

Christ the Savior is Born
Luke 1:68-79

The best of all. It's something we all long for. There's something within us that yearns not only for that which is good, or even that which is better, but that which is best. From the earliest age, we want the best things life can offer. We want to eat the best food. We want to be the best student, or athlete, or performer, or employee, or you fill in the blank. We are hard-wired to seek the greatest, the most beautiful, the highest. And yet, try as we might, our search for the best has always left us empty. The greatest athletes who have won the most championships will tell you that those victories have never satisfied them. The greatest musicians in this world will tell you that they are never satisfied with their skills. CEOs who have worked their way up to the top of the corporate ladder will tell you that happiness is not to be found there.

Which begs the question, why is there nothing in this world that can satisfy us? If we are all just the products of random chance and billions upon billions of years of evolution as the scholars of this age tell us, then why do we long for more? Wouldn't it stand to reason that if we are just highly evolved animals, then the world could offer us the environment which would fulfill our deepest needs. Why do we feel an emptiness inside? Why is the world in which we live not enough for us?

C.S. Lewis famously said,



“If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.”

You see, our longings are meant to point us to something. They tell us that we are not merely highly evolved animals. The emptiness we feel points us to the fact that we were made for something more. Our longings tell us that all is not right in this world. They point us back to the fall. Something has gone tragically wrong with this world. That's not all. They point us to the fact

that something has gone wrong with us. Our troubles are not only external, but also internal. All the brokenness in this world originally sprung from the evil within the human heart. Your desires for the best are not in you by chance. Someone put them there. And the One who put those desires in you is the very One who is able to satisfy them and to make you well.

That leads us to a problem; *the* problem. The great problem behind all problems in this world is the problem of our relationship with God. This is the problem at the heart of the Christmas season. This Christmas season, we really want to take time to prepare our hearts for the birth of the Savior once again. We are embarking on a journey today through the biblical narratives of Jesus' birth. Christ the Savior is Born. You likely sing those words every Christmas in the song Silent Night. It's been said that familiarity breeds contempt. Through the years, we can lose our sense of wonder at the reality of the Incarnation if we are not careful to take the time to truly reflect on the why and the how of Christmas. If we don't dig deep into the Word of God to find the true reason why Christ was born and to simply stand back and marvel at the glory of His humility and condescension, we will miss out on the joy and the wonder that God wants us to experience this Christmas. The joy of knowing the best of all. Emmanuel has come. God is with us. So, that is exactly what we are going to do together over the next four weeks leading up to Christmas day.

Today, our journey begins with preparation. It's never wise to set out on a journey without first preparing for the road ahead. So, as we prepare to journey back in time to a holy moment in Bethlehem, let's go back to the days leading up to the birth of our Lord. Today, we prepare our hearts to be lost in wonder, love, and praise once again by looking at the way that God prepared the world for Jesus' arrival. Turn with me to Luke 1.

As you turn, understand that we are turning the pages of history. That is one of the reasons we set a date on our calendar year-by-year to remember this great day: so that we remind ourselves that the miracle we are considering took place in time and space. It is an event that can be placed on a calendar. There are many who strip this message of its meaning by denying that simple fact. They say that all that matters today is the spirit of Christmas: joy, hope, and peace. They treat it sentimentally as if this is just some fable or legend meant to teach us the lessons of joy and charity. That is to deny the meaning of Christmas altogether. So, let's remember that these events really happened. This is the event that God planned and that altered the course of history. ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Galatians 4:4)

With that in mind, if I could describe the historical condition of the world in these days when God sent forth His Son in one word, it would be *hopelessness*. Remember, the nation of Israel had been conquered by the Romans. They were in bondage. They had been without a prophet for four hundred years. It had been generations since they had last heard a word from the Lord under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. No Scripture. Just silence.

In the bondage and the silence, the people of God were waiting. There was a priest by the name of Zechariah who had a wife named Elizabeth. They are described as righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they were both barren and were advanced in years. Hopeless. All the years of their life they had served the Lord faithfully, and yet they could never bear a child. Imagine the heartache they had endured through the years. At this point in their lives, they have likely both had to come to terms with the fact that they would have no child to carry their lineage forward into the next generation. They would be the end of their portion of their family tree.

It was this hopeless, barren couple whom God chose to be the vessels of the first prophet since Malachi. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah while he was burning incense in the Temple, and Zechariah was terrified. Gabriel told him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” (Luke 1:13b-17)

Zechariah couldn't believe it! He was so astounded by the message of the angel that he questioned how it could even be possible. How could he and his wife, hopeless as they were, ever bear a child? It's difficult to blame Zechariah for doubting in this moment, but because of his doubt, Gabriel told him he would not be able to speak until his words were fulfilled. So, Zechariah came out of the temple unable to say a word. All he could do was make hand motions and gestures to try to tell the other priests what had happened.

