

PURSUING A LIFE OF SIGNIFICANCE

An Advent Sermon on Luke 1:57–80

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Merry Christmas! Today I bring you all “good news of great joy ... for unto you [has been] born ... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11). On this fourth Sunday of Advent, 2025, God wants us to query about our significance as we consider John’s life in the light of our Savior. What makes a mere human life count? What makes a person consequential, special, impressive, important, or remarkable? What gives a person’s life meaning and purpose?

How desperately we grope for glory, longing to be noticed, admired, or seen, to add a line to the resumé, a medal to the trophy case, or some other recognition. Yet *God measures significance in the light of not our greatness but his*. The most remarkable human lives are those that magnify the magnificence of God, that value what he values and love what he loves, and that help others revel in his redeeming work climaxing in Christ. We ask today, “What made John’s life significant?”

Our passage is Luke 1:57–80, which has three parts: (1) the birth (vv. 57–58), (2) the declaration (vv. 59–79), and (3) the growth (v. 80) of John’s significant life. Biblical narratives often capture a passage’s main idea in direct speech. Zechariah and Elizabeth’s neighbors raise the question of John’s significance by asking in 1:66, “What then will this child be?” Then in the poetic prophecy of verses 68–79, Zechariah clarifies the meaning of John’s life. Follow along as I read Luke 1:57–80.... Pray with me....

The Birth of John’s Significant Life (vv. 57–58)

Mary, mother of our Lord, is no longer on the scene. She had departed in Elizabeth’s ninth month of pregnancy. Verses 57–58 open with the birth of Elizabeth’s miracle-son and with her neighbors and relatives celebrating with her. These loved ones rejoiced upon hearing “that the Lord had shown great mercy to her” (v. 58). A miracle conception in Elizabeth’s old age was not something she earned from God. This newborn was an expression of manifold divine mercy—of unmerited heavenly love ... for not only Elizabeth but also the world.

The Declaration of John’s Significant Life (vv. 59–79)

In accordance with Yahweh’s instruction to Abraham (Gen 17:18), the loved ones gathered to circumcise the boy on the first day of his second week. The Jews were the only ancient people who removed the foreskin, thus distinguishing them from all non-Jews and marking every male member of the covenant community. Through this people God had promised to raise up the offspring through whom he

would overcome the world's curse with blessing. Every male's birth included a mark on the reproductive organ, thus highlighting the hope in the coming male leader who would rise through Abraham and ultimately David.

This day also marked the time when the child would officially receive his name, often signaling the parents' longings for the child. Against the ESV, verse 59 clarifies that the neighbors and relatives were already calling him "Zechariah after his father." However, apparently having learned from her husband the angel Gabriel's instruction (Luke 1:13), Elizabeth corrected the onlookers, declaring, "He shall be called John," which means "Yahweh has given." Yet this was against the custom, for "John" was not a family name (v. 61). So, those gathered sought direction from the boy's father, who after nine months remained deaf and dumb, following his failure to believe the promise that his barren, aged wife would have a son. In verse 20, the angel had declared to Zechariah, "You will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place." Now, the promised son was born, and responding to their sign language, Zechariah "asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And they all wondered" (v. 63). At this, this father's mouth and tongue were opened, and "he spoke, blessing God" (v. 64).

The Question about His Significance (vv. 65–66)

The prophecy in verses 68–79 likely shapes the content of his speech, yet Luke first gives us a lens to understand the oracle. Zechariah's earlier encounter with the angel at the temple would have caused quite a stir, especially because it resulted in the priest's silence and in his wife's absence from the community for five months (1:20, 24). She then arose a very pregnant woman with a clear understanding of God's redemptive purposes climaxing in Christ (1:41–45). Now, the newborn son receives a non-family name, which frees Zechariah's lips to proclaim praises to God. It's no wonder that verses 65–66 declare, "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 on their hearts, saying, 'What then will this child be?' For the hand of the Lord was with him."

"What then will this child be?" This is a question about John's significance. What role will he play in God's purposes? What will mark his importance or his legacy? The Lord made numerous features related to John's birth remarkable to motivate the onlookers and readers like you and me to query, "What makes his life significant?" What follows answers this question.

The Prophecy about His Significance (vv. 67–79)

Verse 67 opens by noting the divine origin and the nature of what Zechariah declares: "filled with the Holy Spirit" of the living God, this elderly father

“prophesied.” The prophecy comes in two parts: (1) praise to God for the Savior (vv. 68–75) and (2) guidance to the son to be a pointer (vv. 76–79).

