

A PRIEST TURNED PROPHET

Luke 1:76-80

Intro: Along with the account in Scripture of the conception and birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, was the miraculous conception and birth of another who was to play a major role in the life and ministry of Christ. That one was the one we know now as John the Baptist, the son of Zacharias and Elisabeth. The birth of Christ was the most miraculous birth ever to occur, when the Son of God became a Man, conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. But the birth of John the Baptist was also miraculous, not to the same extent as the birth of our Lord, but miraculous nevertheless because John was born when both of his parents were, as Zacharias said to the angel of the Lord, “well stricken in years” (Luke 1:18). In fact, Zacharias did not believe the angel, and so was stricken with dumbness until after his son was born.

The passage which I want to consider with you tonight is the latter part of what is called, *the prophecy of Zacharias*. Luke 1:67 tells us that Zacharias was “filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied,” and so we are to understand that he was speaking by divine inspiration. And he was fulfilling both ministries of a prophet--that of *forthtelling* and *foretelling*. And so Zacharias was, on this occasion, A PRIEST TURNED PROPHET.

The first part of his message had to do with what God had done in fulfillment of prophecies given to the OT prophets; the latter part had to do with the unique place that his son, John, was to have in the ministry of the Lord. And it is this part that I want to consider with you because it was not only relevant for John the Baptist, but for us as well.

It is hard for us to comprehend how low things had fallen spiritually at the time John the Baptist and our Lord were born, but it was described in the most graphic terms by the prophet Isaiah in words which we find in Isa.9:2. Let me read them to you:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light:
they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon
them hath the light shined.

This is describing the people of Israel when the Lord came (and also during a large part of the time before He came). They were walking in darkness. That is, they were living in spiritual ignorance and sin--and were content to have it their way. The nation to whom the prophets had been sent with the light of the Gospel, was now described as “the land of the shadow of death.” The light had almost been extinguished. The Lord

will never allow it to die completely, but conditions spiritually were very bad in Israel. Religion had become very legalistic. The Pharisees taught works to the exclusion of grace. The people were in darkness, and, consequently, without hope.

Notice how Zacharias described conditions in verse 79 of our text. (Read.) To “**sit** in darkness and in the shadow of death” indicates not only where the people were spiritually, but that they were content to have things the way they were. Most of them were unaware that things could be different. People without Christ and without the light of the Word are always like that. They are like that today. They have no idea that Christ is the One they need. They face their problems and needs in their own wisdom, or in the wisdom of others who are just as blind and needy as they are.

Well, into this situation John the Baptist was born, and our Lord Jesus Christ was born. Both men were “sent from God,” but, as we have seen, in different ways. At this point in Zacharias’ life when his ability to speak had been restored to him, he predicted by the Holy Spirit what the ministry of his son would be. It seems that his son, John, was only a baby when Zacharias spoke these words, but there is no doubt but that he heard these words from his father many times during the years in which he was growing up. Let us look carefully at what Zacharias said about his son.

The first thing that he did was to tell John what he would be called:

I. “THE PROPHET OF THE HIGHEST” (Luke 1:76a).

Although Zacharias was here acting in the role of a prophet, yet his son was the first officially appointed prophet in approximately 400 years. He was the personal prophet, the forerunner (as he is so often called) of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord is here called, “the Highest,” *the Most High God*. This is the equivalent of what the Apostle Paul called our Lord in Rom. 9:5, “...who is over all, God blessed for ever.” The Lord is the Supreme God, the Sovereign God. There is none greater than He! And this statement indicates that John was commissioned by our Lord to proclaim to the people what the Lord wanted him to proclaim (Hendriksen, p. 127). Matthew Henry said it meant “that what he said was as his mouth, what he did was as his harbinger” (V, 595)--harbinger means *his forerunner*.

So we should not be surprised to read what his ministry would be.

II. JOHN THE BAPTIST'S MINISTRY (Luke 1:76b).

John was to “go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways.” This was the prophecy which Isaiah uttered concerning John the Baptist. See Isa. 40:3. It is cited by Matthew in Matt. 3:3 where he was speaking of John the Baptist:

For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

When the delegation of Jews from Jerusalem came from their leaders to find out who John was, he said that he was not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet that should come, but

He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias (John 1:23).

His ministry was to exalt Christ, of Whom he said,

26 ...I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not;

27 He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose (John 1:26-27).

In the latter part of John 3 we find several verses in which John the Baptist was speaking of his own ministry. One statement is especially important: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

John the Baptist was very careful to humble himself so that he could give the greatest possible glory to the Lord Jesus Christ.

But, according to the prophecy of Zacharias, how was he to prepare the ways of the Lord? This brings us to:

III. THE MESSAGE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (Luke 1:77-79).

These are very important verses. They all add up to what the Gospel is. And remember that the Jewish people were not hearing the Gospel from their religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees and elders.

