

Christmas Hope

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you to our musicians and readers for leading us in our carols and readings this afternoon.! It's great to be able to sing together and to remember the joy and the wonder that comes when we gather together to think of what God has done in sending His Son into this world.

What I'm going to do now is just give a short talk on the last Bible reading that we had that Martin read for us and think through just what it means that God sent Jesus.

God becoming man and the person of Jesus came into this world for us. Well, you know that Christmas obviously is coming when there are lights everywhere.

So there's lights in our gardens as we climb up ladders and try and attach them to various bits of tree and bush that we've got. Candles, we light candles in our homes.

Decorations come up in the shops from about October saying that Christmas is coming. And even whole streets are lit up with lights. Lights in the darkness because of the season that we are in.

[1 : 07] And so light shining in darkness does capture for us that Christmas is coming. Christmas is here. Light in darkness. But you know that light shining in darkness also declares the message that is at the very heart of Christmas.

That's why at the beginning of our service we read these words from the prophet Isaiah. From Isaiah chapter 9. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. It's saying that this dawning light would save those who are living in darkness.

Who is the light? Well, the light is Jesus. It's a prophecy about the coming of Jesus into this world. Jesus is the light in our dark world.

And that's what we see from that last Bible reading that we had from Luke chapter 1. It's one of the original songs of Christmas. And it was sung by a man called Zechariah.

[2 : 10] And he concludes his song by singing these words. The rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

He's saying this rising sun will come to us from heaven and will shine on those living in darkness. That's us.

And in the shadow of death. That's also us. Death is our experience. We will all die. And that's why the message of Christmas, the true message of Christmas, could not be more real and more relevant for this dark world.

Because it's obvious to all of us that there is something wrong with this world. It is a dark place. Wars. Violence. Injustice.

Poverty. Abuse. Disease. Depression. Death. There is something wrong with the world, isn't there? And if we're really honest with ourselves, we know if we look deep down inside that there is also something really wrong with us.

[3 : 19] In our hearts and in our lives, there is darkness. And yet it is into this weary world of darkness that Jesus came to save.

The true light shining on humanity as we live in darkness and under the shadow of death. And that's why the message of Christmas gives us real hope.

The hope of salvation. And that's really what bursts through in Zechariah's song. It is a song about salvation. And we really see three things from it, which is where I'm going to go with this message this afternoon.

We see how salvation comes. We see why salvation matters. And we see what salvation brings. How it comes. Why it matters.

What it brings. So firstly, how salvation comes. In this song that Zechariah sings, salvation comes through God's promised Savior. Now, how did Zechariah know and come to sing about God's

salvation?

[4 : 26] Well, Zechariah was a priest, but he had failed to take seriously what God had said to him. Because an angel said to Zechariah that, your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.

Now, he was an old guy when the angel came. And the son, the angel said, would be called John. And John had a job and he would prepare people for the coming of Jesus.

That was John the Baptist. But Zechariah didn't believe it. Because not only was he old, but his wife Elizabeth was old. And so he didn't believe this could really happen.

And so he was struck dumb for failing to believe what God had promised. And he couldn't talk all the way through his wife Elizabeth's pregnancy.

I guess some pregnant mothers would be glad if their husband couldn't talk all the way through the pregnancy. But that was Zechariah. And so he had plenty time to be thinking about God's salvation plan and what the angel had said to him.

[5 : 27] Because when John was born, these were the words that came from his lips. He said, praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

And so this is a song, not just about Zechariah's boy son, John, but it's a song about God's promised savior. Here, Zechariah is praising God because he has come to his people.

It's literally saying God has visited. Now it's Christmas time, so we visit people, don't we? And you know what it means to visit someone, especially at Christmas.

We visit those that we love. We visit those that we care for. We visit those that we are concerned about. And we want to be with them. And that's the kind of visit that's in view here, except it's God who is doing the visiting.

And that is really Christmas. God comes to visit us in Jesus. But why did God come? Well, Zechariah tells us he has come to save.

[6 : 34] And he sings, 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.

Now the horn of salvation being raised up in the house of David is saying, Jesus would be born into this man David, King David, into his family line.

And he would be a mighty savior. And this would fulfill everything God had promised through the prophets. And that's why Zechariah sings that God will show mercy to our ancestors.

