Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Zacharias: The Righteous Priest
Scripture: Luke 1:5-7
Code: 42-3

Well again, this morning, we have the opportunity to open our Bibles to the gospel of Luke. We are taking our time as we begin this gospel because there are so many foundational things. There are so many nuances, so many wonderfully rich things that Luke is doing in this opening as he begins this great history of redemption, that I want to take the time to make sure that we understand those. Since every word of God is pure by the testimony of Scripture and since all Scripture is given to be profitable for us, we want to take our time to really understand the very gripping nature of Luke's beginning of this tremendous gospel.

So we're looking at Luke chapter 1. We finished the first four verses which is the prologue in which we met Luke the physician and Luke the historian and Luke the theologian and then Luke the pastor. We got a little bit acquainted with the man. And starting in verse 5, this morning, the story begins. As we introduce this message let me just say a few things that will provide for us a context.

In this chapter in verse 78, toward the end of the chapter, the comment is made that "The sunrise from on High shall visit us....The sunrise from on High shall visit us." That is a reference to the Jewish Messiah. So borrowing those words, the sunrise from on High which refer to the birth of Christ, we could conclude then that the account of chapter 1 covers the final hours of darkness before that sunrise arrives, before Messiah comes. And the night, frankly, for Israel had been long and dark. And not only for Israel but for the world, waiting for the Savior. Through all of Israel's history, a history of calling that began with Abraham, a history of exile 400 years in Egypt, of wanderings 40 years in the wilderness, of the conquest of the land of Canaan, of the occupation of the land of Canaan, of captivity, the northern kingdom taken captive in 722 B.C., the southern kingdom taken into Babylon in 586 B.C. The northern kingdom never returning, the southern kingdom returning 70 years later. Israel's long history of coming back out of captivity and trying to rebuild and then only to be oppressed as Greeks invaded and controlled the land, and then Romans came and further oppressed them...the long night of Israel's history of blessing and cursing mixed, the long night of Israel's history of faithfulness and apostasy. And what sustained those who really looked toward God through all those long, long years of darkness was the hope that the sunrise would break.

The last book of the Old Testament, the last Old Testament prophet was named Malachi. And Malachi promised in the last chapter of the last Old Testament book that the sun...s-u-n...of righteousness would arise with healing in its beams. And he was really saying exactly what was said in verse 78, "Sunrise is coming...sunrise is coming." The darkness is not permanent, but it's usually

true that the darkness is the deepest just before the dawn. And for the 400 years since Malachi said that, since the last prophet said the sun of righteousness will rise, for 400 years since that God never spoke. There was no prophet in Israel. There was no prophet in Judah. There was no revelation from God. Therefore it was the darkest time of all.

For 400 years heaven was silent, prayers went up but it seemed as though they hit brass and bounced back. And Israel sunk deeper and deeper into depression, oppressed by the Greeks whose ruler Antiochus Epiphanes actually had the unmitigated gaul to step into the sacred Holy of Holies, the holy place of the temple, and desecrate those places, even sacrificing a pig on the altar...a time when the Gentile Greeks came in and brought their pagan gods and their pagan theology and mingled it in that sacred land with the people of Israel. They were followed by the Romans, also with all their idolatries. This made the depression all the greater. And as much as the Jewish people cried out to God, God didn't speak and no prophet appeared.

Where was the sun of righteousness? No one dreamed it would be 400 years from the prophecy to its fulfillment. Where was the day of which Malachi also said, "You will tread down the wicked and they'll be like ashes under the souls of your feet on the day which I'm preparing, says the Lord of Hosts." Where was the day when righteousness triumphed over evil? The prophet said it will come. The light will break. The dawn will come. The sun will rise. He was referring, of course, to the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of Israel and the world. And Malachi, that last prophet, also said that that Savior, that Deliverer, that sun of righteousness that will rise, that one who will bring righteousness to prevail over evil will in fact be the Lord Himself cause Malachi wrote in chapter 3 of his prophecy in verse 1, "And the Lord whom you seek shall suddenly come to His temple and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold He is coming, says the Lord of Hosts." So the Lord of Hosts says the Lord is coming. We know then that the one who comes, the Messiah, will in fact be God Himself.

So that's how the Old Testament ends. It ends with the promise of light, the promise of the sun of righteousness, the sunrise on high, the light of the world, Messiah, the Lord Savior will come and shatter the deepening darkness. But as I said, 400 years have gone by since Malachi's words were uttered in about 430 B.C. No prophet appeared, no word from God at all and no light.

