

## The Tender Mercy of Our God

Luke 1:78-79

David Sunday

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Merry Christmas, everyone. I was thrilled this week to come across a quote by C.S. Lewis that describes the Christmas story so wonderfully. He said, “Once in our world a stable had something in it that was bigger than our whole world.” That’s enough to really capture your imagination for a long time. I need Christmas to come around once a year to reignite my wonder at the sheer beauty, the sweet mercy and the fathomless mystery of the Word Who became flesh and dwelt among us.

We need Christmas so we will behold again in Jesus the One Who is the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, bowing before Him in joyous adoration. We need this time of year because you and I can get to a point in our lives when we’re really not expecting God to do much, when we rule out the possibility of God’s intervention, when we’re pretty sure that not a whole lot is going to change in our lives. God seems remote, faith falls into a rut and worship becomes rote. We can recite the gospel with our mouths, but we resist it in our hearts.

That was Zechariah’s problem. Don’t get me wrong. Zechariah was a real believer. He was a Jewish priest and a very good one at that. Luke 1:6 tells us that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth “*were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and the statutes of the Lord.*” Luke goes on to say, “*But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.*”

One day, when Zechariah was doing his priestly duties in the temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. This was not Zechariah’s normal experience, so he was filled with fear. But the angel of the Lord said to him, in verses 13-15, “*Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord.*” This is good news of great joy.

But Zechariah did not respond with humility. He didn’t say, “Who am I to have such an honor?” Instead, he responded with disbelief. In verse 18, Zechariah said to the angel, “*How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.*” The angel of the

Lord answered him, *“I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”*

A lifelong prayer of his was being answered. God was about to do immeasurably more than Zechariah had ever asked or imagined, but Zechariah could not believe God’s message. Even though he had been reading his Bible his whole life long, and he knew all the stories of God’s intervention in Israel, he didn’t believe that God would do something great now in his life, in his time.

What do we and Zechariah have in common? Zechariah had lived a long life and hadn’t seen any miracles. Up to this point he had never seen an angel. He’d never heard any real live prophets. It had been about 400 years since the prophet Malachi closed the Old Testament. It was a time, like ours, when it’s easy to think God is no longer acting in history, that He’s silent and distant and remote—or maybe even that God no longer cares.

Even though we know better, that is where our hearts can drift at times. Even though we say we believe God is alive and present and active—and that He hears and answers prayer—deep in our hearts we doubt it. We disbelieve it. So because Zechariah doubted and disbelieved the Word of God, God gave Zechariah nine months to keep silent, to ponder and pray, to prepare for God’s promise to be fulfilled.

Imagine—what would you be like if suddenly, for nine months, you had no access to the internet? No television? No Netflix? No Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter? None of this stuff? No smart phone and no voice? You can’t speak for nine months. Some people in your life would be pretty happy about that, probably. You can’t do anything for nine months except read the Bible—and you can only read the Old Testament, waiting in silence for God to do something.

What would you want to tell the world after the nine months of silence were up? What would you want to say about God after having nine months to ponder the promises of His Word? If He were to give you your voice back, what would be the message you would bring? The first words out of Zechariah’s mouth were words of blessing to God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah cried out, *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.”*

Zechariah knew the book of Psalms very well. He would have known that three of the five books of the Psalms end with those very words. Whenever the Lord God of Israel came to the rescue, intervening in the lives of His people to redeem them, they would sing these words to Him: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel. He has visited us. God has redeemed us.” So in his

prophecy in verses 68-79, Zechariah wants us to praise, rejoice and believe in a God Who keeps His promises, a God Who draws near to His people, a God Who rescues them at great cost to Himself. That's what it means to be redeemed. He is a God Who remembers every word He has spoken. He has a plan for an eternal Kingdom and He has the strength and wisdom to carry out that plan with perfection. That's what Zechariah wants us to focus on.

The striking thing about Zechariah's words is he's speaking them at a dedication party for his baby son, John the Baptist. All his friends and neighbors are surrounding him. But instead of focusing on his son, Zechariah focuses on Someone infinitely greater than his own son. Only 18% of his words are directed to John the Baptist. The other 82% are directed to God and to His Son, the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.

