

## INTRODUCTION

I recently heard the funny story about a man who took a vow of silence and entered a monastery where the monks were allowed to only speak two words a year. After one year the man said to the visiting bishop, "Bed hard." The next year, his two words were, "Food bad." Another year passed and he said, "Room Cold." At the end of the fourth year, he simply said, "I Quit." The bishop said, "Well, I'm not surprised—you've been complaining for the past four years!"

Today, we are going to hear the first words Zechariah utters after nine months of silence. Like Elizabeth and Mary, he is going to sing an inspired song. The event that produces this song is the birth of the character called John the Baptist. I'm calling this message "The First Baptist: John." I call him a Baptist with my tongue firmly placed in my cheek. Literally, the New Testament refers to him as John the Baptizer. Some Baptist Christians mistakenly think that we trace our denominational history all the way back to John the Baptist. They are usually the same people who think the Apostle Paul spoke King James English.

We actually trace our spiritual heritage back to the early 1600's when some Dutch Protestants started immersing believers in water after they trusted Christ, rather than sprinkling infants as the Catholic Church had taught. Their enemies labeled them "ana-baptists." The word literally means re-baptizers. Of course, there was no re-baptism; they were simply baptizing by immersion believers who had been sprinkled as unconscious infants. Facing persecution from both Catholics and other Protestants, these "Baptists" fled to England and then to the colonies to find the freedom to practice their faith. Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, established the first Baptist church in the colonies in 1639. Now, there are over 30 million Baptists in America.

It's a rather long text, so let's walk through it and I'll make some comments as we go. Our text is found in Luke 1:57-80. When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." (Hebrew boys weren't named until they were 8 days old. All the relatives assumed he would be named Zach Jr. Since he was the only son of Zechariah, he would be the only one to carry on the family name.) They said to her, "There is no one among you relatives who has that name." Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. (Now, remember, Zechariah had doubted the words of Gabriel nine months earlier, so for forty weeks he had been unable to speak a single word. It interesting that they made signs to him; he wasn't deaf! (I had a friend in a former church confined to a wheelchair because of a spinal injury. She told me one time that when some people speak to her they often bend over and yell at her. She would usually respond by saying, "Hey, I'm not deaf, just disabled.") He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." (He didn't say his name "will be" or "should be," he said, "his name *is* John." It was a done-deal as far as Zechariah was concerned.) Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God.

The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea, people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is

this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him. (Now Zechariah is going to sing a song. Last week we studied the songs of Elizabeth and Mary. This song is often called the Benedictus, from the Latin word for “blessed.”) His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation (we are going to talk about who this “horn” is later, so pay attention) for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” And now can’t you see as Zechariah looks down at his own son and says: “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, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of the our God, by which the rising sun will come 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.”

In verse 80, we have one verse that covers the next 30 years of John’s life: And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel. Today, I want us to focus on three men in this passage: Zechariah, John, and Jesus. You may be thinking, “Jesus isn’t born yet; we haven’t got to Luke 2 yet. Is He in this passage?” Absolutely—as you will see. Let’s start by looking at Zechariah and asking ourselves this question:

## **I. ZECHARIAH: HOW CAN I COPE WITH PROBLEMS?**

This is the last time we are going to see Zechariah, so before we leave him, let’s let him teach us something else. Here was an old priest who found himself at a time in his life when he realized that much more of his life was behind him than was ahead of him. He and his wife faced the heartache of leaving no biological legacy. They couldn’t have children. What a problem! God addressed that problem and announced through Gabriel that they were going to have a miracle baby. How did Zechariah respond? He doubted God and as a result, he was struck dumb. Really, he only traded one problem for another one. For nine long months this priest couldn’t utter one word. As a priest, he did a lot of talking—now that was impossible for him.

Throughout your life, you will find that problems are lined up like cars at a tollbooth. When you get rid of one problem, and the gate falls down on an unpleasant episode of your life. You breathe a sigh of relief and then—ding! There’s another problem (and others are lined up behind that one). The Christian life isn’t devoid of problems but God gives us strength to cope with them. There are a couple of things I have learned from Zechariah that may help you, too.

