

The Tender Mercy of Our God

Luke 1:57-80

KV 77-78: “to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven.”

There’s a saying that goes, “Nobody’s perfect,” and although it’s just a saying, it’s the truth. That’s why mercy is valuable to us, that’s why it is so important for us. The deeper you feel your imperfection, or the deeper you feel your guilt, the greater mercy will seem. Take for example, getting pulled over while driving. A few years ago, I was on the way home from an Easter Conference in Wisconsin. I was just going with the flow of traffic, and then I happened to pass a police car in the right lane. Immediately he turned on his lights and pulled me over. He asked me, “Do you know that you are over the speed limit?” I said, “yes, but I was following traffic,” and he said, “But you passed me up!” He took my license and registration, and I knew I had no excuse: I was guilty, and in another state. If I did not have to pay a fine, I would have to come back for court. The waiting was intense, and I was just thinking about how stupid I was to pass a cop who was driving at the speed limit. So the cop comes back to my car, and hands me my license and registration back. He gives me a yellow slip of paper, and he says, since you’re from out of the state, I’m just going to give you a warning. It doesn’t matter if you’re driving with the traffic, you need to obey the speed limit. The officer had mercy on me, and I thanked him, but in my heart I was sooooo thankful that I did not have to pay a fine, or come back for court. On the rest of the way back home, I put the cruise control on the speed limit, and stayed in the slowest lane. It didn’t matter how fast I was driving any more, I was just happy to be set free, and was did my best to obey the law.

Our God is a God of mercy. He is a merciful God, and he is rich in mercy. Nobody is perfect, everyone needs compassion, and everyone needs mercy. Through this passage we will see the tender mercy of our God, and hopefully gain a deeper understanding of his mercy, and a deeper understanding of our need for God’s mercy.

Part I: God’s Mercy Takes Away Disgrace

This passage opens in the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was a priest who served in the temple of the Lord. Once when his division was on duty, he was chosen by lot, at random, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. This was a very privileged duty, and for most priests it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The selected priest would go right next to the Most Holy place deep within the temple, and burn the incense, which represented the prayers of the people. It was here, while performing this duty, that the angel Gabriel appeared to him. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.’”

When the angel was done speaking, Zechariah asked him, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” This statement reveals his unbelief with what the angel said. It seems ironic – he is talking to an angel, but he did not believe. However, imagine unexpectedly seeing an angel yourself. Like Zechariah, you might be struck with fear and wonder, and the only words out of your mouth are probably the worst words you could say –

“How can I be sure of this?” So angel said, “And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.” Zechariah probably thought “D’oh! I shouldn’t have said that...”

Usually when the chosen priests were finished offering the incense, they would come out of the Holy Place and say a public prayer of benediction. The people were wondering why Zechariah took so long to come out, but when he came out they found that he was unable to speak. Everyone realized he had seen a vision. When his time of service was completed, he returned home, and his wife Elizabeth became pregnant, just as the angel said! So Elizabeth responded, “The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people. (Luke 1:25)”

The Lord had shown Elizabeth great mercy. In Bible times to be barren was a shame and disgrace in society. Children were thought of to be gifts and blessings from the Lord, but if a couple could not have a baby, people would wonder and ask, “Who sinned, these people, or their parents (John 9:2)?” What did they do wrong? Is this a curse from God? To make matters worse – they were both priests of the Lord. Were they not doing their job right? The Bible is clear that they did nothing wrong. “Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly (Luke 1:6).” Imagine the suffering and sadness Zechariah and Elizabeth had to go through. Not only was the scorn of society hard enough, but they were truly without the joy of their own children.

Perhaps they prayed earnestly in their youth for a child, but the time for child bearing has passed. Still they did not seem bitter, but served the Lord blamelessly. Though they may have forgotten their prayer, the Lord did not forget. The Lord was faithful to them, and the angel said, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard.” In fact, the name Zechariah means “God remembers.” (The name Elizabeth means “God is an oath.”) The Lord, in his great mercy, lifted them out of their darkness, sadness and gloom. He gave Elizabeth a child, and took away her disgrace. They both got to witness a miracle from God – imagine two grandparents with a newborn baby! Their son would be sealed with the Holy Spirit. And all their neighbors and relatives came to share in their joy.

