



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

December 9/10, 2017 - Jeff Bucknam
Zechariah's Song - (Luke 1: 67-79)

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

So, if you have a Bible, Luke 1:67 this is where we are going to start in the next couple of minutes. Before we do that, though, I want to read to you a blog post from a guy named Preston Sprinkle, which is a name that I wish I had, Preston Sprinkle. He's actually a really gifted scholar and he writes a little bit about a very poorly known story about Santa Claus. Now this is a debated story, alright— Santa Claus I mean Saint Nicholas. It's a debated story so you can do with it what you will, it's not very Mennonite though. You'll see what I mean. Here we go. He writes,

"I'm not sure how it happened, but the modern picture of a slightly inebriated jolly old St. Nick, with rosy red cheeks, ear to ear smile, and a belly like a bowl full of jelly and beer, couldn't be further from the truth of who St. Nick really was.

St. Nicholas [who lived between] (AD 240-343) [so like 143 years when he died] was the bishop of Myra in Asia Minor [which is in] (modern day Turkey) and lived through the brutal Diocletian persecutions of the early 4th century. While many Christians gave in to their torturers and denied Christ, Nicholas held strong to his confession. As a result, he was beaten, exiled, and ultimately thrown in prison, where he continued to be tortured. All the while, bishop Nicholas maintained his faith in his crucified Saviour and lived to see the day when persecution of Christians was banned at the Edict of Milan in AD 313.

A decade later—and this is where it gets juicy—Nicholas was one of the bishops who attended the first ecumenical council at Nicea in AD 325. Emperor Constantine, newly converted, presided over the meeting, and several leaders were given the floor to expound on their theological views. Most notorious was Arius, who was famous for denying the deity of Christ. As Arius carried on, old St. Nick was more aggravated than jolly, as he squirmed irritably in his seat listening to Arius's heresy. Nicholas was committed to (what would be) the orthodox position that Christ was fully human and fully divine—Nick spilled a few pints of blood for this conviction. So finally, Nicholas couldn't take it. He got up from his seat, marched to the front where Arius was spouting off, reared back and straight socked Arius right in the face. He then danced around the floored Arius shouting: 'Daaaang, you just got Kris Kringled, son!' [Laughter]



Okay, well, I'm not sure if this is exactly how Nick celebrated, but the rest is true as far as I can tell.

What I find fascinating is that our society has replaced Jesus with Santa, when all along the original St. Nick would be horrified at the spineless consumerism of the American Christmas season. Nicholas bled for Jesus. He was tortured for Jesus. And when Jesus' name was being attacked, he got into the ring for Jesus.

When we replace the birth of King Jesus with Santa Claus, we bring shame on both the King and his most feisty defender: St. Nick, aka Santa Claus, the dude who cold socked a bishop in the face for theological treason.

So you better watch out this Christmas season. [Laughter] Don't make the mistake of Arius and miss the real meaning of Christmas. St. Nick is making a list and checking it twice, and if your theology is not in order, you better watch your back, cause jolly old St. Nick may drop down your chimney and open up the can on you."

Like I said, it's debated. I'd like to think it's true. I mean, one of the things that's true about Christian history is that theology has always mattered. It's matters what you say about God. It matters what you say about Jesus, if he's fully divine or not quite fully divine. That's a huge issue that divided the church in the early days and it led to persecution for those that held that Orthodox understanding. A.W. Tozer, an old pastor, years ago, he actually wrote a great book called *Knowledge of the Holy*. In it he begins by saying the most important thing about you is what comes into your mind when you think about God because your life will be irresistibly drawn toward that image. If you think that God is grand and sovereign and capable of taking care of you, it will affect the way you worry, for example, or don't worry. If you think he's small, insignificant, if you think that the forgiveness that he offers you is not that great then your worship will reflect that. The most important thing about you is what you think about God. The Bible is a book about God, ultimately, and these Christmas carols— we are in a series, we are walking through some of early Christian songs that were written in Luke 1 from these different characters as they reflect on what God has done for them. These early Christmas carols, that is all they are about is the character of God. Last week we talked about Mary and she noted the humility of God and the effects that has on the life of those who follow him. This week we are talk about Zechariah and his song. He really wants to emphasize God's promise keeping, and his ability to fulfill what he has promised in his deliverance for his people. So, there are two stages that we're going to walk through in this passage.