Praise to God for the Savior (vv. 68–75)

Verses 68–75 shape a single, extended sentence that declares praise and clarifies the reason for praise. “Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel” (v. 68a). In view of all that has happened, Zechariah indicates that the sovereign God of the old covenant people is one who is adorned with blessing and who is, therefore, praise worthy. Calling him “the God of Israel” situates the prophecy in the context of Old Testament hopes; the God who punished Israel in exile had promised to redeem them through the Messiah, the Christ.

Next, we get the reason for praise, which includes both the gift of the Savior (vv. 68b–71) and the motivation for the gift (vv. 72–75). The Sovereign God of Israel is worthy of praise because “he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (vv. 68b–69a). The old covenant prophets (v. 70) foretold that God had appointed a day of visitation both to punish rebels (Isa 29:6; Jer 10:15; Zeph 1:8, 12) and to restore a believing remnant (Zeph 2:7). Zechariah believed the latter manifestation had come (cf. Luke 1:78; 7:16; 19:44), for the miracles and utterances associated with John’s birth provided certainty that Yahweh, as if already accomplished, had “redeemed his people” (cf. Ps 111:9; 130:7; Isa 63:4) and raised up a strong Savior from David’s house.

As an image of strength, the “horn” was associated with the hope of a rising royal deliverer in David’s line. Thus, Hannah—Samuel’s mother whose song Mary had already recalled—celebrated in hope how “the LORD will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed” (2 Sam 2:10). Similarly, as if envisioning this great deliverance already accomplished, the psalmist asserted that the most foundation reason all the earth should praise the Lord is because “he has raised up a horn for his people ... for the people of Israel who are near him” (Ps 148:14).

As the angel had already told Mary in 1:32, the prophets foretold how the coming Son of God would reign on David’s throne forever (2 Sam 7:12–16). And the result would be, as verse 71 says, “that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.” As noted in the prophecy of Malachi to which Gabriel had alluded nine months earlier when he approached Zechariah, Yahweh’s day of visitation would distinguish “between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him” (Mal 3:18). At that time, “all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble,” and “the day that is coming shall set them ablaze ... so that it will leave them neither root nor branch” (4:1). As Malachi also says, when the messianic messenger of the

covenant arrives, to whom John served as a pointer, he would operate as “a refiner’s fire and like a fuller’s soap,” both refining and purifying while also being the agent of swift judgment (3:1–5). All this clarifies why Zechariah’s prophecy stresses that the result of the Savior’s coming is “that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (Luke 1:71).

Sin is no light matter, and this Christmas we should remember that the sovereign Savior is also the sovereign magistrate, “the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). God will slay his enemies and the enemies of his people. Everyone who has not confessed with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believed in their hearts that God raised him from the dead will experience eternal shame and suffering. Christmas brings into the world not only the Savior but also the judge, and part of the good news for the redeemed is that the enemy is overcome.

Verses 72–75 now clarify two purposes that motivated God’s action. Speaking as an Israelite to the Israelites surrounding him, Zechariah says that God raised up a Savior “to show the mercy [or steadfast love] promised to our fathers and to remember the 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.”

God’s love and promises demanded that he act in history. In the wake of the flood judgment and the scattering of the world’s families across the globe at the tower of Babel, Yahweh had set apart Abraham and his offspring to serve as the agents through whom he would overcome the world’s curse with blessing (Gen 12:3). By providing a substitute sacrifice in the place of Isaac, the Lord displayed the hope of forgiveness for his people (22:13–14). Then he promised Abraham how one of his male offspring would possess the gate of his enemies and be the agent of blessing to the nations (22:17–18). To claim enemy territory implies victory over hostility and kingdom expansion. For nations to regard themselves blessed in Jesus implies that they have become right before God with their sins forgiven and their lives now surrendered to the true King (see Mic 7:20). Thus, the hope of God’s promises to father Abraham was that a multi-ethnic community would enjoy peace and pardon and protection, all without fear (Zeph 3:11–20).

While shadows still exist, dawn has come and noon is coming. Believe today that the child-King is now reigning and one day will complete what he started. At the cross he became God’s enemy so that you and I could become his children; Jesus rose from the grave so that you and I could walk today without fear of enemies. As he declares later in this book,

Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.... Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are more value than many sparrows. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before me, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God. (Luke 12:4, 6–8)

If our hope today is in Jesus, we have nothing on earth to fear, for we've been "delivered from the hand of our enemies" (1:74). We need not fear loss or lack, harm or hatred, failure or defeat. We should fear neither evil nor the evil one, for the child-King is greater, knows our need, and cares. However, if you have not surrendered and trusted in King Jesus, you have someone to fear. As Jesus will say, "Fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.... The one who denies me before me will be denied before the angels of God" (12:5, 9).