You likely know the rest of the story. Zechariah returned home, and his wife Elizabeth, sure enough, conceived. It happened just as the angel had said it would. Fast-forward about nine months, and Elizabeth gave birth to a baby boy, and she named him John, just as the angel had commanded. This broke the family tradition and apparently caused a bit of a stir. The neighbors and relatives all wanted her to name him Zechariah, after his father. They likely figured they could get some backup for their opinion from Zechariah, even though he couldn't speak, so they made signs to Zechariah asking what he wanted the baby to be named. He asked for a tablet and wrote, “His name is John,” silencing all the opinionated relatives. All of this was to show that this was indeed the action of God and not man. Immediately, we are told that Zechariah's tongue was loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. Which brings us to our text for today. Here is what we read beginning in verse 67,

⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people

⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us

in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
72 to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
74 that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
(Luke 1:67-79)

Zechariah's first words after being struck mute for over 9 months were words of praise. His hopelessness had been turned to hope. He blessed God. Psalm 33:1 says, "Praise befits the upright." Zechariah was a righteous man, which is shown very clearly right here in these words. We are confronted here with what should be the characteristic mark of the Christian during this Christmas season. When others look at us, they should be able to see joy. Whatever our circumstances, we should be a people who vocally bless the Lord. This is not something that should be confined to our time here in this building, either. This is something we should carry with us everywhere we go. Praise!

Let us ask ourselves, therefore, do we know something of the thrill of Zechariah? We are going to see this throughout the whole narrative of Jesus' birth. All who understood something of what was happening, were filled with exceeding joy and burst forth in praise. It happened to Mary a few months earlier when she had come to visit Elizabeth. She broke forth in praising God. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." This is emblematic of the true believer!

It also comes out in the great hymns that have been written about this theme of the Incarnation. Look at the praises that have been sung throughout the ages. Let them fill you again with that same awe and wonder that filled the hymn-writers such as Charles Wesley.

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.

Consider a man like George Frideric Handel, who wrote that classic oratorio, *Messiah*, originally for Easter in 1751, but now sung every year the world over at Christmas. Consider that Hallelujah chorus. It may be one of the greatest musical works ever composed, and its inspiration was this incredible moment in history. He could not have written such beautiful music had it not been for his joy and the overflowing praise that arose within him as he considered what Jesus Christ had done.

These men and women could not contain themselves. Their praise burst forth from their hearts like a river breaking through a dam. This praise is something so powerful that it breaks through the darkness and the heartache and the sorrows of this world.

What about us? If we could ask someone on the street to come live with us for the next four weeks, would they describe us as a praising people? Would they say that we are joyful? Remember the command, "Rejoice in the Lord always." (Phil 4:4) In the midst of the daily trials, would they still hear us blessing God? Would they say that our tongues have been loosed to praise the Lord, or would they hear the same kind of grumbling and complaining that is characteristic of the world?

How can we recover this deep sense of joy inexpressible and full of glory today? How can we know something of the joy that Zechariah experienced upon the birth of his son John? His words give us the answer. If we want this river of praise to break through the dam of our hopelessness and despair, first we must dig down into the depths of our need, and then, it must flow down from the heights of God's provision.

First, if you want to know the joy and thrill of Christmas, you must dig down deep to examine the depth of your need. You must start with an honest examination of the state of the world into which Christ came. Look again at verse 79,

**⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:79)**

Zechariah is actually borrowing language from the prophets. There are references to Isaiah 9, Psalm 23, Psalm 119 in these words. He is clearly a man who has the Word of God hidden in his heart. The Scriptures are the guide for his praises. His biblical wisdom reveals three characteristics of this world into which Christ came. Here, we are face to face with the depths of Christ's love. These are the depths into which He was willing to descend for us.

First, we see the world as a place where we sit in darkness. "To give light to those who sit in darkness." The imagery here is of a group of people who have set out on a journey to some great city. But on the way, the sun set, night descended, and they could no longer see where they were going, so they sit down in utter hopelessness and despair.

Second, the world is a place where we are exposed to sudden and terrifying danger. They sit not only in darkness, but also in the shadow of death. They can sense the possibility of enemies or predators lurking around them. At any moment, they could be attacked and killed. There is no security, no walls around them to protect them from their darkest fears. The world is a place of grave and horrific fears. Death is the last enemy, and we live in bondage to the fear of death in this world.

