

Preparing the Way

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, Watermark. Great to see you today. Get set up here for a second. All right. My name is Eric, if you don't know me. I'm one of the guys on staff here at Watermark, and it's great to be able to share with you today. I'm sure everyone knows Christmas is approaching. Everyone excited for it? Parents are excited for two weeks of kids at home running around going crazy. I don't know what your family is like, but I'm guessing if you're anything like my family was growing up, that you have some Christmas traditions in your family. Yeah? One that was a tradition in my family was as Christmas approached, we would watch Christmas movies. You know, there's this section of movies that only gets watched like one month per year, and everyone's really excited to watch them for that one month, but then if you try and mention it the other 11 months, forget about it. And somehow there's this one set of movies that actually people will watch all the time, but always gets included in the Christmas countdowns, and I don't have any idea why. Maybe because over the course of the school year there's a Christmas break there, but it's the Harry Potter series. I don't know why they list that as a Christmas movie, but they include it there for some reason in their Christmas countdowns on the TV channels. And if you think about the story of Harry Potter, you have a boy who is raised in this home situation where he is told and he believes lies about his identity that keep him trapped and oppressed. And he spends years and years and years of his life living in the situation where he is believing these lies and letting those shape the way that he sees reality until one day someone shows up and tells him actually something different is true about you than what you've been told your entire life. And when he realizes that his reality is different than the truth that he's been told his entire life, everything changes for him. Everything.

And that's actually got a lot in common with the story of Christmas. Because at Christmas, we have God stepping down into the world, not just telling us that we have a new reality, but transforming reality for us, showing us his mercy in the middle of our brokenness so that we can have something else be true about ourselves that reshapes our reality and allows us to have transformed lives. And today, we're going to be building up towards the story of Christmas and the birth of Jesus. We're not quite at the birth of Jesus yet. We'll get there next week, so come back and hear that.

Today, we're going to hear about another birth, the birth of John, John the Baptist. But as we look at this story, we're going to see God's mercy all over the place. And since we're going to talk about mercy so much today, I wanted to start off by giving us a quick definition of mercy so that you can know what I'm talking about when I say it over and over and over. Mercy is the place where God's love and faithfulness meet our brokenness with forgiveness and favor. So we have three parts to the definition here.

So we have God's love and faithfulness. The Bible tells us over and over that God loves us, that God makes promises to us because he loves us, and he's faithful to fulfill those promises. Part two is our brokenness. The Bible says that God has given us commands, and we have disobeyed and rebelled and rejected them, and that because of that, we deserve nothing good from God. And then part three is forgiveness and favor. That even though we deserve nothing good from God, he still looks at us, he forgives the wrong that we've done, and instead of responding with anger, he responds with favor to us.

And that's what mercy is all about. And today, as we look at this passage, we're going to see that God's mercy is great to the outcast, that it is promised to the forgotten, and it is tender to the broken.

[4 : 1 1] It's great to the outcast, promised to the forgotten, and tender to the broken. So before we jump into the passage, let's pray. Father, we thank you that you have spoken to us through your word. We thank you for the gift of revealing yourself to us, and we pray that as we look at your word today that you would work mightily. Holy Spirit, come and transform lives, transform hearts, help us

to grow in our love for you, to see you, and to be transformed by the reality of who you are and what you have done for us.

In Jesus' name, amen. So as we jump into the passage, first we see that God's mercy is great to the outcast. In chapter one of Luke, verse 58, it says, And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. So today's passage is about a birth, not the birth of Jesus, the birth of his relative, John the Baptist. But I think we need to take a minute and step back into the story to really understand the significance of this birth. So there's a couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, they got married probably at a very young age. It was common for girls to get married as young as 12 in that culture. And they were Jewish, which means that they had heard the stories of God creating the world and placing Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and telling them to be fruitful and multiply and have lots of kids. And they knew the stories of how God had promised their ancestor Abraham that he would make a great nation out of him, and he would bless him, and he would have lots of kids.

And they knew this idea of having kids and expanding the nation was something that was commanded by God and promised by God as a blessing. And so surely when they got married, they were excited to start a family of their own. But you can imagine how it felt when a couple years went by and they were unable to have kids. You can picture those awkward dinner conversations where your parents sit you down and they're like, hey, this guy from our synagogue, he's about your age. He's already given his parents three beautifully young grandkids. He is a better son to his parents than you are. Did that just get too real?

But that type of conversation where their parents are pressuring them and wanting them to have kids, and their friends start having kids and maybe moving into different social groups.

And on top of this, the fact that in their culture, whether or not you had kids was seen as a sign of whether or not God favored you. If you didn't have kids, people would commonly look at you and sort of think, oh, maybe God's judging you for something you did wrong, and that's why he won't let you have kids.