Israel not only sunk deeper into depression because of oppressing nations occupying her land, but sank deeper into sin and apostasy until by the time the gospel of Luke begins, Judaism as we know it existing in the land of Israel was apostate. It had abandoned the true message of the Old Testament for a false one, engaging itself in works-righteousness, self-righteousness, all those things which God hates. Israel had suffered then from sin and apostasy as well as the oppression of foreign nations desecrating its holy ground.

Where was the light? Where was the sun? Where was the dawn of redemption? Where was the hope of every Jewish heart?

It's important to realize there is a critical element of the predictions that Malachi made that can't be overlooked. Yes he said the sun of righteousness is coming, but he also said this..."Before He comes, before the sun rises, before the Messiah, Lord Savior comes there will come a prophet to announce His arrival, a herald, an announcer." He's often called a forerunner. Malachi said this, "Behold, I'm going to send My messenger and he will clear the way for Me." There's coming a messenger to announce the arrival of the sun of righteousness, to announce the dawn.

In fact, Isaiah spoke of him. Isaiah said he will be a voice in the wilderness crying out to clear the way for the Lord, make smooth the highway for my God. Both Isaiah and Malachi then said before the sun arises, before the Messiah comes will come a prophet pointing toward Him. When the Messiah's forerunner arrives, when that prophet comes, the silence of heaven will be broken with the voice of God and the darkness of earth will be shattered with the light of the Savior and Redeemer.

Now the world will know when the Messiah arrives. How will they know? Because he will be preceded by His forerunner. Before the sun of righteousness, before the sun rising from on high will come this prophet, this forerunner and he will announce the arrival of the Messiah.

The silence then will be broken when the forerunner arrives. And then will come the Messiah and the saga of salvation. Because Luke is such a careful historian and because he is so comprehensive in what he wants to cover, he therefore has to begin his story with the arrival of that forerunner. And that's precisely what he does.

Look at verse 5. "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. And they had no child because Elizabeth was barren and they were both advanced in years. Now it came about while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense." And with that the silence of God was broken.

"Zacharias was troubled when he saw him and fear gripped him. 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." And we'll stop at that point.

This is where the story begins. It begins with the birth of John. John who would be the forerunner to the Messiah. At this point, before we can go further in the story, I have to cover some things that are very critical and fascinating. It is essential to begin the saga of salvation with the story of John the Baptist for several reasons, let me give them to you and make note of them.

Reason number one, it connects the Old Testament with the New Testament. That is critical. Mark it. The Old Testament and the New Testament do not propose two different religions. There is not the religion of Judaism and the religion of Christianity. Rather, the Old and the New Testament are one revelation from God with continuity telling the story of redemption, of only one religion, one faith and that is faith in the true and living God which involves His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is one complete revelation from God. And either the Old or the New is incomplete without the other.

Secondly, Luke begins the story of salvation with John the Baptist because that links John the Baptist as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and that shows the accuracy of Scripture's prophecies, the accuracy of Scripture's predictions. Therefore we understand that the Old Testament which is Scripture makes predictions which the New Testament fulfills, therefore the New Testament is the Scripture as well.

Beginning the story with John the Baptist also is important because John the Baptist's birth was the first point at which God spoke. It is the initial appearance of angels...you saw that in verse 11. "An angel of the Lord appeared..." And with that the silence was broken, with that the 400 years with no word from God ended, with that the saga of salvation began.

And so, Luke wants to take us right back to the first place where God acted decisively, supernaturally and immediately in history and he has to go back to John. Not only is that the first place where angels appear and they will continue to appear through the two birth narratives, the birth of John and the birth of Jesus. As we know, the angels play a very important role in the annunciation to Mary as well as in the time of Christ's birth. This is the first of those angelic appearances.

It is also true that the birth of John was a miracle. His birth was miraculous, and so was that of Jesus Christ. And so by telling us the full story of the birth of John, the miracle of his birth and the involvement of angels with a message from God, Luke is careful to begin the story where the story really begins where God first initiates supernatural activity.

Furthermore, and this is critical, the story of John the Baptist establishes that he is the prophesied forerunner of Messiah. I'll say that again. The story of John the Baptist, as you will see, establishes beyond argument that he is the forerunner of Messiah. If we know that to be true, then we can therefore know who the Messiah is, it is whoever John identifies, right? Very important to know that. And there was a day, as we shall see, when Jesus came down to the Jordan River where John was baptizing and John turned toward Him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of

the world." John pointed to Jesus Christ as the Messiah of which he was the forerunner. Very important. If you establish who the forerunner is and it's John the Baptist, then you know who the Messiah is, it's whoever he points to.