So John the Baptist was “to give the knowledge of salvation unto his,” the Lord’s, “people by the remission of their sins.” And this is why the Apostle John mentioned that John the Baptist’s message was, “Behold the

Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). John did not hesitate to talk about sin. People are not ready to hear the Gospel until they are willing to talk about sin. It is sin that has separated us from God. It is sin that has put us under divine condemnation. The Lord did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. See Matt. 9:13. As the Physician of our souls, he did not come to those who were well and healthy, but to the sick. See Matt. 9:12. The Gospel gives the answer to man’s sin, and John the Baptist proclaimed to the people of Israel that every sacrifice in OT times which had been offered for sins, was a type of the one, final sacrifice which would be made by the Son of God, His sacrifice of Himself which would forever put away the sins of those for whom the Lord died. Zacharias spoke of it as a “remission.” This word speaks of being released from a penalty, of having all charges dropped because they had been fully satisfied. And the record against a forgiven sinner is cleared so completely that it is as though the sins had never been committed.

This was not the idea that the Jews in that day had about their relationship with God. Many felt that they were God’s people because they were Jews. But John the Baptist had the difficult task of proclaiming the saving work of the Messiah Who had come.

But this was not all.

Always when people begin to understand that their problem is sin, they immediately want to do something about it, to atone for their own sins. And this is why it is so natural for them to turn to good works of some kind. Or they may feel, and rightly so, that they are not worthy of such a sacrifice by such a Person as the Lord is. And so this is why John the Baptist was to talk about “the tender mercy of our God.” The very mention of the mercy of God does away with any idea of personal merit, or the need for any works. God is not moved toward sinners because He finds them attractive to Himself--in fact, we merit nothing but His judgment. And yet in His mercy He sent His Son to provide salvation for undeserving sinners. And God’s mercy is sufficient to cover all of the sins of any sinner, regardless of how many there are, or how great they might be. Paul obtained mercy even though he said that he was *the chief of sinners*. Cf. 1 Tim. 1:15.

And notice that it was because God is a God of mercy that “the dayspring from on high hath visited us” (Luke 1:78b). The Lord is “the dayspring.” And He is called this because His coming was like the first rays of the sun after a long, dark night. And he did not come from some place on the

earth, but “from on high”! He is the Lord from above. He is the Light of the world. And you will undoubtedly remember that He said, “He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12b). The Lord Jesus came to a people who were sitting in darkness “and in the shadow of death.” They would have been content to sit in darkness all of their lives if the Dayspring had not arisen upon them. There is nothing to awaken people to the truth in this world which is “in the shadow of death.” That is why Christ came, and that is what John the Baptist’s message was to do in preparing the way for Christ. It was not a popular message then, and it is not a popular message today. But it is the only message of salvation. There is salvation in none other. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and we can only come to God for the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life when we come to Him through Christ.

And then notice how the description of John’s message ends: “To guide our feet into the way of peace.” People in every generation have been concerned about peace--personal peace, family peace, national peace, and world peace. But Christ is “the way of peace.” There is no peace when people walk in darkness. It is only when we are walking in the light of Christ and of the Gospel. There we find peace with God. There we receive peace in our hearts. And it is only in Christ and the Gospel that there can be peace on earth, “good will toward men” (Luke 2:14). And I am not talking about a cease fire; I am speaking about real peace, lasting peace, the peace of God which passes all understanding.

Concl: It seems that little John the Baptist was only eight days old when his father, THE PRIEST TURNED PROPHET, uttered these words of truth. How do you think that John the Baptist was saved? Scripture does not tell us, but surely there is no need for that. With a father like he had, and a mother like he had, we can be sure that Zacharias and Elisabeth were the two main people who taught him about the Savior, and what his own ministry would be. John’s mission was short, but, oh, what a blessing! And it would be impossible to calculate how many were turned to the Lord by his faithful preaching of the Gospel. It is one of the outstanding stories of all of Scripture.

But why would I pick a Scripture like this on the last Sunday night before Christmas of this year? I trust that the Lord has led me. But personally it is because it is so apparent that we live in a world just like the one John the Baptist was born in--a world where people are walking in darkness, and are content to walk in darkness, and who do not know that there is any other way that they could be walking. They do not know that peace about

which so much is said at Christmas time, is never to be found in this world. I hear people talking about death all of the time with no thought that there is any need to prepare for death. Most people have no idea what David was talking about when he said, as he did in Psalm 23, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...”

So what should this passage tell us for this day in which we live? It should tell us that we have the same mission and the same message that John the Baptist had. We do not have the relationship with the Lord that he had, but the needs of the world are certainly the same, and people are the same, and the Gospel is still the same, and it is still the only remedy for sin. We are reaping the harvest of our God-less and Christ-less and Bible-less ways. Morally the world has fallen apart. Our sins as a nation are mounting higher than Mt. Everest every day. May the Lord give us the boldness we need to prepare the way for people to come to Christ! We need to spread the message of the Gospel, believing that it is still the power of God unto salvation, and that it is a message that will always bear fruit, accomplishing what the Lord intends to do in reaching the hearts of sinners whom He intends to claim for Himself.

But what is going on today? (Read the note that Gary sent to me about the ad a church in Beaverton placed in the newspaper.)

May God forbid that we should ever follow that path. That is the way of darkness. Are we looking for big crowds, or are we preaching and praying that God will touch the heart of people in our day, and turn them to Himself? By the grace of God let us follow the example which John the Baptist has left for us. That is God’s way, the way of life, and the way of blessing.