

John the Baptist and Jesus

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I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Luke 1. Luke 1. The next three messages this morning, Christmas Eve morning and then Christmas Eve night will be looking into Luke's Gospel and his proclamation of the coming of Christ. So this morning, I want us to begin where he begins in the coming of Christ by going back a little further than the other Gospel writers do. To be fair, John goes back the farthest. He goes back to the beginning before creation, but when it comes to the actual appearance of Jesus, it's just, "The Word became flesh," right, and he doesn't tell us about the early life or the circumstances. Matthew goes back pretty far. He goes back to the point where Mary is pregnant, Joseph is considering what he's going to do about that. But Luke goes back not only to Mary finding out but to John the Baptist's conception, pre-conception of John the Baptist to Elizabeth and Zacharias.

So anyway, I want us to read this story today and to see John the Baptist and the title of the message is "John the Baptist and Jesus." Next Sunday we're going to look at Mary and Jesus and what we're going to see is it's all about Jesus. John the Baptist is there and he is great but it is all about Jesus. Mary is there and she is blessed of the Lord but it is all about Jesus. It's all about Christ. As John the Baptist himself said, "I must decrease. He must increase." Or as we read earlier in John's Gospel, writing about the other John, John the Gospel writer says there was a man sent from God whose name was John, talking about John the Baptist, he came to testify about the Light. He was not the Light but he came to testify of the Light. About Jesus Christ.

That's what we want to look at this morning in Luke's Gospel. Before we do, though, I want to take a moment and mention something that many of you probably heard, some of you may not have heard this week about the passing of R. C. Sproul on Thursday, December 14th, and just something that hit me harder than I expected in just how much he's meant to me in my own life and ministry. And I was really blessed by what Al Mohler said on his website about Sproul and I want to read some of that to you. He says, this is Al Mohler, the President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, one of the great leaders of the Christian faith in our day, writing about R. C. Sproul. Al is probably a few years older than me, probably in his mid-50's, late 50's, and R. C. died at the age of 78. So he writes this, Al Mohler says,

"For me, the story begins as a teenager stuck in a desperate struggle with huge theological questions in the 1970s. Of course, R.C. Sproul, with firm conviction and a friendly smile, would rightly insist that the story really begins in the gracious will of our sovereign, eternal, and omnipotent God. Actually, those were some of the big theological questions that had me by the throat.

I had been confronted by teachers in high school who had declared their own atheism and ridiculed Christian theism. I was surrounded by a culture of increasing moral relativism and the first wave of what would later be called post-modernism. I knew Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and I wanted to be faithful to him. But how?

My struggle was spiritual and moral, but it was also irreducibly intellectual. How could I know and defend the Christian faith? I did not even know where to begin. At home and at church, I was surrounded by sweet Christians who loved me and invested their lives in me. But I had big questions they could not answer. Questions that gnawed at me and kept me awake at night. Questions that I feared could not be answered. Questions that I had no idea Christians had grappled with for centuries.

Thankfully, I found help. I found other Christians who were struggling with the same questions, and some of them passed to me cassette tapes. At that time, the cassette was a recent invention. For me, these tapes were a lifeline – bringing me expository preaching from Dr. John MacArthur and lectures from this strangely infectious and compelling teacher at an oddly named center in Western Pennsylvania. The teacher was R.C. Sproul.

Those tapes from R.C. Sproul were not my own. They had been passed to me after several others had listened to them. They squeaked. Nevertheless, I pounced on them like a hungry tiger. I received the tapes out of sequence. No matter – I just gained confidence and understanding with every tape.

R.C.'s voice was captivating. Honestly, I probably would have listened to him read the Farmer's Almanac. But the power of his teaching was the vitality and virility of biblical Christianity, presented logically, forcefully, biblically, and passionately.

My own pilgrimage as a theologian cannot be traced without the indelible influence of R.C. Sproul. Had I never met him in the flesh, I would have been in his debt and gifted with his influence. By God's grace, I came to know R.C. Sproul as a teacher, colleague, encourager, and friend.

He was, as the British say, a man in full. He never made a half-argument, presented a half-correction, preached a half-sermon, or laughed a half-

laugh. He was all in, all the time. His voice would fill the room, his preaching would shake the timbers, and his passion would spread like a virus. He showed up as everything he was and with everything he believed – every time.

He was one of the great defenders of historic Christianity of our times. It is fair to say that R.C. was the greatest and most influential proponent of the recovery of Reformed theology in the last century. He was a stalwart defender of the Word of God, and one of the primary architects of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978. His tapes were soon accompanied by his books and the vastly expanding influence of Ligonier Ministries.

