

Sunrise and Shadow

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter one. When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that 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.

They said to her, there's no one among your relatives who has that name. Then they made signs to his father to find out what he would like to name the child.

He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, his name is John.

Immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbours were 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?

[1 : 07] For the Lord's hand was with him. His father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a horn of salvation 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 ancestors, 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 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 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.

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel. Thanks, Joe.

I'm going to speak together about this passage for a while now. It's a really interesting passage. I don't know if you tracked well with what Joe was reading, but it's a mention of the prosaic and the poetic.

[2 : 48] You know, you've got a baby born eight days later, the relatives and the neighbours are all in the house. What are you going to call the baby? He's got to be called Zechariah after his old man.

And there's this argument, no, no, no, he's got to be called John. No, call him after his dad. No, we want to call him John. So that's very kind of familiar, prosaic kind of way of experiencing life, arguing over the name of a baby.

Happened to me and Louise, I think with one or two of our kids, tell people what you've called the baby and they're like, hmm, I don't know about that. But then there's this poem, this song, this praise.

And I think there's a fascination in here. If you read Luke chapter one carefully, because right at the beginning of the chapter, he says, I want to write an orderly, detailed, thorough account of the life of Jesus so that you, Theophilus, who I'm writing to, and all my other readers, can be really sure about the reliability of what I've written.

So Luke's saying, here's a great, accurate, historical record about the life of Jesus that's based on eyewitness testimony and interviews.

[4 : 03] So that's it. There's this sort of orderly, fact-based narrative. We get chapter one, what do we get? We get names, times, people, places, facts.

But then thrown into that is this fact that there are two really great, amazing, wonderful poems. So we move from fact and evidence, times, places, people, to poetry, to song, to emotion.

And that's a little surprising to me when I read Luke's introduction. What's going on? Well, Luke doesn't just want to tell us something. Luke wants us to feel something.

He wants us to know the truth of what he's saying, not just intellectually. He wants us to know it in our bones, in our gut, in the very center of our being.

Luke wants not just to inform us, but to move us. He wants us to feel, alongside Zechariah today, relief that God has come good and true to his word, that God has come through for him.

[5 : 16] He wants us to feel hope that, yes, God keeps his promises, and there are better days coming as God breaks into the history of our world through the coming of his son.

We have to feel that surge of confidence that comes by knowing that we can depend on and trust in God. So what we have here then is a story of hope, hope that is being restored by a promise-keeping God.

I'm going to think about two or three things with you. I'm going to think about sunrise, I'm going to think about shadows, and I'm going to think about knowledge. So there's this idea of sunrise.

Just at the end of this great poetic outburst from Zechariah, the elderly father, he talks about the tender mercy of our God by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine in those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

So there's this idea then of a sunrise, a new light coming into the world. So in this chapter, Luke's showing us that God speaks through the angel Gabriel, disrupting a silence that's lasted 400 years.

[6 : 35] For 400 years, no prophet of God has come to his people. Now that threw up a lot of questions for them, didn't it? Has God forgotten them? Has God washed his hands of them and cast them aside?

Will God's promised Messiah, the Savior, really come? And so John the Baptist matters because the coming of John the Baptist as a prophet to prepare the way for the Lord means God has kept his word.

This chapter's full of people like Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary who are waiting and longing for God to come again, for God to speak again, for God to come near, for God to fulfill his promise of bringing a savior.

And God is saying, you can trust me. My word is true. I am coming amongst you to redeem or to save. But Luke's also showing us that the way that God comes isn't the way that we might have expected.

The sun doesn't rise in a sudden burst of blazing light from heaven. We don't find an army of the Lord with the Messiah at its head, banners flying, swords and shields and spears glistening in the sunshine.

[8 : 00] We don't feel the ground trembling beneath the trampling hooves of a great cavalry or the wheels of charioteers bearing the Messiah along on a wave of power and popular acclaim.

So the sun rises, but not in the way that they were anticipating. The dawn of this new day breaks much more slowly, more gently. God is coming to save his people, but he's coming via a teenage woman from a small town, Mary, who's going to be the Messiah's mother.

God is coming, you might say, incognito. This coming king comes in humility, in obscurity, bringing the upside down kingdom.

