

An Act of Mercy - Luke 1:57-66
Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis
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I. INTRODUCTION

I want to open our time in God's Word today by setting the stage with a significant, prophetic, future-looking passage found in Psalm 89. Turn with me there in your Bibles if you would. If you'll remember where we left off last week in our study of the gospels...two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, have just met up and swapped stories of the miraculous things God had just brought about within them...2 miraculous pregnancies that were undeniably made possible only by the hand of God...one woman pregnant without the help of a man, and the other pregnant as an old woman, long past the age of child-bearing. And in their conversation with each other, the Spirit filled these 2 ladies up and led them to loudly and boldly proclaim how great and merciful and good God is. Then we left them last week spending the final 3 months of Elizabeth's pregnancy together, as they waited for Elizabeth's promised son to arrive.

But before we pick up the history of what happened next, I'd like us to consider an important passage in the Hebrew Scriptures that provides essential background to what begins to unfold today in Luke chapter 1, verses 57 to 79. This passage from the Hebrew Scriptures is Psalm 89. Hopefully you've turned there by now. Keep in mind as we read it, that this section of Scripture would have been melded deeply into the minds of Zacharias and Elizabeth and all other Hebrew believers. It deals with God's special relationship to King David, and how God would preserve and exalt his throne forever and through his descendants bring forth salvation...a salvation that other passages make even clearer will be brought about through none other than the promised Messiah, coming from the line of David. He would be the ultimate horn of salvation that God would raise up from David's descendants.

Let's read verses 1 through 4 of Psalm 89 and then skip forward to verses 19 through 37:

Psalm 89:1-4

**1 I will sing of the lovingkindness of the Lord forever;
To all generations I will make known Your faithfulness with my mouth.
2 For I have said, "Lovingkindness will be built up forever;
In the heavens You will establish Your faithfulness."
3 "I have made a covenant with My chosen;
I have sworn to David My servant,
4 I will establish your seed forever
And build up your throne to all generations." Selah...**

Psalm 89:19-37

**19 Once You spoke in vision to Your godly ones,
And said, "I have given help to one who is mighty;
I have exalted one chosen from the people.
20 "I have found David My servant;
With My holy oil I have anointed him,
21 With whom My hand will be established;
My arm also will strengthen him.
22 "The enemy will not deceive him,
Nor the son of wickedness afflict him.
23 "But I shall crush his adversaries before him,
And strike those who hate him.
24 "My faithfulness and My lovingkindness will be with him,
And in My name his horn will be exalted.
25 "I shall also set his hand on the sea
And his right hand on the rivers.
26 "He will cry to Me, 'You are my Father,
My God, and the rock of my salvation.'
27 "I also shall make him My firstborn,
The highest of the kings of the earth.
28 "My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever,
And My covenant shall be confirmed to him.
29 "So I will establish his descendants forever
And his throne as the days of heaven.
30 "If his sons forsake My law
And do not walk in My judgments,
31 If they violate My statutes**

***And do not keep My commandments,
32 Then I will punish their transgression with the rod
And their iniquity with stripes.
33 "But I will not break off My lovingkindness from him,
Nor deal falsely in My faithfulness.
34 "My covenant I will not violate,
Nor will I alter the utterance of My lips.
35 "Once I have sworn by My holiness;
I will not lie to David.
36 "His descendants shall endure forever
And his throne as the sun before Me.
37 "It shall be established forever like the moon,
And the witness in the sky is faithful." Selah.***

Through this and many other passages, the Jewish people knew that Messiah, the only One who could continue David's throne into eternity and who could redeem the souls of human beings, was coming in the family line of David, and they were looking expectantly for that day of his arrival. And at this point in history, the time of Zacharias and Elizabeth, in the context of the scattering and destruction and discipline of the Lord that the Jewish people had been experiencing for more than 400 years as a result of their rebellion against God, there was a deep longing and a desperate hunger for this promised Messiah to finally arrive.

