JESUS, THE RISING SUN

Luke 1:67–80

Key Verse: 1:78

“…because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven...”

 Merry Christmas! Every year, millions of people all around the world celebrate the birth of Jesus. Unfortunately, the materialism and traditions drown out the real meaning of Christmas. The only way we can understand what Christmas really means is when we turn to the Bible. The video we just saw summarized all the famous Bible stories about Jesus’ birth—Mary and Joseph and the angels, Bethlehem and the inn that was too full, the manger and the shepherds, the angel chorus, and the magi. But today we're going to look for what Christmas means in a kind of unlikely place—the song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. But it's a really good place to find the meaning of Christmas, because in his song Zechariah describes what Jesus' coming means. Some people are naturally attracted to themes of power and victory; so they like to focus here on the expression “horn of salvation.” They feel empowered and vindicated. But when we look at the song carefully, the author’s emphasis seems to be on the expression “the rising sun.” Tonight we especially want to think about what it means that Jesus was born to be “the rising sun” to each of us. May Jesus the rising sun really shine on each one of us this Christmas.

Look at verses 67–68. It’s kind of odd that at the birth of his son, Zechariah is praising God for sending Jesus. The baby boy John could have suddenly spoken up and said, "Hey, dad, what about me?" By the help of the Holy Spirit, Zechariah’s thinking not just about himself or his immediate family; he’s thinking about all God’s people. We see this all throughout his words in this song of praise. It shows us that in his heart of hearts Zechariah really cares for all the Lord’s people. He also understands the bigger implications of the miraculous birth of his own son. God was doing something much more than just helping him and his elderly wife to not die in childlessness. And he’s speaking as if it already happened, though Jesus hadn't been born yet.

In verse 68 the words “has come” literally mean “has visited.” God and his people had had a broken relationship for many years. When we read the Old Testament, we find that their relationship was like a really bad marriage, and the Israelites were like an unfaithful wife to God. God had taken a 400-year break from them. But now he was coming to visit them. It shows that fundamentally, God is gracious. God still loved his people, even though they’d utterly failed him.

The last part of verse 68 says he “redeemed” them. We often hear that word in church, but what does it really mean? “Redeemed” means to be bought back from slavery. God had already redeemed his people twice: from slavery in Egypt, and from Babylonian captivity. This time he would redeem them from their real slavery, slavery to sin. The word “redeemed” resonates only with people who’ve suffered through bondage and felt trapped and hopeless. It’s kind of like being in huge debt—student loans, credit cards, mortgages, car payments—and suddenly having it all cancelled: "I'm redeemed! My debt/sin is all paid off!"

Zechariah describes the content of God’s redemption in verse 69. He says, "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us." Zechariah calls Jesus our “horn of salvation.” The Bible has many inspiring names for Jesus; among them, “horn of salvation” isn’t so appealing. We don't say, "Wow! Jesus is my horn!" This expression was first made famous by David when he wrote, “…my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation…” (Ps18:2; 2Sa22:3). David personally experienced that God fought for him and gave him victory. His expression “horn of salvation” turned out to be a prophecy of Jesus.

Why do we need Jesus to be our horn of salvation? It’s because Satan always tries to impale us with his horns. He tries to knock us down and defeat us, through discouraging events, temptation, and sometimes through people’s cruel words. But Jesus our horn of salvation saves us. He saves us especially by healing us from all the wounds inflicted on us by the devil. The Bible repeatedly says, “by his wounds we are healed” (Isa53:5; 1Pe2:2:24).

Look at verse 69 again. The last part says, “…in the house of his servant David.” It means that Jesus would be born in the direct line of King David. The Lord God would give him the throne of his father David, and his kingdom would never end (32b–33). In this way God fulfilled all his promises to David (2Sa7:8–16). Verse 70 adds, “...(as he said through his prophets of long ago)…” It wasn’t just about David; so many Old Testament prophets also predicted the coming of Jesus. Verses 72–73 tell us the root of it all, “…to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham…” The foundation of all this was the holy covenant God made with Abraham (Ge12:1–3; 17:1–27). He told him, “Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed…” (Ge22:17b–18). All along, God had his own salvation plan. In sending Jesus, God was keeping his covenant with Abraham, fulfilling all the prophecies and all his promises to his servant David. Today people want to just feel good in the here and now; they don’t care about the past and don’t think much about the future. But Zechariah’s song tells us that God is the God of history. God remembered all his ancient promises. He still has promises yet to be fulfilled.