### **1. God’s rebuke can become God’s reward if I submit to Him (vs. 63)**

What was God’s rebuke to Zechariah? Nine months of silence. By the end of the nine months, I believe Zechariah was thanking God for his “burden of silence.” I believe the burden had actually become a blessing, because Zechariah humbly submitted to God’s chastisement. What was his punishment? Silence. What was his reward? Silence. I can just imagine during the first

few months of his sentence of silence that Zechariah was miserable. Can't you hear him beating up on himself saying, "You dummy! Why didn't you just believe God? Then you wouldn't be facing this awful incarceration of silence." (I don't know about you, but I get madder at me than I do at anyone else!) But gradually, over the months, I believe Zechariah came to see something in his silence that he would have missed if he had been talking the whole time. Silence is a good channel through which God can speak to us. Have you ever noticed how most of us surround ourselves with as much noise as possible? Are you the kind of person who gets in the car and you *must* have some music or talk show playing? Do you play your TV at home even though you aren't watching it? There is great value in stillness and silence. That's why I constantly stress that a daily "quiet time" is essential for spiritual growth and health. God says, "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

As I prepared this message I wondered what it would be like if God took away my ability to talk for nine months. Frankly, I would be devastated. After all, preaching and teaching is my life and I love to sing. But I think nine months of silence would really have a positive impact on me. How? I'm sure would listen more. I would be able to look into the eyes of my wife and children and really hear what they are saying. I would pray more and listen to God's voice. I would read more and write more. When Zechariah could finally speak, what did he say? "There! I'm sure glad that's over with!" No, he uttered a song of praise that is so deep and beautiful it is preserved in scripture. Do you get my point? What we often see as burdens God says, "submit to me and I will turn your burdens into blessings." Do you have the sense you have been the target of the Lord's gentle rebuke? In Revelation 3:19 Jesus says, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent!" If you are under the rebuke or discipline of the Lord—cheer up—that proves He loves you. God doesn't discipline those who aren't His children. I've used this before, but it still illustrates this important point.

When I was a kid, my dad would often have to spank me by using his belt doubled over. He told me later it made him physically ill to have to punish us and I didn't fully believe him until I had to punish my own children. My dad would grab my arm with one hand and swing the belt with the other—and we would go around in a circle. Before I learned better, I tried to pull as far away from my dad as possible, after all he was punishing me. I didn't know anything about the laws of physics or centrifugal force but I soon discovered the farther away I pulled from him, the faster the velocity of the belt. One time I discovered that instead of pulling away, if I got as close to him as I could, the inside of the arc of the swing wasn't nearly as fast—or nearly as painful! So I learned that whenever my father punished me, that instead of pulling away, I should get as close to him as I could and the punishment wasn't as unpleasant. Get the point? When Zechariah was under God's rebuke, he didn't pull away, he drew closer. As a result, his rebuke actually became a reward. When God has to take you to the woodshed, make sure you don't resist Him or pull away from Him, draw as close as you can to His heart! Here's another thing I have learned from Zechariah:

## **2. One small act of obedience can be the catalyst for great blessing (vs. 64)**

It is interesting to me that Zechariah's voice wasn't restored to him on the day John was born. He was silent for eight more days. Why? Because Zechariah had one more act of obedience to perform—that act of naming his son as God commanded. Even though the relatives wanted to

name him Zechariah Junior, he refused. He motioned for a writing tablet (probably a board covered with wax) and he wrote four simple words: “HIS NAME IS JOHN” At the very moment he wrote the last letter of the last word—Pow! His sentence of silence was completed. Such a simple act, writing four words, but such a powerful impact. Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Zechariah hadn’t obeyed God? He would have probably died a priest who never uttered another word but thankfully, he *did* obey and he was so blessed that he was filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaimed a beautiful song of praise.

Could it be you are just one simple step of obedience away from some area of blessing? Maybe you haven’t been baptized by immersion since you trusted Christ. This is an important step of obedience but if you are refusing to obey the Lord, you are missing out on the blessings that could be yours when you obey the Lord. Your attitude may be, “Baptism? No big deal. I’m saved and that’s the main thing.” Just remember: Writing one sentence “HIS NAME IS JOHN” made all the difference for Zechariah. Are you obeying the Lord by bringing a tenth of your income into His storehouse? Has God led you to work in a certain ministry of our church? Has He led you to someone who needs to hear about Jesus? Don’t ever underestimate the power of obedience. Just think, if you will go ahead and take that step of obedience, there are certain blessings out there you will never experience otherwise. Well, let’s leave Zechariah and talk about his son:

## **II. JOHN: WHAT IS MY PURPOSE IN LIFE?**

Now, we will talk about the ministry of John more in detail when we get to the third chapter of Luke. But I want to take a moment and share with you a couple of things I have learned from studying the life of the first Baptist: John. First:

### **1. God has a unique plan for my life (vs.60)**

John the Baptist was a one-of-a-kind individual. He is the transitional character between the Old and the New Testament. He can be considered the last Old Testament prophet and the herald of the Messiah. God already told his father his name was to be “John” and that he would take a Nazarite vow. Although John was and is a common name, he was totally unique. You probably don’t have any argument with that. However, I believe that each of us is just as unique and special as John the Baptist. Just as God had a plan for John, He has a special plan for you and your life. Our God is so awesome that He established this plan long before we were born. God never says, “I’m making this up as I go along.” Before you were ever born, God had a great plan for your life. Here’s what God said to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart.” (Jeremiah 1:5) Have you ever heard the expression, “when God made him, He broke the mold?” It’s actually true for each one of us. You are totally unique. You are not one-in-a-million—you are one-in-six-billion. No person has the exact DNA you possess. Nobody has an ear shaped exactly like yours. Nobody else has the same fingerprints you have. You are special and God has a special plan for your life. I can’t tell you what it is but He can. There’s an old Bill Gaither song I used to sing and play for our girls when they were little. I haven’t heard it in a long time, but I believe the words: “I am a promise, I am a possibility with a capital P. I am a great big bundle of potentiality. And I am learning to hear God’s voice,

and I'm trying to make the right choice. Because I am a promise to be everything God wants me to be."

## **2. I should be pointing others to Jesus (vs. 76-77)**

In verse 76, Zechariah sings what the life purpose of John will be. "... for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation . . ." If you are wondering what God's plan for your life is, this is a big part of it. Our job, like John's, is to introduce people to the Messiah, Jesus. John's entire existence was devoted to introducing Jesus and God's plan of salvation to those who lived in his land.

The old Methodist evangelist of the 1800s, Sam Jones, used to talk about a certain man who worked on a Mississippi River pier. Every time a certain steamboat passed, this man would get excited and say to everyone else working on the dock, "Look, look, yonder's the captain! Do you see him? He's the finest captain on the Mississippi." Newcomers would always ask him why he got so excited and pointed out that particular captain. The man would smile and say, "Years ago I was working on his boat and I fell in the river. I couldn't swim, and that captain dove in and rescued me." Then with a big smile, he would say, "And ever since he saved me, I just love to point him out." That's what you and I should be doing! "I was sinking deep in sin/far from the peaceful shore/very deeply stained within/sinking to rise no more/but the Master of the sea/heard my despairing cry/from the waters lifted me/now safe am I! ("Love Lifted Me" words by James Rowe) We should be pointing to Jesus with our words and with our lifestyles.

John the Baptist would say, "He is coming—repent!" We should be saying, "He has come and He's coming again—repent!" John left home at an early age and lived a life of solitude in the desert. He never cut his hair, he wore rough clothes and ate locusts and wild honey. When he finally burst onto the scene he was a mighty prophet—pointing to Jesus. He never took a course in public relations and he never read the book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, because he ended up getting his head cut off. But He received the approval of God. When you devote your life to pointing others to Jesus, you won't win any popularity contests and you will be labeled as intolerant. But that's okay. The only approval you need to hear is when God says to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant." We've looked at Zechariah, and we've learned something from John. Now let's take a few moments and learn something about:

## **III. JESUS: WHAT DOES THIS PROPHECY MEAN?**

In this inspired prophecy, Zechariah speaks more about Jesus than he does about his own son, John. Did you recognize Jesus in his song? There are two powerful word pictures that speak of the power and character of Jesus. First, we learn in verse 69 that Jesus is God's:

### **1. Horn of salvation (vs.69). Strength over His enemies**

In verse 68, Zechariah praises the Lord because He has, "come and has redeemed his people." Last week we saw where Elizabeth called Mary's unborn child, "my Lord." Here, Zechariah has so much faith that he talks about the birth and redemption of Jesus as if it has already happened. Nine months earlier Zechariah could not believe his wife would have a child. Now, filled with

the Holy Spirit, he is so confident of God’s redeeming work in the coming Messiah he puts it in the past tense. For the mind of faith, a promised act of God is as good as done. Zechariah has learned to take God at his word! Remember, God had been silent for 400 years—no angels, no prophets, not a single word from heaven. Now, God was doing more than just speaking: He was coming to visit