There was a slight controversy over the naming of the child. The well meaning guests wanted to name the child Zechariah, to honor his father, because this child born in these special circumstances. Elizabeth spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” There was no one in their family with that name. It was a custom to honor someone in the family by giving their name to the child, but they obeyed God and gave the baby the name God gave him, which was John, which means, “God is a gracious giver.” When Zechariah wrote that the baby would be named “John,” the Lord immediately gave him back his ability to speak, and he praised God with his first words after 9 months of silence.

Part II: The Power of God’s Mercy

Zechariah was mute, as a punishment for his unbelief, but when God’s plan was fulfilled, he was restored and could speak again. Look at his first words in v.68, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel.” His first words were “Praise be to the Lord!” This is incredible. He could

have said, “Wow I can talk again!” or, “Let me sing to my son!” or, “Why didn’t you listen to Elizabeth?” but his first words were to praise God’s name. Think about what he had seen and heard over the last 9 months. The angel came and said, “Your son will go before the Lord in the spirit of Elijah.” No doubt as a priest, he knew this was a fulfillment of prophecy. He also witnessed the visiting of Mary, with the Lord in her womb. This was an exciting time: the hope and expectation of Israel, the Savior, the Redeemer was here! He sees the Savior, which surpasses the excitement of even being given a son.

Zechariah continues in his song, “because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (v.69).” The horn is a symbol of strength and courage. Some of the most magnificent animals have majestic horns, like the big horn elk. You would not want to mess with that animal. The horn of salvation was the symbol of the strength and might of God to save his people. He would be raised up in the house of David, which means he would be descended from King David himself. Many prophets wrote about this hundreds of years earlier. The prophet Isaiah wrote of this salvation: “Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this (Isa 9:7).” That is one powerful horn. His rule will never end, nor will peace, because He is mighty to save.

God sent his salvation to also “show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham. (v.72-73)” God promised Abraham that through his offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed (Gen 22:18). The Savior could have come from anyone, but God chose to honor and bless Abraham to express the immeasurable riches and depth of his mercy. Similar to Zechariah and Elizabeth, his son Isaac was not born to him until he was 100 years old, and his wife was 90. Because of his faith and obedience to God, God has shown him mercy even to this day. God said to Abraham, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars, if indeed you can count them...so shall your offspring be (Gen 15:5). To this day, children are being added to Abraham’s family. If you were a Christian when you were young, you probably sang, “Father Abraham had many sons, and many sons had father Abraham, I am one of them, and so are you, so let’s all praise the Lord!” This same mercy to Abraham extends beyond time and borders and reaches to each and every one of us.

Part III: God’s Mercy Is Our Salvation

God’s mercy is our salvation – it is only by his mercy we can be saved and redeemed. The oath God promised to Abraham was also “to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days (v.73-75).” God’s people always had enemies. Abraham lived in foreign country that had conflicts over land. King David fought with the nations around him. Jesus had bitter confrontations with the Pharisees. For Christians today, there is a battle waging within our souls. We battle against pride, against envy, against lust and many other sins that are natural to us. Sometimes we also battle against Satan and other powers of this world. Sin is in us and all around us. This is the real issue, and this is why we need mercy. The Bible says for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). As we said earlier, “Nobody is perfect,” and the Bible even testifies to this fact! We are all imperfect, we are all guilty of sin. However, God has promised to rescue us.

