

GOD ASSURES US OUR FUTURE IS SECURE BY SENDING A MERCIFUL AND FAITHFUL KING Luke 1:57-80

INTRODUCTION

The thing which most often shakes my confidence that my future will be good and happy is my own sin. The things that usually cause me to question whether I am going to live forever in heaven are my own failures to love God and people. As the psalmist says, “my sins testify against me.” When I consider my prayerlessness, my irritation with my family, my impatience with my disabled son, my impure thoughts, my indifference to the sufferings of others, my self-indulgence, I wonder about my status before God. Especially when I consider passages like Galatians 5:19-21 “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” I experience at least some of these works of the flesh and things like these in my own life and so I wonder about the certainty of my inheriting the kingdom of God.

I’m pretty sure, based on over 35 years of talking with others about these issues that every honest person in the room has a similar struggle. On what ground can I have assurance that God is going to warmly welcome me into heaven in view of my many and great sins and in view of his perfect holiness and justice? This is, if not the central question the Bible addresses, one of the main questions. This tension between God’s hatred of those who disobey him, which is the entire human race and his obvious commitment to save certain sinners, is prominent throughout the Bible. Consider with me one example in Jeremiah 30-31. In 30:15 the Lord says to disobedient Israel whom Jeremiah has repeatedly denounced and declared God’s judgment upon, “Why do you cry out over your hurt? Your pain is incurable. Because your guilt is great, because your sins are flagrant, I have done these things to you.” Israel has no ground to complain about the horrific destruction of their nation because it is God’s just judgment against them for their sins. But the very next verse says, “Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured, and all your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity; those who plunder you shall be plundered, and all who prey on you I will make a prey. For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal... Thus says the LORD: Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob and have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt on its mound, and the palace shall stand where it used to be. Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving, and the voices of those who celebrate. I will multiply them, and they shall not be few....”

So here it is, sinners who deserve God’s wrath are the object of his saving work. Why does God do this? The answer is given a few verses later in Jeremiah 31:2-3, “Thus says the LORD: ‘The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness... I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you... the remnant of Israel.’” Did you hear it? It is because of the Lord’s everlasting love that he has continued to be faithful to the sinful remnant of Israel. The Hebrew word that is translated “everlasting love” is one of the key words in the entire OT. It is the Hebrew word “Hesed”. It refers to God’s covenant love, his free and sovereign determination to love a particular group of sinners not because of who they are but in spite of who they are. In the Greek translation of the OT this term is most often translated by the Greek word for “mercy”. The reason I mention this is because in our passage today this word shows up three times. Look at vv. 52, 72, & 78. It is God’s mercy, his everlasting love for his chosen people that is the reason for his giving a child, John, to the barren couple Zechariah and Elizabeth, it is the reason for his sending the great Son of David to fulfill the covenant promises he made to Abraham and it is the reason for his forgiving our sins..

It is the mercy of God, the “Hesed”, the everlasting, covenant love of the creator of the heavens and the earth that is the ground upon which sinners like you and I can stand. It is only as we understand and trust and live in and upon his eternal love for his people that we will have assurance that he will welcome us into heaven. If we attempt to find assurance that we will be welcomed into heaven based upon our own performance we will only

find fear. It is my prayer this morning as we look at what happens when John the Baptist is born that each of us will have confidence in a bright future in spite of our many sins as we see the great mercy of God given to us in and through our king and savior Jesus.

MAIN POINT

God's mercy motivates him to save his chosen people, therefore...

I. His people rejoice in his saving works (vv.57-66)

Over nine months prior to these events, the angel Gabriel had promised the old priest, Zechariah, while he was offering incense in the Holy Place that his old, barren wife would have a son. The angel also told him that his name would be John and that many would rejoice at his birth. If you will remember, Zechariah received this word from the angel Gabriel, not with faith but with unbelief. He asked for proof. Gabriel told him that the proof of God's faithfulness would be that he would be mute until God's word was fulfilled by John's birth.

In v. 57 we see that what God has promised, he has now performed as old Elizabeth gives birth to a son. In addition, God's word is fulfilled because all of her neighbors and relatives rejoice with her at his birth. Then, on the eighth day, as they come to circumcise the baby boy in accordance with God's command in the OT we discover that Zechariah is still mute and apparently, he is also deaf as those who are there to perform the circumcision and naming of the child must make signs to Zechariah to find out if he agrees with his wife that the name of the child should be John and not Zechariah. As soon as John writes on a tablet that the baby's name is to be John, in obedience to the angel's word, his muteness is taken away and he immediately begins to praise God. Zechariah's unbelief has turned to faith during the months of his silence and God shows that he is truly a believer by releasing him from his prison of silence as the angel had promised.