On this morning before Christmas, I want us to focus our thoughts on verses 78 and 79. There Zechariah tells us about what was moving the heart of God the Father in sending His Son and about the unique character of Jesus the Messiah Who was coming into the world. Zechariah reveals some wonderful things to us about God in these two verses. Look at verse 78. Why did the Father send His Son? Zechariah would answer, "It's because of the tender mercy of our God."

I think these words are so evocative: "The tender mercy of our God." Dear friends, God is not distant. God is not remote. God is not passive. He is not far from each of us. God is not harsh. He is not vindictive. God has a heart that is tender and warm with mercy. God's mercy is His loyal, faithful, compassionate love coming to rescue us from our misery. That's what mercy is. Mercy is God sparing us from the misery our sin deserves. Mercy is God moving toward us when we are wrecked and ruined and ravaged by evil—by our own sins and by the wickedness that's been done to us. God's mercy comes and rescues.

Zechariah wants us to know, in verse 78, that God's mercy is a feeling kind of mercy. It's intensified by that wonderful word "tender," which in the Greek is *splanghna*, the word for bowels—the innermost part of a person. Zechariah wants us to know that our misery provokes a visceral reaction in the heart of God. God feels our pain. He feels our sorrow. He feels our oppression and He knows our shame.

You might be cold toward God today, but God's heart is warm toward you. You might be distant and reserved, but God's heart is moving toward you with affection and extravagant love. You might be tough, but God's heart is tender. In His mercy, God has launched a search and rescue operation, with His eternal Son Who accepted the mission, diving into the darkness behind enemy lines to rescue those who've been held captive by the devil—to rescue us.

Picture yourself in a stifling dungeon. You're sitting in the darkness of your doom. You're waiting for death to devour you. Suddenly, off in the distance, a light dawns. The enemies who

have been watching at the gate are struck down. And there before your cell appears Jesus, the gift of God's tender mercy, with the keys to unlock your cell and release you from your bondage.

That's how Zechariah is describing the coming of the Messiah into our world here. He's been meditating on the prophet Malachi. In Malachi 4, after speaking in verse one about how God will come and destroy all the enemies of His people, Malachi says in verse two, "*But for you who fear my name...*" What will God do for those who fear His name and put their trust in Him? Here's what He will do: the Son of righteousness shall rise with healing in His wings. He will come and deliver you, and "*you shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.*"

What a lively illustration that is of the joy Jesus comes to bring us at Christmas. It's like the joy of being freed from captivity to sin and Satan that can only be compared to a calf leaping from its stall, roaming free—free at last. That's what Jesus comes to do for us. I love the way Zechariah speaks to Jesus' unique character in Luke 1:78: "He is the sunrise from on high that God in His tender mercy has sent to visit us."

What good news that is! We live in a world of violence and injustice, where refugees are fleeing from oppression and families are ripped apart. Our world is a world of bottomless grief. It's dark and no one knows how to find their way out of this darkness. No one can cure it. But there is a light that shines into the darkness and the darkness could not overcome that light. In Tim Keller's wonderful book Hidden Christmas, he speaks about how sunlight brings three things: life, truth and beauty.

The sunrise from on high brings us life. Without the sun we'd freeze to death. Our sin has dragged us into a realm of darkness and death, where we lose meaning and hope in the darkness. We get addicted to things that destroy us. We have disordered desires that spill over the boundaries of blessing, and we have gnawing discontent that shrivels our souls. We get crippled by shame, and we struggle with our identity. We become paralyzed by our inability to change. That's death—spiritual death. But Jesus is the sunrise from on high Who restores life and light to us. The sun brings life.

The sun also shows us what is true. If you tried to drive a car in a dark and foggy night without any headlights, you would probably go off the bridge and into the river. We cannot see the truth of things—the way things really are—without the light. You cannot know who you really are without knowing Who God really is. Jesus is the One Who shows us the truth about God. He reveals "*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God*" (2 Corinthians 4:6). He's the One Who makes God real to the human race.

Think about what we're celebrating here at Christmas. We're celebrating the fact that the Creator God—Who made the Rocky Mountains and Lake Michigan and the hummingbirds and

the universe with all its galaxies, Who made you and me—this God in His mercy became a human being like you and me so that we can know and understand Him. I heard a pastor say, “In the historical Jesus of the New Testament, there is all of God that you and I are capable of grasping.” All you could ever need to know about God—every question you could ever ask of God, everything you could ever be capable of grasping about God—He has made known in Jesus Christ, the God-Man. He’s the sunrise from on high Who shows us the truth we couldn’t see in the darkness of our ignorance. Jesus alone makes God real to us.

