

# What Jesus Came to Do

Luke 1:67-79

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What is the meaning of Christmas? There are two main ways that people think about Christmas. There is the way of our culture and there is the way of the Church. For the general culture Christmas is about parties, family gatherings, exchanging gifts, a few days off work, Christmas shopping and mall parking lots that are filled to capacity. For many retailers this is make or break it time. It all has very little to do with the birth of Jesus. Jesus is there in the background music, but for the most part he has very little to do with Christmas. But there is also the way that Christians think about Christmas. We share in the parties and the gift-giving, but for Christians, the real reason for Christmas is to celebrate the birth of Christ. There are Christmas concerts and carol-sings and there are worship services which focus on the meaning of the birth of Christ and during which God is worshipped because of the great significance of the birth of Christ.

This is what we have been doing in this worship service. And in this sermon, I want to explain why Christians make such a great deal about the birth of Jesus Christ. The basic story is familiar enough. A virgin becomes pregnant without having sex through a miracle performed within her by the Holy Spirit. Joseph and a pregnant Mary travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem because of a census that was ordered by the Roman emperor. There was no room for them in the inn. Jesus was born in a stable and his first bed was a manger. An angel appears to some shepherds to announce his birth. He tells them, "Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord." And then a multitude of angels appear singing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased."

But why all the fuss? Why should the birth of a baby in a stable be announced by angels? And why do Christians celebrate that birth some

2000 years later? I want to answer these questions this evening. And I want to do that by explaining part of a song sang by a man named Zechariah when he heard that Jesus was going to be born. We have just read the words of that song. We are going to look at some of the key phrases in it. But in order to understand the words that Zechariah sings, we need some background. We need this background to understand the significance of the birth of Christ.

You see the birth of Christ is part of the larger story that the Bible tells, and it can only be understood in the light of that story. Jesus Christ is the key figure in the whole story and his role in the story is the reason that Christians make such a big deal about his birth.

The biblical story begins with the creation of the world by the God whom the Bible reveals to us. The first words of the Bible are, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." God is the creator of all things. The pinnacle of the creation is the human race, beginning with Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve are made by God. Their purpose is to have children and fill the earth, to work to provide the things that they need, to manage the creation for God, to enjoy the bounty of creation with thankfulness to God and to find happiness and fulfillment in their relationship with God and with one another. The human race was designed to flourish by loving and serving and worshipping God. This is a key point of the biblical story. We are made to thrive by being subject to God. God is good, and he is good to us and we experience goodness by loving God and doing what he commands. We were made to thrive in submission to God's authority over us and in loving and honoring him. When man loves and serves God, everything is as it ought to be, and everyone is happy.

But Adam and Eve sinned. There was one thing that God told them not to do and they disobeyed. God told them not to eat of the fruit of a certain tree and they disobeyed him. That act of disobedience is known as the fall of mankind into sin. It is the entrance of sin into the world and it is the cause of all the misery and death and brokenness of the world. We can only flourish when we are loving God and doing what he commands. Rebellion against God is the way of death and is the cause of all that is wrong with the world.

Now God could have ended it right there. He could have just wiped Adam and Eve off the face of the earth. But he didn't. Instead he put in place a plan to undo what had happened in the fall. God revealed a plan to put the world right again. He began to pursue a long-term mission to renew his creation by dealing with the curse of sin. God plan was to overcome sin – to win the victory over sin. His plan involved reasserting his rule over the earth.

You see, when Adam and Eve sinned they had been tempted by Satan. By sinning they had gone over to the enemy of God. They had become followers of Satan rather than God. God's plan was to rescue them from Satan because following Satan is the way of death. So, God began to reestablish his rule on the earth by taking some people and bringing them back to his side. As the story in the first book of the Bible unfolds, there are two kinds of people. There are a small number that God has rescued and brought back into his kingdom. And there are a larger number who continue to live in rebellion against God. But God's plan is to grow the number of his people until all people worship him and submit to him and so reestablish his rule over his world.

God calls Abraham and promises him that his family would be the people of God and that through them he was going to save the world from sin. From Abraham would come a great nation – the nation of Israel. They would be the kingdom of God on earth. Eventually that kingdom would fill all the earth. They were an important part of God's plan to rid the world of sin. But they were also sinners.

And so, they did not do a very good job of being God's kingdom. They sinned against God and because of their sin, God allowed their enemies to defeat them and drag them from their land and take them into exile. But God promised that he was going to send a Saviour who would save them by bringing them back to himself and by defeating their enemies. This is the background to the story of the birth of Christ. You have the nation of Israel who had been defeated by their enemies because they had failed to be faithful to God. You have many promises that God was going to send the King in the line of king David who would deliver them from their enemies. The people of Israel at the time Jesus was born

were waiting for this Saviour. And that is enough background to understand what Zechariah sings about the birth of Jesus.