When he taught about the holiness of God, a generation of evangelicals was rescued from the emaciated and desiccated theology of cultural Christianity. When he defended Reformed theology, he taught us all how to understand the gospel in terms of God's eternal purpose to save, consistent with his sovereignty. He was rigorously biblical and ruthlessly logical . . . with a smile.

He loved to introduce Christians to both the splendors and the humbling lessons of church history. He wanted evangelical Christians to stand in a line of faithfulness that began with the apostles and continued to the present. He had the heart and courage of Martin Luther and the theological precision and passion of John Calvin. He was a proud son of the Reformation, and the solas of the Reformation were the architecture of his mind. He urged and taught Christians toward the development of the Christian mind, and ideas were his battleground.

He was a preacher of the Word of God, a faithful steward of God's mysteries. In the later years of his life, he told friends that his greatest joy in ministry had come as a pastor. That comes as no surprise."

Skipping on down to the end he writes,

"In a tribute [that R. C. wrote] to his own beloved teacher, Professor John Gerstner, written in 1976, R.C. stated: 'In an era of church history when theology is in chaos, the church is being shaken at its foundations, and Christian ethics shift and slide with every novel theology, we are grateful for the vivid example of one who stands in the midst of confusion as "a bright and burning light.'"

Sproul said that about Gerstner. Mohler concludes,

"Indeed, we are grateful to God for the bright and burning light named R. C. Sproul. Soli Deo Gloria"

Certainly it is a wonderful thing to see how God works in and through flawed instruments. As Dr. Mack said just a couple of weeks ago, he takes a crooked stick and hits straight blows and we praise God for that.

Let's pray together.

Father, we do thank you for your faithfulness throughout history, that you are effecting your purposes at every moment, in every place, at all times. You are calling out for yourself a people from every tribe and tongue and kindred, and you are fashioning us to be a part of the bride of Christ and we stand in awe of you. We thank you, Lord, for allowing us to be the beneficiary of other brothers and sisters in the faith who have gone on before us and who have handed down the Gospel, the faith once entrusted to the saints; they have guarded it and they have entrusted it to us. We thank you so much for them, Lord. We thank you for R. C. Sproul. We pray for his family, his wife, Vesta, for his children and grandchildren and for those that love him so dearly that the church that he pastored. Lord, minister to them, encourage them. And Father, help all of us to continue to take the charge of stewarding the mysteries of God that you have entrusted to us, carrying them faithfully, holding them tenaciously, and confidently, lovingly, winsomely, for the glory of God. Father, speak now to us through your word, through your precious word. In your light, may we see light. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

We come to the Gospel of Luke and so we are going to hit, we're not starting an exposition of the Gospel of Luke, it's just a couple of messages, three messages from this, but I want us to talk a little bit about Luke as we do and I'm going to read a lot of verses of Scripture so I would encourage you to really hang in there with me as we do this. We're going to look at what Luke says about John the Baptist today and we'll look more at what Luke says about Jesus and Mary next time. But Luke 1:1. In light of what I just read about Sproul's difficulties wrestling with questions, I think some of this is actually very well timed and encouraging because we have a faith that is rooted in facts, that's rooted in history, that we can put our confidence in and be certain of. Listen to what he says Luke's purpose in writing his Gospel.

Luke 1:1,

1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. 5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. 7 But they had no child,

because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years. 8 Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, 9 according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. 11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. 12 Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. 17 It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, To turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 Zacharias said to the angel, "How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years." 19 The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time." 21 The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. 22 But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute. 23 When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home. 24 After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, 25 "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men."

We'll stop there and we're going to read a little more momentarily. I want to make an important preliminary observation before we get into the main points. There are going to be two main points we're going to get to. These are not the main points. This is a preliminary observation and the preliminary observation is the character of the word of God and the character of the Gospel. What you heard Luke say in those first four verses, he wanted to compile an account of the things accomplished, the things that were handed down by eyewitnesses. He investigated everything carefully from the beginning to write it out in consecutive order so that you may know the exact truth, that is, the word there means that you may know with certainty, that you may know with firmness, with an immovability, the things that you have been taught.

The Gospel and the word of God are written so that we can be sure. It stands up to scrutiny. It stands up to the doubts that we have. The word of God is rooted in history. It's not an esoteric book of ideas; that, you know, it isn't like what other religions are: Buddhism, Hinduism. Just ideas about what life is about. And many of the false gospels that people think should be in the Bible, like the Gospel of Thomas, for instance, people say, "Why isn't it in there?" Well, it's not there because it was not originally given through Thomas, it is given through a liar who used the name. (unintelligible)

Also, it's not even in the character of the Bible. The Bible is rooted in time and space. Look at how Luke writes. When he tells you about an event that is happening, he's going to tell us about the coming of Jesus Christ, not the idea of God sending his Son, the reality of God sending his Son in human flesh at a precise moment in history to a precise location to do precise things, which he did.