Then in verse 69, he tells us how this redemption will happen. He says, “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” Here he refers to Jesus as a horn of salvation. Here, a “horn” doesn’t mean a musical instrument like a trumpet. It is a reference to the sharp and dangerous horn of a wild bull, ram, oxen, or deer. These animals use their horns against their enemies. Get the point? Pardon the pun. All the conquering power and strength of a bull or a ram or a deer is concentrated in its horns. In the same way, all the power and strength of God’s salvation is concentrated in the horn called Christ. There are several references to the power of a horn in the Old Testament. For instance, the Psalmist writes: “For surely your enemies, O Lord, surely your enemies will perish; all evildoers will be scattered. You have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox.” (Psalm 92:9-10) In Psalm 18:2 David sings this song after God has delivered him from his enemy, Saul, “The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation.” A horn of salvation speaks of power. Jesus has great power to conquer all His enemies. A horn also speaks of protection. Horned animals generally use their horns only to protect themselves when they are threatened. Jesus is our source of power and protection.

You may recall a couple of years ago, as we were in the initial stages of the Discover the Joy building program, people were generously donating all kinds of merchandise to build our building. We got cars, boats, jewelry and we even got a Longhorn steer. The day of the auction I had my picture made in a stall with that Longhorn, and I don’t mind telling you I was a little scared. That animal had these long, sharp horns and he kept staring at me like I didn’t know what I was doing—and I didn’t. I was afraid that Longhorn was going to think I was an Aggie fan, so I thought about saying, “Hook ‘em horns” but then I decided that wouldn’t be too smart either. I thought about the advice “just take the bull by the horns”—but since he wasn’t a really a bull, I decided to *steer* clear. Now, I have been around Alabama cows a lot when I was growing up, but do you know what it was that made me fearful that day? It was those sharp horns. The horn made that animal something that deserved caution and consideration. It spoke of power to hurt anything that would threaten that animal. When it says here that Jesus is the “horn of salvation for us” it means He has conquered His enemies and has dealt with any enemy that would threaten us as well. John Piper writes:

Satan may be a roaring lion seeking someone to devour, but none of those who take refuge in Christ, the horn of our salvation, can Satan destroy. If I were an artist, I would paint for you a picture today of how Jesus, the horn of salvation has conquered Satan, the roaring lion. The scene would be of a distant hill at dawn. The sun is about to rise behind the hill and the rays shoot up and out of the picture. And all alone, silhouetted on the hill in the center of the picture, very dark, is a magnificent wild ox standing with his back seven feet tall and the crown of his head nine feet tall. On both sides of his head there is a horn curving out and up six feet long and twelve inches thick at the base. He stands there

sovereign and serene; facing the southern sky with his massive neck slightly cocked ... and impaled at the end of his right horn hangs a huge lion, dead.

Jesus has conquered the devil and because of that, we can rejoice and be glad!

## **2. Sunrise (vs. 78) Illuminating the darkness of death**

The KJV translates that word in verse 78 as "dayspring." What's a dayspring? The NIV translates it "sun rise" but that's really not exact either. It is the Greek word "anatole" (same spelling as the big hotel in Dallas). It's a word that describes the sudden appearance of the sun at dawn (thus "day"); it was also used to describe the springing up of grass after a rain (thus "spring"). "Light bursting into darkness" is probably the best pure translation of this beautiful word. That's the second word picture of Jesus Zechariah gives us. Here, he prophesies that Jesus comes like a brilliant light illuminating the darkness. Verse 79 says Jesus will "shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death." That's what the prophet Isaiah predicted when he wrote: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." (Isaiah 9:2) Who are these people who are walking in darkness? It's us. Darkness bears witness to uncertainty and fear. According to the scriptures, those who reject God do so because their minds have been darkened. (Ephesians 4:18) People all over the world share a common fear: Death. None of us have ever been there before, so we don't know what's it going to be like. The Universal human problem is death. From the start, God said, "the soul that sins, it shall die." (Ezra 18:4) Now, if you have never sinned, you don't have to worry about death but if you have ever had a sinful thought, spoken a sinful word, or performed a sinful deed, you are going to have to deal with death. In the New Testament, God expresses it this way, "The wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23)

Our culture has created a dark, sinister creature to symbolize death. We call him the grim reaper. He is this tall gaunt figure who wears a robe and hood that shadows his face. In his bony hand is a reaper's sickle with its razor-sharp edge glinting. We cringe in fear as we assume this grim reaper is going to swing his sickle and cut the cord of our life. Ugh! How dark and scary! And each of us has an appointment with this grim reaper. Now what I'm about to share with you should cause you so much joy and excitement that if you really could grasp it, you will jump up and run around a few pews. The reason Jesus came was to deal with this death problem. The reason He took on a human body was so that He could experience death.

