



“Sweet Mercy”
Luke 1:57-80

Idea: God shows mercy when He relieves our suffering.

Intro: In sports, no one enjoys the suffering of a brutal defeat. On October 29th, two Southern California high school football teams met each under the Friday night lights. Inglewood High hosted and entered the game riding high at 8-0, while Inglewood Morningside was 2-7. After the first quarter, Inglewood High led 59-0. When the damage was all done and the suffering over, Inglewood High had defeated Inglewood Morningside 106-0.

For this reason, there is a “mercy rule” in high school football. In Virginia, this rule is instituted when a 35-point differential is made any time in the second half of the game. In this situation, the clock will continue to run on incomplete passes and when a runner goes out of bounds. The goal is to minimize the scoring by shortening the length of the game; thus, relieving the suffering.

During the early days of the first century, the Jews living in Palestine were longing for relief from their suffering. They had been under the thumb of ruling kingdoms for over 600 years. Rome was their latest oppressor. The Jews held tightly to the prophecies of old, which foretold of a coming messiah who would bring freedom and restoration to their once great nation. They yearned for God’s mercy to bring an end to their suffering.

When Zechariah was visited by the angel Gabriel in the Temple, the nation of Israel had been living in darkness for over four hundred years. The people had not heard from a prophet since Malachi. Heaven had been silent during those centuries as the world awaited the coming of the Lord. The prophet Malachi had prophesied that God would send a messenger in the spirit of Elijah (Mal 4:5). Zechariah learned from the angel the prophesy would be fulfilled in his son. The long darkness was about to experience sunrise, and Zechariah’s son would be the forerunner to the dawn of light. God’s sweet mercy was about to be poured out on them.

Read Luke 1:57-80.

Inquiry: It had been nine months since Gabriel had visited Zechariah in the Temple and promised that Elizabeth would bear a son. As it goes with the declarations of angels, everything happened just as it was said. Verse 57 is a simple but great reminder that we can trust God’s Word because God’s Word is true.

Through the birth of John, the Lord had brought an end to Zechariah’s and Elizabeth’s suffering. He had strengthened Zechariah’s faith and devotion. And the Lord had begun to roll out His gift to humanity, which

would bring an end to all suffering. We see in this story God's sweet mercy. There are three pictures of this beautiful gift.

1. The Gift of Children

As I pointed out a few weeks ago, Zechariah and Elizabeth had longed for a child for decades. They had prayed for years, yet Elizabeth remained barren. More than likely, they had given up on the thought of having a child. If you remember, Zechariah's own description of their ages reveals this. He says, "*For I am old, and my wife is advanced in years*" (1:18). They had grown used to the cultural shame of having no children. During those early years of their marriage, people used to ask, "When are you going to have children?" As Elizabeth began to age, the people began to say with concern, "We are praying for you." Now in old age, the people whispered around her, "She can't have children." This elderly couple had suffered through great disappointments, but now, in God's infinite wisdom and timing, they experienced His sweet mercy through the gift of a son.

There are a few significant aspects of this gift that need to be mentioned. The gift of children...

- Brings joy in the home. (vs. 58)
Zechariah and Elizabeth rejoiced at John's birth. Not only were they filled with joy but also their neighbors and relatives. Again, it happened just as Gabriel said it would (1:14).

Children are gifts of God's great mercy, regardless of the circumstances. The Jews understood this and viewed children as "*a heritage from the Lord*" (Ps 127:3-5). Israel walked away from the paganism of their surrounding neighbors who aborted, abandoned, and assassinated their babies on the altars of worship. They embraced children as gifts from God.

America would do well to hear and heed these lessons from history. Over the last fifty years, millions of babies have been sacrificed on the altar of convenience. Rather than seeing babies as the gifts of joy they are to our homes, our culture has viewed them as nothing more than obstacles impeding our plans. This distorted and devilish perspective has brought great destruction upon our people. We must change our perspective on children. I love the view E. T. Sullivan offers of children. He says, "The greatest forces in the world are not the earthquakes and the thunderbolts; the greatest forces in the world are babies." They bring joy.

- Brings praise to God. (vs. 65-66)
Every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. The very purpose of human existence is for God's image to be reflected within His creation. Therefore, every person has the propensity to bring honor and praise to God. This was equally true of this baby boy. After Elizabeth and Zechariah named the boy John instead of a family name, people began to wonder about what he would become. It was obvious that the Lord's hand was on him.

The name given to the boy also brings praise to God. John, "*Yohanan*" in Hebrew, means "the Lord has given grace." As the forerunner of the Savior, God was indicating that His mission and power would come to this world from outside the natural order. He alone was mercifully working to bring salvation to sinners.

Our children, too, belong to the Lord. They are to grow up and become all that the Lord has sovereignly chosen for them. Let us remember that the gift of children in our lives is for the praise and glory of our great God.

- Brings the opportunity to pray and trust. (vs. 59-64, 80)

Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful in their obedience to God and His Word, so they had the boy circumcised on the eighth day. All male children were to be circumcised on the eighth day (Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3). This procedure would mark the boy with the sign of the covenant and incorporate him into Israel. Circumcision obligated him to live under the commands of the Law and to share in the blessings promised to God's people.