Read verse 71. We notice the word “enemies” is repeated again in verse 74. The Bible says our real enemy is the devil, and those in whom he is reigning (Mt13:39; Ac13:10; 1Pe5:8). Enemies? Really? Usually, people make enemies because they’ve done some incredibly stupid or harmful things. But we Christians begin to have enemies simply because we’re trying to follow Jesus. It’s because we’ve chosen the light, whereas the people around us have often chosen the darkness, and in darkness they hate the light and hate others (Jn3:20; 1Jn2:9). We shouldn’t think it strange that when we follow Jesus we come to have enemies (1Pe4:12; Jn15:18). It’s so tempting to fight with enemies or become afraid of them. But Jesus is our horn of salvation, so if we quietly depend on him, we have nothing and no one to fear. He fights for us, protects and saves us.

In Zechariah’s song we find one of the rare places in the Bible that actually explains why Jesus saves us. Read verses 74–75. Honestly, today many people want Christianity only if it works for them, only if it feels good. They want it to meet their needs. If it doesn’t fit their desires, dreams or plans, they bail and turn to their own way. It’s so prevalent in our culture to live for ourselves. But Jesus didn’t come just to meet our needs and make us feel good living for ourselves. He saves us to live for him as our Lord. He saves us so that we serve him fearlessly. He saves us so that we serve him in holiness and righteousness all our days. It sounds beautiful, but actually it’s hard. It’s a life of self-denial and self-sacrifice, taking up our own cross daily (9:23). But it’s God’s truth. God made human beings to serve him. Sin took our mission away and replaced it with the curse to serve ourselves, our sinful nature, and the devil. But when Jesus saves us, he restores our God-given mission, the purpose for which God made us.

How does Jesus enable selfish, weak sinners like us to serve God? When we repent he gives us God’s mercy, forgiveness and cleansing, and the Holy Spirit. With our own effort or willpower we can’t serve him in holiness and righteousness. No legalism can do that in us, no matter how intense. Only with Jesus’ gifts of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit can we get out of our chronic sins and serve him in holiness and righteousness. And only by his forgiveness and the Holy Spirit in us can we live before him and be faithful to him all our lives.

Look at verses 76–77. At last Zechariah briefly addresses his own son. His son John the Baptist would give people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, especially by challenging them to repent. We too can actually experience God’s forgiveness when we repent. Read verse 78. This is the third time in this passage that the word “mercy” is mentioned (58,72,78). God’s mercy seems to be the climax of Zechariah’s song. Based on this, according to Luke, God's mercy seems to be the core meaning of Jesus’ birth. At Christmas, we're mainly celebrating God's mercy to us in Jesus.

Many religious people down through history have mistakenly thought that it’s righteous to judge others for their sin. That's what the Pharisees did in Jesus' day, and it's what many modern-day so-called Christians still do. But that's not what Jesus did do. In his mercy Jesus touched a man covered with contagious leprosy. In his mercy Jesus made friends with tax collectors, sinners and social outcasts. Jesus showed all kinds of people God's mercy. God’s mercy, his compassion and forgiveness, is a major theme of Luke’s Gospel (e.g. 1:50,77; 3:3; 5:20–24; 6:37; 7:36–50; 10:37; 11:4; 15:20; 17:3–4; 18:13,38,39; 23:34; 24:47). In the Bible it actually says, "…judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jas2:13).

Honestly, people can be so hard, cold and harsh. They compete, demand perfect performance, and kick at those who’re down. This is why life among people, even among those who should be caring, is sometimes called “the school of hard knocks.” But God isn’t like sinful, self-righteous people. The Bible says God’s mercy is great (Neh9:31; Ps25:6; 69:16; Da9:18). David, a man after God’s own heart, wrote most of the Psalms in the Old Testament and often mentioned God's mercy. He experienced firsthand how great God’s mercy is, and he learned to entrust his life into God’s merciful hands (2Sa24:14; 1Ch21:13).

Look at verse 78 again. In Greek the word “mercy” here means kindness toward the miserable and afflicted, with a real desire to help. Luke adds the word “tender." It means “in the bowels”—in other words, in the deepest place. In the deepest place within him, God is merciful toward weak, sinful people. He doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve; he knows how we’re formed and remembers that we are dust (Ps103:10,14). He showed his tender mercy when he sent his Son to be born in this dark, sin-sick world. In our sin we were proud and rebellious, and though we didn’t know it, we were spiritually sick, from the top of our heads to the soles of our feet (Isa1:5–6). But in his tender mercy God sent Jesus to heal us.