I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases Hebrews 2:14-15 in *The Message*. If this doesn't make you want to shout, check your pulse, because you may already be dead. Listen to this glorious truth:

"Since the children are made of flesh and blood, it's logical that the Savior took on flesh and blood in order to rescue us by His death. By embracing death, taking it to Himself, He destroyed the devil's hold on death and freed all who cower through life, scared to death of death."

This passage is saying that Jesus has already faced the grim reaper; he embraced death! When Jesus died, he grabbed that old fellow, looked him straight in the eye and said, "boo!" And the

grim reaper fell at the feet of Jesus and confessed, "Jesus, you are Lord over death!" And into the darkness and uncertainty of death, Jesus is shining like a ten-billion-watt floodlight so that even the shadow of death disappears before Him. Oh, the old grim reaper is still someone to be feared by a person who stands outside of Christ. If I weren't a Christian, I would fear death every second of my life. But for those of us who are now in Christ, when the time for death comes for us, the old grim reaper has been changed into an angel of mercy who escorts us into the arms of Jesus. Jesus is that "dayspring," that life-giving star, the light that was promised centuries earlier. My friend, there is only one way to be saved, that is by putting your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. There are no exceptions to God's plan of salvation.

Most of you have heard of the comedian W. C. Fields. He was pretty funny, but he lived a life of sin and debauchery. When he was on his deathbed a friend found him sitting in bed reading through a Bible. His friend asked him what he was doing. W. C. Fields said, "Looking for loopholes, my friend, looking for loopholes." There are loopholes in our laws and sometimes you can hire an intelligent attorney to help you find a legal loophole but there are no loopholes in God's Law. "The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

## CONCLUSION

Peter Marshall once told the story of when a young pastor was called to the bedside of an old Scottish shepherd who was dying. Although the shepherd was a Christian, he was terrified of facing death. The pastor wanted to give him some encouragement so he could face death peacefully. He asked him, "You were a shepherd, right?" The shepherd said, "Aye, I have tended sheep many a day." The parson asked, "Have you ever stood on a hillside and watched the wind drive a cloud across the valley with the shadow approaching you?" "Many a time," the old man remembered. "And when you saw that cloud come racing across the heather toward you and your flock were you afraid?" The old man drew himself up on his elbow and said, "Afraid? Of a shadow? Nay, I've never run from a shadow." And his eyes began to flood with tears as the pastor read those familiar words from the Bible. "Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." (Psalm 23:4) The old shepherd said, "I see it now. It is only the shadow—not the real thing—that can touch a believer." And his fear was replaced with peace. His family reported that the old shepherd lived only two more days. As he grew weaker, they were sitting by his bedside. In the very early hours of the morning—it was pitch black outside, the old shepherd opened his eyes and said, "Blow out the candles—the sun is up now." Then with a smile, he was gone ... to the place where the sun never sets. His family reported to the pastor that just before he had died, he had said the sun was up. They thought it strange. But the pastor recalled the words from Zechariah's song—and they understood that, indeed, he had seen the sunrise. Have you? When the Son of God is living in your heart, then you don't have to fear the shadow of death. Look to Jesus today. He is our power, our protection, and our peace in times of struggle.



## OUTLINE

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2. One small act of obedience can be the catalyst for a great blessing. (64)

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1. God has a unique plan for my life. (60)

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart." *Jeremiah 1:5*

2. I should be pointing others to Jesus. (76-77)

### III. JESUS: WHAT DOES THIS PROPHECY MEAN?

Jesus is God's:

1. Horn of salvation (69) Strength over His enemies

For surely your enemies, O Lord, surely your enemies will perish; all evildoers will be scattered. You have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox ... *Psalms 92:9-10*

2. Sunrise (78) Illuminating the darkness of death

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. *Isaiah 9:2*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes