

Bethel

Pulpit

The Lord's Gracious Visits

Sermon Number 448

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B.A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 19th December, 2021**

Text: *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people" (Luke 1. 68).*

I think this is a most beautiful chapter, the Lord's appearance to Zacharias, to Elisabeth, to Mary, the wonderful things that were spoken. Everything seems to be a loving foreshadowing of the blessed truths of the Saviour's birth that immediately follows in the next chapter. There are quite a few *fear nots* appear, and that is what the Lord's people need: "Fear not."

Always remember that this was one of the darkest ages in the history of the ancient church of God. Do not forget, the Lord had been silent for four hundred years. Malachi closed the work of the Lord's prophesying, the Lord's promises. There was the silence, and it seems that the most part were living in complete ignorance of the truth. There were just one or two people like Simeon, Anna, Zacharias, Elisabeth, Joseph and Mary. So really, beloved friends, these things I have been reading to you this morning were the first breaking through of gospel light that there had been for all those centuries. It was a wonderful time and there were some wonderful things which were soon to follow: the actual coming, the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Now that must have been an amazing event when the people were all gathered round the tabernacle at the time of the burning of incense, and they realised that something mysterious was happening. An angel had appeared to Zacharias with remarkable news. His prayers were to be answered. There was to be the birth of a son. He was going to be the fore-runner of the Lord Jesus. Poor old Zacharias just could not believe it. The Lord struck him dumb for unbelief. What a lesson there is for us! The Lord struck him dumb because of his unbelief. He remained dumb for about nine months until the promise was fulfilled, and all the people realised something was happening, something mysterious, a visit from an angel. It seems there was a large crowd there. We do not read that that did any of them any good in the days that followed.

That is one of the sad and solemn things concerning the coming of the Saviour. All Bethlehem heard about it. They all heard what the shepherds had to say. We do not read of any of them going themselves to the manger to see what had happened. How that word was fulfilled: “He came unto His own, and His own received Him not.” Isn’t that the same spirit in the world today, in the professing church! “He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not.” The world knows Him not today.

Then we have that lovely little word comes in: “But as many as received Him.” “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” “As many as received Him, to them gave He power” – that is, authority – “to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.” May you and I through mercy be favoured to be found amongst them.

Now the time has come for old Zacharias’ deliverance. The appointed time was come, and he asked for a writing table, and wrote, “His name is John.” And his mouth was immediately opened; his tongue was loosed; he spake; he praised God; he was filled with the Holy Ghost; he prophesied. He had not been able to speak a single word for all those months. What was the first word that he spoke? “Blessed be the Lord.” It is something like Noah when he came out of the ark. There had been those days of solemn darkness, if you will, death. What was the first thing that Noah did? There was a world which was lying in ruins. There was so much needed to be done. He had the same spirit as Zacharias, and Zacharias had the same spirit as Noah. Noah immediately built an altar to the Lord. This spirit of gratitude for what the Lord has done. And isn’t this where you and I come so far short? Especially at this time of the year when we think of these amazing happenings, the “amazing, boundless love that brought the Lord of glory from above.” And how does it affect us? May we have the spirit of old Zacharias: “Blessed be the Lord” – that gratitude.

Let us be clear, we are not just thinking of his own deliverance from being dumb. He was not just thinking of the fulfilment of the promises. He was not just thinking of the birth of John the Baptist. In this wonderful expression of thanksgiving, “Blessed be the Lord,” he was looking forward to the coming of the Saviour and what the Saviour was going to accomplish. “Blessed be the Lord,” thinking of the dear Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,

of whom his son was going to be the forerunner. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.” Perhaps you may wonder why, when he blessed God, Zacharias said, “Blessed be the Lord God of *Israel*.” Never forget, this was still the old dispensation. It was just coming to an end. It was soon to be abolished. But Zacharias could not fail with a full heart, an overflowing heart, to bless Israel’s God. In a New Testament sense, you and I would have to say, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Did you notice one thing that seemed to flow in every verse of this beautiful portion, this – do we call it a Psalm of prophecy? In popular diction, especially in the Church of England, it is always known as the *Benedictus*. But what is it that flows through every verse? *The faithfulness of God*. The Old Testament saints loved that promise. They loved the faithfulness of God, that one day Messiah would come, and now verse after verse, speaking, praising the Lord God of Israel. Zacharias is looking back to all those promises and all those prophecies of the Old Testament, and he is glorying in the faithfulness of God. “Hath He said, and shall He not do it?” It is one of our foundation truths.

“Tell of His wondrous faithfulness,
And sound His power abroad.”

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.” And then one thing after another follows on the faithfulness of God.