1. God's unsurprising deliverance.
2. God's surprising deliverance.

I'll explain what I mean by those as we go along.



[God's Unsurprising Deliverance]

If you go in your Bible to Luke 1:67, I want to start reading there is just a second. Let me give you a little bit of context to where we are. If you were here last week, you heard the beginning story about Zechariah. Zechariah is a priest of God, he serves in the temple. Occasionally, given an opportunity, in fact, on one occasion given an opportunity to serve in the most important priestly position that you could have and that was to go in and to serve at the Altar of Incense, which is was very near the Holy of Holies in the temple, very near where God dwells. You have to get everything right when you go in there. His wife, Elizabeth, was barren. It is said that Zechariah and Elizabeth were *righteous* people, but she was barren. Those two things aren't supposed to go together. In those days, you could tell, they believed, who God liked and who he didn't by how he blessed them. So good people get blessed, but bad people don't get blessed. Kids are a blessing, believe it or not. Kids are a blessing. She didn't have any, therefore, she is not blessed, therefore, she is not righteous. Luke writes no, no, no, she was. So everyday of their lives, Zechariah and Elizabeth, everyday of their lives they would have been praying to God to remove the reproach they had among the people, meaning that "God would you please give us a child. We are mocked and scorned and pushed to the edges of our community everyday of our lives. I mean, we're not invited to the parties. We're not included in all the important events. We are nobodies. Please, God." And God's answer to that for most of their lives was no.

If you've prayed for something for a long time, there's a period at which you just say, "You know what? It's probably never going to happen. For whatever reason God has left us to the side." I'm sure that is what Zechariah believed when he went to serve in the temple that day. He's in there and he's serving the temple. Nobody else is with him. He's got to do everything right and an angel appears to him and he freaks out. The angel says, "Don't worry. I'm not here to attack you or anything. I'm here to tell you that your prayers have been answered, your wife is going to have a child!" He responds by going, "Hmmm. She's old. I'm old. We're tired." "You could have been here a long time ago" is basically what he means by this. "We've been praying a long time and now you show up. You'll have to excuse me if I doubt a little bit about what you're saying. We've waited *so long* for this to happen. Come on." The angel said, "Oh, really, well here's the thing: I'm Gabriel and I sit in the presence of God and he told me this. He told me to come and tell you this and no word from God will ever fail. So, here is what I'm going to do for you. I want to put you on the shelf for a little bit. I'm going to make you mute. You don't get to talk anymore because the last thing you said was ridiculous, so you don't get to talk. Nine months you get to watch God's Word to you come to fruition." So, he comes out from the temple and he's mute, he can't say anything. "What happened to you Zechariah!?" The people are wondering why it took so long. "What happened to you?" "[Garbling]" Fast forward nine months and we'll pick up the story in Luke 1:57-64,

"When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, [everybody got named after their dad] but his mother spoke up and said, 'No! He is to be called John.' [Of course, everybody there is thinking, 'Where did you get that name from? That's a ridiculous name. What are you doing? Did you pick up one of those



books with baby names in it. That's not how it's supposed to work. He's going to be called John.] They said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who has that name.' [Maybe we should talk to your husband.] Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. [Assuming, of course, the answer is going to be Zechariah.] He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.' [And in that moment, he agreed with what the angel told him all those months ago. It's a little white flag from Zechariah saying, 'I give up, you're right, I agree! I see the fulfillment of the promise, right here.'] Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God."

