers either to delusion or depravity or despondency, sheer downright depression. There is no gleam of hope in the sky. Everything is totally black, the prevailing conditions.

But now, the bulk of Zechariah's song has to do with the fact that in his day, God had moved into action. The great acts of saving mercy and grace in Jesus Christ have begun to move. God is moving into action.

And there are so many things he has to say. I have to confine myself now briefly just to pick out three of the images used by this priest called Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and employed by him in order to describe what God has done, not through his son John the Baptist, that was the occasion of the song, but through the babe that was still in the womb of the Virgin Mary who was to be born in the fullness of the time, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. How did this spirit-filled man, this spirit-filled priest Zechariah, how did he come to think of the salvation that God was already in process of performing? Three images.

First of all, he refers to it as a divine visitation. In verse 68, blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited his people. Now, the statement here in verse 68 has to be understood against the background of Old Testament thought and usage, which was essentially familiar to Zechariah as a priest.

Old Testament writers used this word visitation to describe something far more than a social call, pay a visit, something much more than that. When God is said to have visited his people or to visit men, it means that something momentous has taken place, either in terms of grace and mercy or in terms of judgment. Let me give you just one or two illustrations of each.

You remember the story of Sarah and her husband without child in the book of Samuel. We read in, I'm sorry, Sarah Abram's wife. I was going to give you something else and get mixed up in the process.

Let me speak of Sarah Abram's wife. She was childless. And we read in Genesis chapter 21 and verse 1 that the Lord visited Sarah.

Now that visit was not just a social call. When God visited Sarah, he came to do a work that was supernatural, a work that would have consequences right down to the end of time. And a work of grace.

Or let me give you another illustration since I began from the book of Genesis. Joseph said to his brethren in Egypt, I, he says, I'm about to die, but God will visit you. And then he goes on to say what he means by that.

And we'll bring you up out of this land to the land he swore to Abram and Isaac and to Jacob. What does God's visitation mean? Oh, not a social call, but this. He's coming down into Egypt to gather his people together and to set them free and to lead them through the wilderness and through the Jordan into the promised land.

Divine visitation. God has visited his people in grace. To confine ourselves to the Old Testament again and to the early books, God also makes such a visit in judgment.

We are warned in Exodus 20 and verse five, God says, I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me. You go on hating God and produce children that hate God. And they produce children that hate God.

And in due course, God will visit your children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him in judgment. Again, in Psalm 89 verse 32, I will visit their transgressions with a rod and their iniquity with stripes. Now in the conception and birth of the babe in the virgin's womb, God then, according to this priest Zechariah, God was visiting his people.

God was not simply coming down to pay a social call to his creatures, but he's coming to visit, to do something big, to do something great, to purchase our redemption from sin and from death and damnation, and to liberate us, to be free to be his servants, and to make us worthy and able to enjoy fellowship with him. A divine visitation. When you think of Christmas, think of it in these terms.

God has visited his people to save. The second image or metaphor to which I want to refer is this. It's a very unusual one.

It almost takes your breath away. You almost wonder whether Zechariah has made a blunder here in referring to it in this way. A horn of salvation.

See how he speaks of it in verse 69. He has raised up, he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. God has raised up a horn of salvation.

What an amazing, what a strange metaphor. Well you remember of course that this man was a priest, ministering in the temple, offering sacrifices day in and day out, and he had a lot to do with cattle. That statement has to be understood against that background.

But what really does it refer to? What did he have in mind? I can't dogmatize, but I want to give you four suggestions, and the four of them may be true. He may have had the four in mind, but he may only have had one. I can't tell you which.

First of all, a horn of an animal was its strength, its weapon of attack and of defense. Be it a sheep, be it a goat, or whatever animal is horned, it was the means whereby he made war against others and defended itself against those who would attack it. And you have this in the Old Testament brought out very, very

often.

The false shepherds addressed by Ezekiel, for example, are addressed in these terms. You push with side and shoulder and you thrust at all the weak with your horns. Now he's speaking about men, he's speaking metaphorically, but he's thinking of the false shepherds like sheep with horns hurting one another, making war.

And some of the false shepherds of Israel were doing exactly that. They were hurting, they were harming the people of God. It may well be that the image in Zechariah's mind of the babe of Bethlehem, yet to be born but already conceived, was the image of God coming down and manifesting himself as a God who is on the attack.

A God who has come to declare war against sin, against Satan, against evil, to exterminate the world in due course and to purify it of the sin that has ravaged it from beginning to end until the great day when the earth and the heavens shall be set ablaze and purged and become a place wherein righteousness is at home, as Peter tells us. A horn of salvation making war. The horn was also used as a musical instrument.

Did Zechariah think of Jesus in these terms? And of all the usages of the horn as a musical instrument, I suppose the one that stood out in Israel's experience was that used at the great fall of Jericho. You remember how the book records with one long blast of a ram's horn sounding, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. Did the old priest think of the Lord Jesus Christ as God sounding forth the word of salvation and finality and victory? That the walls of Jericho that had hedged us in and held us in, were at last torn down and men are freed from the captivity of sin and death to move into the land of promise? If so, he was on the right tack.

But the horn was also used very especially in Zechariah's experience of the four protrusions from the altar. Now I don't want to sound heretical, and you remember the altar was something like this pulpit, an oblong shaped affair. There was a horn on every corner, on the four corners.

And the point is this, whenever atonement was made, you will notice in the Old Testament that the horns of the altar were always sprinkled with the blood. So that reference to the horns of the altar was invariably a reference to the place where atonement was made. Did the old priest think of Jesus as the one who would come and somehow or other in whom the great atonement would be made, whereby sin would be expunged? Did he know that? I can't dogmatize.

I shouldn't be surprised if he did. But last of all, as far as this is concerned, I make you another suggestion. The horn was also used in the Old Testament for anointing with oil, prophets, priests, and king.

The horn would have the oil in it, and someone would come along and pour it upon someone who was to be prophet, who was to be priest, or who was to be king. What a picture of the babe in the virgin's womb. He held the horn.

He is the one who outpours the spirit upon the church and who will pour new life into the darkness of the darkened, dismal souls of men and bring the life of heaven into the experiences of sinners lost and ruined by the fall. Did he think of that? I don't know. But if he did, he was on the ball.

He has raised for us a horn of salvation. The last image here is a very beautiful one. Divine visitation, a horn of salvation, a day star or day spring from on high in verse 78.

I'm quoting from the King James. The day spring from on high hath visited us. What a vision was given to this spirit-filled man.

It's no wonder his lips began to move again. And here he describes the Savior's birth literally as sunrise. Sunrise.

And all the pictures, you know, I really like this. What happened when Jesus of Nazareth conceived already in the virgin's womb? What happened when he was born? I'll tell you. The sun is risen indeed upon the world and a new day has dawned.

The darkness is broken and it's only a matter of time before it is completely scattered and exterminated and night shall be no more. The sun is risen indeed and the old priest sensed it. God's on the move, he says, and the day spring from on high has already visited us.

We are sitting in darkness, as he tells us in another verse later on, sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death reflecting the thoughts of the prophet. But the day spring has visited us. Even though you don't see it yet, in the virgin's womb he is.

As you and I come to the Lord's table this morning, I think we would do well with a concept of the visitation of God in Christ. With a remembrance that a horn of salvation has been raised in the house of David. He is the Savior of man and we would do well, my friends, to come into the light that is risen upon us in the coming of the Lord Jesus, expose the hidden recesses of our souls to the light of his countenance and his knowledge of us, confess our sins and begin to walk in the light and to live in the light that we may die in the light and that the path of the just as the shining light grows more and more until the fullness of the midday glare is upon us.

The dumb priest spoke again. Have you seen the vision? Do you get it? Do you trust Jesus Christ like this? Then I trust that these few words of mine this morning will not be only the means whereby God will illumine you and teach you some of the new concepts of scripture employed to describe the glories of our Lord, but that the same spirit will bring you to rest in him, to trust in him, and to be proud of him. Let us pray.

Father in heaven, seal your word to our hearts and minds by the spirit and enable us, the better on account of them, to have the right mind and the right spirit and the correct attitude as we come to your table. Save us from undue familiarity with these holy things. Teach us how to receive with faith and how to eat and drink with a confidence that Jesus Christ is all in all the bread and the water of life, yea, the wine of heaven.

Amen.

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