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people.” Now you notice a very unusual, very remarkable thing here. Zacharias does not say, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He *will* visit and redeem His people, and that in a short time. He speaks as if it had already been done, so sure was he of the faithfulness of God. “*He hath visited* and redeemed His people.” This follows the language of so many of the prophets in the Old Testament. They speak of the coming of the Saviour, the Saviour’s work, as if He had already come, as if it was already finished. Perhaps especially I could take you back to our beloved Isaiah 53: “He was wounded” – well, the Saviour had not yet been born; He had not yet come. “He *was* wounded for our transgressions, He *was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed.” What a beautiful word! Hold it fast! It is the same spirit here.

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people.” So Zacharias speaks of the coming of our Lord Jesus as *a visit*. Well, I think all of you know what a visit is, even you young ones, you children. You know what a visit is. If you met somebody in the street, that is not a visit. Even if they stop and talk to you, that is not a visit. What is a visit? It is going somewhere with some special purpose.

When the doctor visits you – if he does, because doctors do not seem to visit so much today, but if he visits you – he comes with a special purpose, because somebody is ill, because he is seeking to help, to see what the matter is, to prescribe some remedy. Never forget that: that in the Word of God, the Saviour’s coming is spoken of as a *visit*, a visit from heaven to earth, a visit with a purpose, and O what a purpose it was! A purpose of love and mercy.

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited ... His people.” Now there is one line of a hymn in our hymnbook I often think of: “*Thou visit’st sinners still.*” Now what a mercy that is, and surely I am right in thinking that there are a few of you here this morning – I hope many of you here this morning – and that is what you want. You want the Lord to visit you personally, savingly, and especially when we come to this season of the year, your prayerful desire more than any other is this: that the Lord Jesus will not pass you by, but that He will visit you.

So we think of that well-known word, and I am sure in the spirit of it, it is the prayer of some of you here this morning: “Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people: O *visit me* with Thy salvation.” That is what the Lord Jesus did when He came to earth. He visited His people with His salvation, and your desire is, Do not pass me by. Do not leave me out. “*Visit me* with Thy salvation.”

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people.” So Zacharias knew straight away what the purpose of the Lord’s visit to earth was going to be. He had had it revealed to him. The reason for the Saviour’s visit was that He might redeem His people, the one thing that sinners needed more than anything else. When the Lord Jesus came, there were many on earth who thought that He had come to visit His people, to set them free from the bondage of the Roman government. Even some of the disciples seemed to think so. Even when the Lord ascended to heaven, they were still hankering after it a bit. But old Zacharias had it very

clear. That was not the purpose of the Lord's visit. It is an amazing thing that Almighty God should visit this sinful world, but the purpose of His visit was that He might redeem His people from their sins.

So really as we come to this verse, there is a black background. When Adam fell, his great need was redemption. He could not redeem himself. He needed a visit from heaven, and really that visit from heaven was promised to Adam in the covenant of grace: the Seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head. That was the visit from heaven. "Thou shalt bruise His heel."

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people." So with the Lord's help, simply this morning I would like to speak of three things. First, the Redeemer; second, the mighty work of redemption; third, the application of the work of redemption to the hearts of needy, longing, seeking sinners.

I. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people." Now first of all, *the Redeemer*. Over the years at Bethel I have always felt we have had people and their hearts seem to be really cheered by the very mention of the Redeemer's name.

"Thou dear Redeemer, dying Lamb,
We love to hear of Thee."

You know what the word *redeemer* means. Even naturally, it means to set something or somebody free by paying a price, and the price is usually spoken of in Scripture as the ransom.

Of course, there are many analogies of this. Perhaps the one I have mentioned most over the years, and the one I like: our famous king, Richard the Lionheart, was captured by the French. They kept him prisoner, and it was a great trouble in England, who loved their king so much. There was only one hope of him being set free, and that was if England could raise sufficient money to pay the ransom price to the King of France. If that ransom price was paid, then he would be set free. That price was raised. Some of you know the old story. They did not even know where he was, except he was a prisoner, and there was that minstrel boy who wandered about France, and outside every castle, every prison, he would play his minstrel's tune, until in one place he got a reply, and realised the reply was coming from the King of England. When the price was raised, the price was

paid, and the king was set free. Now that is just a simple illustration of what redemption is.

So how vital is the Redeemer and how precious is the Redeemer's coming; as it is said here, the Redeemer's visit. What wonderful accomplishments there are of the Redeemer's coming!

II. And then secondly, "He hath visited and redeemed His people." Keeping to the analogy, the Redeemer must pay the price. Creation was an easy work: "He spake, and it was done." Not so with redemption.

"Lost souls to recover, and form them afresh,
Our wonderful Lover took flesh of our flesh."