[7 : 07] And so you can just imagine this feeling of being more and more isolated as more and more years went by and they remained unable to have kids. And early in Luke chapter 1, it tells us in verse 6 that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. He says they were good people. They were obeying God. This wasn't a curse. This wasn't a judgment from God. But how would society around them know that? And so as they continue trying to obey God, to live for God, they were in a place where everyone around them just looked at them and said, how have they messed up? What's wrong with them? And you can imagine them feeling more and more outcast by society, more and more isolated and alone as the years went by. And not only that, but they're a fast approaching retirement age or potentially being too old to be able to work.

And in that society, kids are your retirement policy. From a very practical perspective, they're probably wondering, where is food going to come from when I'm too old to work? And the years keep going by until one day an angel appears to Zechariah and says, your wife is going to have a baby. At this point, they're so old that Zechariah, he's not excited.

He's just like, yeah, right. How's that going to happen? But it does. And the story says that God giving Zechariah and Elizabeth this baby was him showing great mercy to them. It was a great mercy that their neighbors and their relatives came to celebrate with them. And in our society, I think the social stigma of not having kids is less than it was in ancient Israel. You might still get parents pressuring you, shaming you if you're not giving them grandkids. But I think in wider society in general, there's more of an acceptance of people not having kids either because they don't want them or just a recognition that some couples aren't able to have them. But I think there are still a ton of things that do make people feel outcast and shamed and isolated and alone in our society. All of us have moments where we feel like outcasts. Maybe it's that time you're walking down the hall and you look in a window at your office and you see a meeting taking place and you're just like, hold on a second. If he's in there and she's in there and he's in there and she's in there, why am I not in there? Surely this is a meeting that I should have been included in.

Why are they isolating me and leaving me out? Are they talking about me? Is that why they don't want me in there? Or do they just not want me in the office anymore? Is that why they don't want me in there? Maybe it's when we're frustrated about being single. We look around at all of our friends who are now happy in relationships and think, what is it that's wrong with me that no one

wants to be in a relationship with me? I don't know what the moments are in your life where you feel this way, but I think all of us, all of us feel this way at some point in time. We feel isolated, alone, rejected, outcast. And today's passage speaks to those of us who feel outcast, who feel isolated, rejected, and alone.

That's, I think at some point or other, all of us. And it tells us that God's mercy is great to the outcast. That God's love and faithfulness reach through the pain and exclusion that we have experienced to give us hope. And the moment where we start to feel outcast, start to tell ourselves that that's what defines us, the story of God blessing Zechariah and Elizabeth with a child can remind us that God's mercy is great to the outcast, and our circumstances don't define us.

[11 : 21] God and what he has done for us defines us instead. But not only is God's mercy great to the outcast, it's also promised to the forgotten. So after the baby is born, Zechariah starts prophesying.

He had actually been mute for the entire time of the pregnancy, and this is like basically the first thing that he says after nine months of not being able to speak. And he mentions in verse 72 that that God is showing the mercy promised to our fathers and remembering his holy covenant. So when he refers to the fathers here, what he's talking about is in the Old Testament, the earlier part of the Bible here, there were several people, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's 12 sons, who God made these promises to, that he was going to bless them. He was going to make them a great nation. He was going to give them loads of descendants. He was going to make them a blessing to the other people around them.

And there was this period of time for a few hundred years where it looked like that was starting to come true, but then it all fell apart. And as Zechariah speaks these words, Israel had been living under oppression from foreign powers for most of the past 600 years.

And at the time when he speaks these words, they're under the control of Rome. And I think most of us have heard great things about Rome, so we don't hear Rome and think like, oh, that's terrible, right?

But think about the idea of living in a land oppressed and ruled by a foreign enemy. I mean, the newspaper this week has been filled with stories about the anniversary of the rape of Nanjing. And you can see these reminders of how terrible it is to live under foreign oppression.

[13 : 17] If you go to the Hong Kong History Museum, you'll see stories up on the wall about the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong and how Hong Kongers were forced to learn Japanese language and culture at the expense of learning their own. And when you live in a land that's occupied by a foreign power, you're constantly in fear. Fear that you're going to say the wrong thing and your neighbor is going to turn you in to try and gain favor with a foreign power. You don't know who you can trust.

You don't feel comfortable being yourself and living out your own cultural heritage. It's not a good situation to be in. It's not something that any of us wants to be in. And when you're in that situation for an extended period of time, it's easy to start to wonder, has God forgotten me?

Has God forgotten about me? And that's what life was like for Israel in those days. Based on their circumstances alone, it would be easy for the people of Israel to feel that God had forgotten them. He made promises to them almost 2,000 years ago, and they still hadn't come true and didn't look like they were anywhere near coming true. You know, we've talked here before about this idea of an internal live stream, how there's thoughts constantly running through your mind all the time, every day.