On the eighth day, parents also named their sons. When Zechariah and Elizabeth named the boy 'John' instead of a family name, they were formally committing themselves to God's plan for John's life. They recognized this gift from God was an opportunity for them to pray and trust the Lord.

God was not obligated to give Zechariah and Elizabeth a son. John's birth was the result of God's sweet mercy in their lives. He relieved their suffering and replaced it with joy. In the same way, God is not obligated to give us children. Thankfully, in His sweet mercy, He does. Let's, therefore, remember that our children are God's, given to us for His praise. And let's remember they are opportunities for us to pray and trust the Lord for their future.

There is a second picture of this beautiful gift...

2. The Gift of Affliction

Read verses 63-64.

Why was Zechariah mute and deaf? It was the result of his disbelief of what Gabriel had shared with him in the temple nine months earlier. Throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy, the only way Zechariah could communicate was through a writing tablet. Can you imagine how frustrating that must have been for him? He could not share the incredible news with his friends. Simple conversations in their home were difficult. There would surely have been a plethora of misunderstandings during that time. He suffered greatly. Through all of it, however, it seems Zechariah did not give up. Suffering has a way of making a person either bitter or better. Zechariah became better through his suffering. When God restored his speech and hearing, he blessed God (vs. 64). J.C. Ryle offers insight on this:

"He shews that his nine months' dumbness had not been inflicted on him in vain. He is no longer faithless but believing. He now believes every word that Gabriel had spoken to him, and every word of his message shall be obeyed... Let us take heed that affliction does us good, as it did to Zechariah... Sanctified afflictions... are spiritual promotions. The sorrow that humbles us, and drives us nearer to God, is a blessing and a downright gain. No case is more hopeless than that of a man who, in time of affliction, turns his back upon God.

Zechariah's affliction was God's merciful gift that resulted in his increased faithfulness and devotion. May we also adopt this perspective in our own affliction and allow it to make us better rather than bitter.

There is a third picture of this beautiful gift...

3. The Gift of Salvation

In response to God's mercy to him, Zechariah prophesied of God's mercy to the world through salvation. This gift has three parts.

- The Plan (vs. 68-73)
Zechariah recognized that John's birth was connected to God's plan to visit His people. God's plan had always been to visit and redeem His people through the "horn" He would raise up from the house of David. This is the story of the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, the meta-

narrative of Scripture is salvation. God is on mission to visit and rescue sinful people from the darkness and destruction of sin. The plan involves a physical rescue (vs. 71), but it more importantly is also spiritual in nature. In mercy, God rescues sinners from the domain of darkness and transfers them into the kingdom of His light (Col 1:13).

- The Purpose (vs. 72-75)

Zechariah also recognized that John's birth was in conjunction with God's purpose in salvation. He was working to not just make people's lives better; He was working to make them holy worshipers of God. Thank God that when Jesus comes into our lives we are transformed. We become new creatures in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). For what reason, however, are we transformed? The purpose is worship (vs. 74).

God redeems people so they might worship Him. He returns us to our purpose in creation...the worship of God. Freedom from sin is an awesome result of our salvation, but the freedom God is most interested in is our freedom to worship Him.

- The Peace (vs. 77-79)

As mentioned earlier, salvation is largely spiritual in nature. It involves the "forgiveness of sins" (vs. 77). Sin is man's biggest problem because it is an offense against God. Sinful man has rejected God's Word and rule. This rejection offends His holiness. His holiness and justice demand that He punish our sin. Therefore, as sinners we are at war with God. Sin has also broken our relationships with others and broken our own physical and emotional state. Consequently, there is no peace in our lives.

Salvation brings peace. It brings peace with God, with whom we are at war. It also brings peace with other people by transforming how we live and act. This inner transformation brings a personal peace within our lives we never knew before.

Conclusion: The first-century Jews living in Palestine were defeated. They were suffering under the tyrannical rule of Rome. They were down 106-0. Israel was not defeated because they could not fight. They were once the great power in the region. No, the reason they were under the hand of Rome was because of their own sinfulness and rebellion against God. The story of John's birth reveals God's sweet mercy as He works to relieve their suffering through the Messiah. Likewise, we are not defeated because we cannot fight. The truth is, we fight very well. The problem is we are at war with the wrong Person. The depravity of our hearts leads us to war against God rather than warring against evil, but thankfully God comes to us in sweet mercy. The children God gives to us is a picture of His mercy. The affliction He walks alongside us in is a picture of His mercy. And the salvation He offers through Jesus Christ is His mercy.

Do you recognize God's mercy in your life? On this first Sunday of the year, what an opportunity we have to commit to pray for and trust the Lord with our children. They are gifts given to us for the praise and glory of God. We also have an opportunity to allow the affliction we may be suffering to make us better instead of bitter. Trust the Lord through the pain and hardship. And then, of course, if you have not yet received God's gift of salvation, what is keeping you from it?

Good news: God loves you. He created you and desires to know you.

Bad news: You are a sinner in rebellion against your Creator.

Best news: God has done everything necessary to justly deal with your sin and bring forgiveness and restoration to your life. Today, He calls you to turn from your sin and self and turn to Him as Savior and Lord. Have you received forgiveness in Christ? What would keep you from embracing the truth and believing on Jesus today?

The birth of John reminds us God's sweet mercy-rule, and we are thankful that He relieves our suffering.