A reminder that God's kingdom is built with the powerless and the unknown and the unspectacular, with the weak and the ordinary and even the foolish. They're the ones who are central to God's wonderful works of salvation in this world.

People use power so often to dominate and destroy, to consume and to defy God. But God comes in humility, in meekness, in obscurity, to show that the kingdom he is building is so different from the kingdom that we would build for ourselves.

[9 : 32] So you might be waiting for God today in some sort of way, wishing that God would act, do something for you. And all of us, if we've got that kind of sense that we're looking for God, where are you, God?

I wish you would help me, God. I wish you would show yourself to me. We're often wanting that to happen in a dramatic way. And I just want to say, well, this is a reminder that God's dealings in our

lives are often gentle and subtle and counterintuitive.

That often it's in quietness, in rest, in worship, in the reading of God's word, in prayer or in the bread and wine of communion that God enters our lives and shapes us in his image.

A couple of weeks ago, I was recommended this book that I read, *You Are What You Love*. And it's a book, the subtitle says, *The Spiritual Power of Habit*.

So there's power in habit to form our hearts, to fill us as people with life and hope.

[10:44] You may be looking for a bright new dawn in your life. And that dawn might come to you in the simplest of ways, through the most basic of habits.

As we read God's word, pray, join with his people in worship, receive communion, that the Messiah comes, that this Messiah enters our lives and shines light into our darkness to lead us in the path of peace, as Zechariah says.

And that's what we're going to see next, I think, is that, you know, Zechariah was a man who lived his life in shadows, in hard places. What sustained him? Habits of scripture, habits of knowing God's word, habits of prayer, habits of worship, brought him through difficult times and hard years. So I'm going to think about that next. We've talked about sunrise, that God's light will shine. But we're going to talk about shadow too. Because, I don't know, I mean, I've got this here, you know, listen to the poetry of this man, Zechariah, you know, a poem that comes from his heart.

You know, he talks about salvation from enemies, from the hand of those who hate us. Again, he talks about being rescued from the hand of our enemies.

[12:08] Lord, we want to serve you without fear, he says. He talks about the tender mercy of God, the living in darkness, being in the shadow of death itself.

So, this, this poem is written by a man who knows tears and fears. He's lived a life full of shadow. This is a man who's wrestled with the fact that sometimes life is agony. Life is just not hard. It's more than hard. It's bitter. It's sorrowful.

It's agonizing. And he's struggled with the agony of his life and at the same time tried to hold on to hope in the face of sorrow.

I'm trying to think about Zechariah looking through his old album of photographs. Okay, so think about that. I don't know how many of you have a photograph album in your house.

[13:14] We don't need them quite so much anymore. We just scroll through our screens to look at family photos. But back in the day we made albums full of photographs that we had printed off.

And we could leaf through these albums and look at our childhood photos and look at ourselves in our school uniforms and look at ourselves at our graduations or when we start work and look at ourselves with our first kids.

So think about Zechariah and Elizabeth. 18 months before what happens here just scan back and they're there sitting together in their old age Zechariah and Elizabeth and they're going through their photograph album.

And there's a photograph first of all of Zechariah and his mum and dad on the farm when he's a kid. And then turns the page there's some more photographs at Zechariah and his friends as teenagers hanging outside the synagogue.

Next page in the photograph album is the wedding photos. The big day for him and Elizabeth. Starting their married life together with the hopes and dreams of a family a house full of children and noise and laughter and fun.

[14:29] And then next page in the photograph album and what do we have? We've got Zechariah looking very smart first day of work as a 30 year old male as a priest serving at the temple in Jerusalem.

A big day again in his life. That uniform cost him a small fortune. And what do Elizabeth and Zechariah do as they look back through the photographs the story of their life?

Well they probably commiserate with each other and comfort each other because there's sadness in these photographs. There's hopes that have faded a family that never came.

Dreams that weren't fulfilled. The story of their life together is a life lived under the shadow of loss and grief.

That's what's written on the pages of their photograph album 18 months before. But now 18 months later they've been pasting in some new pages so there's some new pages at the back of the photograph album.