And when you're in this type of situation, you can just imagine the thoughts going through that internal live stream. You have doubt. Will God actually keep his promises? Feeling rejected by God.

[14 : 50] This fear of, is everything ever going to change? Being forgotten. Feeling alone. And these are emotions that all of us face, even if we're not living under the oppressive rule of a foreign military or government. But Zechariah's prophecy here is a reminder to us that God's mercy reaches to the forgotten. Then and now. He's prophesying here about the birth of Jesus. And if you look at what Jesus does, you look at these promises that God made to Abraham, I'm going to make a great nation, a great people. I'm going to be a blessing. And when you look at what Jesus accomplishes later in his life, he rescues a people for God. He's the king of an everlasting kingdom.

He blesses all the nations of earth, including Israel. He is the fulfillment of all these promises that have been made to the Israelites over the years. Jesus, Christmas and Good Friday and Easter is living proof that God has not forgotten his people. That God's mercy is promised to the forgotten,

but also that he fulfills that promise. And in our world, there are a ton of people who are feeling forgotten today. I mean, just look at the news. What have we had in the news the past few years? ISIS, Brexit, rise in nationalism across the globe. Why do these things happen? Because people feel forgotten. Either there's a war that just wipes out your livelihood or jobs being sent overseas or whatever it may be. People are left in this position where they're unable to provide for their families. They're unable to take care of their children. They're unable to take care of their children. Or at least they feel like they are. And they look around and they say, there's no way for me to change my circumstances. I think the world has forgotten about me.

And then one day, someone comes along and says, I haven't forgotten about you. I remember you. And I'll tell you what. I will take care of your family, feed your children, feed your wife, make sure their medical bills are paid.

[17 : 18] If you will strap a bomb to yourself and go blow yourself up in the middle of a crowd. And in that, this person hears hope. This person hears, my life has been purposeless. I've been unable to provide for my family. And now I have an opportunity to do that. Someone has remembered me and my family. And people will do terrible, terrible things and support terrible regimes for the sake of being remembered and not feeling forgotten anymore.

And it's not just this big global thing. Again, it's something that happens in each one of our lives. We each have times where we feel forgotten, where we wonder, does anyone remember me?

Does anyone care what's happening in my life? You know, it's that feeling you have when you're a parent and your kid becomes a teenager and stops listening to you. And you're just like, do you recognize all of the time and energy and countless hours that I have spent investing in you and helping you become a sustainable human being?

Have you forgotten that? It's the feeling you have when you have a fight with your spouse and they walk out the door after the fight. And you think, have you forgotten the fact that you promised to stick with me forever? All of us have these moments where we feel forgotten, where we feel alone. And the awesome thing about Christmas is that Christmas shows us the way to be remembered isn't to reach out to extremes to make people remember us. Because God has already remembered us. Christmas is the proof that God has rescued us in the moment when we were feeling forgotten and that his love and faithfulness reach out to us.

And understanding this truth reshapes the way that we view reality and live our lives. Here's how. Think about this. Imagine it's your birthday. You're excited. It's your birthday.

[19 : 36] But no one says anything about it to you. You're like, terrible friends. They've forgotten about me. Item number one on my to-do list for the next year of my life, find better friends.

And you try and call people and you're like, hey, you want to grab dinner tonight? And they're like, no, I'm busy. And you're like, what's going on here? Has everyone forgotten about me?

And if that's all we have, if those circumstances are all we have, we're going to make some judgments based on those circumstances. We have terrible friends who don't love us and don't care about us, and we're all alone and we're going to die alone. But imagine that you had different perspective on this. Imagine that as this day is going on when no one wants to hang out with you, you knew that the reason no one was available to hang out with you is because they were planning the most epic surprise party ever for you that evening. And they couldn't spend time with you because there was so much planning and preparation that needed to go into making this party totally awesome. And they actually did a good job keeping it a secret, which never happens in the real world. As this day goes on, and you're still maybe alone for parts of the day, but are you thinking, I have terrible, miserable friends that I need to replace with better ones? No, you're thinking, wow, my friends are incredible. They're taking care of me. They're putting so much effort into this party for me.

And instead of feeling forgotten and alone, you're having hope and joy and expectation of this amazing celebration that's going to happen tonight. Our perspective and our understanding of what reality is changes the way that we live our lives. When we believe that we have been forgotten by God and the world, we're going to live sad, neglected, pitying ourselves. But when we recognize that no matter how we feel in this moment, God has remembered us and God has amazing things that he's doing in us and for us, we can have hope even when our circumstances seem to say that there's no way for hope.

So the fact that God has remembered the forgotten is something that can transform our lives. And not only is God's mercy great to the outcast and promise to the forgotten, but it is tender to the

broken.

[22 : 09] If we jump down to verses 77 and 78, Zechariah says that John will give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace. He's saying that his child that's just been born, John, is going to go before the Lord, that's Jesus, who's going to be born soon, to prepare the way for him and give knowledge of salvation to his people. And he makes a reference to the tender mercy of God.

