

Luke Chapter 1 v 13 - 17

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Date: 11 December 2016

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. Please have Luke in chapter 1.

We read through Luke chapter 1 from 1 to 25 this morning and we're just going to remind ourselves of part of that, particularly from verse 13.

This is when Zechariah was in the holy place in the temple offering the incense and the angel of the Lord, or an angel rather, appeared to him, who we're told later is Gabriel, and he speaks to him and this is what he says.

Verse 13, the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You are to call him John.

He will be a joy and delight to you. Many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink.

[1 : 08] He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many to the people of Israel, sorry, he will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children, the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

The rarer an item is, the more valuable it becomes. I'll say that again with my teeth in.

The rarer an item is, the more valuable it becomes. That's not just true, of course, of animals, and there's a lot of talk of that with Planet Earth number two, which is on the TV.

I think it's on again tonight, and about animals and birds and creatures which are becoming extinct or have become extinct or on the verge of extinction. But also that's true of everyday items, everyday common items at one time.

They become very valuable as they become rarer and rarer, whether that's a child's toy or a book, a first edition book, or a piece of furniture or a piece of clothing, all sorts of things.

[2 : 28] The rarer they are, the less there are of the original thing, the more precious they are. And of course the highest prices, the greatest value is placed upon those things which are considered to be the very last one of its kind.

The very last one, the final, with no more to replace it. Prophet Elijah was a man who considered himself to be the very last of the prophets of the Lord.

In 1 Kings 19, he complains to God and says to him, the Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, put your prophets to death with the sword, I am the only one left.

There's no other prophets left, said Elijah. They've all been killed. But as you know, in the event, God has to correct him, which is a wonderful encouragement, and tells him he's not the last who's been faithful to God, but rather in that chapter 1 Kings 19, he says, I've reserved 7,000.

I've reserved 7,000 in Israel. In fact, that distinction of the last of the prophets falls to John the Baptist, the one who is spoken of here, whose coming is to precede the greatest prophet, in one sense, the final prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

[3 : 53] There in Matthew in chapter 11 and verse 13, Paul, sorry, the Lord Jesus says this, all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

He's the last. He's the one that closes the door in that sense on the Old Testament prophet ministry. And as Gabriel speaks with Zechariah here, he tells him this good news, that the prayer that he and Elizabeth had prayed over and over again, we thought about that this morning, was being answered.

He also tells him, not only that he will have a son, but what he would do, what sort of a ministry he would have, what sort of an impact he would have upon the world around about him.

And John's prophetic ministry, as we read about it here in these verses, follows in the pattern of all the prophets that have gone before. There are similarities amongst all the prophets. They all had unique messages in one sense, but they all had the same message.

They all had the same work, the same ministry. And so really, as we look at the words of Gabriel to Zechariah, we're able to understand, not only the ministry of John, who is the pre...

[5 : 05] Sorry? Well, that's a good word, but I wasn't thinking of that one. Anyway, he's the one who precedes. It's probably the right word, but since I don't know what it means, it's no good to me.

He's the one who precedes the Lord Jesus. He's the one who precedes the Son of God, the day of the Lord. That helps us to understand his ministry, but also the ministry of the Old Testament. Understand the word of God as it's given to us here in preparation for Christ's coming.

Because that's our theme. That's the theme that Luke has been presenting to us, isn't it, as I said this morning. Luke doesn't dive straight into, as Matthew does in one sense, the announcement of the birth of Christ and his coming.

He goes back a step. He goes back several months to the announcement of John's birth. And he gives quite a lot of time, doesn't he, to that, to not only the prophecy here, but we see later on in chapter, the end of chapter one, the actual birth of John and the song of Zachariah, his father.

And so we see that John's ministry is preparing us for Jesus, and therefore we see that the whole of the Old Testament is preparing us for the birth of Christ, for a right understanding of this child who is born of Mary.

[6 : 21] So what I want us to do this evening as we continue is to think about these truths, for us to understand why God has given us what we call the Old Testament, why God sent his prophets, and why John had to come to prepare the way for the Lord.

