

The Way of Peace - Luke 1:76-80

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I. INTRODUCTION

Think back for a moment, if you would, and consider what existed before there was time...before there were human beings...before the earth and the sun and the moon and stars were created...before God spoke and there was light. Think back even before the angels existed until you see only the uncreated One...the great I Am...Yahweh...our perfect and eternal three-in-one God. Do you imagine him as lonely or bored with himself, having no one to talk to and desperately in need of company? Do imagine he's tired of darkness and needs a burst of light? These are common misconceptions people have about God and his existence before there was time. But in actuality nothing could be further from the truth!

If you're envisioning a problem with a lack of light, consider what we learn about God in 1 John 1:5:

This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

God definitely didn't have any problems with a lack of light, since he himself is light. Paul even tells us in 1 Timothy 6:16 that God alone possesses immortality and he actually dwells in unapproachable light. But maybe you're thinking that surely he at least needed some company. How lonely it must have been to be the only One in the universe. This must be why he created angels and human beings: so that he could have some company and fellowship. Paul, however, gives us a much different picture in Acts 17, verses 24 through 29. He says:

4 "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; 26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their

habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' 29 "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.

Yahweh...the great I Am...the eternal existing One...blows away all our human concepts of him. He's above and beyond anything the human mind can fully conceive or describe. Artists and poets can never do him justice. He in himself needs nothing. And being three-in-one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (3 persons), God was never lonely or in need of company.

As we think back to when God was the only being in existence, we see perfect fellowship, perfect love, perfect cooperation and perfect peace. One thing we experience today that's notably missing when we think back to when only God existed is conflict or strife. In the Trinity we see three persons operating with different roles and responsibilities in perfect peace and unity: the Son in submission to the Father and willing to obediently and joyfully carry out whatever assignments are given to him; the Spirit in submission to the Son and the Father and willing to obediently and joyfully fulfill whatever roles and responsibilities are given to him; the Father functioning in his role as head and having conversations with the Son and the Spirit in the planning and decision making process. We see this in Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."
[emphasis mine]

All persons of the Trinity seem to be involved in the process and the conversation. There was no jostling for position or arguments about who was going to do what. There was simply perfect love, fellowship, communication, unity and peace as each member of the Trinity conversed and worked together in cooperation and submission...what we might describe as joyful community. Peace and love and joy and perfect fellowship is what we see when we understand correctly what it was like before there was time. And that peaceful and harmonious fellowship led to a burst of creativity and a mind-blowing demonstration of the power and glory of the one true God as he spoke the universe into being. Our friend, Andy Baxter,

describes creation as a burst of joy flowing out of the joyful community of the Trinity. How amazing it would have been to watch the creativity and power of God unfold in creation! The angels must have been awestruck by what they saw!

And as we think back to the Garden of Eden, we also see peace and perfect fellowship between Adam and Eve and between them and God in the beginning. They actually got to walk in the garden with God and talk to him directly. But as we know now, that peace was short-lived. Conflict and war and death were about to make their appearance in the perfect world God had created. Already there'd been sin and rebellion against God in heaven as Satan, a created angel, had tried to exalt himself above God and overthrow his rule. And what had been the result?...conflict and separation between Satan and God. Satan had been cast out of heaven and removed from fellowship with God. Peace and fellowship and community were destroyed by sin.

And we know that misery loves company and Satan was on the move to take away peace and fellowship from human beings and God. Unfortunately Adam and Eve believed Satan's lies and followed him in rebellion against the One who had lovingly created them for fellowship, peace and community with him and with each other. Peace and fellowship with God was destroyed as a consequence for that sin and what we've seen in the world since then is conflict and wars, jealousy and selfish ambition, anger, bitterness, pride, broken relationships, death, suffering and so much more...what we significantly call the deeds of darkness.

But God had a grand plan to guide people back into the way of peace, restoring peace and fellowship with him and teaching them how to live in peace with others even in the middle of broken, un-peaceful world. The beauty of God's grand plan was now beginning to unfold in the lives of several people we've been learning about recently in our study of the gospels. Turn with me in your Bibles, if you would, to Luke chapter 1, where we'll be focused today on verses 76 through 80, the second part of the prophecy about God's grand plan that was given to the priest, Zacharias, as he was filled with the Spirit. This part of the prophecy focuses on the son of Zacharias, John the Baptist, and how God would use him to prepare the way for the One who would make possible this restoration of peace with God and others.

Let's read verses 76 through 80:

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."

May the Lord bless the reading of his Word and open our minds to his truth today.