Even in Psalm 89, if you continue on, you see this crying out to God for his favor to return to the people of Israel...for the discipline and wrath of the Lord to be lifted after hundreds of years of suffering. The psalmist asks, beginning in verse 46:

***46 How long, O Lord?
Will You hide Yourself forever?
Will Your wrath burn like fire?
47 Remember what my span of life is;
For what vanity You have created all the sons of men!
48 What man can live and not see death?
Can he deliver his soul from the power of Sheol? Selah.
49 Where are Your former lovingkindnesses, O Lord,
Which You swore to David in Your faithfulness?***

***50 Remember, O Lord, the reproach of Your servants;
How I bear in my bosom the reproach of all the many peoples,
51 With which Your enemies have reproached, O Lord,
With which they have reproached the footsteps of Your anointed.***

This was the cry of the Jewish soul at this amazing point in history when God was interacting in such miraculous ways with the ordinary lives of people like Mary and Joseph and Zacharias and Elizabeth...to bring about his amazing plan of redemption...to raise up that promised horn of salvation. Understanding this expectation and cry of the Jewish people will help us understand what happens next as we pick up where we left off last week in history. Turn in you Bibles now to Luke chapter 1, where we'll begin with verses 57 and 58.

II. THE BIRTH OF A SON (vs. 57-58)

After 9 months of waiting, 3 months of conversations between Mary and Elizabeth about what God was doing, and more than 9 months of Zacharias being unable to speak, the day for the birth of John had finally arrived. Let's read verses 57 and 58:

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.

It was a glorious day! After a lifetime of being unable to have kids, Elizabeth finally had a son and everyone knew without a doubt that God had brought it about miraculously. The shame and disgrace of a lifetime had been reversed in a moment and now instead of being suspected of having some secret sin for which God was judging her, Elizabeth was being viewed as someone whom the Lord was graciously favoring. What a turnaround! And clearly Elizabeth was continuing to boldly give great glory and credit to God, because all the neighbors had heard that in this pregnancy God had shown and put on display his great mercy toward her...his kindness and goodwill toward Elizabeth in her suffering and disgrace had caused him to do something amazing about it...beyond anything Elizabeth could have imagined or thought possible!

And now, in Elizabeth's arms was a beautiful, miracle baby...the son promised to Zacharias in his encounter with an angel in the temple. And as stated by the angel, the promise of a son in Elizabeth's old age was perfectly fulfilled right on schedule despite Zacharias' struggle with unbelief. And this beautiful baby boy was real and warm and everything a mother could hope for! And to top it all off, their neighbors and relatives were rejoicing and celebrating and sharing in Elizabeth's great joy! Our God, who is rich in mercy, was showing that mercy in very real, tangible and personal ways toward ordinary, imperfect people who feared him. And the result was great joy for all involved!

III. A SURPRISING NAME AT CIRCUMCISION (vs. 59-63)

Well, 7 days went by after the birth of John, and in accordance with Jewish law (Leviticus 12:2-3), on the eighth day Elizabeth's purification was complete and it was time to have the baby circumcised...and at least in this case, also named. Let's read what happened in this process in verses 59 through 63:

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. 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." 62 And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called. 63 And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, "His name is John." And they were all astonished.

Clearly there was a group of people present at the circumcision ceremony, identified as "they" in these verses. These other people naturally assumed that the baby would be named after his respected father, but when they checked with his mother she surprisingly said, "No, indeed." Not just, "No," but "No, indeed." Elizabeth seemed to indicate that naming him Zacharias was not a negotiable option, and then she provides them with a name that had never before been used in either Zacharias' or Elizabeth's family. This was highly unusual and certainly couldn't be done without checking with Dad.

So, through making signs to the mute Zacharias' they asked him what he wanted to name the child, and everyone was even more shocked when he wrote out on a tablet the authoritative words, "His name is John." He didn't say, "I think we should name him John," or "Zacharias is a good name, but what about John?" Instead, he declared it was a done deal...his name already is John. This was so unusual that we're told the people were astonished!...such a break with tradition that the everyone was starting to wonder what was up.

As we discussed a few weeks ago, the name John means: "Jehovah is a gracious giver." Zacharias, on the other hand, means: "Remembered of Jehovah." Jehovah had special plans for both of these men and he even wrote it into their names! And the significance of each of these names is quite obvious now in light of all that was happening here in these amazing times.