There's a story in the Old Testament about a guy named Nebuchadnezzar. He's a king and, at one point, he goes to a location in his land where he can see lots of it and he basically says, "Check out how great I am! Like, all this land has been taken by me and my armies. Is there anyone greater on the entire planet besides me?" It says in Daniel 4 that while the words were on his lips, the Sovereign Lord said, "Hmm, let me think. Can I think of somebody else in the universe bigger than you? Yes. Here's what I'm going to do for you Nebuchadnezzar, because you're so arrogant and snooty I'm going to make you go out into the field. Your fingernails are going to grow real long and your is going to go crazy and your going to be walking around like this for a while [in goofy voice] until you learn what your real place is." This happens to him, and finally after a period of time, his senses come back to him and the first things out of his mouth, when he comes back to his senses, is basically, "I was wrong! There is a greater one than me."

Zechariah is a New Testament version of Nebuchadnezzar in this case. He's been set on the side lines. He has learned his lesson. There is no promise that God will make that should be doubted. So he sings a song. He writes a poem. He is so overwhelmed with joy. This is what he says. And here is our text: Luke 1:67-75,

"His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: [Now, listen. In this prophecy, you are going to hear that his main point is going to be: God keeps his promises. The things that he's promised long ago, he's doing now. He's showing his power by doing it. Just notice the language.] 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David [There was a promise given to David long ago and he's raised up a horn— this is an animal language, right. If you had an animal in those days and you wanted to show how strong it was, it would have a horn and raise it up. It's how you fight. He's drawing on that image saying that the Lord has a horn and he's basically raising it up and showing his great power to everybody. He's raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David] as he said through his holy prophets of long ago, [so it was all promised] salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.'"



In other words, “God is finally coming through! We’ve waited so long! We thought there was never going to be any hope.” I mean, Zechariah’s own life is a like a microcosm of this. “I prayed and prayed and prayed and longed and longed and *finally* you’ve come through. And I’m seeing it in this present time. Oh, praise God!” And it had been a long time, guys. Four hundred years long. That’s the distance in time from the end of the Old Testament, where the last promises were given to Israel, and this moment. Four hundred years. You can go back to “Malachee” 4— he’s the Italian prophet, [laughter] “Malachee”. He’s the last one in the Old Testament— You go to the last chapter of “Malachee” and you have it there. Here’s what it says. Some of the last words that are written in the Old Testament. Malachi 4:2-3,

“But for you who revere my name, [this is God speaking through his prophet to the people of Israel] the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

“There is a day coming, O people of Israel. There is a day coming. Even though in the present time you are under oppression, there is a day coming when you will go out and frolic in the fields and your enemies will be subdued and the sun will rise, the dawn will come.”

“When? O, tomorrow!? Maybe next week, maybe next month, maybe next year.” And then a generation goes by and then another generation goes by. Four hundred years. What were you doing four hundred years ago? What was your family doing four hundred years ago?

I was in Boston just recently. My father’s side of my family is from Boston and my mother’s side is from Prince Edward Island. The first Bucknam who came to the United States came and lived in a place called Charlestown in Boston. If you’ve ever been to Boston, it’s one of the really trendy areas to live. I have a picture actually of me standing by... this a tavern. I have it there because I like to drink. [Laughter] I’m kidding, okay. I have it there because this is actually one of the first buildings that was built after the American Revolutionary war. That hold area was decimated because of all the artillery and fighting. The first thing that they built, in true American fashion, was the tavern. The rebuilt and they put it up there, “This is the place where Paul Revere and George Washington used to frequent.” I actually sat across from Ezra, one of our pastors, in the corner where George Washington supposedly sat and drank his beer. I was drinking diet Coke. This area though, Charlestown, is where my ancestors came about four hundred years ago, got off the boat, lived in this area. I was texting my father and I said, “Dad, where did the first Bucknam...I knew he was in this area. Where was it?” My dad kind of gave an address because he had done some of this research. He gave me the idea anyway, not the address, but like the idea of the region of it and I stood on a step near, very near, where it was that my first ancestor in the United States was over four hundred years ago.