Zechariah describes how God’s tender mercy is expressed to us in Jesus. He calls Jesus “the rising sun from heaven.” In his tender mercy God causes his sun to shine on the evil and the good; he’s kind even to the ungrateful and wicked (Mt5:45; Lk6:35–36). God still brings his mercy into our lives softly and tenderly, like the rising sun. The sun doesn’t appear in the morning suddenly, with a fiery blaze, like an intense searchlight suddenly switched on. If it did so, all creation would run and hide. No, the rising sun starts out with a faint, warm glow at the far horizon. That’s when all kinds of creatures on earth—birds, insects and animals—start their early morning singing and form a chorus. As the sun grows steadily brighter, all the pitch-black darkness of night is gradually dispelled.

Read verse 79. Living in darkness and in the shadow of death is cold, bleak and scary. In the dark, creatures like bats thrive, but darkness has an adverse affect on humans. The longer we’re in it, the more depressed we get. They've even found a disease, seasonal affective disorder (SAD), because of winter's lack of sunlight. In the dark our thinking becomes twisted. We get confused. We misunderstand. We can’t trust. We grow bitter. We feel guilty. Hopelessness sets in.

In many ways we may be living in spiritual darkness: it may be pride, doubt, self-hatred, or being enslaved by sinful desires. And living in the shadow of death means living in constant fear. On the surface people seem fine, but deep in their souls many are living in fear. They’re afraid of terrorism, nuclear war, meteor strikes and pandemic disease. They’re afraid our whole advanced way of life is soon going to be destroyed by some unknown force. There’s a T.V. show called *The Walking Dead*. In its plot there’s been a worldwide outbreak, and many people have turned into flesh-eating zombies. Loved ones are lost, people fight like vicious animals, and it’s “every man for himself.” This show has become so popular, it has the highest ratings of any show on cable T.V. I wondered why so many people like a show about zombies. It seems it’s because it resonates with their inner fears and loss of humanity. Jesus the rising sun is still the best news for people living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Read verse 79 again. The light of Jesus melts away all our darkness, gives us direction and puts us on a new path, the path of peace. It's a miracle. What is this “path of peace’? It’s an inner peace, peace with God (Ro5:1), being sure of his grace and no longer resisting him. It’s the path of living by faith in a right relationship with him. It’s also a new life direction. We’ve already seen it described back in verses 74–75. It’s a life of serving God without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. We’ve all struggled a lot, more or less, to try to find out what we should be doing with our lives in this world. Things can seem so confusing. But when Jesus the rising Sun shines on us, he guides our feet into the path of peace. He shows us the way.

Everyone knows the famous hymn *Amazing Grace*. What many don’t know is the story of its author, John Newton. When he was 17 years old, on his way to visit some friends, he was seized and forced to join the English Royal Navy. At one point he tried to desert, but he was caught. Before 350 crewmembers on the ship he was stripped to the waist and given eight-dozen lashes by flogging, and his rank was reduced. After that public humiliation, he contemplated murdering the captain and committing suicide, throwing himself overboard. But he didn’t. After recovering from the beating he continued to engage in the slave trade. Newton was a problem on every ship he sailed on; captains couldn’t handle his rebellious behavior. They finally left him in West Africa. There, he was forced to live under an African princess named Peye and got severely abused along with her many other slaves. At the age of 22 he was sailing back to England, when the ship got caught in a terrible storm off of Ireland and almost sank. Newton realized it was only God’s mercy that saved the ship, and his life. For the first time in his life he started reading the Bible on his own. He resolved to stop swearing, gambling and drinking. He didn’t come to know Christ right away. But gradually, the rising sun Jesus began to shine in his sin-sick soul. Within a few years he fully received Christ and felt real inner peace for the first time in his life. A few years afterwards, he finally stopped dealing in the slave trade. He became a minister, a famous hymn writer, and eventually an abolitionist, along with his friend William Wilberforce. God’s tender mercy in Jesus healed his soul and changed him from the inside out. Praise Jesus the rising sun whose tender mercy can deliver us from any kind of darkness.

Let's read our key verse, verse 78 again. This Christmas, may God bless each one of us to experience the true meaning of Jesus' birth, God's tender mercy. May Jesus, the rising sun, shine on us newly, dispel any kind of darkness that may’ve crept into our souls, and guide our feet into the path of peace. May Jesus, the rising sun, shine on all the young people of our nation with God’s tender mercy, until they can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all their days.