[15 : 34] What are these new photographs like? Well the first one is a baby scan photo and it's pasted into the end of the album and above it in big block capitals J-O-H-N.

John we're having a baby whenever thought it would happen and his name is going to be John. So there's the baby scan photo next page what's in the photo album there's Elizabeth and Mary arms around each other both with their baby bumps big swollen pregnant bellies smiling and laughing full of hope like sisters despite the huge age gap and then another page baby John he's arrived red face thick dark hair mouth wide open crying and then another page of photographs the circumcision party eight days later all the relatives around at the house arguing about the name of the baby call him Zechariah call him after his dad no his name is John just listen to his please so there's two stories there there's two themes or threads to

Zechariah's life that come out in this poem and the first is the thread of agonized disappointment and alongside that is the thread of hope these are the two things that have shaped his thinking over the years and the two things that come bubbling out in this poem as he an old man looks down on his little baby boy holding him in his arms praying and prophesying in poetic manner there's the agony of childlessness and worry of disappointment and social embarrassment that they didn't have children so common for people at that time to feel that kind of pressure there's the agony of unanswered prayer of silent heavens and a God who doesn't seem to care there's the sorrow of spiritual depression and fear for the future and that's one thread of the story but woven in is another thread another story how in the face of these agonies there are years and years and decade after decade of patient prayer and trust year after year decade after decade holding holding to the promises of God clinging to the covenant that he describes here in the poem the promise of a new and greater

David who would be the savior the promise to Abraham that he would be a blessing to the nations because he year after year day after day week after week he remembers scripture he feeds his heart and his soul on the habits of prayer and scripture and worship and so these things are etched into who he is as a human being the things he knew about God the things that he pondered and prayed for and hoped for they were sitting there all along beside the sorrow and the agony and all these hopes come true because God has held to his promise God as Zechariah confesses here is the God of unbreakable covenant such an important word in the Bible covenant verse 72 you're the God who shows mercy to our fathers remembers his holy covenant a covenant is an unbreakable promise and so

God has made an unbreakable promise that he will show mercy to his people that he will remember his promise of a savior covenants were made in blood in Old Testament times you made and entered into this unbreakable contract you offered a sacrifice of blood to show that you meant what you said God's promise to you to me to show us love to be for us and not against us to be with us always to go before us at every point that covenant is also written in blood not the blood of Old Testament sacrifice but the blood of Jesus the son of God crucified for us when we look at the cross we see covenant we see that God's tender mercies are ours forever we are his and he is for us Zechariah knew that despite the struggles of his life despite that thread and theme of loss and agony and hurt in his life there is a better story another thread a hope that comes from the habits that have formed his heart habits of worship of prayer of scripture the promises of God are real they're solid they're trustworthy and they're true there is shadow in all our lives but as we move to God towards God there is sunrise as well the coming of the saviour is the breaking of a new and a better day and to move you know what's the difference between living in the shadows and living in the sunshine how do we move between the two

[21 : 18] I think he describes it really well when he talks in verse 77 about how John the Baptist is coming to give the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins to know we're saved to know we're forgiven to know we have peace with God moves us from the shadows into the sunshine so he there's two little parts to his poem isn't there there's this first part which is about praise to God and then there's the second part that starts in verse 76 that's blessing for his son you my child will be called a prophet of the most high why you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him now this is found through the Old Testament this idea of preparing the way for the Lord and it's drawn from a sort of recognizable custom from the ancient world where if a king is going to visit your town you get ready you prepare the way for the king to come to your town you fix the roads you fill in the potholes you drain the puddles because you don't want the king to remember your town as the place where his chariot busted a wheel and the whole convoy broke down and he