I don’t know much about him. I actually don’t know a whole lot about the intervening years. I don’t know what promises were made to him by the government. I don’t know much about anything and that’s because the distance in time is so great. There’s been generations of Bucknams that have come and gone and come and gone and come and gone that we kind of forget over that time. You can



imagine Zechariah, being at the end of four hundred years, you just get to the point where kind of give up and then you see the deliverance of God.

This is a good history lesson, but the question that you have to ask is “How does this sort of thing apply to us?” Because we are on the other side of the coming of Jesus, right? They were awaiting his coming, but now he’s come, right? Well, yes, he has. But, we Christians, who live in this age, we know what it’s like to wait for the coming of God to deliver his people, don’t we? They waited for the coming of Jesus the Messiah to deliver them in their day and we wait, on the other side of that, for Jesus to finish what he began. We await the coming of our Lord the second time. So, if you go to the end of the Bible—not the end of the Old Testament, the end of the New Testament— the last words, basically, are “Come Lord Jesus.” We are awaiting that. In the meantime, we live in this very difficult day. The Apostle Paul, in fact, uses an image of child birth. We’re like a pregnant woman awaiting the birth of a child in this present time. You get that in Romans 8. Just listen to his language. Romans 8:22,

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.”

He’s saying, “You know what it’s like to live in this time as we await the second coming of Christ, the great Christian hope? It’s like being a pregnant woman.” Have you ever gone up to a pregnant woman while she is in labour and said, “How you feeling? You doing good? It’s good? Everything’s good?” No! It hurts! It’s difficult! It’s challenging. We long. There’s a great hope and when the baby comes we will rejoice. There’ll be ecstasy in that moment, but in the present time it’s so hard. We know what it’s like to wait, Christians. Sometimes it takes so long, so many years that we see generations come and generations go and the promises to God’s people are not fulfilled. You almost get to the point where you’re like, “Really? I don’t think it’s going to happen.” And yet, this story. This is the point of this story for us is, God’s word is to be trusted. He will always do what it is that he said he would do even when we least expect it. Even when it looks like it’s against all odds, he will actually come through. You can trust everything he said.

So, I’ve told you my sons, both of them, have been playing volleyball recently. The season just ended. My youngest son, Micah, his season ended in quite dramatic fashion. We were at the volleyball provincial tournament in Kelowna a few weeks ago. They went into the tournament ranked the second team in the province, which is way higher than they probably should have been. Not because they weren’t very good, they were greater than the sum of their parts. They had a lot of courage, a lot of ability and they won a lot of games, which was great, but they went into the tournament ranked second. They got to the quarter finals of the tournament. The way these tournaments run, you have three set matches. Okay. Twenty five points. The first one to twenty five wins the first two sets, right? So, twenty five points, twenty five points. If it’s tied, the third set only goes to fifteen. Well, in the quarter finals, they were supposed to beat the team that they were playing. The other team was a lower ranked team. They didn’t really have a good game, so they split the first two sets. So, they’re in the third set and they’re thinking, “Ah, we should be able to take care of them,” so they start setting one of their really great players, but he’s getting blocked and, before you know it, we’re down thirteen