Third, and this follows inevitably from the first two, they have no peace. They are in a state of anxiety and restlessness. They cannot even lay their head down to rest because of the deep fear within and without. They are encompassed about with fear. Such is the condition of this world into which Christ came. Lost, shrouded in darkness, unhappy, wretched, poor, pitiable, blind, anxious, nervous, in turmoil.

These are the depths out of which the river of praise begins to bubble up. If you want to know the thrill of this season, you must be willing to dig down deep and examine things honestly. This is really what the ministry of John the Baptist was all about. Look at verse 77 again.

**77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
(Luke 1:77)**

John the Baptist's ministry of preparation had one focus. The forerunner to Jesus was called to proclaim the true need of God's people. There is ultimately only one disease that infects us all. We all have the same problem. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance.

One of the enemy's great tactics is to deceive us about the true nature of our need. He wants us to treat the symptoms, not the disease. He did this to the nation of Israel in the days when Jesus was born by leading them to focus on their condition as conquered people. They had been conquered by the Romans and were a colony or province of the Romans. They thought the darkness in which they sat consisted only in their slavery to Rome. They may have never been as politically-minded as they were in the days when Jesus was born. They thought they needed some great conqueror to come in and deliver them from their bondage to Rome. This may be the number one reason they did not recognize the Christ when He came to them. John the Baptist came declaring that they needed to rethink their troubles and their conception of salvation. The cause of their condition was not primarily political, it was spiritual. It was sin.

So many of our problems today stem from our unwillingness to face the true need. We want someone who will heal our wounds lightly, saying 'peace, peace,' when there is no peace. (Jeremiah 6:14) Could it be that our loss of wonder at this time of year can be attributed to just this fact, that we have lost touch with the depths of sin? Our world is seeking to deny the disease that plagues us. We want a better world, but we don't want the cure for ourselves. Only Jesus can save us. That's what He came to do.

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
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Here are the heights of God's provision that flows down to us from heaven. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ means that God has visited and redeemed us. He has given us knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus has met our deepest need. Having grasped the depths of the need, we can have a deeper sense of the joy of God's provision. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. (1 Peter 3:18) Jesus came to bring us to God. Sin had estranged us from God. We had been in a state of rebellion against Him. We did not want Him. We were at odds with Him. We had been denying our very nature by departing from the holy. But Jesus offers forgiveness.

Let's trace the glory of this message higher. The fount of praise flows down from these heights. Listen to why Jesus suffered and bore the punishment for sin in your place.

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
(Luke 1:78)

This is the light from on high. These words have reference to the closing words of the Old Testament, Malachi's prophecy in Malachi 4. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. (Malachi 4:2) Jesus is the light of the world. As John said, ⁴ "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:4-5)

What does this mean? In the midst of our hopelessness and despair, out of nowhere, in the most unexpected of ways, a light burst forth. A flash of light breaks into the darkness. He breaks into the hopelessness and failure of mankind and shines the light of the glory of God into our hearts. The philosophers have failed, the scientists have failed, the legislators have failed, *all* men have failed. But He has not failed. He shines the light of the tender mercy of our God into our despair and utter failure.

What is this light? It is the knowledge of God, the best of all! Not just the knowledge about God, but the intimate, personal knowledge of Him which is eternal life. (John 17:3) He came to bring us to God. Are you prepared to be lost in wonder, love, and praise at the tender mercy of our God and Savior this Christmas? Dig down into the depths of your own sin to see that His light has overcome it. The provision of heaven is the Son of God who gave Himself as the propitiation for our sins. Through Him and His atoning death and His mighty resurrection there is hope for this hopeless world. This world holds out no hope for you today, but Jesus, the light of men, holds out the hope of eternal life in His Father's house. May this river of praise flow forth from our hearts this Christmas as we meditate deeply upon these truths: the depths of our need and

the heights of God's provision. You cannot measure the distance between the depths and the heights. It is infinite. Only God could bridge this chasm.

We have committed ourselves to 50 days of prayer leading up to Christmas. We are praying for our lost friends and family members. As we pray, let's ask ourselves if we are giving the impression that we have something to offer them. This river of praise ought to flow out of us. If they do not see a joyful, hopeful, praising people as they look at us, why will they listen to us as we witness to them? Let's pray for boldness, but let's also pray that the Lord will give us a deep sense of the thrill of this season so that this hopeless world will see that we are a people with a hope that will not put us to shame.