Look at verse 5. He wants you to know, "In the days of Herod, king of Judea," he is dating this event, "there was a priest named Zacharias," and this guy, he wasn't just a man who had a wife, it was a man named Zacharias, he was "of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth." He tells you their family background.

Details like time. Verse 24, "she kept herself in seclusion for five months." Then he is going to tell us, we'll look at this next time in more detail about Mary's conversation with Gabriel which happened in verse 26, "Now in the sixth month," the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

In chapter 2, verses 1 to 4, look at how he dates for us the birth of Christ in the detailing he goes into, "Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth." He could have just said, "Mary and Joseph had the baby." Or, "Mary and Joseph had the baby in a town called Bethlehem." But he wants you to know how Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem, precisely what happened, and there was a decree that went out from Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, that all the world should have a census, and look at what he says in verse 2, "Hey guys, this was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria." You read that and you're like, "Who cares?" Have you wondered, what about the third census taken while Quirinius was governor? Who is Quirinius? He is dating it to show these are real facts that happened in real time. This is not a made up, it's not like Peter says the same thing in 2 Peter 1 when he says, "We did not declare to you, you know, fables and fanciful stories when we made known to you the coming of Christ. We are telling you truth, things rooted in history."

This is what Luke is telling us and he goes on to say, "Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David." I want you to know why he got there. He was of David's family. Why would anybody leave with an eight and a half month pregnant, why would any man, sane man, take his wife who is eight and a half months pregnant on a donkey ride for two days? Because he had to. Because God was moving the mind of a Roman Emperor, a godless, God hating Roman Emperor, bending his will

to do exactly what he wanted because he wanted his Son to be born in Bethlehem because that's what had been prophesied 700 years before the birth of Christ, and he wanted us to stand in awe and wonder at it. But Luke gives us the details to see that. You see, John's Gospel is beautiful in its own way but this is why we have four Gospels. John just said, "The Word became flesh, marvel at that." Luke says, "Let me tell you how."

Chapter 3, just show one more time, "Now in the fifteenth year," this is John the Baptist's ministry starting, okay? "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene." That's a whole bunch of things I don't care about. It's like saying, you know, back in 1980, the last time that Georgia won a national championship, forgive me for going there, I was trying to pick something that would be a good dating thing. You know, that was the year that Reagan beat Carter in the presidential election and that was also the year that the Falcons went 12 and 4 and won the Western division of the NFC, and that was also the year that our team played for the state championship in high school. Who cares? Who cares? Who cares, right? The thing is it has happened in a moment in time. People's lives, real life is going on, and this kind of detail here is what made secular historians give to John the title as the greatest historian of antiquity. He gets all the details and he gets all the titles right and every time they dig something up, it just confirms again. John was right. We didn't think that Philip was the tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, but sure enough he was both.

Now I say all that to say that's the character of the Bible. It is talking about events that happened in time and space. Our God is not some distant, unmoved mover. He is a personal God who is intervening in real life, real situations.

Okay, that's the preliminary observation. Now, two points: the importance of John and the ministry of John. Those are the two points. We'll spend most of our time on the ministry of John. The importance of John the Baptist. We see it, first of all, in the circumstances of his birth. A supernatural birth testifies to the importance of John the Baptist. This is a theme that runs throughout Scripture.

Think back with me, back to the Old Testament, and look at how God unfolds his plan of salvation. Abraham is called to be a father of a multitude of nations, remember? Do you remember the problem that's going on? Sarah is barren and for 25 years after the promise that Abraham is going to be a father of a multitude of nations, she remains barren until God miraculously opens the womb when she is 90, Abraham is 100, and Isaac is born. The son of promise is born a supernatural birth.

Well, to make sure we don't miss it, Isaac gets married to Rebekah to continue on this line of salvation, the seed coming, right? And what happens? Rebekah is barren. Twenty years they are married without a child. The Lord opens the womb and we have Jacob and Esau, of course Jacob the son of promise from that. Again, this barrenness bringing God's fulfillment of his plan.

Well, Jacob gets married, remember he has two wives and he has a whole issue with his family situation and the Lord works through that to give us the 12 tribes of Israel. But do you remember the wife that really had his heart was Rachel and what about her? She was barren. She couldn't have a child and when God opened her womb, who was born? Joseph, the one who would deliver them from famine and death, deliver the whole nation.