Now, this is a difficult phrase to translate. Maybe heart mercy would be a more literal translation, but that's just awkward. But to give you some perspective on what he's saying here, this word tender is in the original language used in Acts chapter 1 verse 8, when Judas hangs himself and his bowels spill out onto the ground. The word for tender here and the words for bowels there are the same word. So what he's saying is it's this thing that's like deep inside you that if it comes out of you and spills out of you, you die. He's saying mercy is so core and central to God's character that without it, he's not God. That mercy is something that's central to what it means for God to be God, in relation to us. And the best part is it's not just an abstract concept, but it's something that finds its expression in real action in the real world. And that's the action of sending his son to rescue us. And this is vital for us. Because apart from God's mercy, we're broken. The Bible says that God created us, that he created us for a relationship with himself, and that we rebelled against him. We said, I'd rather be the king or the queen of my own life, and that we have consequences because of that. That we deserve death, and we experience feelings and emotions in line with that reality.

We feel guilt. We feel shame. We feel anxiety because of this brokenness. We don't just feel broken. We feel broken because we are broken. And the awesome news of Christmas is that God didn't just sit back in heaven and be like, well, too bad for them. Maybe they can figure out a way to fix it.

[24 : 44] But that God, in our brokenness, looked down at us and said, I love them. I love them so much that I'm willing to give up my son to rescue them, to make them whole, to heal them in the areas where they have messed up. And again, this is hugely important for our lives today. You know, I mentioned earlier that internal live stream that we have. There's this internal dialogue going inside each one of our heads every day. And in a lot of ways, that's the most important conversation any of us have ever. Because that conversation inside our heads is telling us what to believe about God, the world, ourselves, reality. And if we listen to the wrong voices in this internal dialogue inside our heads, we're going to respond the wrong way in real life.

That every day, this internal dialogue, it's an opportunity for us to believe lies about ourselves and God and the world, or to fight those lies with truth. And whichever voice we listen to is going to shape the way that we live our lives. So if you're anything like me, it's common for this dialogue to be like, you're broken. Nobody wants to be around you. Nobody likes you. And if we listen to that voice, we're going to respond as if we are broken and nobody likes us.

But in the moment when those voices come in to our minds, we have this option that we can respond and say, no, that's not true. Because God's mercy is great to the outcast. It's promised to the forgotten. It's tender to the broken. Even if I feel these ways, they don't define me. See, when I define myself as broken, if I say I am broken, how am I going to live? I'm going to have a pity party and try and get everyone else to join in it because I want them to know how messed up I am. Maybe I'll act out in ways that show my brokenness because I want other people to recognize how broken I feel inside. And I feel like the way to do that is by acting out on it. Or maybe I'll act out to get attention because I feel so lonely and I feel like the only way to get people to notice me is by doing things that are just like beyond social acceptable. This is why kids in a classroom will act out when they're neglected at home because they realize if I behave badly, I get attention. And the thing I want more than anything is for someone to notice me. And so when we tell ourselves that we're broken and that's what defines us, we act out in a way that's in line with what we feel is true about us. But when we recognize I'm not broken, I am a child of God and his mercy is healing my brokenness. It's like when you have the friends preparing a surprise party for you, right? There's hope, there's excitement, there's recognition that my circumstances right now don't define me. And we actually have power to go out and show love to others because when we have experienced this type of love and acceptance, that transforms us and we want other people to

experience that as well.

[28 : 27] Well, the truths we believe about ourselves shape the way that we live our lives. And our circumstances will tell us again and again, you're outcast, you're rejected, you're forgotten, you're broken.

And the truth of Christmas is that those things do not define us because God has reached out to us and he has showed us that we are loved, we are accepted, we are forgiven, we are wanted.

This isn't just pop psychology telling us to feel better about ourselves. If Christmas didn't happen, it would be. It would be just, you know, try and feel better, try and tell yourself something to make yourself feel better. But this isn't that because this is true.

This is God, Christmas is God stepping down into our world, transforming the very fiber of what it means for us to be us, taking us out of our brokenness, giving us hope, showing us mercy, reaching us in our brokenness with love, faithfulness, forgiveness, and favor. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for Christmas. We thank you for your love. We thank you for rescuing us. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you that when we were at our worst, you didn't give up on us, but you came down to seek us and to save us and to make us whole. I pray that we would believe those truths today, that those things would transform our lives, that we wouldn't live as if we were broken, as if we were forgotten, as if we were isolated, that we would live knowing that we are your children, that we are loved, that we are accepted, that we are wanted, and that we are now free to show that love and acceptance and welcome to others. Thank you that you're good. Thank you for Christmas. Thank you for rescuing us.

[30 : 40] Amen.