

One evening I was watching one of those “World’s Most Amazing Videos” type programs. It was one of those where people survived harrowing experiences. And there was one guy who jumped out of a plane to go skydiving and his parachute didn’t open correctly. This guy tumbled through the sky, hit the ground, and lived to tell about it.

Now I don’t know about you, but I think that if I was falling to what I believed was my death, and then hit the ground and survived the first words out of my mouth would be words of praise to God.

The thing that struck me about this fellow was the first words out of his mouth were blasphemies and curses. In fact they had to bleep them out of the TV program. And he jumped around saying ‘I’m amazing. Aren’t I great! Who else could fall from the sky and live?’”

That’s what I call misplaced praise!

A few weeks ago we began a study in the Gospel of Luke and we saw a man named Zecharias who received a promise from God.

The events of Luke chapter one occurred during a gloomy period in the life of the nation of Israel. Israel was not just any nation. It had been chosen by God from among all nations to be a priestly nation to the rest of the world.

But....in the time of Zecharias, this nation that was to lead all nations to God was being led by the pagan empire of Rome. And Rome was the last of a long line of pagan nations that had ruled Israel. The king in Zecharias’s day was Herod. Herod was a very degenerate man.

Herod had introduced Roman temples into the land and had built idols to the Roman gods. Under his leadership Israel became a land filled with immorality....the spiritual life of the Jews lost its vitality. In the midst of these dark times, Luke introduces us to a simple, faithful couple, an elderly priest named Zecharias and his wife, Elizabeth.

When they married there was great joy but the rejoicing quickly faded when years passed and it became evident that Elizabeth was barren. Zecharias and Elizabeth had lived with what was culturally a shame throughout their married life but it had not caused them to become bitter or abandon their faith in God.

At this time in the life of Israel there were approximately 20,000 descendants of

Aaron...all of them priests by birth....like Zecharias. Since there were so many priests--and only one temple---they were divided into groups, and those groups served in the temple only two weeks in the year with various duties allotted to each priest.

Now....the greatest privilege granted to an ordinary priest like Zecharias.....the thing they each lived for.....was the privilege of burning incense on the altar of the Holy Place. This coveted privilege was granted by lots so only a few priests were given this opportunity.

And if you ever were given it you never got the chance to try again for you were only allowed to do this once in your entire life.

So when Zachariah was chosen for this privilege it was the chance of a lifetime.

When this most solemn occasion began Zecharias was expected to offer his prayers of intercession on behalf of the people of Israel and then put incense on the coals of the altar as a symbol of the prayers of Israel rising to God.

And all the while, outside in the court of Israel a great multitude of people waited laying face down on the floor in prayer.....praying with the priest who represented them in the Holy Place.

In this context the angel Gabriel appears to Zecharias with an announcement. Elizabeth is going to have your baby.

Zecharias and Elizabeth had prayed for children for a long time but the physical possibility for that happening had long passed.....so probably this godly man was praying for the Messiah to come...for God to keep His promise to His chosen people.

But God's answer through the angel addressed both prayers...the prayers of Zecharias's past and the prayers he had just uttered. The angel said that Elizabeth would bare Zecharias a son and that this little boy would not be just any child.

No, Zecharias' boy would be named "John" and he would fulfill the 400 year old prophecy of Malachi 4. He would turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God and prepare them for the Lord. Zecharias' son would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah!

Zecharias was shocked. He questioned how any of this could ever take place and doubted. At that God pronounced him mute for the next 9 months.

That brings us to our passage for today. **Turn to Luke 1 vs 57 Pg 990**

The time had come for little John to be born. **Read 57-66**

Why was the naming of the child so important, and so emotional? And why was naming the child *John* the cause of such a hub bub? Was there an evil guy in town that everybody despised named John?

You know, sometimes we don't use a certain name because it reminds us of someone unpleasant. You might have an Uncle Clarence who was a career criminal and even though your spouse loves the name you won't use it because of its association.

Actually the problem wasn't that at all. In a middle eastern culture the naming of the son after his father implied that this child would "walk in the steps of his father." In other words, that he would carry on the father's name, and his occupation. Had John been named "Little Zach," he would have been expected to grow up as a priest, just like his father.

He would have gone around with his father as he carried out his priestly duties, learning how to do things, just like his daddy did them.

To be named by any other name implied just the opposite. John would not follow in his father's steps. He would not learn to do what his father did. He would not be a priest.

It isn't the meaning of the name "John" which is so important, but the message implied by having any name other than Zacharias which was such an emotional issue. Many of those gathered at the circumcision ceremony were relatives, Elizabeth's insistence that the boy be named John was to renounce the family, its work, and its continuation through the next generation. And yet John would not be a priest.