II. PART 2 OF ZACHARIAS' PROPHECY:

So let's consider what God is sharing with us today through part 2 of this prophecy of Zacharias. Let's see what it tells us about God's grand plan.

A. The child, John, will be called prophet of the Most High (v. 76a)

First of all we see that Zacharias' son, John, is going to be a prophet of the Most High God. He will be speaking a direct message from God to human beings. God has set John apart, put his hand on him, and plans to communicate a message to his people through him.

B. He will be called prophet of the Most High because he will go before the Lord to prepare His ways (vs. 76b-77):

Zacharias' also gives us the reason why John will be called prophet of the Most High, and that is that he will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.

John was going to be that messenger of God promised to the Jewish people more than 400 years before through the prophet Malachi...the messenger who would prepare the way for the Messiah. Malachi 3, verse 1 contains that promise which John was going to fulfill. It says this:

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His

temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts.

John's task was to prepare or clear the way for Messiah, the Lord, who was coming soon to his temple. John would do the necessary ground work to get people ready for the arrival of Messiah.

C. He will prepare the way by giving the Lord's people knowledge of salvation that comes by the forgiveness of sins (v. 77)

And what would John do to prepare people for Messiah? Well, in verse 77, we're told that he would prepare the way by giving the Lord's people knowledge of salvation that comes by the forgiveness of sins. In order to be ready for the message of Messiah, people needed to know that their sins and rebellion against God were real and serious and that they were in desperate need of forgiveness. They also needed to know that there was a salvation available through Messiah that would come about only as they repented of their sins and received forgiveness through him. And if we fast forward in time for a moment, we see that John's message to people was just this: that they needed to repent of their sin in order to receive forgiveness of sins. We learn from him that forgiveness comes through repentance.

Mark 1:4 tells us this about John:

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And listen to this description of John the Baptist in Matthew 3, verses 1 through 11:

1 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!'" 4 Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and

all the district around the Jordan; 6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. 10 "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Well, one thing's for sure: John didn't beat around the bush about the need for repentance, did he? And he was concerned that people were offering true repentance that would be shown to be true, not just by words, but by a change in their actions.

I think it'd be helpful here to spend just a little time developing a clear picture of what true repentance is. If it's something that's necessary in order for us to receive forgiveness, it's probably important that we understand what it really is. Have you ever forced your child to say they're sorry to someone they've hurt? You know that they're not really sorry, and that they're not taking responsibility, and that they really feel no remorse for what they've done; but you nonetheless force them to make the word, "sorry," come out of their mouth. That's not true repentance, is it? Repentance isn't even just saying you're sorry. True repentance is recognizing that what you did was wrong, taking full responsibility for it, and deciding you want to act differently in the future. As we've discussed recently, the Greek word for repentance literally means "to change one's mind." This is often described as a turning from sin...recognizing sin for what is and turning away from it to go in a completely different direction.

I don't know if you've noticed, but true repentance is in very short supply in the world today. Sadly, it's even often in short supply among Christians. Concerned about our image, or insecure about exposing any weaknesses to others, or maybe just trained by our parents to never admit failures or apologize, we so often struggle to follow the only path to true freedom, true change, and enduring peace

in our relationships. That path is paved with repentance: admitting our failures without making excuses; taking full responsibility for them; sincerely apologizing to those we've hurt and asking for forgiveness; and then deciding to behave differently in the future by the power of the Spirit within us. This is what repentance looks like, and if there's one thing that will lead us to peace in our relationships, it's this.

Repentance is not only how we experience peace with God at the moment of salvation and receive his forgiveness, but it's also how we maintain peace with him and experience peace in our relationships with others. John preached repentance, and there's no salvation and forgiveness and peace with God without it! This is how he prepared the way for Jesus Christ: through preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

D. God's tender mercy is the reason salvation by forgiveness of sins in being offered (v. 78a)

So as we look back in Luke 1 at the first part of verse 78, we discover the reason why forgiveness is even being offered to human beings, none of whom deserve it. We discover why people who are in full rebellion against God are being offered a chance to be forgiven and restored to a peace-filled relationship with their Creator. What we find is that salvation by the forgiveness of sins is being offered to us because of the tender mercy of our God! You may have noticed that mercy has been a recurring theme throughout this passage we've been studying in Luke 1, verses 57 to 80. This is the 3rd direct reference to God's mercy in these verses. I've shared the definition of the Greek word translated, "mercy," here with you so many times that I'm confident you have it memorized by now. If not, you'll have one more chance to memorize it today. I just love the picture it gives us of God's kind intentions and sympathy toward us and how it motivates him to take action on our behalf. Here we go with the definition one more time: mercy is God's "kindness or good will towards the miserable and the afflicted, joined with a desire to help them" (*Blue Letter Bible*).