Listen again to the first part of what he sings, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” Zechariah is singing about the birth of Jesus. And his point is that by means of the birth of Jesus, God has come to the world to save his people. He refers to Jesus as a horn of salvation for us. A horn is a symbol of power. Zechariah is saying that Jesus had come to be a powerful Saviour. In verse 71 he speaks of being “saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us...” In verse 74 he sings of the people of God “being delivered from the hand of our enemies” and further that because of that they would be able to “serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all [their] days.”

Now it is possible to interpret these phrases in terms of a political salvation. Israel at this time was not a free people. This was during the period of the Roman empire, and they were a people subject to Roman oppression. The people of Israel longed to be free from the Romans and many of them were interpreting God’s promises of salvation in political terms. They were hoping that God was going to raise up a king who would lead them in battle against the Romans and establish the free state of Israel.

But if we look at the words of Zechariah’s song in the light of Jesus Christ and what he actually did, we find that these words about being saved from our enemies have a deeper meaning – a meaning that corresponds with God’s plan for ridding the world of sin.

If we look closely at the words of the song that Zechariah sings we will notice that the salvation that Zechariah is singing about is a salvation from sin. Listen again to what Zechariah sings in verses 74-75, “[T]hat we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” In verse 77 he sings about salvation in terms of the forgiveness of sins.

You see Jesus came to bring salvation for Israel. But he did not come to bring the kind of salvation that most of them expected. What most

people did not understand was that their greatest need was not to be delivered from the Romans, but rather to be delivered from their sins. Most people did not understand that their most dangerous enemies were not the Romans, but the spiritual enemies of sin and the supernatural anti-God kingdom of Satan and the evil spirits.

And you see that is true for us as well. We live in a different world from that into which Jesus was born. We are a free people. We are not a people who are being oppressed by some unwanted political system. But what we share with the people of Israel at the time when Jesus was born, is that our greatest priorities have to do with our physical well-being. Our priorities have to do with the things that are seen rather than spiritual realities. Our priorities have to do with getting ahead in life and enjoying life and being healthy and comfortable. And if those are our priorities then the birth of Jesus will not matter all that much to us because he did not come to give us this-worldly peace and prosperity. He did not come to meet our this-worldly desires and longings. The salvation that he came to bring is not a salvation from political enemies and not a salvation from the hardships and disappointments of this life.

He came to save us from much more serious enemies – the enemy of sin in our own hearts – sin in the world in which we live and the unseen but very real enemies of spiritual forces who promote evil in us and around us. Jesus came to save us from sin and Satan and death. This is what we need to understand to appreciate the birth of Jesus.

As I already said, the good life as the Bible describes it is life in a loving and submissive relationship with God. The most important thing about us as human beings is that we were made to love and serve God. This is completely different from the way that most people in our society think about human beings and human well-being. The dominant conviction in our society is that we thrive as human beings when we follow our own hearts and desires. The path to wholeness and flourishing is the way of freedom and self-expression.

The teaching of the Bible is very different. We experience the greatest happiness and wellbeing through a loving relationship with God. The Bible teaching is that God made us and that we are designed to

experience joy and satisfaction by living our lives as God would have us live them. That means loving and worshipping God. It means living not for ourselves but for God. It means directing our lives to pleasing God. It means living in obedience to his commands. God's commands are not a hindrance to joy and pleasure but the way to the greatest joy and pleasure and satisfaction.

And not living in a loving relationship with God and for him is the way of emptiness and misery and death. There are short term pleasures, but they do not give the kind of satisfaction that we were meant to experience as creatures made by God and for God. There is no doubt that there are people who do experience joy and fulfillment without God, but the biblical claim is that there is much more to be had in a life focused on God and pleasing God. Many of the results of life lived apart from God are clear all around us: broken homes and broken lives, hatred and conflict, emptiness and futility, selfishness and greed, addictions and other forms of destructive behaviors and on and on.

Salvation in biblical terms is being saved from a life apart from God and being saved to a life in a loving relationship with God. Our enemies in biblical terms are anyone and any thing that keeps us away from loving God and doing what he commands. Satan is our greatest enemy. The Bible says that the devil is our adversary and that he "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." What Satan is all about is tempting us to sin and sin in the Bible is the cause of death. God had warned Adam and Eve that if they would eat of the forbidden fruit they would die and die they did.

But death in the Bible is more than physical death. Death stands for all the results of sin. The Bible teaches that just being a sinner is a form of death. Apart from salvation we are dead in sins. In 1 Timothy 5:6, Paul says that someone who is self-indulgent is "dead even while she lives." Life apart from God is a living death according to the Bible.

There is an OT verse that makes this clear. God is speaking to his people Israel. In Deuteronomy 30:19-20, God says, "<sup>19</sup>I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life, that you and your offspring

may live, <sup>20</sup>loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days....”

Death is a great enemy along with Satan. Death according to one author is “the negation of life, wholeness and communion with [God].” This is the biblical perspective of life apart from God. Life apart from God is a living death. And conversely life in fellowship with God is truly life – it is life as it was meant to be lived.