When Zacharias wrote the words, "His name is John," on that tablet, he once again was given the power of speech. At that moment, his tongue was loosed and he began to praise God.

Put yourself in Zechariah's position. For 8 or 9 or even 10 months you have been unable to talk. Suddenly you regain the use of your voice. What would you say? Who would you talk to? Would your first words be to your spouse, "Honey, I love you?" Would your first words be to one of your friends standing there? Would your first words be to your newborn son?

Picture this: for months Zechariah had been silent and when he could finally speak again his first words were not to his wife, neighbors, friends, or new born son; rather, his first words were to God.

"Blessed is the Lord God of Israel," he said (vs 68).

This is more dramatic than jumping out of an airplane with a defective parachute and living to tell about it. Zecharias realizes he's seeing the fulfillment of God's ancient promises right before his eyes. God is on the move and God has used Zecharias and Elizabeth as part of His plan.

Zecharias breaks out in a Christmas carol.

This is the second Christmas carol ever sung. The first was the virgin Mary's *Magnificat*. This is the second.

What I want us to see this morning is where Zecharias goes with this song of praise. What makes Christmas so special? Zecharias isn't going to sing about Santa, reindeer, or chestnuts roasting on the open fire.

This is a Christmas carol of praise for the greatest gift ever given. Zecharias praises God for the 4 reasons why Jesus came.

I. Jesus Came to Redeem Us. **67-68**

Zecharias says it's none other than the Lord God of Israel who's visited and redeemed His people. He's so sure, he speaks in the past tense as if it had already happened.

At this point I realize that Zecharias probably didn't know the full implication of the word *redeem*.

He was looking at redemption as setting Israel free from Rome and restoring the people spiritually.

But God's redemption is so much more than that. Israel's future greatness will come but its based on the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31. The new covenant is based on the blood of Christ.

Here's the Biblical picture. There are three different Greek words translated as redeem in the NT: *agorazo*, *exagorazo*, & *lutroo*.

agorazo literally means “to purchase in the market place.” Slavery was very common in the Roman Empire and the word *agorazo* implies buying a slave in the marketplace.

God’s view of humanity is: people under slavery to Satan and sin. We like to think of ourselves as free. God says we were actually slaves of sin. But the one John the Baptist would proceed would buy us from the slavemaster of sin by His blood.

exagorazo is obviously the verb *agorazo* with the preposition *ek* which means “out.” As the concept of redemption is developed we get the picture of Christ taking us out of the slavemarket all together.

The verb *lutroo* which Zecharias uses in verse 68 completes the picture. It means to “set free.”

The Lord God has redeemed us by paying the price. *The wages of sin is death. But we were bought with a price.*

Jesus Christ came to give His life on the cross so that we could be purchased back from sin, be taken out of the market place, and set free.

- I. Jesus Came to Redeem Us.
- II. Jesus Came to Bring Us Victory! **69-75**

Not only has God redeemed us but He’s raised up a “horn of salvation for us.” This isn’t a horn like you play. The image here is of a mighty bull with big, curving horns. It lowers its head at the approach of a lion or wolf and points those long, deadly horns at the enemy.

One stab or toss of those horns is all that it needs to defend itself.

When I was a kid I spent most of my summers in Alabama on my grandparents farm. I can remember my cousins and I getting in trouble for scaring the chickens and chasing the pigs. But there was one animal we didn’t mess with. In fact we were scared stiff of him and that was the bull in the pasture.

When we cut through the pasture to go down to the creek the last guy you wanted to meet was the bull!

In the same way as all the power and strength of the bull is concentrated in its horns, so all the redeeming and saving power of God is centered in the Messiah. He is the only means of salvation and the only Savior.

Warren Wiersbe writes, In Scripture, a horn symbolizes power and victory. The picture here is that of an army about to be taken captive, but then help arrives and the enemy is defeated.

In the previous picture, the captives were set free; but in this picture, the enemy is defeated so that he cannot capture more prisoners. It means total victory for the people of God.

So even though Zechariah is thinking mainly of the eventual national redemption of believing Israel, yet his own view of things, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, implies that this visitation and redemption of God is going to mean profound spiritual transformation and spiritual battle.

And, therefore, to view Jesus as a horn of salvation is to see Him not only as a national liberator but, much more importantly for us now, as a spiritual conqueror.

If the goal of God's redemption is to be achieved -- the gathering of a people in holiness and righteousness -- then He must conquer sin and conquer unrighteousness. And the good news of Zechariah's song -- the good news of Christmas -- is that God has raised up a horn of salvation. Jesus is the great horn of salvation for all those who call upon Him and trust Him.

What is it about Christmas gifts that makes them appealing? If we see what we can use them for that's what gives them their appeal, right?