IV. MIRACULOUS SPEECH BRINGS PRAISE TO GOD (v. 64)

Well, if people were astonished at the naming irregularities, they were really blown away by what happened next. Let's read verse 64:

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

The man who had seconds earlier been only able to communicate by writing on a tablet, suddenly started speaking loud and clear and now it wasn't even about what to name his son...it was about how great and awesome God is! After months and months of not being able to express and celebrate what amazing things God was doing and what Zacharias had experienced in his angel encounter, he was finally able to let it out. And what came out was praise to God. Of all the things he could have talked about when he could finally speak again, he chose to use his first words to praise God, and in a very big way as we'll see as we continue moving through this passage! Zacharias had learned his lesson about the importance of believing God and his newfound belief led to a bold, uninhibited magnifying of his great God who was unlike any other and worthy of all praise.

V. FEAR, TALKING AND WONDERING AT THE HAND OF THE LORD (vs. 65-66)

Well, what was the effect on all the people who witnessed these events and saw the hand of the Lord in it all? How did they respond? Let's find out in verses 65 to 66:

65 Fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them kept them in mind, saying, "What then will this child turn out to be?" For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him.

Fear came on all those living around Zacharias and Elizabeth. In witnessing the miraculous pregnancy and birth of John in Elizabeth's old age; in watching mute Zacharias start speaking suddenly and boldly in praise of God; and in finally hearing what Zacharias experienced in the temple and how he got the name John for his son; fear came on people in a big way.

The Greek word is *phobos*, meaning fear, dread or terror. People in the hill country of Judea suddenly became acutely aware that the hand of God was doing something big and it somehow involved this miracle baby born to Elizabeth and Zacharias...and it created great fear within them. Am I ready for whatever God's about to do? Will it be good or bad for me? Will I be able to live out the ordinary life I had planned, or is the world as we know it about to end? Is God ushering in the end of Israel's discipline and punishment or is he getting ready to ramp it up? These were perhaps some of the fear thoughts going through people's minds. Everywhere in the hill country of Judea people were talking about these things and wondering what this child would turn out to be. Word spread far and wide so that everyone in the area was well aware that John was no ordinary child. Perhaps even some shepherds who watched their flocks by night had heard about John and the amazing circumstances of his birth. All who lived in the hill country of Judea knew without a doubt that the hand of the Lord was with this special child.

And if you want an interesting study sometime, look up the phrase, "the hand of the Lord," in the Bible and check out the wide variety of miraculous happenings, good and bad, that take place when the hand of the Lord is on someone. The hand of the Lord can be on someone for blessing or for judgment. But one thing

is for sure: the hand of the Lord is powerful beyond our comprehension and extraordinary things happen when his hand is on someone.

Imagine for a moment what life must have been like for John as he was growing up, being that everyone knew the hand of the Lord was on him. It seems like having ordinary friendships and being viewed as a normal person would have been next to impossible. Perhaps that's how he ended up living out in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey.

VI. THE FILLING OF ZACHARIAS AND AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS PROPHECY

Well, let's briefly look at what happens next after the opening of Zacharias' mouth. The text isn't completely clear as to the exact timing of verses 67 to 79, but in studying the passage I think it most likely took place at the circumcision ceremony and records what Zacharias said in praise of God right when his mouth was opened. Verse 67 introduces the speech of Zacharias:

67 And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

A couple things are clear from this verse: 1) his speech came about through the filling of the Holy Spirit; and 2) his speech is labeled prophecy...God speaking a message through a human being. So as we read now the prophetic words Zacharias spoke as he was filled with Holy Spirit, just imagine what it must have been like to hear a man who hadn't said a word for almost a year to suddenly say these words. Here we go:

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 — 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 [Psalm 106:10]; 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. 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, 78 Because of the tender mercy of our God, With which 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."

Now if that isn't a bold message of hope, I don't know what is! Here again, similar to what happened last week with Elizabeth and Mary, we see the bold and powerful praising and magnifying of God that results when the Holy Spirit fills a person. Do you think worshipping, praising and glorifying God is important at all in the lives of Spirit-filled believers? I'd even go so far as to say, that if a person is truly filled with and directed by the Holy Spirit, you can expect a praising and magnifying of God and not themselves to be the focus of their words and actions. Keep this in mind as you exercise discernment in evaluating whether or not something is of the Spirit or whether or not someone claiming to be Spirit-filled really is...or whether or not you yourself are walking in step with the Spirit. Other passages of Scripture make it clear that authentic manifestations of the Spirit always edify and build up the body, promote unity and above all glorify God and not men.