Then later you have a situation in the period of the judges where a woman named Hannah can't have children and she is at the temple praying and God speaks through Eli to tell her she's going to have a child and Samuel is born, the first great prophet of the Old Testament. Samson, actually before that too. I forgot about Samson. He's a great deliver that is born to a woman who could not have children and he comes and he delivers the people.

So you have this theme running throughout the Old Testament. Whenever there is a barren person who is miraculously given a child, that child is great in the sight of God: Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel and Samson. So the same thing happens here. It's not accidental. The Lord could have had John the Baptist born like most all the other prophets were born without any fanfare, just born a natural way. But we see the greatness of this man that after 400 years of silence, God is at work and he gives this supernatural birth.

So that's the importance of John, it's first seen in the circumstances of his birth, secondly, in the words of the angel. The importance of John is seen in the words of the angel. Verse 15, "he will be great in the sight of the Lord." Wow, John the Baptist will be great in the sight of the Lord. What a commendation.

This is a man of God, a man after God's heart, a great prophet. In fact, Jesus says of him, remember in Matthew 11 when John the Baptist has a moment, one of the most encouraging passages in the New Testament to me. Remember, John the Baptist is arrested and he sends word by one of his disciples to Jesus to ask him a question. It's profound when you really think about what we're going to see in a minute, that he asked this question. He sends word to ask Jesus, now he's in prison, "Are You the one or are we to expect another?" The most unlikely person to ever ask that question, "Are You the one or are we to expect another?" What a crisis of faith this man is going through.

And look at the way the Savior answers. He first of all answers the question but gently, he says to the disciples, he says, "Look around you. The blind see. The lame walk. The dead are raised. You go back and tell John the things that you see." In other words, "Of course, I'm the One."

Then he turns from those guys who are basically being dismissed and he turns to the crowd and he says, "I want to talk to you about John the Baptist, the guy that just had this crisis of belief, when everybody has rejected me all the time," and here personally it had to hurt in his humanity that he had this. He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist." That's what he says at that moment. John the Baptist is the greatest to this time. No one. Abraham, no.

Moses, no. No one is greater than John the Baptist at that moment. What a loving Savior. He's speaking the truth. It's interesting, he goes on to say, "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. I'm about to inaugurate something that makes everyone greater than John the Baptist." Wow. When you become a follower of God, when you repent and place your faith in Jesus Christ, you become great in the sight of the Lord. How amazing. Me? Us? Because of Christ, what he has done, he brings us into his righteousness, into his power, into his standing.

So the importance of John, though, he actually in that sense you can say he was the apex of the Old Testament ministry. He was the final and great prophet who pointed ahead to Christ. Before the inauguration that happened when Jesus, as Ted was talking about, the momentous moment in history is the cross. When the cross happened, when Jesus died, that's when everything changed. His resurrection confirmed it but the moment is the cross. The new era begins. John the Baptist is the greatest of all that anticipation because basically the Old Testament prophets, what were they all saying? "There is One who is coming. There is One whose coming." And the one had the clearest vision and the clearest clarion call issuing that call out with his voice with the clearest voice, was John the Baptist. "Here is the One." The importance of John.

Now, secondly, the ministry of John. The second point this morning: the ministry of John. Three subpoints and the third subpoint has three subpoints, sub subpoints. Basically the ministry of John consists of three things, these three points I'm talking about. First of all, to prepare the way. To prepare the way. We see it in verses 15 to 17 when the angel tells Zacharias why he's going to be great, "he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb." And this is what he's going to do, he is going to "turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God." He is going to bring about repentance. He is going to turn them from walking away from God and turn them back. "It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, To turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." He's going to prepare the way.

Now it's interesting, this is what his dad, Zacharias, is going to say too. Now Zacharias hears this and then we saw Zacharias has his own crisis of faith. I mean, you think about it, we can judge these guys sometimes harshly. You think, how can you have an angel appear to you and not believe what he said? I mean, really? You know, and you are a righteous man. We were just told earlier you guys were walking blameless in all the commandments of the Lord and requirements of the Lord, how could you not believe? And he didn't. And it says he has this crisis of faith and the angel says, "You're going to be mute until the day, you want a sign, you want a proof? I'll give you proof. You're not going to be able to speak for nine months." And he can't talk for nine months. If he was a talker, I bet Elizabeth was really glad about that, "Thank you, Lord, for the extra blessing that you gave me." Probably most women would like their husbands to talk more and maybe it was really, "Man, I can't believe it, he's even quieter than before."