As soon as Zechariah begins to speak a great sense of fear falls upon the people present as they recognize that God himself is present. The strange birth of John becomes the topic of conversation throughout the entire region of the hill country of Judea. The hill people of Judea, in view of the miraculous birth, the strange name and the miraculous recovery of speech by Zechariah remember John and wonder what he will become because it was so obvious, from these events that the hand of the Lord was with him. This last phrase is a common OT phrase used to express God's power at work. In the OT either "the hand of the Lord was against" a person or people in bringing destruction due to sin or "the hand of the Lord was with" a person or people to act for their salvation. The hand of the Lord was against Egypt and with Israel in freeing Israel from its slavery. The hand of the Lord was with Elijah but against the prophets of Baal when he overcame them on Mt. Carmel. The hand of the Lord was with Elijah, enabling him to run through the desert to Mt. Horeb. The hand of the Lord was with Ezra in bringing him and the other exiles safely from Babylon to Jerusalem. Here, the fact that the hand of the Lord is with John is to be seen in all of these events. It was because of God's covenant love for his people that he caused old Elizabeth to give birth and made his birth such a topic of conversation and wonder among the people and freed Zechariah from his silence.

The thing I want to draw your attention to is the response of the people to these acts of salvation motivated by mercy. The chief response is that of joy resulting in praise. This is one of the most common occurrences in the biblical record: whenever God's hand moves to save his people, the recipients of his saving work are full of joy and fear which results in praise. Consider what happened after Israel crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land but the Egyptian army was destroyed by God. We are told in Exodus 14:31-15:6, "Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses. Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, 'I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea... The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him... Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.'"

These hill people of Judea and especially Zechariah see here in the birth of John the God of mercy extending his hand to save his people like he did at the Exodus. The joy we see in these people, especially that we see in Zechariah, is the joy of those who have been living in dread and fear of some great calamity but who receive news that what they feared has been overcome; an unexpected check came in the mail and so the bill was paid, the doctor's report came back negative, the estranged child has come home. This is the experience of these people at the birth of John. Zechariah, by a work of the HS knows exactly how God will use his son and he expresses that in his song so that all those assembled may know what great things God is doing to rescue his people. So now for us as we see this record of God's work we see how God has sent his son into the world to live and die and rise again for our sins and for our salvation, as he promised long ago, and so our hearts are to be full of joy and wonder and thus our lips full of praise. We do not rejoice in our goodness, in our righteous acts but in his mercy being revealed in his great saving acts. You will never find joy and hope by looking at you, at what you are doing or not doing. You will only find joy and thus give praise when you recognize God's everlasting love, his mercy being given to you and for you in the person of Jesus whose coming was preceded by the birth of John to this old couple.

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II. His people are redeemed by Jesus to worship (vv.67-75)

The song of Zechariah is a HS produced song and it is thus called "prophesy". In other words, this song is God's explanation of what he is doing in the birth of John and the pregnancy of Mary. He is speaking through Zechariah just as he spoke through the prophets of the OT. The second thing to notice is that the verbs in vv. 68-69 are past tense. Zechariah rejoices in God because he "has visited and redeemed his people and he has raised up a horn of salvation for us." On the basis of the birth of his son John and the visit of Elizabeth's young, unmarried, but pregnant relative, Mary, Zechariah declares that God has already visited his people and redeemed them and raised up a horn of salvation for them. It is a done deal while John is an 8 day old infant and Jesus is a not more than a three month old baby in his mother's womb.

What exactly is Zechariah saying that God has already done? The two terms: visited and redeemed are associated most often with Israel's escape from their slavery in Egypt. God came to their rescue, he visited them through Moses and the plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea. He destroyed Egypt, the enemy of God's people and set his people free. He redeemed them, that is, they were slaves and he set them free from their slavery to Egypt to be his people. The phrase, "he raised up a horn of salvation for us from the house of his servant David" is a reference to God's promise to make one of David's descendants the permanent king over all his people. The use of the metaphor, "horn" captures the idea that just as a bull overcomes all its adversaries through the use of its horns, so will this king overcome all the enemies of God's people in order to save them. This is the point of the next several statements by Zechariah. The birth of John and the pregnancy of Mary is the fulfillment of all that the prophets spoke, it is the completion of the oath that God made to Abraham to make him a great nation and bless all the peoples of the earth through one of his descendants. John's birth and Mary's pregnancy is the destruction of all the enemies of God's people; God's cursing those who curse his people. Note in v. 72 that all this deliverance is for the purpose of revealing God's great covenant love that he has for all those men and women in the OT to whom he promised deliverance but who died without receiving what was promised. The birth of John and the pregnancy of Mary with Jesus is the culmination of everything that God ever promised and the means by which all his covenant promises will come true for his people. The greatest expression of God's everlasting love for his people is to be seen in the birth of these two babies.

My friends, what will it take to convince you of God's everlasting love towards you? What is it that must happen before you will be confident of God's love for you? Will your husband have to love you the way you want? Will you have to be delivered from your sickness or your sadness? Will you have to get more money or a better job? Will your children have to say thank you? God's love has been made known in the birth of John

and then Jesus and then in John's preparing work and Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension. Zechariah knows that the birth of John is the first pebble rolling down the mountainside that will eventually become a landslide of God's judgment upon his enemies and deliverance for his people. If you are a part of God's people through faith in Jesus then you are the object of his everlasting love and you can know it because of these events. You cannot know how God feels about you based on the circumstances of your life but only by his saving work in Christ who came into the world in the way described here in Luke.