Now this is a major concern of Luke's, to link John the Baptist and Jesus. And, in fact, the stories of the angelic annunciation of John's birth, the miracle of his birth, the story of the annunciation of Jesus' birth, the miracle of Jesus' birth are woven together in chapters 1 and 2 of Luke's gospel. They're woven together because they're inseparable. You...you...you have the inseparable convincing argument that Jesus is the Messiah because of His connection to the one who clearly is the forerunner who came to identify the Messiah.

Now there are all kinds of nuances in the way these are laid out in Luke's literary style which I'm not going to get into. We'll leave that for some other time. But there are so many incredibly and marvelous insights expressive of the inspired brilliance of Luke as a historian that I can't resist taking you in to some of them.

Luke doesn't begin his story like fiction. He doesn't say, "Once upon a time..." Rather, he gives us history. So he begins in verse 5, "In the days of Herod, king of Judea..." Now the argument among the elders this morning was whether I would get past that and I will get past that, you'll be glad to know. But that's where we have to start because that's the setting, that's the timing. In the days of Herod, king of Judah...he's not a fictional character, he's a very real character and history has left us an immense amount of information regarding this man. Luke places us in the accurate moment in history where the story begins to unfold. Herod...he was known as Herod I in terms of the fact that he was the first of a long list of Herods who ruled in one way or another in the land of Palestine. But he commonly called himself Herod the Great...Herod the Great, king of Judea.

Let me give you a little background so you kind of know this man a little bit. Herod the Great was the first of several Herods mentioned in the New Testament. One of the things that a New Testament student must do is sort out all the Herods and this is where it all begins. This is sort of the patriarch of the Herodian dynasty.

Julius Caesar had appointed Herod's father, a man named Antipater, to be procurator, or to be governor of Judea under the Roman occupation. What the Romans did in the development of the Great Roman Empire was they just took over all kinds of nations and when they established their control militarily of those nations they then placed someone in power there who was a representative of the Roman government so they would have control. Antipater was selected to do that in the land of Judea under the Roman occupation. He was the Roman appointed governor in that land.

Antipater then managed to have his son, Herod, appointed prefect of Galilee, the northern part of Palestine is an area of Galilee and he managed to get his son the position of ruling and representing

the Roman government in Galilee. Now in that office Herod was quite successful. He knew where he was going. He was a smart guy. He planned his strategy very well to achieve his goals. One of the problems that the Romans had to deal with in the land of Palestine was terrorism...nothing new under the sun, folks. Terrorism in the Middle East didn't just start in this century. There were all kinds of Jewish terrorists. There were some of them known as the Sakariai(?) because that was the term for little sword. They were dagger carriers who went around in the crowds and when they found a Roman soldier or Roman citizen, they would assassinate them. There were terrorist activities going on in Galilee as well. Herod was very successful in bringing those guerilla bands of terrorists to accounting, to imprisonment and really did away with them. He was very successful in that so he garnered an awful lot of good will from the Romans toward him.

The Parthians, another group of people, came into that area, actually invaded Palestine rather formidably while Herod was in that northern area, so he fled to Rome. He was in Rome. The Romans liked him because of what he was able to do. The Romans wanted him to go back and they wanted him to fight the Parthians and get them back out of the land of Palestine, so they gave him an army. He was declared by Octavian and Antony, with the concurrence of the Roman Senate, to be king of the Jews. That happened in Rome and they gave him an army and sent him back.

He invaded Palestine the next year and after several years of fighting, drove out the Parthians and established himself as the king of the Jews throughout Palestine. The year was 37 B.C.

Now he had a problem, he was not Jewish. Worse than that, he was an Edomite. And Edom had been cursed by God. He was an Edomite, often called an Idumaean. He worried about that. He was very concerned about his reputation so he married a Jewish girl by the name of Mariamne. She was not just any Jewish girl, she was an heiress to the Jewish Hasmonaean house, a very, very well-established and noble family. He did it in order to make himself more acceptable to the Jews that he now ruled. He was a clever man. He was a very capable warrior. History tells us he was an immensely gifted orator and he was a diplomat. In times, for example, of severe economic hardship he had a surplus from taxation. He actually took the surplus and gave it back to the people...something that all of us are longing to experience.