And the first thing that we understand, and we're just going to look at the words here, particularly of Gabriel, the very first reason that God gave John and the reason that he gave his Old Testament prophets was for our joy and rejoicing.

Verse 14, he will be a joy and delight to you and many will rejoice because of his birth. Now, of course, it was going to be a great deal of joy for Zachariah and Elizabeth, wasn't it?

What a wonderful thing. There they are, both very old, over 60, and there they are to receive this child who's going to be born to them after all this time. And as Elizabeth herself speaks about at the end of verse 25, taking away her disgrace, this sense of shame that she bore, this stigma because she had been unable to have children.

John's coming and John's ministry was one of joy and rejoicing. Now, it's very sad and we know it's true that there are many Christians, in fact, who have a very poor view of the Old Testament.

[7 : 42] In fact, look down on the Old Testament, maybe even despise the Old Testament. Christians who think of it as obsolete or irrelevant, boring, dull, actually horrific and bloodthirsty and that somehow the God of the Old Testament has no connection with the God of the New.

But that's not what we are meant to understand. And it's certainly not how God's people have understood the Old Testament or God's Word. Of course, the most wonderful place to read about God's Word and its effect upon the believer is Psalm 119.

Because in every verse of that very, very long psalm, the psalmist talks about the wonder, the glory, the splendor of the Word of God. He says in verse 111, your statutes are my heritage, they are the joy of my heart.

In fact, when you read through that psalm, and I'd encourage you to read through it, certainly regularly, you'll find that there is a distinct trace all the way through of the psalmist speaking of joy and rejoicing in the Word of God.

Verse 14, I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. Verse 16, I delight in your decrees. We can just go on and on again. Whenever he was faced with the Word of God, he found it a delight and a joy.

[9 : 04] Now I wonder, dear friends, is that how we feel when we come to the Old Testament Scriptures? When we come to the prophets, the major and the minor prophets? When we come to the book of Numbers, or 1 and 2 Chronicles?

Do we see it as a blessing that God has given us for our joy and rejoicing? Well, I think one of the reasons why perhaps we don't is because we do not find in the Scriptures the one about whom they are written.

We do not find the very nugget of gold that is hidden in every part of the Scriptures. which of course is the Lord Jesus Christ. John's ministry was to speak of Christ, to prepare the way of the Lord, to point people to Jesus.

That of course was his great ministry. We know that, don't we? He was the one who spoke when he saw Jesus coming towards him to be baptized. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

That was his main message. He had other things to say, but his main message was to speak of Christ. That's exactly what the Old Testament is all about. And it could be that perhaps when we come to read God's word we come perhaps with a wrong attitude.

[10 : 19] That was certainly the problem with the religious leaders and the Pharisees and the Jews of Jesus' day. If you remember in John chapter 5, Jesus corrects them, challenges them.

He says in verse 39 of John 5, you study the scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about me yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

And so they studied the scriptures, they studied the Old Testament. What is it that we need to do? What is it laws we need to keep? What is it practices we need to perform that we might earn God's favor and earn eternal life?

Now I don't think that we necessarily come to the scriptures in that way but we may come to the Old Testament and think, well, in my readings today I've got to read through these chapters and I've got to get through them and I've decided I'm going to read through the Bible in a year so I'm just going to get them out the way.

Is it no wonder that we find the Old Testament boring, inadequate, irrelevant, out of date? Brother, dear friends, let me encourage you when you come to the scriptures, look for Jesus because he's there everywhere.

[11 : 31] I'm not saying you have to lift a stone to find him but he's the rock in the desert, isn't he? He's the manna, he's the sacrifices, he's the temple, he's the kings, he's the heroes.

It's all there, he's all there. So like John, the ministry of God's word brings us joy because it reveals to us Jesus. We find Jesus there if we look for him.

Why else is the Old Testament a source of joy for us? A source of rejoicing for us?

Because also within the Old Testament of course we have the fullness, if I can put it that way, of God's Holy Spirit.

The Old Testament scriptures are full of the Holy Spirit. They are spiritual. Again, unfortunately people look at the Old Testament and say, that's all law and New Testament that's all spirit.