had to stay an extra two nights and his schedule was disrupted and he hates your town forever such a terrible place that was a custom in the ancient world to prepare the way for the coming of the king make sure the roads are flat and smooth and easy to travel over same thing happens today last time the pope was in edinburgh which is not that long ago he was staying in morningside where our church is located and the roads were repaved for him edinburgh didn't want to be embarrassed by the pope going into a pothole so in the ancient world the king will send his envoy ahead to make sure the road has been prepared to make sure the road is passable and smooth because the king doesn't want things to go wrong either he wants to make sure the people of the town are ready to receive him and so in the same way john the baptist is sent ahead to make sure that people are ready to receive jesus the king when he arrives how does he prepare us how are we made ready for the coming of jesus the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of our sins that's how we're made ready to have christ jesus in our lives to know salvation through the forgiveness of our sins we are not saved by anything that we do no kind of moralistic change in our behavior no kind of legalistic keeping of religious rules we are forgiven our sins by an act of god's free grace he forgives we don't earn it we don't buy it we don't deserve it it's grace but it means that we do all need forgiven all of us you know we may think forgiveness is for for the worst kind of criminals you know the monsters that are out there but actually all of us need to be forgiven there's sin in all of us because what is sin well sin is greed it's lies it's cheating it's stealing it's adultery it's not worshiping god it's blasphemy we all have sinned and fall short of god's glory and we need to know what it is to be forgiven to have a relationship with god i was listening to a sermon on this on this chapter a couple of days ago by alistair beg who's a scottish guy but he's a minister in cleveland ohio and he was talking about what kind of knowledge is this is it just

an understanding oh yeah i need to be forgiven and god does that through jesus or is it something more than that and he says it is something more it needs to be a personal experience of living as a forgiven person and the the way he explained it was imagine you're a young guy and you know you're not married but you know what it means to be married you know you have a wedding you've got your wife your bride in future years there might be children you set up home together you become parents you go through life's journey with each other and you know that there might be ups and downs to that and stresses and strains but all your knowledge about marriage is really theoretical you've never been married well one day this young guy actually gets married suddenly he is a wife he has a responsibility a commitment he has to put somebody else's interests ahead of his own every single day he has to make sacrifices all the time for the happiness and the well-being of this other person he knows what it is to live with another person and the ups and downs and nooks and crannies of everyday life sharing everything he knows from experience because he's a married man do you know God's forgiveness from experience because you are a forgiven person the weight and the guilt of your sin taken away from you it's absolutely critical that you do because it's at the very heart of what it means to be a

Christian are you forgiven for your sin how can this forgiveness be mine or yours only through the cross of Jesus Christ this Messiah comes incognito to be born of a virgin in Bethlehem to live in the shadows himself to suffer the incarnate deity to go to the cross obedient unto death so that our sins will be paid for not by us but by him so that the cross where our sins are nailed and we are given peace with God so that we don't have to live in the shadows but walk instead in the path of peace what a great poem this is it's evidence isn't it it's evidence of God's big story of redemption he is sending a saviour he's true to his word that's a great story that really matters what God is doing in this world but the little story of Zech and Aariah and Elizabeth that also matters it's recorded here by Luke it matters to him but it's recorded here too by God through Luke because it matters to God the big story is important and the little stories are important the big story of salvation is vital but your story your little story your agonies your sorrows your disappointments your fears your distresses that story also matters to me to other people but to God and heaven as well he knows your story with its twists and turns and sins and sufferings and he says I am here I am for you I am with you I want what is best for you I have sent my son to save you this is a great story and a great reality John the Baptist is all about preparing the way for us to know Jesus as our saviour are you ready to receive Jesus whenever I read about

John the Baptist getting ready to prepare the way of the Lord I think about a song by Curtis Mayfield people get ready so I thought I'd just end with a little quote from Curtis Mayfield people get ready people get ready there's a train a coming you don't need no baggage just get on board all you need

is faith to hear the diesels humming don't need no ticket just thank the Lord it's not what we do it's not about having a ticket in our hand it's simply about trusting what God has done and thanking him for it yes there's hard stuff in Zechariah's life and in our lives but there's hope and there's worship and there's praise and that's where he ends isn't it in a place of hope and worship because God is trustworthy and true and I'm hoping that at the end of this service he'll end in a place of hope and worship too that's my prayer for you and I hope it's your prayer for yourself thanks let me say a quick prayer and

[30 : 13] Andrew's going to line up hopefully our next song which is Psalm 23 Lord we do want our poems our stories our songs to be not just dominated by sadness but to be woven through with love and hope and worship because you're a God who's trustworthy and true may we sing the songs of salvation together as one people and we pray for anybody who's not part of your people yet that today they would get ready and that they would be one with you amen