

“In Those Days...The Way Was Prepared”

Pastor Wally Contreras

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“Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, “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, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to 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, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.” (Luke 1:57-80)

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Scripture tells me that when God showed Elizabeth His “great mercy” by giving her a son, her neighbors and relatives “rejoiced with her.” The Classic Bible Commentary said this: “We see in the behaviour of Elizabeth's neighbours and cousins a striking example of the kindness we owe to each other. It is written that they rejoiced with her (verse 58). There would be a great deal more joy in this evil world if more people behaved like Elizabeth's relations. Sympathy over one another's joys and sorrows costs little, and yet it is a very powerful grace. The heart that is warmed by good news, or chilled by affliction, is particularly open and such a heart welcomes sympathy more than precious gold.” Spurgeon once said, “A good character is the best tombstone. Those who loved you and were helped by you will remember you when forget-me-nots have withered. Carve your name on hearts, not on marble.” When is the last time I showed “a striking example of the kindness” – “carved [my] name on hearts” to someone? Explain.

Did what I did for someone else have an impact on me? If so, how so? If not, why not?

Discuss Pastor Wally's assertion that it's more important what God says about me than what others say.

At times, do I value the world's opinion of me more than God's opinion of me and if so, why?

Pastor Wally likened Zachariah's statement that God "has visited...his people" to that of a doctor's house call to check up on the condition of someone (Webster's 1828 dictionary: "To go or come to see; to attend. The physician visits his patient and prescribes"). The word can also mean just "One friend [who] visits another from respect or affection" (ibid.). Is this an important distinction to be made? If so, how so? If not, why not?

John Piper pointed out that "...nine months earlier, Zechariah could not believe his wife would have a child. Now, filled with the Holy Spirit, he is so confident of God's redeeming work in the coming Messiah that he puts it in the past tense: "he has visited and redeemed his people. (emphasis added)" For the mind of faith, a promised act of God is as good as done. Zechariah has learned to take God at his word and so has a remarkable assurance: God "has visited and redeemed!" Do I truly believe that "a promised act of God is as good as done" or do I at times allow doubt to creep in? Explain.

Malachi 2:17 reminds me that "You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"" Pastor Wally said that God is wearied when I make little of sin. Ravi Zacharias put it this way: "God isn't merely moral. God is holy. We do not understand the problem of evil because we do not understand the nature of holiness...We are not called to moral lifestyle." Do I view my sins in varying shades of severity (e.g., the little white lie)?

Pastor Wally went on to review Malachi 3:1 ("Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts." Have I taken time to spiritually "prepare the way" for Him this Christmas season?

John Piper made these observations regarding Advent: "Christmas will not have its intended effect until we feel desperately the need for a Savior... Advent is to Christmas what Lent is to Easter. "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Psalm 139:23-24). Let every heart prepare him room . . . by cleaning house." Do I need to do some heart "cleaning" in the coming year?

What “junk” do I need to throw out to make more room in my heart for Him?

Pastor Wally said that I “need to think deeply about [my] faith because God gave [me] a mind to think with.” Growing up, I loved to see “Burma Shave” sayings on fence posts as we drove to visit my grandparent’s farm in Mississippi. These ads were used from 1927 to 1963 and each part of the saying was posted on a separate fence post to be read as we drove by them. One of the sayings went this way:

Don't lose

Your head

To gain a minute

You need your head

Your brains are in it



So, what are some things I can do better to enable me to think more deeply about my faith?

Pastor Wally said that “the tender mercy of our God” (Luke 1:78) is a deep, deep mercy. Spurgeon on June 27th, 1886 said that God “looks with anxious care upon them to see how he can turn away his wrath and restore them to favor... Furthermore, our God visits us when we are in darkness; when we are in such darkness as to know nothing, see nothing, believe nothing, hope nothing; even then the Lord's mercy comes to us. Is not this tenderness?” When I “think deeply” on His tender mercy, what comes to mind and why?

Spurgeon admonished his congregation: “If the tender mercy of God has visited us, and done so much more for us than I can tell, or than you can hear, let us ourselves exhibit tender mercy in our dealings with our fellow-men. It is a wretched business for a man to call himself a Christian, and have a soul which never peeps out from between his own ribs.” Who do I know who needs to be shown some “tender mercy” by me today?

Santa's

Whiskers

Need no trimmin'

He kisses kids

Not the wimmin



Hope you have a blessed and joy-filled Christmas!