And he will remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham. So God made a covenant. And we know what a covenant is. It is a solemn obligation, an agreement.

And God made a covenant with his people. He promised Abraham that a descendant would come from his family who would bring blessing to all the peoples of the world.

[7 : 39] And so when Zechariah says God will remember his holy covenant, it doesn't mean that God had forgotten what he had promised and somehow he needed somebody to jog his memory. No, it means now is the time.

Now is the time for God to do what he promised he would do. And send his savior Jesus to save his people. And so Christmas is God's visit to this world to save.

And just like we give advance notice when we want to pay somebody a visit, like I text my mom in Aberdeen and I say, Mom, I'm going to come and see you on Tuesday. Does that work for you?

So God prepared the world for the coming of Jesus, his promised savior. And so Christmas is about God coming to save us.

Now that indicates something, doesn't it? It tells us that we need saving. What do we need to be saved from? Saved from what?

[8 : 42] Well, that takes us to our second point. Firstly, how salvation comes, it comes through God's promised savior, who is Jesus. But why does salvation matter?

Well, it matters because we are enslaved to our enemies. That's what this song is saying. So we need to be set free. And that's why Zechariah sings, He has come to his people and redeemed them.

Now that word redeemed speaks of being released from slavery. It's a word connected with salvation and the storyline of the Bible. So God established this pattern of being redeemed and saved when he delivered his people Israel from their slavery in Egypt.

They were enslaved to their enemies, the Egyptians, but God redeemed them and he set them free. And so when Zechariah uses this word redeemed, he's echoing God's saving work in the past and he is singing that God is going to continue that saving work and do something significant right now

in the present.

Because we're told in his song, we need salvation from our enemies. And he says that God has visited us to rescue us from the hand of our enemies.

[10:03] Who are our enemies? Well, Zechariah is referring to a deeper problem than just physical enemies. He's talking about our spiritual enemies of Satan, the devil, of sin and of death.

They're the enemies of the human race and they always have been. And if we go right back to the beginning of time, we understand how and why. Because when our first parents, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God with the help of our enemy, Satan, sin entered the world.

And as a consequence of sin, death also entered the world. And that's why both sin and death come up in this song. And so we need the forgiveness of our sins and we're told we're living in the shadow of death.

And we know that's true. And sin is slavery. It's a spiritual slavery from which we need rescue.

And the Christmas message is that Jesus came to save us and set us free. Now, when it comes to sin, most people don't think sin is really that big of a deal.

[11:16] Especially if our sin isn't really harming anyone else, then surely it's fine. And so this expressive individualism of our culture tells us that we're free to do whatever we want to do.

We're free to feel however we want to feel and then act on our feelings. And so the slogans would be, you do you, or be true to yourself, or follow your heart.

But Christianity reminds us that we're not as free, actually, as we like to think we are. We're really enslaved to sin. Because we're sinful by nature as well as by choice.

And so even if we believe we've got the freedom to live however we please, it is only really the kind of freedom that an inmate has in prison.

So yeah, an inmate has got some freedom. They can socialize a bit. They can read. They maybe get some exercise outside for a bit. But they're still locked up in prison.

[12:19] Because sin has this addictive and therefore enslaving power over us. And so perceived freedom can actually be slavery to addictive behavior.

For example, we might think that we are in control of our anger. We're in control of our speech.

We're in control of our sexual desires. We're in control of our money.

But in reality, all of these things can be controlling us. And we can be enslaved to them. And so when we sin, our sin doesn't just disappear.

It is an enemy that takes on a life of its own and wants to destroy us. And we can't escape its clutches. And so unless our sin is forgiven, the result is spiritual death.

And sin is forgiven from God forever. And that is why salvation matters. We need a savior who will redeem us from our slavery and who will rescue us and who will set us free.

[13:27] And so true freedom comes not by playing into the hands of our spiritual enemies, but by being saved by Jesus Christ through having our sins forgiven.

And that's why Zechariah sings that God will 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.

So that's the second point, why salvation matters. First, how salvation comes. Second, why it matters. And third, what salvation brings. It brings forgiveness from our sins and also defeat of the darkness.

Because when Zechariah sings about the hope of salvation, he is likely singing this song as he holds his newborn baby son, John, in his arms because he's singing it to him.