There was in 25 B.C. a great famine in the land of Palestine and Herod being the diplomat that he was melted down some of the most beautiful objects in his palace to buy food for the poor, and thus in some way endeared himself to the people. He built theaters and he built race tracks and he built other athletic and entertainment structures in the land of Palestine, the ruins of which you can even see today if you go there. He revived Samaria which had kind of fallen into...into a waste place. He built the most beautiful port city of Caesarea which you can still visit and see elements of his buildings there. He named it in honor of his benefactor, Caesar Augustus, which was the title of Octavian.

He embellished the cities of the route and Damascus and Tyre and Sidon and even the city of Rhodes. And he even contributed to the rebuilding of the great city of Athens. Very successful as a leader and a ruler. He built the remarkable and frankly almost impregnable fortress of Masada...Masada down in the desert, down by the Dead Sea, elevated high up on a mountain top, Masada where in A.D. 73 nearly a thousand Jewish defenders committed suicide rather than be captured by the Roman general Flavius Silva who had besieged Masada. It was the summer home of Herod, actually.

Those are his achievements, but personally he was cruel and merciless and vicious beyond description. He was incredibly jealous, completely suspicious of everybody and afraid that someone was going to take his position and power. He feared every potential threat and every threat that was just manufactured in his own mind.

For example, he had the high priest, the Jewish high priest Aristobulus, drowned. That was bad enough, but it was his wife's brother which made it worse. His wife wasn't happy about that...by the way, he attended the funeral of the brother-in-law he had drowned and wept in a pretense of affection. And then to silence his wife about what had happened, he killed her. And then knowing that mother-in-laws can be a problem, he killed her mother. Fearing that his sons might tell the truth about him, he killed two of them. Five days before his death, which is about a year after Jesus was born, he had a third son executed. One of the greatest evidences of his blood-thirstiness and his insane cruelty was having the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem all rounded up and imprisoned just before his death. He knew he was dying. He got all of these nobles and put them all in prison. He knew that no one would mourn his death because everyone knew him as a slaughtering, massacring serial killer, I guess you could say, he knew no one would mourn his death so he ordered that at the moment of his death all of those nobles who were in prison be instantly executed so at least there would be mourning in Jerusalem when he died...even if it wasn't for him. the press could put a spin on it.

That barbaric act, along with all the others, really pales in the light of the most horrifying thing that he ever did. When he heard that a king had been born in Bethlehem, in order to kill that king he slaughtered all the male Jewish children in Bethlehem and its surroundings from two years old and under in the hope of killing someone who might some day be a threat to his throne. How paranoid he must have been at his age to fear a child under the age of two. That's Herod.

"In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zacharias." Now we go from Herod to Zacharias. From the king to the humblest of men, just a certain priest, not anything but a certain priest, common guy. That name, Zacharias, appears on behalf of thirty different people in Scripture, a very common name, it means "God remembers" in Hebrew. It's a wonderful name, God remembers. One of the things the Jews liked to celebrate was the fact that God remembered everything about them and that was a part of His care over them.

So now we meet the first character in the story. Not particular notable, there were 18 thousand priests in Palestine at the time, or about 18 thousand. He was just a certain one of them, just one priest who lived somewhere out in a village somewhere and carried on his priestly duties like his 18 thousand other priestly compatriots. But he becomes such an important character in the story, it's really remarkable. And actually we're going to look at five things about him flowing all the way down to verse 25. Now we won't get through all of that today but by the time we get to 25 we will have seen five things about him...his personal righteousness, his priestly responsibility, his prophetic revelation, his perfidious response and his punishing reproof...and you'll be able to hang your thoughts on those five hooks as we go.

Let's start with the first one, his personal righteousness. This is quite a remarkable guy. He was a priest and nothing more notable than just to say "just a certain priest." Judea was under Roman occupation, to be sure. It was under the fearful leadership of Herod. The Jews, however, even though it was under Roman occupation had the right to practice their religion freely so the priesthood was in full force and there were 18 thousand or so priests actually functioning within the Jewish religion.

Now let me tell you a little bit about how priests function. The nation of Israel is a theocratic kingdom, that is it's ruled by God. It basically was a kingdom ruled by God. And God mediated that rule for the officers of the kingdom who were priests. And all the priests were sons of Aaron. They call came through Aaron's loins and he had two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar in particular and out of their loins came...came others who are identified with the priestly orders and he had other sons and they were priests. Everybody who came out of Aaron, every male child who came from the family of Aaron was considered a part of the priesthood. They were the agents of God. They basically operated the theocratic kingdom. They took care of the public issues and the public events and the teaching of Scripture, etc., etc.