Now look at vv. 74-75. All the redeeming work that God has done in the birth of John and the pregnancy of Mary is so that all God's people might serve him fearlessly, in holiness and righteousness forever. The fruit of John's ministry and Jesus' life and death is that we can now and forever serve God fearlessly in holiness and righteousness. To serve God does not mean we do things for God that he cannot do for himself or that we somehow help him out. We serve God in the way some people serve money. When we say someone is serving money we mean they organize their entire life in order to get more money and to enjoy the money they have. Thus, those who serve God are people whose chief objective is to know God better and to enjoy him more and to participate fully in all that he has done for us in Christ. What fear are we free from? In light of the emphasis on enemies it must mean that we can serve God without fearing what men and demons and sin can do to us. We fearlessly pursue God even though men mock and oppose us, even though demons bring suffering into our lives, even though our sins testify against us and tell us we are not fit for God. We believe that we are acceptable to God through Christ and that so long as we have Christ we can lose everything else and still be safe. We have nothing to fear. We pursue our happiness in God while seeking to glorify him in all things and to live in obedience to his law of love so that our lives bear witness to his saving work.

How can Zechariah say that all our enemies are defeated and God's people will serve God fearlessly in holiness and righteousness when sin and misery still run rampant in the world and the people of God are still oppressed and only a handful of people in the entire world even know that God is up to something? This is so important to understand. When we read the OT we discover these amazing promises of the whole world being made new; of suffering being ended; of sin being no more; of all the wicked being destroyed; of children leading lions like pets; of death ending; of all sorrow gone. Zechariah says all these promises are fulfilled at the birth of his son, the forerunner who will announce the arrival of Messiah. What the NT teaches, right from the beginning of the story of Jesus' arrival and work, is that with his arrival the day of the Lord has come. God has visited his people and redeemed and established his king on his holy hill. With the arrival of Jesus the kingdom of God has come to this earth. He has triumphed over all the enemies of God's people by his life, death and resurrection and is now seated upon his throne extending his rule throughout the earth. Jesus is currently gathering his people out of the nations of the world and when he is done, then will come all the fullness. The reign of King Jesus has come while its fullness is yet to come. Thus we can now serve God fearlessly with holiness and righteousness while we wait for the completion of his saving work when we will join with all God's people to be completely delivered from all our enemies and so perfectly serve him without fear in perfect holiness and righteousness forever.

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III. His people receive forgiveness through Jesus (vv.76-80)

Zechariah, in v. 76, now describes the ministry of his son, John the Baptist. His work will be to go before the Lord as his prophet to prepare the people of Israel for the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus. In what way will he prepare the people for the arrival of the Messiah? He will announce that God's salvation of his people, which is motivated by his tender mercy, his compassionate, everlasting love is only obtained by means of his forgiving the sins of his people. Thus, we discover here that the greatest barrier to our entering into this salvation, the

thing that we most need to be redeemed from, the chief problem the horn of salvation from David's house is raised up to deliver us from is our own sins. This is what John must announce to prepare for the coming of the Messiah because when he comes, then will come forgiveness of sins and our entry into the salvation he brings.

So we end where we started this morning. The thing which most often shakes the confidence of every believer in Christ is our own sins. We know that we are complete failures when it comes to obeying God. We want to obey, but we know that not a moment goes by that we are not in some way failing to love God and neighbor. So we must daily, moment by moment hear and believe the promise of forgiveness that Messiah brings. As he said about himself, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." We must hear and believe that promise as stated by his apostles, "Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins; having canceled the written code with its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us, he took it away, nailing it to the cross and having disarmed the rulers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." "...there is no difference, for all have sinned and are falling short of the glory of God while being justified freely by his grace as a gift through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood."

You see, this baby in Mary's womb about which Zechariah's joy is so aroused was born so that he could die. God, being just cannot simply overlook our sins. If he were to simply pardon criminals like us and reward us with eternal happiness he would be the most evil of beings. He would be like a judge who emptied all of our prisons and rewarded every convicted criminal with a \$100,000 a year pension to be paid for by your taxes. Thus the means by which God forgives sinners like us, the way in which he shows forth his tender mercy, is by killing his son, his Messiah in the place of each one of those who, like Zechariah, believe in this Christ. Christ died for all of the sins of every believer, once for all. Thus there is now no condemnation for us. There is no threat. That final metaphor in vv. 78-79 is now true: The sunrise from heaven has come upon us, people who have been sitting in the darkness of sin, under the shadow of death due to us for our sins. We have been brought into the way of peace with God, with one another and with the whole universe. Our sins, which were the cause of our miserable condition have been removed from us as far as the east is from the west through Christ dying and rising and so our future is bright and secure. The dawn of salvation has come. The sun of righteousness with healing in its wings has risen upon us who sit in the shadow of death and we have now come into the light of God's presence. Salvation is ours and can never be taken from us because God has pledged himself to us in love forever. He has sealed that love and demonstrated it in the giving of his only son for us and for our sins. We know the compassionate love and mercy of God towards us because of this Jesus who was preceded by the last and greatest of all God's prophets, John the Baptist, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

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