[12 : 31] That's completely wrong, isn't it? The Holy Spirit inspired all the scriptures. And so from the beginning to the end it's full of the Holy Spirit just as John himself was a man full of the Holy Spirit.

Quite uniquely so, wasn't it? Because we read there in verse 15 that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he's born. That throws all sorts of questions up which we're not going to look into at the moment about regeneration and when the Holy Spirit works and do we choose to follow Jesus?

Do we choose to become regenerated? Well, here's John. This, if I can use that phrase, fetus within the womb of Elizabeth who leaps for joy because he senses the nearness of the Saviour.

Well, scriptures are full of the Holy Spirit and so it is, indeed, those prophets who preached and spoke all the way through the scriptures. Moses was a prophet.

In fact, all those who spoke God's word in the Old Testament were prophets. Here's what Peter says about them in his second letter, chapter 1. Prophecy never had its origin in the human will but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

[13 : 49] God's word in the Old Testament is full of divine life. It's not the dead letter. It's not the sterile law but the very essence of God touches every word, quickens every page.

So we need the Holy Spirit's help to understand God's word. If he's the author, if he's the one who led and guided and directed the thoughts and minds of those who wrote it in a, we have to say, mysterious way because we don't fully understand but we know that he did so and we believe, as Paul tells us, elsewhere, all scripture is God breathed, then we need to go to the source, as it were.

We need to go to the author in prayer. prayer. If we just read the Bible as an ordinary bit of history, if we study it as if it was just another book, as many, of course, people do, who study theology or philosophy or whatever it may be, then we'll always fail to draw from it the blessing and the joy that God has for us.

It will always be sterile and dry to us. It will simply be something of minor interest. No, we need to pray.

Again, that's the problem, isn't it? We come to the scriptures and we come to say what I'm going to read. Are we praying? Lord, what have you to say to me here before we read it? Lord, what is it you want me to understand?

[15 : 17] Where is the Lord Jesus in this? Help me to receive its truth, its power. Let's remind ourselves again that God's word was that which created all the universe and the same voice is heard here and speaking to us.

Just like John, the last, the final. Like all the prophets, the Holy Spirit was speaking through him. Yes, speaking through him into that particular situation, of course.

Speaking to those people at the time, but because God himself is everlasting, his word is everlasting. Because God is himself involved in every particular time in history than his word has effect in every time in history.

So, we see the prophets, like John, spoke and had a ministry for our joy and rejoicing, our delight, our blessing, our encouragement.

Then we see as well the other purpose. Another purpose. The purpose was to bring God's people back to himself. Verse 16.

[16 : 32] He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord, their God. The Israelites in the Old Testament, as we know only too well, if we read it, of course, strayed.

They got it wrong. They sinned. They fell. And the work of the prophets was always to bring them back to God. So, we read about whoever it was, Isaiah or Jeremiah, speaking to the people who'd gone into idolatry, God warning and saying to them, a judgment is coming, get right with me, get back to me.

And of course, some of those prophets were heard, and the people were restored. Isaiah, Jeremiah, were largely ignored, and the people suffered because of it.

The history of God's people in the Old Testament is a rollercoaster history. One time, they were fervent, devoted to God, passionate for Him. But in a short time, they had fallen into idolatry, worshipping the gods around about them.

Their eye was distracted from Him, and their heart was turned. Prophets came to warn them, to woo them. You read some of the language of the prophets, particularly Isaiah, and the language is full of love, isn't it?

[17 : 53] Hosea, of course, what a wonderful picture that is, of the prophet and his wife, and how the Lord said, I've loved you with everlasting love, and the tenderness. Prophets were men who had to portray that and display that.

And of course, we know that John's ministry was just that, one that called for repentance from a people who were far from God. Matthew records some of his ministry in chapter 3, where he prepares the way for the Lord.

We're told, here was John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, saying, repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. And then we find, don't we, people came confessing their sins, were baptized in the river Jordan.

How many of us, dear friends, can honestly say that our hearts are steadfastly following Christ? How many of us can honestly say that we don't at times play fast and loose with the God who loves us?

Don't we need the correcting word of the Old Testament prophets? Don't we need their language to call us back to God, to challenge us, to convict us when we stray?