And there's an adjective attached to the word, "mercy," this time that gives it even more significance. It's the English word, "tender;" the tender mercy of our God. You might be interested to know that the Greek word translated tender here refers to the bowels or the intestines. The *Blue Letter Bible* tells us that the

Hebrews regarded the bowels as “the seat of the tenderer affections, esp. kindness, benevolence, compassion; hence our heart.” So you might call this the “bowel mercy” of our God. To me this tells us how deeply God feels kindness and goodwill toward us and desires to help us. It might be compared to how we feel toward our children when they’re suffering pain or when they’re making bad choices we know are going to harm them and lead them down painful paths...how are heart aches for them and longs for them to be relieved from suffering or follow paths that will lead them closer to God instead of further away. That’s a faint picture of the kind of intense, heart-felt mercy our God feels toward each of us.

E. The Sunrise from on high will visit us with this tender mercy (v. 78b)

And the beautiful thing about this tender mercy of God is that he doesn’t just feel it, he takes action to bring relief and offer us a way out. Look at the second part of verse 78: “with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us.” What is it that the Sunrise from on high is going to visit us with? He’s going to visit us with the tender, bowel mercy of our God. God’s taking action and sending the Sunrise from on high to bring that tender mercy to bear on our lives. No wonder the angels later declared to the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” – Luke 2:14 (NIV)

What an undeserved blessing for us to be visited with the tender mercy of God! And who is this Sunrise from on high? Well, if you’ll remember back to my message on John 1, verses 1 through 18, you’ll recall this word picture describing “the coming Sunrise.” It’s the beauty of God’s Word: how different books of the Bible, written by different human authors, agree and complement one another... all because the true author of the Bible is God himself, speaking through human beings. In that message, I described the Sunrise from on high this way:

The sunrise crested the mountains when the Word, the true Light, the One who spoke us into being and is right now holding each of us together... when He became flesh and lived right here on earth with us...the very Creator of the universe living and walking around on earth among those he created. This is what we call the incarnation...when the only Son of God,

the Word, Jesus Christ, put on human flesh and came to earth as a helpless baby in order to provide a way for us to come out of the darkness and walk into his perfect light.

When the true Light [*the Sunrise from on high*] arrived and dwelt among us, “we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father” ...glory meaning splendor and brightness. The true Light had arrived...the sunrise had crested the mountains and was shining on the earth. In the way Jesus lived his life on earth, the choices he made and the miracles he performed, people saw God’s splendor and brightness in a way they’d never seen before.

Jesus Christ is the Sunrise from on high and he came to visit us with the tender, bowel mercy of our great God!

F. He’ll visit us with God’s tender mercy to do 2 things (v. 79)

Zacharias also shares with us in verse 79 that Jesus would visit us with God’s tender mercy to do 2 things.

1) To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death (v. 79a)

First, he would shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. This is a reference to a passage in the Hebrew Scriptures found in Isaiah 9, verse 2. It says this:

***The people who walk in darkness will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.***

The Jewish people had looked forward to this day for centuries and now it’s been revealed to Zacharias that this prophecy is about to be fulfilled. The Sunrise from on high was coming to a world full of human beings who were living and walking around in darkness and in the shadow of death. Back in verse 79 of Luke, this situation is described in an even more sobering way. It says people are sitting in darkness and the shadow of death. You get the picture that they’ve accepted it, it’s all they’ve known, and they’re not even

trying to find a way out. They're just sitting there, so used to the darkness that they can't even comprehend a life lived in the light.

It's into this dark world, full of people sitting in darkness and living in fear of death, that the Sunrise from on high is about to visit and shine his light. And the light he shines will show them the way out of darkness. As we look forward 30 some years to a couple of profound statements Jesus himself made during his ministry, we find that this is exactly what he did. Listen to what he said in John 12, verse 46:

"I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.

There's a pretty clear way out of darkness according to Jesus, isn't there? Believe in him and you will not remain in darkness. And what do you do from there, after you believe in him? Well, Jesus also makes that very clear for us in John 8, verse 12. He says:

..."I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life." [emphasis mine]

Allow the Light of Christ to expose you as you are, repent, believe in him and follow him. That's the simple path to go from sitting in darkness to living and walking in the light. Jesus invitation to come into the light is restated beautifully by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5, verses 13 to 14:

13 But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. 14 For this reason it says, "Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you."