All this helps explain the significance of John's life. Yet what is amazing is that all Zechariah's praise to God relates to Jesus and not John. John's life is like a window, designed not to be focused on but looked through to another object. His life is a sign that simply points us in the right direction. Zechariah looked beyond his son and celebrated him whose way his son would prepare. In John's own words from another gospel, "After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.... He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 1:30; 3:30). What makes John's life significant is the one to whom he pointed. The measure of John's greatness is in the attention he would draw not to himself but to Christ. What gives John's life meaning and purpose is Jesus and Jesus alone. Luke wants us to consider this fact and its implications for our own sense of significance.

Guidance to the Son to Be a Prophetic Pointer (vv. 76–79)

Zechariah now makes this idea of John's significance clear. He has praised God for the Savior, and now he guides his son to be a prophetic pointer. Addressing his newborn, he asserts, "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (v. 76). All the praise Zechariah declared to this point was in past time. John's life made the coming redemption so certain that this new father could praise God as if the great salvation were already fully accomplished. But now Zechariah notes the truth that John's role was as a pointer to the Savior who was still to come.

In 3:4, Luke says that John's ministry fulfills Isaiah's prophecy of "one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" Yahweh had told the prophet Malachi, "I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me" (Mal 3:1). Yet in Isaiah, Malachi, and Luke's gospel, the one who comes is Jesus, the "messenger of the covenant," "God with us" (3:1). As already hinted at in the

fact that Jesus is regarded as the “Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32), the “Lord” whose ways John will ready is both God and Christ.

How will John prepare his ways? Verse 77 clarifies that God will use him “to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.” Sins burden the soul. When we drink from broken cisterns, we can’t help but be unsatisfied. When we pursue emptiness, we become empty. Whether open sins or secret sins, they weigh us down and eat away at us—gnawing, hounding. We may be able to suppress the truth for a time, but the immorality, the evil, the covetousness, the malice cannot be ignored forever. So, to know that you can be truly free, fully forgiven and declared clean in Jesus should fill us with hope. John would proclaim “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (3:3), and his calling for his listeners to pass through the waters of judgment was a true signal that the new exodus was occurring and that light had dawned on a new creation. Those who are “gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom 1:29–31)—all these, indeed, all of us can know salvation in the forgiveness of our sins. “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Later in this book, John will say, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:16–17).

I hope you sense “the tender mercy of our God” in this Christmas message. Verse 78 says that it is this mercy that fueled the locomotive of God’s saving love to which John’s ministry points. Verse 72 told us that Yahweh had promised the fathers that he would one day manifest his “mercy” in space and time. Verse 58 said that in supplying elderly, barren Elizabeth with John, the Lord was displaying “great mercy.” And it is this heart of steadfast love and “mercy” that allows you and I to enjoy a “knowledge of salvation ... in the forgiveness of ... sins” (v. 77).

We’ve read how and why God will use John. The end of the prophecy now unpacks what God will accomplish. Zechariah declares that by “the tender mercy of our God ... 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” (vv. 78b–79). In the days of Moses, the prophet Balaam declared, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Num 24:17). Seven hundred years later Isaiah declared,

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.... For to us a child is born, to

us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. (Isa 9:2, 6–7)

And again, “Behold, my servant, whom I uphold.... I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring ... from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Isa 42:1, 6–7). Finally, in response to the exilic plea, “Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations” (Ps 106:47), Book 5 of the Psalter opens, “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love [or mercy] endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands.... He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love [or mercy]” (107:1–3, 14–15).

Friends, in Christ God “has visited and redeemed his people” (Luke 1:69). The sunrise that Zechariah envisioned has dawned, and today you and I can know peace with God, the forgiveness of our sins. Consider the tender mercy of God and thank him for it this Christmas.

The Growth of John’s Significant Life (v. 80)

The question the neighbors raised regarding John was, “What then will this child be?,” for it was evident the Lord’s hand was upon him (v. 66). In what was John’s significance found? What special meaning or purpose did his life have? Zechariah’s prophecy gives the answer: John’s life would be remarkable in the way it pointed to God’s tender mercy shown in Christ. God measures significance in relation to how we point to our Savior.

In a passage that opens focusing on this boy’s name, the conclusion keeps him unnamed. “And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (v. 80). This son would mature, and then, as a voice from the wilderness, he would prepare Israel for the coming Lord. He would point God’s people to their Savior and Judge. John’s purpose and significance would be marked by elevating the seriousness of sin and the tender mercy of the magnificent one to lead our steps in the way of peace.

Do not seek popularity and the applause or praise of men. A true legacy is a life that leads others to Jesus. Join our passage’s remarkable man in saying, “[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). *God measures significance in the light of not our greatness but his. Our significance grows the more we point to our Savior. Pray with me....*