Have you ever gotten a gift that you think had absolutely no use for? If you were to give me the latest all digital mouse trap. I wouldn't appreciate it unless I had a mouse problem at my house.

If you offer me a quick ride after service to the emergency room at Anne Arundel General Hospital I might think you're a little weird. Unless I was having chest pains. Then I'd love you for it.

That's the way life is: we don't appreciate gifts that don't meet needs or satisfy desires. We don't value or love an offer for help unless we know we are sick or endangered by some enemy.

See, there's a lot of people who look at Jesus and the Christmas story of His coming as a useless mousetrap, a crazy trip to the emergency room because they don't know that

they have a terminal illness called unforgiven sin, and they don't believe in the fearful enemy, Satan. For them, the "horn of salvation" is a useless toy.

For me, it is my only hope of recovery from this deadly disease of sin that infects my soul and my only protection from Satan, the most dangerous external enemy.

For there is a real and deadly disease. *"All have sinned and come short of God's glory"* (Romans 3:23). *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us"* (1 John 1:8). *"The wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23).

And there is a real and powerful enemy. *"Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour"* (1 Peter 5:8). *"He is the god of this world and blinds the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ"* (2 Corinthians 4:4). So there is a deadly disease and an awesome enemy. And every one of us will die from this disease and be devoured by that enemy if there is no horn of salvation for us.

But...blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people, and raised up a horn of salvation for us.

- I. Jesus Came to Redeem Us
- II. Jesus Came to Bring Us Victory
- III. Jesus Came to Pay Our Debt **76-77**

Zecharias finally speaks to his newborn son. But only to sing about John's purpose in introducing others to Jesus.

The knowledge of salvation comes by the remission of sins. Remission means, "to send away, to dismiss as a debt."

The Bible declares that everyone of us is in debt to the Living God. Later on in Luke 7 Jesus compares forgiveness of sin to the forgiveness of a debt by a creditor.

We're in debt to God because we've all broken His laws and failed to live up to His standards. Not only that but we're spiritually bankrupt. We can't pay our debt. The price of sin is more than any of us have no matter how much we try to do for God.

That's why Jesus came. He came to pay a debt He didn't owe. It was our sin debt. But it was a debt we couldn't pay.

If I were to ask you today, if you knew for sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, if you were going to heaven when you die, what would you say? You know what most people say to me when I ask them that question? "I hope so." Not, "I know for sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt", because they don't. But they hope so.

Jesus Christ doesn't leave us guessing. There's no uncertainty with Him. The knowledge of salvation comes through the remission of sin. God's great Christmas gift to the world was a savior who paid our sin debt.

The Biblical call is: *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.* In other words put your trust in the one who cancelled your sin debt. Trust only in Him and not anything you can do, and you will have the sure knowledge of salvation.

- I. Jesus Came to Redeem Us
- II. Jesus Came to Bring Us Victory
- III. Jesus Came to Pay Our Debt
- IV. Jesus Came to Lead Us Out of Darkness. **78-79**

The word 'Dayspring' means 'sunrise'. Why do we look forward to the sunrise? Because it brings hope. Why do we say, "Oh well, tomorrow is another day?" Because the new day brings new possibilities.

Often people that are depressed and without hope stay in doors with the shades drawn. They sit in darkness.

Except for a few bright spots, the people of Zacharias day lived in darkness and distress. It must have grieved godly Zecharias to see Israel, God's people, living in sin and spiritual darkness.

But in Jesus Christ the Dayspring from on high has visited us. Jesus said, "*I am the light of the world.*"

He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

We were in the darkness of our own sin. But Jesus brings us into the light.

The NT book of Colossians explains: *He has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.*

We don't have to live in hopeless despair, because the light has come.

One of my favorite things about Christmas is the carols. There are so many songs with great messages that we only sing for a few weeks out of the year.

Zecharias sang a Christmas Carol that's appropriate all year long. It's a song about redemption, victory, remission, and light. Can you sing that song with him this morning?

Have you seen that you desperately need this Christmas gift of salvation? Have you seen that only Jesus Christ can be the source of that gift?

I have to say I'm glad this morning that Zacharias didn't name his son "Little Zach." That his son didn't follow the tradition of his day and take up his father's profession. The priesthood was a noble profession for sure.
But John would *go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give the knowledge of salvation to his people...*

Zecharias' song should have been music to the ears of the Jewish people. It was an announcement that God was working in their midst. Unfortunately only a few ever listened.

Zecharias' song should be music to our ears. It's an announcement that God has worked for us through Jesus Christ. Are you listening? Do you hear the urgent message calling out to each one of us? *He has raised up a horn of salvation for us...*

Over all the noise and the commotion of Christmas, do you hear his song?