God has also promised to “enable us to serve him without fear.” Notice the word “enables.” Under sin, we can do nothing right, we cannot serve God, because we fear him. This fear can even paralyze us. When I was travelling, I once had such a hard time working and going to the office because I felt criticized very badly during one meeting. Mercy is the compassion which drives out fear. When God has mercy on us, we do not need to be afraid of serving Him. In fact, we want to serve and obey – just like how I wanted to drive according to the speed limit, and we serve with an attitude of humility, gratitude and love.

In the middle of Zechariah’s song, he looked over at his one week old son and spoke these words about him: “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.” Zechariah believed what the angel had told him, and these words came true. When John grew up, many regarded him as a prophet, as one who was sent from God. John’s mission was to prepare the hearts of people to see the Messiah. This was a very important role. I’ve been an MC at many weddings, and part of the task is to go before the couple, make sure everything is prepared and set up at the banquet hall, get everyone in order, and when the time comes, turn all of the attention to the bride and groom and announce their arrival with much enthusiasm. It was a privilege to have that honor in the weddings I’ve served, and for John, it must have been a tremendous honor to be serving the Savior of the world!

John had a very important task, and this is the main point of everything he would do: Let’s read v.77-78 together, “to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven.” The knowledge of salvation comes through the forgiveness of our sins. Without the forgiveness of sins, there is no salvation. We cannot even know what salvation is, unless our sins are forgiven. Only God can forgive our sins, and he can forgive them because of his tender mercy by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven.

To understand God’s mercy, we need to understand justice. In order to be merciful, God must be just. Rod Blagojevich was the former governor of IL who was just sentenced to 14 years in prison. As governor he should have appointed the most qualified person to the Senate seat to replace President Obama, but instead he was trying to sell the position to the highest bidder for his own personal gain. There is a whole list of charges against him for corruption as governor. If the judge were to just let him go to be merciful, that would be unjust, and crime would run rampant. If there is no justice, then corruption and evil reigns.

For his crimes, Rod Blagojevich received a sentence of 14 years in prison, but that’s nothing compared to his judgment, and our judgment at the throne of God. The Bible says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2 Cor 5:10),” and “For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Ecc 12:14).” God is perfect, he is holy, but our sins make us imperfect, and unholy; they make us evil. Even if there is a ounce of sin in your body, it will be found out, and the wages of sin, whether big or small, is death.

John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." This was his tender mercy. This was his mercy that also makes him just. We are forgiven, and we are set free, because Jesus paid the price. Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Instead of punishing us for eternity, God punished his Son so that our slate would be wiped clean. God's mercy did not come cheap, and not all the treasures and planets in the universe can compare with the price he paid. The cost for God's mercy was the life of his Son, but so that he could forgive us of our sins, he willingly paid the price.

Our guilt and shame and disgrace were taken away, and through Jesus we have been set free from the burden of sin. Jesus has enabled us to serve him without fear. Jesus has made us holy and righteous, because he came to earth, lived a perfect, sinless life, and exchanged his life for ours. Jesus is the rising sun that came down to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. The rising sun came down; he came down to look after us because he cares for us and loves us. He came to shine on those living in darkness and the shadow of death; with Jesus, the rising sun, it is like a new day. He guides our feet into the path of peace. We were once enemies of God, but through Jesus we are now at peace with God.

God is a God of mercy, he is a merciful God. We saw today 2 aspects of that mercy: 1) He has compassion those who are in distress. He had great mercy toward Zechariah and Elizabeth, and gave them joy and delight in their son John. 2) He has compassion, especially toward his offenders. This is God's mercy to us as sinners: to be lenient and compassionate with us, because of his tender mercy by which Jesus came.

The child John grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel. He preached a message of repentance, which means a change in your mind toward God. We studied today about God's tender, compassionate mercy. The weight and reality of our sins are serious, which is why he came down to save us. So then we must embrace his compassion, and ask for it. Romans 2:4 shows the opposite: "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" It is God's kindness which leads us toward repentance. If we reject God, we are in the wrong. He loved us beyond all measure, because he is a God of mercy, but he is also righteous and holy, and out of his great compassion, he will see to it that we become holy, just as he is holy.