He 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 our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven.

[14:43] And so Zechariah concludes his song by saying two things. And the first is that salvation is personal. It brings forgiveness, which means you and I need to have our sins forgiven.

And we can have. And the song tells us why. It's because of the tender mercy of our God.

Christmas is all about the loving God wanting to show you and me mercy.

And so God is just. And we want God to be just. And we need God to be just. And in his justice, God must punish all sin.

And that includes your sin and my sin. And yet we're told here that God is also merciful. And so he wants to forgive us.

And that's why Jesus came. Coming with a physical body so he could die on a cross and pay the price for our sin. As Zechariah sings.

[15 : 46] To shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. To guide our feet into the path of peace. So on the cross, as Jesus died, he was basically plunged into darkness.

So that we can enter into the light. Without fear of our sins being exposed. Because in the tender mercy of God, our sins can be forgiven.

And so salvation is personal. We need it. But secondly, salvation is also cosmic. Because Jesus is the rising sun who visited us from heaven.

Coming to obliterate the darkness. And to destroy death. And to bring about ultimate peace. And so just as the first light of dawn indicates an end to the darkness of the night.

Like this morning in my house when I sat on the sofa and looked out of the window in the darkness. The darkness soon dispelled. And the light came.

[16 : 54] Well, it is Glasgow. So maybe the light will come sometime in June or July or August. But you know, the day comes. And the night goes. And so in the coming of Jesus, the rising sun assures us that the darkness will end.

It's still about right now. But one day it will be gone forever. Or just think of it in terms of energy saving light bulbs. Those bulbs that cost a fortune and don't really give proper light.

Until you've had them on for about five minutes. And then they display their full brightness. And so when you switch them on. You don't get the full brightness. But you know the light is coming.

It takes a wee while before they shine out. And so too the light has been switched on in the coming of Jesus into this world. In his first coming. And you see it in his life.

In the way he healed the sick. The way he controlled the weather. The way he cast out demons. The way he forgave people of their sin. The way that he raised the dead. The light had come into the darkness to dispel it.

[18 : 04] And then it shone even brighter. In his death on the cross. And then in his resurrection from the dead. As he defeated our enemies. Satan, sin, and death.

And his resurrection guaranteed there's still more light to come. To obliterate the darkness for good. Because when Jesus returns.

His light will shine forever. And darkness will be no more. Which means no more death. No more mourning. No more crying.

No more pain. And isn't that the world that we all want? Of course it is. Because we are weary. And we are frustrated. And we long for everything to be restored and put right.

And the hope of Christmas tells us it's coming. We want light instead of darkness. We want light. And life instead of death.

[19 : 04] We want love instead of hate. We want peace instead of conflict. We want joy instead of sorrow. We want hope instead of despair.

Deep down isn't that what you long for? Of course it is. It's what we all long for. But only the true meaning of Christmas can satisfy those deep longings in our hearts.

In a way that nothing else in this world will ever possibly be able to do for any of us. And so Zechariah's song is saying to us, Jesus brings the salvation that you and I so desperately need.

Even if we don't realize it. And his song is also saying that Jesus will bring the salvation our world so desperately needs. Even if we can't fully grasp it.

And so maybe you're here this afternoon. Thank you so much for coming to our carol service. But maybe you're just skeptical about Christianity. And wonder whether all of this can possibly be true.

[20 : 06] But see when you listen and when you read Zechariah's song. Surely this makes you want Christianity to be true. Because there is no better hope for our lives.

And there is no better hope for our world. And so Christmas is this amazing invitation to stop living in darkness. So you can live with real hope.

Live with hope and know that Jesus will cast out the darkness forever. There is no better news for you, for me, for our world this Christmas.

God cares enough about us. He cares enough about this world to visit us. And so whatever dark times you may be going through right now.

Or whatever dark times you may go through in the future. You can have hope. Because we have a God who has come to us. Inner darkness.

[21 : 30] Who took on flesh and bones to be with us. And we have a God who has defeated darkness at the cross. And he promises to lead us out of that darkness.

And one day the darkness in this world will be gone forever. What more could you ask for this Christmas? And this good news about the coming of Jesus.

Let me pray and then we'll sing.