Well, I want to skip to, skip over Mary's visit to Elizabeth, Jesus' birth being foretold, verse 26, Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the Magnificat, her song of praise to God, to verse 57. We read about the prophecy of the birth of John, now let's look at the birth of John itself. Verse 57,

57 Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her.

Which is exactly what they said, many will rejoice at his birth; it is being fulfilled.

59 And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father.

This was a big deal. They would take the baby to the temple to be circumcised and there would be a naming ceremony that would go on, especially with the firstborn. It was a great celebration. So they are there and obviously he's going to be called Zacharias. Zacharias had to wait all these years to get a child, he has a son, there is no doubt we are calling him Zacharias, right, Elizabeth?

60 But his mother answered and said, "No indeed; but he shall be called John." 61 And they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name."

We don't do that. You always name them after somebody. You've got to have a reason. They don't do like we do and just pull a name out of a book. You've got to have a reason for this name.

62 And they made signs to his father,

Now let me tell you something, I think what this is telling us is that Zacharias not only could not speak but he couldn't hear. Why do they make signs to him? He is mute because he can't hear either. He is deaf and mute and so they are trying to signal to him, "Hey, she's, you know, she's loco. She wants to name this guy John and we know you want Zacharias, named after you."

63 And he asked for a tablet,

Tired of trying to motion back and forth. They don't have the sign language, I guess, figured out at that point, and so they are trying, he gets a tablet.

63 And he asked for a tablet, and wrote as follows, "His name is John."

He wasn't hearing what they were saying. He writes it down, though, and that's why they are astonished. He wrote down exactly what she was saying.

64 And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God.

Now it's interesting at this point, he doesn't tell us what he said right now. This is the point when you read the Bible you need to observe carefully. I would expect if you're really thinking about it, you would expect verse 64 to be followed by verse 67. Do you see that? "And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God. And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying." You would expect that, "Blessed be," because this is what he said. But what happens is Luke skips ahead to emphasize the impact of what he said before he tells us what he said.

65 Fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea.

You see, he takes you from the circumstance where he is about to speak and he runs ahead and he says, "Listen." This was spreading all over like wildfire. This had impact all around. People knew about John's birth. Now, it's interesting, the same thing wasn't happening with Jesus' prophecy about his birth. It was quieter until later. But he wants us to see that and that was part of what was happening with John. They were expecting, there had been this furor that happened around John's hometown and the word spread, "There is a prophet. We think a prophet has come. Something happened in the temple. This guy had a vision and he couldn't speak or hear for nine months, then when his child was born, he named him John and suddenly..." That kind of story spreads.

So 30 years later when John the Baptist goes into his ministry, "Ah, yeah, I remember." A lot of us can remember things that happened 30 years ago. (unintelligible) 1987, what happened in 1987? Let's move on from there. Okay, some things definitely did happen. I know one thing, Reagan was dealing with all those difficulties at the end of his presidency, like Iran Contra and all that, Oliver North, 1987. Okay. Alright. I feel better.

But the idea is the impact of these words and then he tells us what he said now and this is astonishing. Zacharias filled with the Holy Spirit and he prophesies and he begins speaking with great clarity about we would think the ministry of John, but what he says mostly is about Jesus. Of these 11 verses, 12 verses, verse 68 to verse 79, that's 12 verses, two of them are about John and 10 are about Jesus. Look what he says,

68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, 69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of David His servant--

Do you see that? Zacharias doesn't even know that. He doesn't know that Jesus has been prophesied. Maybe Elizabeth did tell him. But anyway, he says it about David. He's not talking about John, he's talking about Jesus because Jesus is from the house of David.

70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old-- 71
Salvation from our enemies, And from the hand of all who hate us; 72 To
show mercy toward our fathers, And to remember His holy covenant, 73
The oath which He swore to Abraham our father, 74 To grant us that we,
being rescued from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without
fear, 75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.

And here it goes to John,

76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; For you
will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways; 77 To give to His people
the knowledge of salvation By the forgiveness of their sins,

Then he goes back to Jesus. Look.

78 Because of the tender mercy of our God, With which the Sunrise

What is the Sunrise? That's Jesus.

the Sunrise from on high will visit us, 79 To shine upon those who sit in
darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of
peace."

So John's ministry is to prepare the way of the Lord. It is to, as he says, as Zacharias said
there in verse 76, "For you will go on before the Lord to prepare His way." You see the
same thing when you read in Luke 3. He makes clear and he goes back to Isaiah's
prophecy, to prepare the way of the Lord. John's ministry was threefold and the first thing
was to prepare the way for Jesus.