To be a priest then was to be honored. It was to be a representative of God. It was to be a son of Aaron, if you will. It was to be a descendant of the one who was the originally high priest who was to be set apart by God for holy service, it was to be able to go...to go into the temple and offer sacrifice on behalf of the people. It was a very noble and respected position. They were pronouncers of blessing also. They were servants of the temple. It was the priests who were the butchers who actually did all of the sacrificing of the animals for the people. It was the priests who interpreted the Scriptures. It was the priests who taught the Scriptures and who counseled people out in their villages where they lived. Zachariah was one of them...his name can be with an H or an S, either way. And now there were many of these, as I said, there were about 18 thousand. In fact there were so many of them throughout all of the history of Israel that they had to be divided into 24 orders. Back in 1 Chronicles 24, David before the kingdom even divided into the northern and southern kingdom, in the reign of David he divided the priesthood into 24 orders because Eleazar and Ithamar,

two of Aaron's sons, combined had 24 sons so they just made those sons, all 24 of them, the head of an order of priests and their sons and their sons and their sons and all the way down the line would belong to those orders. There were 24 orders of priests. The eighth order, by the way, was named for the eighth son of Eleazar, Abijah. And it happened that that was the division, it says there, in which Zacharias did his priestly service.
Now why was it divided down into 24 orders? Because there were so many priests they couldn't all serve in the temple all the time and they had to be divided down. And they were divided down and here's how it worked...any priest would serve in the temple two different weeks a year...two separate weeks a year. That was it. During the whole year you would only serve one week at one time of the year and another week at another time of the year, and that was how you were brought into temple service. Because there were so many you only were able to serve two different weeks a year in the temple.

Now all the priests came to the temple for Passover. It wasn't uncommon to slaughter as many as a quarter of a million lambs, a quarter of a million animals at Passover. If 18 thousand priests went about to slaughter a quarter of a million lambs just in a week's period, that would be a pretty great undertaking. And remember, they were butchers. They were covered with blood to the top of their head all the way to the toe of their feet. They were butchers, they slaughtered all day long. That's what they did when they were there. But in the normal course of things they served in the temple just two different weeks a year. And that's where we find Zacharias at this particular time.

It's also interesting to note that it says Zacharias was of the division of Abijah. Just a note about that. It doesn't mean that he was a descendant of Abijah, and I'll tell you why. There were 24 orders of the priests until a great event occurred and that was the Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. Up to that point those 24 orders, you know, basically were made up of the descendants of whoever the order was named for. They were all the sons of those 24 sons of Aaron. But what happened in the Babylonian captivity was all of Israel was taken captive in three deportments, 605, 597, and 586 B.C. they're all carried into Babylon. Seventy years later they straggled back, you remember, they straggled back. Only four of those orders of priests came back and Abijah wasn't one of the four that came back. Only four of the 24 came back under Zerubbabel, and that's in the second chapter of Ezra. For the sake of tradition, however, they wanted back the 24 so they divided those four families of priests back into 24 and restored the old names, even though they actually weren't descendants of those people. They restored the original names for the sake of restoration and the sake of tradition. So Abijah was not one of the four that returned, but the name Abijah was brought back into the priesthood so that they might have those same 24. So we can say then that Zacharias while not in the line of Abijah necessarily served in the division of Abijah and did his duty when that division was called to serve in the temple those two weeks a year.

Now it also tells us about him that he had a wife. I might just say he was...he was a priest and that would fill his life with religion all the time. He also had a wife who knew about that. He had a wife,

look at this, from the daughters of Aaron. He married the daughter of a priest. And since all male descendants of Aaron were priests, her father was a priest, her brothers were priests, her uncles were priests, her grandfather, great-grandfather, she was in a world of priests. She grew up immersed in Jewish priestly function. He chose the best. I think this tells us a little bit about his devotion to the priesthood, his devotion to God, to his priestly duty. He married a girl who was most exposed to the devout involvement in the religion of Judaism.

And, you know, she must have come from a pretty good family, a pretty serious family of priests because they named her Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a beautiful name but did you know that Elizabeth, according to Exodus 6:23, is the very name of Aaron's wife? She was named after the wife of the original high priest Aaron. That tells you something else about this family that she came from. These are people who are serious about their religion. These are people who are serious about priestly function. And by the way, Elizabeth is a beautiful name, it means "My God is an oath," or "My God is faithful," or some variant of that. It celebrates the faithfulness of God. It extols God.