to four. [Laughter] It's a complete meltdown. The other team is two points away from winning. There's no hope. I said to my wife, "There's no hope." [Laughter] I'm not a great fan at these things, right? You don't want me around when things aren't going well. So, I'm on my phone figuring out that I'm probably going to have to go back early from Kelowna. What's the traffic like? What's the weather like? What's up on the mountain. Oh I can't.... My wife's like, "Oh, come on, have some faith." "Whatever." [Laughter] I've been here before, this is going to go really poorly. You know. Anyway. So, while I'm doing this and telling her how ridiculous it is and how bad we are playing, we get a point. Another point. Another point. Another point. Another point. Another point. I'm like, "Whatever. Too little, too late, boys!" Everybody else is like, "Come on!" "Just give in!" is what I'm saying. [Laughter] The other team takes a timeout. It's thirteen to nine. They come out of the time out, we win a couple points, and again I'm like, "My goodness. There's no way this is going to happen." Of course, they finally win a point. It's like fourteen to eleven. Okay, they only need one point. My kid is serving. Typical Bucknam move, he's going to hit it straight in the bottom of the net. [Laughter] It's going to happen. He doesn't! It's in. Another one goes in, we get another point. Fourteen to thirteen. Another one goes in, fourteen to fourteen. We're tied. Next ball, we get a chance to kill the ball. It hits this one kid on the other team who had been losing his mind because his teammates were choking this whole thing away in colossal fashion and it hits the outside of his arm and it ricochets out of bounds. This boy, God bless him, was so incensed by this. We're ahead fifteen to fourteen, all the way. We have a match point now, against all odds. This kid is so mad that he runs over to this trash can and he kicks the trash can, huge dent in this Rubbermaid trash can, and trash goes everywhere. The referee, who is standing kind of next to him, is like, "What?" and he's reaching down and picking up the trash and putting it back in this dented trash can while the kids walking around all angry and yelling at everyone. The other referee sees it and he's like, "Okay, you can't do that." So, he pulls out a red card. I didn't know they gave red cards. I thought that was a soccer thing. [Laughter] So, he pulls out this red card and he gives this kid a red card. Apparently, that means this kid is kicked out of the game and I was like, "Oh no!" In volleyball, apparently, if you get a red card, the other thing that happens is the team opposite you gets a point. We win! [Laughter] Unbelievable. Here's the video of me at the moment that this happened. Here you go. [Video shows team and Jeff celebrating excitedly] [Laughter] [Applause]

Later on that evening... I was tired. Later on that evening, I was sitting in the car with my wife and I just said, "Honey, I know I'm over spiritualizing stuff like this, but I actually feel like God has given us a glimpse and I'm going to tell you right now that this is the way it is for Christians." It looks totally against us. Have you guys been out in the world lately? It's not going well, not for us anyway. It looks like there's no way out. It's been like this for generation after generation, but I'm telling you that there is a moment coming of sheer joy where God, against all of the odds, is going to deliver. In that moment, there will be a ecstasy that you can't... that is your future. This ecstatic joy that you can't even explain.

There is a scene in Lord of the Rings where they are losing horribly at Helm's Deep and the armies of the orcs are just destroying them and your heart is sinking as you are watching it. But then on the hillside next to them arises Gandalf the White, who everyone thought was dead and now he is back. With him come the hoards and they just descent down the hill. As their doing it your like almost rising out of your seats "Yes!" Deliver! And he will.



Randy Alcorn's book *Heaven*, I highly recommend you read it. He wrote in it, I've shared this before, he said,

"My wife and I have spent some wonderful moments with our family and friends— at Christmas or on vacation or at simple times in the family room after dinner— and we've said those enchanting words: 'It doesn't get any better than this.' No matter how difficult your life has been, you've said the same thing about some magnificent moment, haven't you? Maybe it was recently. Maybe it was long ago. Maybe you can barely remember. 'It doesn't get any better than this.' Can you even think of even once in your life when, even for a moment, that seemed to be true? Well, it isn't true. The most ordinary moment on the New Earth will be greater than the most perfect moments in this life— those experiences you wanted to bottle or hang onto but couldn't. It *can* get better, *far* better, than this— and it will. Life on the New Earth will be like sitting in front of the fire with family and friends, basking in the warmth, laughing uproariously, dreaming of the adventures to come— and then going out and living those adventures together. With no fear that life will ever end or that tragedy will descend like a dark cloud. With no fear that dreams will be shattered or relationships broken... We were all made for a person and a place. Jesus is that person. Heaven is that place." [Amen]

Don't be surprised if in those days you start singing like Zechariah did. Praise be to the God of his people because he keeps his promises. That's an unsurprising deliverance. It's unsurprising because that the way God is, we ought to expect that from him.