Secondly, John's ministry was to point to Jesus. To point to Jesus. I just mentioned in
verses 67 to 79, 10 of those verses of his dad's song of praise, here is the euphoria of
having a son. I mean, think about that. He is eight days out of his son's birth, here in his
old age he has got a son, he's looking at his boy, they are asking what his name, he says
his name is John, the Spirit comes upon him and all he can talk about is Jesus. Almost all
he can talk about is Jesus and when he talks about John he's saying, "The thing about you,
boy, is you get to prepare the way for Him."

The same thing you see in chapter 3 of Luke. Let me just turn over there for a moment.
When John, it says in his ministry, chapter 3, verse 1, started with the beginning of his
ministry. Verse 15, "the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in
their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ." Reasonable. Here is this man
preaching with the power of Elijah. After 400 years of silence, we have someone
preaching with the power of Elijah, a prophet is here. Maybe this is the one. "John
answered," verse 16, "and said to them all, 'As for me, I baptize you with water; but One
is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He

will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." It's not me, it is one whose coming. He is pointing to Jesus.

In John's Gospel that we read earlier from John 1:1 to 14, we saw how John says that same thing. "I'm not worthy to untie the thong of His sandals. He is greater than me because He was before me." And remember when he lays eyes on Jesus, the first time he lays eyes on Jesus because he is telling you, "He's coming. He's coming." Then when he lays eyes on Jesus, the first time he lays his eyes on Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That's Him. That's the One." That wasn't the first time he had encountered Jesus, though, was it? It was the first time he laid eyes on him.

Turn back to Luke 1. We didn't read this section, we will now. Verse 39. After Mary in verses 26 to 38 is told she's going to have a son, though she is a virgin, she is going to have a son who will be the Son of the Most High, verse 39, and she is told by the angel, "Listen, I know this seems hard to believe," actually look at verse 36 for a minute,

36 And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month.

"Let me just tell you, I went to Elizabeth a while back and she's pregnant, your cousin." And look at the next verse,

37 "For nothing will be impossible with God."

I think one of the things the Lord is doing is helping Mary believe. "Just so you know that what I'm telling you is true, God has given a child to Elizabeth in her old age." So Mary in her excitement about this, knowing that God is working in Elizabeth's life, she gets up, verse 39, she arises and goes

39 ... in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, 40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.

She goes to visit Elizabeth as fast as she can. She goes into the house,

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting

The sound of Mary's voice, the woman carrying the newly conceived Son of God, carrying Jesus in her womb, she speaks, "Elizabeth, are you here? Hello? Hello?" It's like you knock on the door at somebody's house and you don't want to get shot and so you're, "Hey, hello?" You don't have to worry about that. I guess you might get a spear or something maybe, then. "Elizabeth."

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby [in Elizabeth's womb, 5 ½, 6 months gestation] leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women,

The first thing she says to Mary is not, "Hi, Mary, how are you doing?" She says,

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

I think that verse is a little bit of a jab at Zacharias. "You believed. You're able to talk. My husband isn't." The baby leaped in the womb. John the Baptist recognized Jesus through the voice of his mother when he was only six months gestation because he was filled with the Spirit from the womb, just like it said. He recognized Jesus that way and then back to Matthew 11 I mentioned a little bit ago, how can he later, 30 some odd years later say, "Are you the One?" Isn't that amazing? But he knew. In his heart of hearts he knew. He knew even in the womb because the Lord ordained it so. He had, John the Baptist's ministry was to point to Jesus. That's his ministry. That's what you're here for is to point to Jesus, and so the first opportunity he gets, what does he do? He points to Jesus. "That's the One!" Here's that little baby in the womb saying, "That's the One! That's the One! That's Him! We've been waiting for Him!"

And Luke wants us to know all about that, every detail, every glorious and beautiful detail to point to Jesus. This is why he said, "He must increase, I must decrease." Remember when he was losing disciples, his disciples, I mean, he was losing followers, his disciples because he had disciples just like Jesus did, some of his disciples became Jesus' disciples. His disciples say, "Hey, our church growth thing is shrinking. He's getting more people. What do we need to do to make our church grow bigger?" That's kind of what they were doing. "Hey, we're losing disciples. Jesus is getting more disciples every day." And John says, "He must increase, I must decrease. I'm only here to point to Him. He's everything."