So here is this man, just a common ordinary garden-variety vanilla priest out in some village somewhere serious enough about his priesthood that he finds a woman to marry who has all her life filled with priests, who will understand his life and his love for the priesthood and for God. And one who so comes from such a devoted family as to have been named after the wife of the original high priest, Aaron. This is a remarkable couple. And this certainly provided tremendous heritage for John, didn't it? In a time of Jewish apostasy and a time of Jewish defection from true worship of God, a time of hypocrisy, a time of self-righteousness, this couple was devout. And we know that specifically because of verse 6, look at this, "And they were both righteous in the sight of God."

I have to stop you there. Oh, there's so much to say about this. They were both righteous in the sight of God. Now they weren't like the hypocrites. The hypocrites were righteous in the sight of men. You've got the distinction. They were very concerned about how they looked. That's why Jesus said about them in Matthew 23 that you're like painted graves, inside you have the stench of death but you're whitewashed on the outside. You're dirty on the inside. But that was the way Judaistic religion at the time was, they were involved in being righteous before men, that was the scribes and that was the Pharisees. And Jesus said to them in Matthew 23, "You hypocrites, you hypocrites, you hypocrites," He said it over and over and over and over again and told them they were going to get cast into eternal hell for their hypocrisy. These two were not righteous in the sight of men, they were righteous in the sight of...whom?...God. They were righteous in the sight of God. That's very different. As far as God was concerned they were right with Him and God doesn't look on the outward appearance, God looks in the heart.

You know, God said they're righteous. That couple down there, that Zacharias and that Elizabeth, they're righteous before Me. What does that mean? That means their sins were covered, doesn't it? It must. The only way God could declare someone righteous was if He didn't impute their sins to

them. They were right with Him. Their sins were covered. Now how did that happened? The same way it happens all the time. Same way it happened in Genesis with Abraham the first of all the Jewish line. It says in Genesis 15:6, "And he believed God and it was counted as righteousness unto him." God literally gives righteousness as a covering to those who believe Him. They believed in God. They believed in the true and living God. They believed the Word of God. They believed the revelation of the Old Testament. They believed God's holy law was right and true and just and good. They believed that they couldn't keep His law. They knew they were sinners who fell short of the law of God and they knew that the law of God called for penitence and repentance and they also knew that God was a God of mercy and grace and loving-kindness. They believed all that and so they saw the law of God, they saw its holy standard. They realized they fell short of it. They went to God with a penitent heart and they asked Him for grace and mercy. That's what the Old Testament reveals. That was what God said....Here's My law, you can't keep it but I am a God of mercy and I am a God of compassion and I am a God of loving-kindness and grace and all you have to do is ask. They believed that.

I'm sure Zachariah and Elizabeth both knew Isaiah 61:10, they knew what Isaiah the prophet had said, this is what he wrote, "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God...and here's why...for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness." They knew that. They knew that even though they were sinful they could be covered with righteousness, that God would be merciful and gracious to them and cover them with a robe of righteousness so that when God looked at them He saw righteousness, not sin. He covered up their sins.

The question is...how could God do that? How could God do that and still be holy? How can a holy God be just and the justifier of sinners? How can God just cover up sin and still be holy? I think Zachariah and Elizabeth both knew how. I'll tell you, there's one other statement made by Isaiah that I'm sure they knew and it's the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah said, "There's One who's coming who will be despised and forsaken by men, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief...listen to this, verses 4 through 6...surely our griefs He Himself bore, our sorrows He carried, yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. He was pierced through for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him and by His scourgings we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him."

They knew. They knew there was coming someone who would bear their sins, someone who would be bearing their griefs, carrying their sorrows, who would be pierced for their transgressions, crushed for their iniquities. Their iniquity would fall on Him. That's how God could cover them with righteousness. How? Because someone else would bear their sin. Who was that someone else? Whoever fulfilled Isaiah 53. And who was it to be? The Messiah. And that's why when John first saw Jesus, when John was down at the river in his ministry and Jesus showed up for the first time, John

didn't say, "There's the Messiah, there's the King." John said, "Behold the Lamb." John spent his life head deep in blood in the sacrificial system over and over and over and over day after day after day all through the year these orders of priests just slaughtered animals, slaughtered animals. And never ever did it take away sin, the people had to come back make another one, another one, another one, another one all their life long. He was looking for the final sacrifice, the one who would bear his sin. He was believing that God would provide a sacrifice. Doesn't that sound like Abraham who took his son up on Mount Moriah way back in Genesis and believed that God would provide a sacrifice?