Zacharias announced ahead of time through the Spirit that the Sunrise from on high was coming with the tender mercy of God to shine his light upon those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, and we see that that's just what Jesus did. And the path out of darkness and into light is the same today as it was in the time of Christ: Repent, believe in him and then follow him!

2) To guide our feet into the way of peace (v. 79b)

But we see in the last half of verse 79 that the Sunrise from on high was coming to do a 2nd thing. He was not only coming to show the way out of darkness, but he was also coming to guide our feet into the way of peace. Jesus was coming to show us the way to restore the peace that existed between humans and their Creator in the Garden of Eden and also to teach us how to live our lives in peaceful relationships with other people, especially with those who have walked out of darkness and into light with us.

As we look forward again to what happened when Jesus' arrived and began his ministry, we learn what his message was after the way had been prepared for him by John the Baptist. In Mark chapter 1, verse 14 and 15, we read this:

Mark 1:14-15

14 Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Sounding familiar? Repent and believe. A few verses later in Mark, Jesus calls his disciples and says to them: "Follow me..." Repent, believe and follow. These are the key ingredients to walking out of darkness into light and being restored to peace with your Creator. In the words of the apostle Peter:

"But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. 19 Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;
(Acts 3:18-19)

Repent and return and experience times of refreshing from the Lord.

And Romans 5, verse 1:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

Through repentance and faith in Christ we have peace with God. The way of peace is through repentance and faith, not only at the moment of salvation, but also as we walk in relationship with God and learn to follow him.

G. What happened to the child, John, from here (v. 80)

And this brings us to our final verse today, and the end of Zacharias' prophecy: verse 80...a verse that gives us a short description of what happened to John the Baptist in the years that followed this prophecy. Verse 80 says:

And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

Clearly God's hand was on John and he protected him and prepared him for the important task of preparing the way for the arrival of the Sunrise from on high, our Savior Jesus Christ.

III. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

As I worked through this message, God really drew my attention to repentance, and I hope he did the same for you. John's mission in preparing the way for the Lord was to guide people to repentance. The path to peace with God and others is paved with it. So as we close today, I'd like to ask you: are you a repenting person? Do you regularly examine yourself and take responsibility for your mistakes and failures and whatever else is exposed by the light of Christ and the truth of his word. Do you do what it takes to resolve them with God, confessing your sins, so that nothing is hindering your fellowship with him?

Are you a person who recognizes that in any human conflict, both parties have contributed something to the problem? If it's always the other person's fault, may I suggest that you have a problem you need to work on with God in your life.

When you do recognize your contribution to a conflict with another person, are you willing to admit it to the other person and apologize without qualification?... in other words, without saying, "I'm sorry, BUT....you deserved it.;" or, "I'm sorry IF I did something that upset you;" or, "MAYBE I was wrong, but what you did really made me mad." Qualified apologies, using if, but or maybe, are ineffective and actually show a continued attempt to shift the blame and justify your own actions. They don't represent true repentance and don't lead to true and lasting peace in relationships.

Are you a person who owns your mistakes and sins and does what it takes to repent of them and get right with God and other people? Or is it always someone else's fault? Times of refreshing and peace in our relationships with God and others only come when we are repenting people who allow Christ's light to shine on our lives and then honestly take responsibility for what we discover there; changing our minds by God's power to live differently in the future and to do what it takes to restore relationship with anyone we've harmed. This is God's road to peace with him and with others. There's nothing that takes the wind out of an argument or conflict like true, heartfelt repentance.

Is peace important to God? I hope you've seen clearly today that it is. Just the peaceful cooperation and submission and fellowship inherent in the Trinity, tells us that peaceful relationships are important to God. And our call is to be like him. Jesus himself came to guide our feet into the way of peace. But I want to close today with a few more verses that express in various ways how important peace is to God:

On Palm Sunday, what did the people proclaim as Jesus entered Jerusalem?
"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest."

John 14:27

"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful."

John 16:33a

"These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace..."

Romans 14:19

So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

2 Corinthians 13:11

Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Colossians 3:14-15

***14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.
15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.***

Romans 12:18

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

2 Thessalonians 3:16

16 Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!

Let's be repenting people who do what it takes to live in peace with our God and with other people. Let's get on and stay on that beautiful path of peace shown to us by the Sunrise from on high when he visited us with the tender mercy of God.