[God's Surprising Deliverance]

There is a surprising deliverance, though, described in this passage and it's the next little bit that I want to point out to you. It's Luke 1:76-79. As we finish up with the song, Zechariah's going to turn his attention from "this is what is God is like and this is what he's done for Israel" to now focusing on the child himself. Okay, so this baby who is born to us, who is John the Baptist, what is he going to do and what is the one who follows after him, Jesus, going to be like? How is he doing to deliver us. Luke 1:76-79,

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Now listen— I say this every year around Christmas— if you went to Jerusalem in the first century and you went as a newspaper reporter and you wanted to interview people about what do you expect the Messiah, the Deliverer who was promised in Malachi 4, what do you expect this person to do for you, what is the biggest problem Israel faces? To a person the answer to that question is Rome. The biggest problem we have is the circumstance that we have under the oppression of Rome and, prior to them, the Babylonians and, prior to them, Egypt. That's the issue. We have all these promises as a



people that we are going to be free and we've always been living under the authority of another nation. So, what's going on here? Rome. That's what's going on. That's our problem. That's the oppressor. Okay, set that over here. If you ask the same question, though, of Zechariah in this song, what the real problem? What's his answer? I'll read it to you again. So, a little Bible study here. How would you answer the question if you just had this to go by? What is the problem that the deliverer will deliver them from? Luke 1:76-79 again,

“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

What's the problem that he's identifying? I mean, I don't see Rome anywhere in there. I don't see circumstance. The problem, the oppressor, is sin and death and darkness. The problem that you have is a deeper one than you think. This is basically what Jesus came to deliver you from. It was not the Romans so much as it was the real oppressor which was sin. Jesus is always doing a deeper work. You and I tend to think that our problems are the circumstances around us, but Jesus comes and says, “Yes, those circumstances are troubling, but the reason they are troubling is because the root of them is the trouble.”

I was in New Zealand years ago. I had a really great lawn. I don't have one now because I spent so much time on that one I thought, “Never again. For the rest of my life, I'm not trying to make my lawn look good.” But, in those days, they had this grass called paspalum and it would take over your entire lawn if you let it go. I had a friend who came along and said, “Oh, Jeff. If you want your lawn to look good, you have to get rid of the paspalum.” And I was like, “Sweet.” So, I would walk around and weed it, like you know, you just pull the tops out. This was my first go round ever doing any kind of gardening. So, I'm like pulling some leaves, throw them in a bucket. Of course, you come back a week later and it's bigger than it was before. I said to my friend, stupidly, “Why?” He said,

“Well, are you like getting in there and getting the root?”

“I have to get the root?”

“Yeah, you have to get the root. Here's what you need to do, Jeff. You need to take a little knife and you need to walk around your yard. You need to dig out this thing, put it in the bucket, and then put some good soil on top and put the seed in it and your lawn will be great.”

So, for hour upon hour, I would scooch around on my rear-end on this lawn digging out this paspalum. Because you and I know that unless you get the root of the thing, you haven't got the thing. We don't always believe that because we think that the way to solve most of our problems is by a change of circumstance. We're having trouble at school? Change the school. Having trouble in our relationship? Change the relationship. Having trouble in your town? Change the town. If we can just trade this set of circumstances for a new set of circumstances, all will be well. The problem, of course, is everywhere you go, there you are. [Laughter] What Jesus is coming to do in the lives of people like us is not to deal



with the “Romes” of our lives, not to deal with periphery, the leaves, he’s got that knife and he wants to dig out the root.