So the ministry of John is to prepare the way, to point to Jesus, and thirdly, to proclaim Jesus, and to proclaim that Jesus is the fullness of God's grace. We see this even in the emphasis that we see in the passage on his name. Back to verse 13, "you will bear a son and you will give him the name John. This is a name that is going to surprise everybody because nobody in your family is named John, but you're going to give him the name John." Well, what does John mean? John means "the Lord is gracious." John in Greek, Ionas, is actually a transliteration of the Hebrew word, Ioannes, which means "the Lord is gracious." The Lord shows grace. The Lord shows pity. The Lord is kind. It pictures someone stooping, a greater person stooping down to help an inferior; to see someone in need and to stoop down. This is what the Lord is like. The Lord is gracious so you name him "the Lord is gracious." When you look at Luke and the way this works out, so you name your son "the Lord is gracious," and Mary, you name your son "the Lord saves." Yeshua, Jesus. I'm not going to leave it up to you guys to name them, I'm telling you John will be named "the Lord is gracious." Repent because the Lord is gracious. Turn back.

Turn from your sins because the Lord is gracious. It's the kindness of God that leads you to repentance. The Lord is gracious. Turn back to him.

One of the themes of the Old Testament or one of the, not the themes but one of the recurring mantras, almost, is what Moses heard on the mountain, "The Lord, the Lord, compassionate and gracious," compassionate and gracious, "slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness." You find those four things in the Psalms, in Nehemiah, other places where they look back and they say, "That's who God is, the Lord, the Lord compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness." That's what John, his message is, "The Lord is compassionate. The Lord is gracious. The Lord stoops down and do you want to see proof of that? Look at Jesus. That is God stooping down, coming into our sin sick world, coming to meet our needs." Jesus is proof that God is gracious, that he is compassionate.

I want to mention three little subpoints related to this Jesus being the fullness of God's grace. As we read earlier in John 1:14, "we beheld his glory, glories of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. And of his fullness we have all received grace upon grace, for the law was given through Moses but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Jesus is the expression, is the embodiment, is the proof that God is gracious. But we see it even in the passages that unfolds, what gracious means. I said gracious means a greater looks down to an inferior not with contempt but with mercy and compassion and with action. They do something about the suffering.

Three subpoints that you see as you read, especially through Luke's whole Gospel but this passage in particular, three things that kind of flesh out God being gracious and we see this throughout the Scriptures but particularly in this passage. God sees individual people and their personal suffering. That's what it means to be gracious and compassionate. He sees individual people in their unique personal suffering. It's a great emphasis of John. He tells us about Zacharias and Elizabeth. He didn't just tell us John was born. The Lord inspires him to tell us the added detail, they had no child because Elizabeth was barren and they were both advanced in years. And you see the pain that this has caused her in verse 25 when she says something that is surprising for us in our day because we don't see it this way the same way. Childlessness isn't to us the curse that it was in an agrarian society where you had to have children to live. You couldn't survive without kids. Look at what she says in verse 25. She knows she is pregnant, she is now five months pregnant. She hasn't said anything to anybody because she kept herself in seclusion for five months and she says, "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men." God looked at her disgrace and her pain and her agony and he saw her suffering. Mary even says something to that effect when she says in verse 48, "For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant." I don't know what her circumstances were but she says that her state was humble and lowly and God had regard for it. You see, that's what grace is. Grace has regard. Grace moves toward weakness and suffering.

But Luke is really careful to point out the individuals and their names. In chapter 2, we're going to see the shepherds, now we don't get their names. We get Simeon, remember

Simeon and Anna, two very old people who are about ready to die, who have been waiting for the coming of salvation, they have been prophesying? Anna, a woman who was married for seven years, her husband died and she lived all those years after that as a widow, and it says she stayed in the temple fasting and praying and looking for the salvation of Israel, and God let her see, let her hold the baby. Can you imagine that? God looked with kindness on her. She apparently didn't have children. They weren't taking care of her.

He sees individual people and their suffering. He doesn't just tell us about Jesus healing a blind man, he tells us the man's name was blind Bartimaeus. He tells us about the tax collector that was saved and he tells us his name was Zacchaeus. He tells us it was Simon, the Pharisee, that Jesus went into his house. Cleopas. His emphasis is to show us that God does know your name. Now sometimes in other places it's not emphasized as much because the Lord wants us to see something else, but here through Luke, God wants us to know that this is true, that he knows your name and he knows your pain, he knows your suffering. He sees it. He's not unaware.

Not only does God see individual people and their suffering, that's that first subpoint under John's ministry to proclaim Jesus, the fullness of God's grace, it means he sees individual people in their suffering, that's the first subpoint, the second is God cares about individual people and their suffering. He cares. He is compassionate and gracious. He doesn't just see it, he's not just aware of it, he cares. His heart is moved. He can't see it and not be moved. This is the nature of God.