[19 : 09] We all do, there's no doubt about it. We may not do so outwardly to others around about us, we seem to be dead straight on the rails, all is well, but we know our own hearts.

We know there are times when we spend hours, maybe even a whole day, hardly a thought of Christ, hardly a thought of his word, hardly a thought of prayer, that we need the word of God to bring us back to the Lord.

Isn't the very purpose of it for that? How else is God's word to be helpful to us? How else was Luke, sorry, how else was John the Baptist to minister?

Verse 17 tells us that he will also give wisdom and teach us to live aright. Notice that, verse 17, he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children, the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous.

He was going to give clear instruction to show people the right way to live and the wrong way to avoid. Now again, that's exactly what we find the Old Testament scriptures are, aren't we?

[20 : 19] One of the reasons that we're studying the Ten Commandments is because not only are they the whole of God's counsel and word, therefore we need to know them, but we know that they are practical for us, helpful for us, teaching us what we should do, how we should live.

Well, John did that in his teaching and preaching. In Luke in chapter 3, we're told how he spoke to the people there when they asked him how should they live. Luke 3 and verse 10, what should we do then, the crowd asked.

John answered, anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none. Anyone who has food do the same. Tax collectors came to be baptized. Teacher they asked, what should we do? Don't collect anymore.

Soldiers came. He told them what to do. It was practical instruction, practical teaching in the way that they were to respond to God. And of course, that's the wonderful thing about the Old Testament.

We see again the practical outworking of following God in the lives of God's people. We learn a lot from their mistakes. Paul brings it up in 1 Corinthians quite a lot. Also, we learn about how we can live faithfully for God.

[21 : 25] The book of Proverbs is a wonderfully practical book about how we can live in our relationships with one another, how we can avoid falling into sin and temptation. And aren't we often as believers in that position where a bit like the crowd who came to John, isn't it, at times we want to say, Lord, what should we do then?

What should we do in this situation? We are faced, aren't we, all the time by moral and ethical dilemmas. All sorts of new science and technology is coming forward.

We're living in a fast-changing world. How do we adapt to it? How do we make use of it properly? How do we avoid being sucked into its false teachings and lies?

How do we know where God's will is for us practically in our lives? How do we know when we should act in this way or whether we should seek out that employment or whatever it may be? Well, hear God's word.

The Old Testament gives direct instruction which is relevant for today. You need to read and listen and apply these things day by day.

[22 : 34] So John's ministry like the ministry of the Old Testament and the prophets was one that brought joy and rejoicing for we find Christ in it. It's one that's filled with the Holy Spirit. We hear the word of God and it practically teaches and instructs us.

But we can't stop there, can we? We can't stop there because that wasn't the greatest reason why John the Baptist was born. That wasn't the primary motive for God sending him in this miraculous and marvelous way.

We see it there, don't we, in verse 17. To make readier people prepared for the Lord. Elsewhere, quoting from Isaiah as Jesus does there, I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you.

The voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. It's preparing for Christ's coming. John is the forerunner, the one who makes the path clear for the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the Apostle Paul, as he writes later in the New Testament, helps us to understand the very purpose of God's word in the Old Testament. The purpose that it has in preparing us for Christ's coming.

[23 : 46] Just as John's ministry was. Preparing the people for the coming of Christ into our lives. If you want to turn with me, please do, just for a moment. We're going to look at Romans in chapter 7 and verse 7.

Romans 7 and verse 7. If you've got one of the church Bibles, it's page 1133. Page 1133, Romans in chapter 7.

Talking about the law and its relevance to the believer. Verse 7 says this, What shall we say then? Is the law sinful?

Certainly not. Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. So the purpose of God's word in the Old Testament is to show us sin.

To reveal to us that we are sinners. Because unless we realize that we are sinners, then of course we shall never want a saviour. Until we realize we're in danger, we shall never call for a rescuer.

[24 : 53] And the law's purpose is to show us what sin is. It's to bring our attention to the situation we are in, the circumstances we are in. I want you to imagine that a lovely sunny day, you go to visit a National Trust property or an English Heritage Trust property, and you walk through some gates, and there's a beautifully turfed, maculate, turf lawn.