They were believing people, this couple, they believed in God, they believed in the true and living God, they believed in His law. They knew they fell short of it. They were penitent in their hearts. They cried out to God for mercy and they knew that God would have some provision for their sin. Someone would bear their sin. He of all people, Zacharias, and Elizabeth of all ladies would know their hopeless incompletion of the sacrificial system. Butchering, butchering, slaughtering day after day after day after day...same people over and over and over and over and never was sin taken away, never was the price finally paid, never were the souls of people truly ransomed. You can imagine the exhilaration in John the day he pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world." Wow!

There would come one, Zacharias knew it, who would die the death for sin which fully satisfied the holy justice of God. God knew that that sin would be covered so He could take care of the sinner by covering him with a robe of righteousness based upon what Christ would do. This is justification by imputation.

We aren't righteous but God looks at us and we're righteous in His sight because He covers us with righteousness because we believe. And by our faith our sins are placed on Christ. When Christ died on the cross He was bearing the sins of Zacharias and of Abraham and of Elizabeth and of Sarah and of everybody else who ever believed. He was the sacrifice.

Luke tells the story later in chapter 18 about a Pharisee who went to the temple and he said, "I thank You that I'm not like other men," and he goes on parading all of his external virtue. And there's this other guy beating his chest, he won't look up and he says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And Luke records that Jesus said, "That man went home righteous and not the Pharisee."

Well that's the kind of person Zacharias was, the kind of person Elizabeth was. They were righteous because God had covered them with righteousness because they believed Him and they believed that God would provide a sacrifice for their sin. In the mean time, they cried out for His mercy.

They were really part of a remnant, true godly Jews in the midst of a nation of apostate. There were more. And we're going to meet more...Joseph, Mary, Anna, that old lady in the temple, Simeon, that old man...they were part of the remnant. They were part of the remnant who probably were hanging

on to Malachi's words that the sun of righteousness is going to rise and hoping it would be in their life time.

They weren't just justified, justification and righteousness the same thing, they were also sancitified. Look at the rest of verse 6. They were walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. When God imputes righteousness to you, He also imparts righteousness to you. In other words, they weren't the same after they believed. They were declared righteous based upon Christ's carry...bearing their sin. They were covered with a robe of righteousness which God did for them. But they also transformed. So we always say that justification, which is being declared righteous on the merits of Christ's substituionary death, is never separated from sanctification which is God making you different. They were different. They walked blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. That doesn't mean they were sinless. It doesn't mean they were perfect. It just means they were obedient. They had a reputation for walking according to the will of God, the law of God. They were like Job of whom essentially the very same thing is said. Job was a faithful, obedient man. He was blameless, upright fearing God and turning away from evil, Job 1:1. This means that salvation is justification, being declared righteous because Christ cares for your sins, and it is also sanctification and they have to occur together. Holiness was imputed to them, that is put to their account. It was also imparted to them, they were regenerated. They were converted. They were transformed. Psalm 19 says that, "The law of the Lord is perfect, totally transforming the whole inner man." They were made different people so that they could live a different way. They were able to live life as previously impossible.

They understood the Mosaic Law. They grasped its perfections. They knew they fell short. They came to God, they got His mercy and His grace. They then loved the law of God. They wanted to keep it, they wanted to do it. And God gave them the capability of doing that by changing them. They were then able to obey Joshua 1:8, a great verse, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, you shall meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it, they you'll make your way prosperous, then you'll have success." They were Psalm 119 people, Psalm 119:97, "O how I love Thy law."

Now, you say, "John, why are you in to all this stuff?" Because I think this is what Luke's trying to tell us and we have to have this foundation. We'll get the speed going as we start going downhill, but you have to understand this, Luke is giving us something here that is critical to the gospel, it's critical to the whole message of the Bible. He is...he is showing us, listen, folks, in describing Zacharias and Elizabeth he is laying an essential foundation for the story of salvation. What he's telling you is the gospel is not in conflict with true faith in Israel, it is in harmony with true faith in Israel. You understand that? These people would accept the gospel gladly because it's the next reasonable step because they're looking for their sacrifice. Contrast that with the apostle Paul who was a Pharisee who was going around trying to establish his own righteousness and had to say about his entire life before Christ it was manure.

These people...these people evidenced for Luke the fact that the New Testament message is not in conflict with true faith in Old Testament Israel. It's not a new religion. It's not a new way of salvation. It's not a different way to God. And Jesus did not come to oppose the Old Testament law or to oppose the Old Testament sacrifice, He came to affirm them and fulfill them. Everything the Old Testament taught about salvation, being right with God, confession of sin, repentance, faith, the substitutionary death of a sacrifice for sin, obedience to God's law, that's all taught in the New Testament. Jesus said, "I'm not going to remove one jot or tittle, not one little breathing mark and not one little tiny little mark till it's all complete."