He brings us life. He shows us what is true. Then thirdly—like the sun—He brings joy and beauty. If we lived down in Antarctica and had nothing but darkness for six months, most of us would get depressed. Jesus is the very sun of heaven’s love. He is the joy behind all our other joys. As Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him.” Even when we don’t know why we’re restless, underneath it all it is Jesus we’re longing for. He’s the One Who satisfies our soul’s deepest craving. He is the beauty Who breaks our addictions to money, sex and power. Like a man who falls in love with a beautiful woman and she changes his life, Jesus is the beauty Who changes us. When we behold Him, lesser things fade into insignificance. Base things become despicable and our hearts are filled with new loves, new affections. Jesus is the beauty.

He’s the faithful Shepherd Who takes His wayward sheep through the valley of the shadow of death. Do you see that in verse 79? He’s the One Who gives light “*to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.*” He never leaves us there in the dark—He’s with us. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23). And then He guides our feet into the way of peace, like a Good Shepherd, leading us in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake, until we dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Friends, we are celebrating today the coming of the One Zechariah looked forward to welcoming—the sunrise from on high has visited us and He will come again. So we say with all the people of God this Christmas:

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace;  
Hail the Son of righteousness.  
Light and life to all He brings,  
Ris’n with healing in His wings.

[Hark! The Herald Angels Sing By Charles Wesley, 1739]

There will be times in the darkness when it will be hard for us to rejoice. It will be a fight. But fight we must. The only other alternative is defeat and despair. Kate sent me a note on Thursday from a devotional she’s been reading. It talked about how Martin Luther resolved, “If a

cross comes—if something difficult comes into my life—I will make the cross but little. But, if there is a mercy, I will make the mercy great.” That’s what Zechariah is inviting us to do here. He’s saying, “Oh, there is a mercy. There is a tender mercy from our God, an abundant mercy from our God, and it is seen in most brilliant display in the sunrise from on high Who has visited us, Who has brought light into our darkness, Who guides our feet into the ways of peace. There is a gift of God’s tender mercy.”

It’s easy, isn’t it, for us to magnify our trials and minimize God’s mercies, so that we start to become defined by our pain. We can’t even see God’s mercy anymore except through the prism of our pain. It’s so easy to let the trials multiply and magnify. But this Christmas, God is inviting us to minimize our trials and magnify His mercies. So pause now and think: what great and loving mercies has God brought to you this year? Can you name them? Can you number them? Has He given you food to eat? That is a mercy from God. Has He given you a family to love? That’s mercy from God. Has He shown you compassion through fellow Christians? That’s mercy. Has He revealed to you fresh truth from Scripture? That’s mercy. Has He spared you from many years of wandering without Him? That is mercy, friends, from God.

Can you see that every good and perfect gift comes down to you from heaven above through the tender mercy of the Father of Lights? Can you see that the greatest mercy of all is found in the gift of His Son? As Isaiah foretold in Isaiah 9:2 and 6:

*The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,  
on them has light shined....  
For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Friends, let the beauty of it all capture your heart afresh today. “Once in our world a stable had something in it that was bigger than our whole world.” The sunrise from on high has appeared. Behold God’s tender mercy. He has not left us alone in this world. He has visited us.

Mild He lays His glories by  
Born that man no more may die  
Born to raise the sons of earth  
Born to give them second birth

[Hark! The Herald Angels Sing By Charles Wesley, 1739]

Put your trust in Jesus, Who came to die in order that you might live forevermore.

Tish Looper is going to come now and share her story of God's tender mercies in her life. As you listen, ponder anew what God the Almighty is able to do for all of you who put your trust in Him.

**Tish:** I'm a Jewish believer and I feel very honored to be able to share my testimony with everyone at this Christmas Eve service. First, I would like to share with you personally what it means to me. I love being a Jewish believer. As I have studied and come to my saving faith, I find joy in accepting Jesus as my Messiah.