And you begin walking across it. Oh, this is beautiful. Lovely. But suddenly at the corner of your eye you see that there's a sign. A sign that says keep off the grass.

Before that moment you were ignorant of the fact that you were breaking the gardener's heart by walking across this lovely manicured lawn. But now as you see the law, in one sense, the sign, now you're brought into the knowledge of your sin.

And you've got a choice. Will I carry on walking across the lawn or will I get off the grass? God's Word is like that. The Old Testament particularly is like that.

That's again perhaps why Christians and others as well don't like the Old Testament because it shows us for who we are like. When we look at the Israelites and their wayward, fickle hearts, they show us our hearts.

[26 : 13] We see David falling into temptation and sin or we see oh there we could go so easily ourselves. It shows us what we're like. It shows us for who we really are.

And let's be honest, truth hurts, doesn't it? We prefer the flannel and the flattery. Prefer the nonsense in one sense which often is spouted where we're all really good people deep down.

All really nice people. The Bible tells us that we're not and that we're in danger. So it works to show us our sin.

But also the law is given to be our guide. And so if you turn over a few more pages to Galatians and chapter 3. Galatians and chapter 3 and verse 24.

Paul is again teaching on the place of the law which we understand as the Old Testament and about its promises and truth and he's arguing that the law is not a bad thing.

[27 : 17] It's not opposed to God's promises. Rather, it has a purpose. And so we read from as we did earlier on at the beginning of the service we read from chapter 4.

We go back a few verses. Chapter 3 and verse 24. Galatians 3 verse 24. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.

The law was our guardian. The law was like a schoolmaster to us to lead us to Christ. A guide to direct us in the way we should go until we could safely be brought under the care of Christ's leadership.

He was like a nanny if I can put it that way that they would have in the very rich houses. But in Paul's day there would be somebody, a servant who was particularly appointed to look after the young master as it were, the young heir of the property.

And he had to obey him even though he was a slave he was to be obeyed by the young master not the other way around. He may have been the son of the owner of the slave but he had no authority.

[28 : 34] The authority rested upon the guardian. And so in that sense God's word in the Old Testament is a guardian to humanity. It keeps us safe, keeps us from wandering and straying.

And we know of course that if we were to keep those simple ten commandments which we cannot keep because we're sinners but if we were to keep them if we were to learn from them and apply them then there would be a much safer world, a better world.

But you see ultimately the word of God in the Old Testament John and the other prophets were to make us ready to receive Christ. We can't prepare ourselves to receive Christ.

We can't make ourselves ready. People have the idea don't they? Well if I'm better, if I'm a good person then Christ will receive me or I can receive Christ. When I've sorted out these bad habits in my life, when I've sorted out the mess of who I am, when I've sorted out my relationships, then I can become a Christian.

Many people put it off don't they? Because they think that they're not good enough. But what they don't realise is you can't prepare to be made ready for Christ. He has to prepare you himself. That's God's work in the heart.

[29 : 54] And wonderfully as we do evangelism together in these coming weeks and as we share and witness with one another. God is using us in one sense like prophets to prepare people to receive the message of Christ.

But ultimately it's his work and he does it through his word. Remember Paul writing to Timothy in his second letter speaking about the scriptures. How from infancy Timothy had learned them.

And he says the holy scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. God's word is the chosen instrument of God to bring us to Christ.

That's why it's so important dear friends that we know the scriptures. It's so important that we are able to apply the scriptures into our own lives and situations. It's so important that when we speak to people about the things of Christ we know what God's word says.

Rather than plucking ideas and answers out of the air we're able to bring before them the truth. The truth of God which the Holy Spirit is able to apply. So John's ministry was to make Jesus known.

[31 : 03] The Old Testament's ministry is to make Jesus known. Do we long for more of Christ? Do we long to see more of him? Do we long to have more of him evidenced in our own lives?

Do we long to know more of what he did and what he accomplished? Do we want greater joy and rejoicing? And surely it is as we turn to the prophets who point us to Jesus again and again that we should be ready.

Are we prepared for the coming of the Saviour? See what great love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God and that is what we are.

The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known but we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.

Amen. So