God's law, man's sin, faith in God, repentance for sin, justification which is imputed righteousness, sanctification which is imparted righteousness which changes you, obedience to God's law, worship of the true and living God, that's all carried from the Old into the New intact, continuity is there.

So Zachariah and Elizabeth were, Psalm 119, one people. It says, "How blessed are those who walk in the law of the Lord, whose way is blameless." Two very righteous people, righteous in the sight of God.

But listen to this, this is fascinating. Probably...probably they weren't righteous in the sight of men. You know why? Verse 7, "They had no...what?...no child because Elizabeth was barren and they were both advanced in years." You want to know the most severe shame that a Jewish woman would ever bear was to be...what?...childless. You know what the conclusion of people might be? "Well, you know what the Bible says, you know what the Scripture says...children are an inheritage from God," Psalm 127, "they are a blessing from the Lord. And you know what Scripture says, that if you sin God can shut your womb and you will pay, Deuteronomy 28, there are curses and when God curses you it can show up in barrenness." This dear couple, this dear woman lived, it says, into her old age, they were both advanced in years. That puts them over 60. And since there was no retirement age for a Jewish priest, they could be 80 or more. All their life, and they were probably married in their teens typically, all their life...all their life they bore the stigma, no child, no child, no child. And all the questions...I wonder what's wrong...I wonder what sin is in their life. The rabbis used to say seven people are excommunicated from God...here's how they begin...a Jew who has no wife, or a Jew whose wife has no child. That was a terrible burden in that society.

You remember the story back in Genesis chapter 30, I'll just read it briefly. It's right there in the first verse. "Rachel saw that she had no children. Jacob, her husband, but his other wife did. She became jealous of her sister and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children...how serious was this?...or I...what?...I'll die.'" Hannah, 1 Samuel 1, barren, weeping and weeping and weeping and weeping. To be barren was grounds for divorce. If your wife couldn't have a child, boot her out. She's probably accursed by God.

So here's this couple righteous in the sight of God, maybe unrighteous in the sight of men. As godly as they were they bore the stigma. But Luke wants us to know that her barrenness had nothing to do with sin in their life, that's why verse 6 is there. But it had everything to do with something God was planning. Better you should have a bunch of unknowns...or worse, I should say, you should have a bunch of unknown kids than to have just one John the Baptist. God had something planned for them that was so much beyond their wildest dreams. To them was to be given the forerunner, the first prophet in 400 years, the last prophet of the Old Testament, and, listen to this, the greatest man who ever lived up until that time. They would have only one son, he would be the greatest human who had ever walked the earth...and that is from the words of Jesus Himself. This is not divine punishment, their barrenness, this is divine planning.

You know, their situation humanly was hopeless. And that's exactly where God often prefers it. And then you know what happened? Come back next week and find out. But I'll give you a hint...verse 11..."An angel of the Lord appeared..." Wow, here God breaks in, this is really exciting. We'll have to wait till next time. And as I said, this foundational truth we need to take our time getting through and then we get into the flow of the teaching of the book. Let's pray together.

What a great time this morning, Father, to worship You and praise You and to just see the richness of this treasure of truth. We're just so thrilled to see the clarity with which the message of Scripture is opened to us and the power with which it comes to our hearts. We thank You that You are the God of history, You are the God of the universe and You are unfolding history in these most marvelous ways. We thank You for the reminder this morning that these two simple humble people who had nothing about them that was distinguished, except they were righteous in Your eyes. Can anything more wonderful be said than that about someone? Thank You that that righteousness, that robe of righteousness can cover any of us who will believe and embrace the reality that Jesus Christ was the substitute for our sins. embracing Him as Savior we are then covered with that same robe of righteousness for He has removed our sins. We thank You that they remind us of sanctification, the fact that when we are justified we are also regenerated, converted, transformed, born again so that we now have a new life and what we couldn't do we now can do and we can walk in Your ways and love Your truth and obey Your Word. We thank You for the example of this couple and with great anticipation we await the remainder of the story as You break through the silence to announce the birth of the forerunner of the Savior of the world.

Father, we just pray for every person here to be in the same situation that was true of these two folks...righteous in the sight of God and blameless and walking in the commandments and requirements of the Lord. To that end we pray for our Savior's sake. Amen.

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