But he doesn't, thirdly, he doesn't just see it, he doesn't just care about individual people and their suffering, he acts to alleviate the suffering of real people who are really hurting. He acts. He sent his angel directly to Elizabeth and to Zacharias, to Mary. He let Jesus be seen by Simeon and Anna and he healed Bartimaeus and all these other people throughout the Gospels.

And you see this about God way back in the Old Testament. Exodus 3, when you read the story of God delivering the people from bondage in Egypt, it says God has seen their affliction, he has heard their cries, he is concerned about them and he has come down. That's the God of the Bible. That's why the Gospel is God. God is the Gospel. Jesus is the fullness of God on display so Jesus is the Gospel because God is the Gospel. This is what God is like. He cares about you and your suffering.

Now sometimes we find it hard to believe because he doesn't alleviate suffering in so many times in our lives. We suffer and we suffer for long periods of time sometimes. I just heard a testimony, Jess and I had the opportunity to go to biblical counseling coalition conference, Curtis preached last Sunday after that conference and we heard Joni Eareckson Tada share. One of the most powerful things that she said or that I've heard her share and she shared a little bit of this that week and I heard it also in early testimonies, is that when she wanted so badly to be healed, I mean, she was a lady who has been a quadriplegic since age 17. Diving into the lake, misjudged the depth of the water, broke her neck and was paralyzed from her neck down, from her shoulders down, and she has

now been that way for 50 years. And she was saying how she so wanted God to heal her that she prayed that God would heal her and she prayed and prayed and prayed. She begged God to heal her and then she came later to realize that the Lord had a reason that he didn't heal her. She had people preaching the Gospel to her, showing her what the word says, "God cares about your suffering."

I heard her share this testimony and I watched this actually online. She was preaching to a church that I think had to be a charismatic church looking at it. You know, you just kind of tell the way people are acting and responding and stuff. And she's in New York City preaching to a charismatic church, she is not preaching, she's teaching or sharing her testimony. She doesn't preach like, you know, a man, but she is sharing her testimony powerfully and she says, "You know, I have so wanted God to heal me but I've come to understand that he did not heal me because he wanted to heal my soul more than he wanted to heal my body and I'm so glad that he did. I can tell you today I am so glad he did not heal me of quadriplegia because quadriplegia has made me know every day how much I need help from God and I need Jesus, and it has shown me so many things in my heart, so many things that I need to keep going to Jesus for." So God is so good that he doesn't give us what we want, he gives us what we need, and if he doesn't give you what you want, it's only because he's giving you what you need and you must trust in his goodness.

This is the God of the Bible. He's a God who sees and hears and cares. He is not unmoved by your suffering. And if he's allowing your suffering, he is not doing it willingly as he says in Lamentations 3, he does not afflict the sons of men willingly. There is a purpose behind it. He is allowing it to do something in your soul, to deliver you spiritually.

He comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. It's interesting that he said that. It's something we can miss. Luke 1:17. He is going to be great, verse 15. He is going to come, he is going to go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah. Elijah was a great prophet of God. Elijah preached powerfully and he did great miracles. By some counts, it depends exactly how you count miracles. Sometimes you want to go A, B, and it's the same miracle. So you may say 14, you may say 15. He did some great miracles. He raised a person from the dead. He brought down fire from heaven. Elijah was a man of great power so when he says he preached in the spirit and power of Elijah, this is what John is going to do. I bet John thought he was going to do some miracles but, you know, you read in John's Gospel, John 10:41, that after John is gone, the disciples, people are hearing Jesus preached and they say this in John 10:41, "John never did one miracle, but everything he said about this man was true." That was the greatness of John. It was not time for him to do miracles, all the focus is on Jesus. It's all about Jesus.

The ministry of John was to prepare the way, to point to Jesus, to proclaim Jesus, and what you and I need is Jesus, and what every sinner needs is Jesus. And Christmas will be a time when we celebrate that, and when we say to people Merry Christmas, we don't do it not with a bad attitude, we do it wishing that they could have a Merry Christmas by knowing the one who is the Christ of God.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for the glory of what you have done, the beauty of your salvation. We see how you have acted in history. You have shown your character, your graciousness, your compassion, and you have done it with such clarity. The pages of Scripture, but most of all you have done it with absolute perfection in the revelation of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the radiance of your glory and the exact representation of your nature. No man has seen God at any time but the only Begotten who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. We praise you, O Lord, for who you are, the glory of your Son. We pray that we might be satisfied with nothing less than Jesus, that every day our song might be praising Jesus all day long, loving him, treasuring him, longing for the day when we will see him face-to-face, and may we help others to see him as well. We pray in his name. Amen.