And then there is eternal death or hell. Those who are not rescued from their living death which is life apart from God will experience eternal death when they come to the end of this life - eternal separation from God. Eternal separation from the source of all good and blessing. The book of Revelation uses the term “second death” to refer to the ultimate death of those who refuse salvation. These are the great enemies of the human race – sin and death and Satan. There is nothing else that comes close in term of being the source of misery and brokenness and suffering.

And this ultimately is what Zechariah is singing about as he celebrates the fact that Jesus Christ had been conceived in the womb of Mary and would soon be born. He sang that through Jesus Christ, God had raised up a horn of salvation for us. He sang of Jesus as the one who would save us from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. And he sang of Jesus as the one who through delivering us from our enemies would enable his people to serve God, “without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”

Now Zechariah is singing about the birth of a very significant figure. He is singing of one whom he refers to as a “horn of salvation for us.” He is speaking of one who would be born “in the house of his servant David.” He is speaking of one who is the fulfillment of centuries of promises made through Israel’s prophets. He is speaking of one who is so important that he will have someone to go before him to prepare the people for his coming. In the second part of the song, Zechariah is singing about his son, John the Baptist, whose task it would be to go before this glorious Saviour/King to announce his coming. The person whose conception and coming birth Zechariah is celebrating is going to be a person of great significance and glory.

But there is an unexpected obscurity about him. There is a huge contrast between the words of the song and the humble circumstances surrounding his birth. The words of the song speak of someone who was the hope of the people Israel – the one for whom they had been longing and praying for centuries. But his mother was an obscure peasant teenager. His mother and his step-father were so poor and unknown that Jesus ended up being born in a stable.

And this was just the beginning. Jesus was very different from what was expected. The people were expecting a mighty king to deliver them from their enemies. Jesus never had any of the pomp and splendor of royalty. He grew up in a small village as the son of a carpenter. When he began his public ministry, he certainly did attract public attention, but he was never accepted by the religious leadership. He never had any money. He had a small band of faithful followers. The religious experts did not accept his claims. He was brought up on charges of blasphemy and finally he was executed in the most shameful way possible – death on a cross. The opinion of the Jewish leadership and most of the Jewish people was that he was delusional. They thought of him the same way that we today would think of someone who walked our streets claiming to be the Son of God.

But a few days after his death, word began to spread that he had risen from the dead. And after a few weeks his followers began to preach and teach that he was the Son of God and that he had died as a sacrifice for sin and that by his death and resurrection he had conquered death. Many people believed, and the NT church was born, and it grew. And his followers began to ponder his teaching in the light of the OT Scriptures and spell out the meaning of his coming and his life and his death and his resurrection.

From their writings we learn that he was the Son of God come to earth to deliver his people from their sins and to defeat Satan and his followers and even to defeat the power of death. So, Peter preached of Jesus in Acts 10:42-43, "[H]e is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup>To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

And the book of Hebrews says of him, that Jesus became flesh and blood “that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” And the apostle John said of him: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believed in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

It is in the light of all this that we have to understand the song of Zechariah and the song of the angels. Jesus was born for our salvation from sin. He was born to save us from the enemies of sin and death and Satan. He was born so that by his life, death and resurrection, he might deliver us from our sins and enable us to serve God “without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” It is in the light of all this that we have to understand the announcement of his birth by the angel, “Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.”

This is why the church celebrates the birth of Christ. Following Christ does not guarantee us an easy life. We suffer. We experience hard times and disappointments. In many places Christians are persecuted and most people think that we are naïve and silly for believing this stuff. But through believing in Christ our sins are forgiven and we have peace with God. Through believing in Christ the power of sin is broken in our lives so that we are learning to live lives that please God. Through believing in Christ we are renewed so that we are learning to find our greatest joy in loving and worshipping and serving God. Through believing in Christ we receive eternal life – that is the life of the world to come. Through believing in Christ we know that death is not the end, but that we will rise from the dead and live with Christ in a renewed creation forever and ever.

This is the meaning of the birth of Christ – or at least part of its meaning. There is so much more than could be said, but this is at the heart of it. Jesus came so that we might be restored into fellowship with God. Jesus came so that we might be renewed in our inner being so that we begin to desire to please God. Jesus came so that he might bring the kingdom of God which will one day overcome all opposition and fill the

earth. Jesus came to make right again all that had been broken by sin. Jesus came to eventually fulfill the promise of a new heavens and a new earth.

This is the good news of the message of the Bible. It is good news because it is offered to all. All of the wonderful things that Jesus accomplished by his life, death and resurrection are available to anyone and everyone who will become a follower of Jesus by turning from sin and by trusting in him. Following Jesus does not mean an easy life, but it does mean a good life – a life with God at the center and pleasing him as the goal. It is the beginning of living life as it was meant to be lived. And it is lived with the certain hope that the change that Jesus begins to work in us now he will complete at the end of our lives so that we will then know the unspeakable joy of loving and serving him without sin. This is what Jesus came to do and this is why the church celebrates his birth.