In my life, candidly, this is how this works. I have found over my years of preaching, that my emotions rise and fall often by my own assessment of how well I’ve preached. Not your assessment, my assessment. If I go home on a Sunday and I feel like, “That was rubbish,” I will genuinely be down for quite a while. If I feel like it was rubbish immediately after the sermon, I don’t want to look in the eyes of anybody. I feel embarrassed because, you know, I dance on there and looked stupid and told people about volleyball. I don’t want to look anybody in the eye, I just feel in myself... I’m embarrassed by it. And then I’m really joyous if it went well. So, my joy is completely dependent upon the circumstance in which I find myself. Over the years I’ve found, however, through a series of reflections and friends giving me input and the reading of Scripture, that the real issue is not.. if you came to me and asked me, “What’s the real issue here, Jeff?” The real issues was my sermon was bad, but no, the real issue is not your sermon was bad, the real issue is you love the praise of people. Like, the root of all this is the fact that you tend to like the praise of people more than the praise of God. Because the praise of God is already there. He says that there is no word that will no forth from him that does not come back having accomplished what is was sent to do. So, Jeff, just stand up, preach the message, and God will accomplish what he wants to do and he will smile on it because you are doing the work. So, his opinion about you, “righteous in Christ”, settled! That’s how Jesus does a deeper work, though. His Gospel comes and he addresses that, he bring light into your darkness. The Apostle Paul actually has a passage of Scripture where he’s talking about money and about how he’s been given this gift from the Philippian church to do his ministry, but he doesn’t want them to get the wrong idea. Listen to what he says in Philippians 4:12-13,

“I know what it is to be I need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

It doesn’t matter what is up here. It doesn’t matter what kinds of circumstances I face, plenty, want, success, failure, it doesn’t matter because at the core of it I’ve got Jesus. I know what he says about me, I know who I am in him, and I know that there is a day coming of rapturous joy that I will experience in his hands.

Let me finish just with this little story. My friend, I was meeting him this week on Thursday, his name is Ray. He’s the pastor of Willingdon church these days and we were having lunch together and we’re preaching on the same passage which we thought was funny. He said, “Oh, Jeff, you’ve got to look at this video that I came across. Because, he said, the passage that we are dealing with talks about Jesus. Did you notice at the end “he is the rising son which will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death”? He’s going to bring to bring light.

There is this city is Russia that lives under darkness most of its days; Norilsk, Russia.” Here is a picture of Norilsk, Russia. One hundred and seventy five thousand people live in this city. It’s the most northern city in the world. It’s dark. Because it’s so north it’s dark for like two hundred and fifty days a



year and the rest of the time it's covered in smoke because they make a thing called palladium there, which is a metal that's in the catalytic converter in your car, it's in your cellphone, it's in laptops. They think it might be the next most precious metal in the world and so the company that owns this city is filthy, filthy rich. The way this city first started is that it was, it's in Siberia, so the Soviets sent the prisoners up there and they had to travel this road. Here's the road in there. This road doesn't work anymore, they used to call it the road of death because the prisoners, of course, would go and die in Siberia. Also, they would often die on the road. There's no real way in it. You have to fly in there or, during the summertime, you can take a boat.

The place itself looks like a video game. It looks like a dystopian future. There's nothing basically there except these palladium mines and the people who work in the palladium mines are getting sick because what happens is sulphur dioxide, when you mine it, goes up into the air and it creates acid rain and it kills all of the vegetation. There is nothing living around them. The people that live there live ten years less than a normal Russian. The little kids in the documentary that I've seen are interviewed and they're like, "I'm always coughing. My stomach hurts all of the time. It's hard to breathe." But then you interview the adults and the adults are like, "We love our city and there is nothing really wrong here. It's wonderful." There's a doctor, in fact, that says, "Isn't it great that sulphur dioxide doesn't really affect humans?" [Laughter] So my friend, Ray, is showing this to me and he says, "Jeff, isn't this the human condition?" We live in darkness surrounded by a death of our own making and we don't really think it's a problem. We're convinced that we can make it here, but what we need more than anything is the sun to rise. You want to know what Christmas is all about? Luke 1:78b-79,

"the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death..."

He has come. He will come. Count on it.

Let me pray for us. Father, I'm thankful for your grace. I'm thankful for this passage of Scripture. I'm thankful, Father, for the knowledge that our Lord Jesus has begun his deliverance that he will carry to completion and, even if we don't see it in our lifetime, Father, the day that it happens, we will be there and we will experience it with great joy. Would you do the deeper work in us, in the meantime? Deliver us from our idols, pin our hearts to you, give us great affection for you, Father, we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.