VII. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Well, this is as far as we're going to get today in our text. I had illusions that I would get through the first part of Zacharias' prophecy, but I don't want to rush through it. There are some powerful things God shares with us in this prophecy that merit a little deeper analysis and, Lord willing, we'll work on tackling that over the next couple weeks. But as we close today, let's think about what we've learned and how it applies to our lives today.

First of all, we've seen again God's incredible, tender, unchanging mercy being actively carried out in the ordinary lives of those who fear him. In both last week's events and what we've looked at today, mercy is front and center...God's kindness and goodwill toward those who look to him is actively expressed in tangible actions he takes on their behalf. He doesn't just feel mercy toward us, he takes action to visit us with help in our daily lives.

Do you sense God's mercy actively working in your own life? Are you paying attention to the ways he's expressing it to you and offering you the daily help you need? Are you convinced that his unchanging, tender mercy toward you is a fixed reality no matter how you may feel or what challenges or emotional roller coasters you may go through in your life? Or is there a lurking suspicion that he really doesn't care about you or that he's allowing too many difficult things to come your way? My friends, if we're going to be able to face the pain, suffering, difficulties and challenges of living in a cursed world where Satan is on the prowl looking to destroy us and our faith in God, we must maintain and protect and believe in our hearts that God is good and full of great mercy...a mercy that causes him to take action on our behalf and give us everything we need to endure and even experience inner joy as we humbly walk with him and trust in him.

Secondly, God is calling his Spirit-led children to live lives that proclaim his glory and goodness. His Spirit is within us and ready to fill us up and give us uninhibited boldness in magnifying him and sharing with others where true hope and new life is found...where they can experience the one-of-a-kind mercy of the living God, found only in Jesus Christ. As we learn to walk by the Spirit and allow him to fill us, we can know that one of his fruits will be humility...a life and words that draw attention to God and his Son Jesus Christ, glorifying and exalting him and not ourselves. In fact if a person loves to tell you how in step with the Spirit they are and how in tune they are with his leading, that might be a pretty good sign that they're not. Why? Because they're drawing attention to themselves and expressing a subtle arrogance that they've figured out how the endlessly creative and unpredictable Holy Spirit works every time...the same Spirit whose work is described by Jesus in this way:

8 "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." – John 3:8.

Rather than ever coming to the conclusion that we've figured the Spirit out and making such claims to others, let's instead follow the words of Scripture in Galatians chapter 5, verses 25-26:

25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. 26 Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

Evidence of the authentic work of the Spirit in someone's life is humility and an exalting of God and his Son, Jesus Christ. And his work within a person will edify others and build up the body of Christ.

And finally, let's be bold proclaimers by the power of the Spirit no matter what other people think of us. The Spirit will enable us to do this as we step out in faith. Why waste our time trying to fit in or worrying about rejection? And I'm speaking to myself just as much as you. Just think how different our lives and words would be if we simply put aside our efforts to please other people, win their approval and fit in with the world around us...if our focus was just on God and his will for our lives no matter other people might think. John is an extreme example of a Spirit-filled person who didn't quite fit in as he walked out the call of God on his life. Fortunately, God doesn't call most of us to live in the wilderness, wearing animal skins and eating locusts and wild honey. But he does call each of us to let the focus of our lives be on trusting him and living a godly life no matter what people may think about us or how they treat us as we walk this out.

Consider this sobering statement from Paul in 2nd Timothy 3, verse 12:

2 Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Paul sounds pretty confident that if we truly live godly, Spirit-filled lives in Christ Jesus, we're not going to fit in with the world around us and it's a certainty that we'll even be persecuted. Levels of persecution vary, but we should count on receiving some if we live the way God intended. But the abundant life, the inner joy, the sweet mercy of God, the strength we receive in weakness, the hope in a hopeless world, and so much more...not to mention the eternal rewards waiting for us in heaven...far outweigh the temporary sufferings we'll experience as we walk with God in a world that's diametrically opposed to him. In the inspired words of Paul, found in Romans 8, verse 18:

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Zacharias and Elizabeth and all people in the hill country of Judea were getting a glimpse of this great glory in the great and miraculous things God's mercy was accomplishing within them and all around them, and you and I, my friends are

invited into this same glory and mercy-filled relationship with our great God. Are you ready to live it out no matter the cost? Are you ready to let your life be another act of the merciful hand of God?