There must be the cross; there must be Calvary; there must be the Redeemer taking the dying sinner's place, suffering in his stead; there must be those bitter sufferings even unto death, first of all in the garden, then in the judgment hall, and then being nailed to the cross. That is the only way the ransom could be paid, the redemption price could be paid. You may say, Who was the price paid to? In the Middle Ages, some Roman Catholic theologians thought the price was paid to Satan. The price was never paid to Satan. It was paid to Almighty God.

But you say, This is strange language. To put it simply, Almighty God is just. He has said that sin must be punished. In His mercy, He agreed in the covenant of grace that not necessarily must it be punished in the sinner himself; it can be punished in someone who takes his place, a substitute. And so He set up His beloved Son to be the Redeemer, to suffer in the sinner's place. "Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God." The Lord Jesus as He suffered, as He paid the price that His people ought to have paid, as He bore their sins, as He bore them away, so redemption was complete in the work of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. When He cried with a loud voice, "It is finished," what was finished? The work of redemption.

So we have that wonderful truth, and it is a wonderful truth, and I hope to some of us it *has* been made a wonderful truth: "Not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold" – none of that can do any good – "But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot." Let us pause, and let me slowly repeat that word, because that is the vital point in the text this morning, and as we think of Christmas day, that

is the vital point why the Lord Jesus came. O the wonder of it, that He came to lay down His life in death, to be a sacrifice for sin, to shed His precious blood for sinners, that they might be redeemed, that they might be set free.

I do think we need to stop and think and tremble. Let us never speak of the blood of Jesus carelessly or sing of it carelessly, but always with a tender heart. Up at Haslingden in our prayer meetings, one of the expressions which was often used: “We would not dare, neither would we desire, to speak carelessly of the blood of Christ.” “Redeemed, with Jesus’ blood redeemed.” I would like to linger here. It is, “Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.”

III. But then thirdly, “He hath visited ... His people” – the application of it. There is quite a well-known book in circulation, and I understand it is an excellent book, called *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. It means that there will be a wonderful effect of that work of redemption on the cross, and that will be made known in the heart of every sinner for whom He died, for the extent of the atonement is made clear here. It was for His people. It was not a general atonement. When I was young, when I was at Haslingden, the normal view of Evangelicals was that Christ shed His blood for everybody, and the sinner had a free will, whether he accepted it or not. People believing the truth as we did – I remember at university, people had heard there were such people who did believe those things, but they thought it was a thing of the past and nobody any longer believed it! We believe in a *definite* atonement, a *definite* redemption for a *definite* people. We want a salvation that really saves and saves to the uttermost, not a salvation which just makes it possible for anyone, everyone, and yet many that Christ wanted to save, He failed, many He died for and they are not saved.

Someone said to me only recently, one weakness in our chapels is that we have not been clear enough on our doctrine, and it has troubled me quite a bit. I wonder if over fifty years I have not spoken to you clearly enough on our doctrines, but I believe in them with all my heart. “He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied.” Not one sinner can perish for whom Christ died. But the Holy Spirit makes the application. What is it? The sinner dead in sin is awakened and he feels his need. He is a sinner. He needs forgiveness. He needs cleansing. He needs his sin washed away. He cannot do it himself. No-one else can do it for him. But then the gospel reveals the way.

“The Saviour died, and by His blood
Brought rebel sinners back to God.”

So all those that the Holy Spirit teaches their need, it is their need of a Redeemer, their need of redemption, their need of an interest in the Saviour’s blood, and they are brought to see themselves the only place where they can find a resting place. “Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom.” And so that can be said of the whole of the Lord’s people: “The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads.” It is not just a redemption left in the Word of God, or left in the doctrine. It is sacredly made known in the heart of every sinner saved by free and sovereign grace. That is our only hope, a fountain opened for sin. That is redemption.

“The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there may I” –

and the wonderful thing is that no sinner has ever yet been forbidden to go in all his need and plead the blood of Jesus and make it his resting place. That is not forbidden. It is something the eternal Father welcomes, to see an unworthy sinner seeking salvation in the precious blood of Christ. The old preachers so often spoke of it as *redeeming blood*, a sure, a certain resting place.

So may we end where we began, with this word: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.” If you will, it is *the song of redemption*. May we this year be able from our hearts to sing it. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.” Why? “For He hath visited and redeemed His people,” and I have a sweet hope it was for me.

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While heavenly hosts their anthems sing,
In realms above the sky,
Let worms of earth their tribute bring,
And laud the Lord most high.

In thankful notes your voices raise,
Ye ransomed of the Lord;
And sing the eternal Father’s praise,
The God by all adored.

All creatures to His bounty owe
Their being and their breath;
But greatest gratitude should flow
In men redeemed from death.

His only Son He deigned to give;
What love this gift declares!
And all that in the Son believe,
Eternal life is theirs.

J. Hart