Every day I wear many hats—a wife, a mother, a friend, a career woman—and I have moments when I feel completely overwhelmed or that I'm not doing any of these well. I like to have things under control, wrapped up with a nice pretty bow. So I turn to Jesus and ask for His help. I may not always have awareness of His guidance, but Jesus gives me comfort and peace. In Christ I find my fullness, my completeness.

I have learned and continue to learn, as I walk with Jesus, that I'm never alone. Jesus loves me through all my imperfections and sins. I could not imagine my life without my personal relationship with the Lord. He has given me light amidst many trials. I take comfort that I am in His arms and that one day I will see Him in heaven. As a mother, I love being able to share my Jewish history and heritage with my boys, as well as my journey to accepting the Lord. I also love to see how the Lord is using them in their walk.

How I came to be a Jewish believer is my Christmas miracle. I grew up in a Jewish home with both my parents coming from big Jewish families, full of flaws, but filled with many family traditions. As I look back at how I came to accept Jesus as my Savior, I know it had nothing to do with my own personal works or my family traditions, but only the wonderful mercy and grace of our Savior Jesus Christ, Who died on the cross for a sinner like me.

After Michael and I were married, he expressed his desire to attend church on a regular basis, a decision I completely supported. I thought maybe this would be a good time for me to go back and explore my Jewish beliefs, as I was not really involved in my religion other than participating in the holiday traditions with my family. Michael told me he would like me to come to church with him, but he understood if I did not want to. He never pressured me.

The first Sunday morning Michael was getting ready to go to church, I felt a desire to go with him. I did not know this was the Lord leading me and working in my heart. I started to attend church with him on a regular basis and I sought counseling from our pastor. Michael and

his family never pressured me, but they were always willing to answer my questions. This was not an overnight process, as I was very fearful of what my family would think, and I was not able to trust the Lord. Through many intercessions, as my trust in the Lord grew, I came to a saving faith and accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior.

After accepting Him, I had a business trip and was seated next to a woman on the plane who found out I was a believer. As we spoke, I started sharing my testimony, my questions about my faith and my fear of sharing this with my family. We prayed together, asking Jesus to show me the way. Shortly after the trip, I spoke with Michael and told him I wanted to be baptized and profess my faith in Jesus. He sweetly said that he wanted to recommit his life to the Lord and would get baptized with me. But my story doesn't end there.

The hardest part was telling my family. When I told my mother and father, all they said to me was, "Well, we always knew you were searching for God." This was hurtful to me. I had learned that they could not do this for me. Throughout my walk of faith, I had learned many things, but I also knew it is only God's grace, tender mercies and love that had been—and continues now—working on my heart.

I now have a better understanding of why my parents could not guide me in my search. There were many discussions of sharing my faith with my parents and siblings, some that unfortunately led into arguments. I have been told that they did not want any part of my Jesus. I so wanted them to accept Christ, to share the joy I have and to know that Jesus is the Messiah Who came to rescue His people. He was not just my Jesus, but theirs as well. It was hard for them to understand how I heard His voice and not theirs.

Many times I've asked myself, "Why me?" I have watched my parents pass away, not knowing if they came to a saving faith. I have witnessed my family's bitterness, hardened hearts, disbelieving nature and their desire to control how God fit into their lives. I take comfort and peace in God, and I have loved hearing Pastor Sunday's messages on Romans over the past weeks—especially when he talked about Romans 9, when he said there are mysteries which God has chosen not to reveal and that we must let God be God.

This spoke to my heart, because this is where I have been—letting go and putting my trust in God. It is not up to me whether my family is saved. I can only shine His light that demonstrates His tender mercy and love. This is difficult at times, because I know they see my sins and my many shortcomings. They fail to see and understand that I am a sinner saved by grace through faith.

As we heard Pastor Sunday preach from Luke today, I prayed for my family, that they would see the light and not sit in the darkness. I pray they might come to a knowledge of saving

faith and share in what I have found in the fullness of Jesus. My prayer today is for everyone to see the light and acknowledge Jesus as their Savior, experiencing my Jesus, my Messiah, Who has come to be the light of the world. For me, to hear the call of the Lord and to accept Jesus as my Savior means the fulfillment of God's promise.

Thank you for listening to my testimony. I wish all of you a joyful Christmas and that you might experience my Jesus, my Messiah. Thank you.

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