

# Zechariah's Song

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Beginning in verse 57, we've been going through a series called Songs of Advent, and we're just looking at the different songs at the beginning of the book of Luke that speak about the significance of Jesus' birth and what it means for the world.

And so last week we looked at Mary's song, and this week we're looking at Zechariah's song. So this is chapter 1, beginning in verse 57 to verse 80, the end of the chapter.

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.

[ 1 : 1 3 ]     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 those 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 of 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 and 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 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 the spirit. And he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. Amen. This is God's word. Now, the surprise of Zachariah's song, which you may not have picked up on it, if this is all you know of the story.

The surprise of Zachariah's song is that for about nine months before this moment, Zachariah could not talk. He literally could not talk. Zachariah was a prophet that served in the temple in Jerusalem.

[ 3 : 1 7 ]     And if you know the story, you know that one day while he was in the temple, something very unusual happened, which is that an angel appeared to him. And the angel came to him and said to Zachariah, who was an old man, he said, Zachariah, you're going to bear a son and his name is going to be John.

And I'm paraphrasing here, but he said that John, your son, is going to prepare the way for the son of the Most High. And Zachariah had trouble believing that promise, which is funny because Zachariah himself, the angel kind of hints at that.

Zachariah had been praying that God would give him a child. And then when the angel finally comes and says, you're going to have a child, Zachariah doesn't believe it. And so he says to the angel, give me a sign so that I can really know that what you're saying is true.

And the angel did not give him a sign. Well, or you could say the angel did give him a sign. And the sign was that he made Zachariah unable to speak until the baby was born, until the passage we just read.

And for centuries, this song, what I call Zachariah's song, for centuries we called this Zachariah's benediction. And you have to picture the scene here.

[ 4 : 24 ] It's like when we baptize a baby. That's kind of what was happening here. They were bringing on the eighth day, if you were a Jew, you would bring your baby forward to be that circumcised. And so you have to imagine, here's Zachariah sitting in front of the congregation with his own child.

And he's looking at this baby, who's eight days old. And he blesses the child. He prays over the child, just like we would if we had a child up here. Except when Zachariah blesses his child, he's, the passage says he prophesies.

He prophesies. He's being given God's own words to explain what this child will become. And the way that he does it, he's actually answering a question. You see the questions there in verse 66.

Everyone knew about John's birth. And they all knew it was exciting. And it says, all who heard them laid it up in their hearts saying, what then will this child be? Because it says that they knew that the Lord's hand was on this child.

And so when Zachariah prophesies, he's answering that question, what will this child be? And what you learn from this passage is Christmas came with a prophet.

[ 5 : 34 ] And if you read Zachariah's song, you see why. Why did Christmas come with a prophet? And that's what we're going to talk about for a few moments this morning. And Zachariah is helping us to see why we need John at Christmas time.

And the first thing you see in this song is Christmas needs a prophet in order to prepare the world for what had already been promised. And you see that down there in verse 70. He says, Zachariah is talking and he's talking about the salvation that God has finally brought to his people.

And he says, he's raised up a horn of salvation in the house of his servant David as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old. And then he goes on to give a lot of references talking about promises that he made to Abraham, oaths that God made.

And you may read right over that and say, yeah, everything the Old Testament said is true. And that's what Zachariah is saying. But Zachariah said this because it meant something to him. Why does this matter?

Why talk about the stories of old? Why not just say Jesus is doing something new? And it's because the character of God is at stake here. You know, think Abraham probably lived something like 2000 years before Jesus was born.

[ 6 : 49 ] And Zachariah is saying with the birth of Jesus, the promises that God made to Abraham all those thousands of years ago are coming true. And it's about God's character.

Is God the kind of God who when he makes a promise, he keeps it? Because you may not know this, but if you think about in the ancient world, the ancient world was full of people who worship all kinds of gods.

And most people worship a lot of gods all at the same time. And it's no secret that all those types of gods, when you worship more than one god, those gods were fickle.

And it was in their nature to be fickle because they don't owe you a thing. You go to them. You pray to them. You offer sacrifices to them in the hopes, in the hopes that they will listen to you for the one prayer that you're asking.

Most people in the ancient world had no concept for a god that you could pray to and who you could always rely on and who you could always believe. Because in the ancient world, your god's love for you was only as good as the sacrifice that you made last week.

[ 7 : 56 ] You could not depend on your god because he owed you nothing and you instinctively knew that. And Zechariah is saying the god of Israel is not like that. The god of Israel is the kind of god who makes a promise.

And 2,000 years later, he still remembers that promise. He's not a god who forgets. He's a god who doesn't change. When he makes a promise, he keeps it.

Which is hard, not just in the sense of keeping a promise, but it's also hard because imagine what kind of power is required to promise one thing and then 2,000 years later bring about that thing.

As if you could control all of history. And Zechariah is saying that's the kind of god of Israel that we have is one that is so in the details of history that he can make a promise and thousands of years later bring it to fruition as if it was nothing for him.

John is a prophet who is coming before Jesus to say, in one sense, all the promises you ever heard, you Jewish people, you people of Israel, all the promises you ever heard in Jesus Christ, they're all coming true finally.

[ 9 : 05 ] God always makes good on his promises. You know, a lot of times we think about, if I were to ask you what is a prophet, you know, you might say a prophet is someone who says what is about to happen.

And that's only part of what a prophet really is. You know, a prophet's main job is not to tell the future, actually. A prophet's main job is to simply speak for God. And a lot of what John did in his life was not to tell the future.

It was to say, this is who God is. It's to say God is the one who has always been and who's always faithful to his promises. And who needs to hear a message like that?

People who doubt the promises of God. People like Zechariah. You know, God, Zechariah prayed to God for help. God comes to Zechariah.

And when he comes to Zechariah, Zechariah doesn't believe him, right? And all of us are Zechariah at some point in our lives. You know, we pray for blessings. We pray that God would help us. We pray that God would watch over us.

[ 10 : 05 ] And then when he actually comes through and he helps us and he watches over us and he protects us, we look back and we don't see him working. Right? Zechariah is, he's saying these words because he needs to hear it more than anybody else.

That God makes true on his promises. And that when he says something, you don't need one more sign to believe him. You can believe that it's true because he said it. But, you know, we often sing here in the hymn, Abide with me.

And one of the best lines of that hymn is, Thou hast not left me, though I oft left thee. Isn't it like that? That's the message of the Old Testament.

God never left his people as often as they left him. Okay? But the other reason to bring up all those Old Testament promises here is because when you know your Old Testament, you know what kind of Savior to look forward to.

That's what Zechariah is saying. And you see that, look down in there in verse 71. What kind of Savior has he raised up, he says. He's going to grant, excuse me, verse 70.

[ 11 : 13 ] As he spoke by the prophets, by the mouth of his holy prophets of old, that, verse 71, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of those who hate us.

So one thing Zechariah tells us about Jesus, whoever he will be. At this point in time, they haven't seen Jesus, so they're just hearing about him. And Zechariah is saying this Jesus is going to be the kind of person who, through God's help, with the hand of God, will deliver you from your enemies.

And if you read the Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi, there is, from Genesis chapter 4 all the way to the end of Malachi, there is violence and there is bloodshed. And there are so many scenes in the Old Testament that are, if they were in a movie, they would not be safe to show your children, right?

You know that if you've read the Old Testament. No person who lived through the events of the Old Testament needed to be convinced that Israel needed help, that they needed a savior to protect them from their enemies.

And yet when Jesus comes, what you find, he doesn't pick up a sword once. He doesn't slay a single person. And yet Zechariah is saying this person, this Jesus Christ, he will deliver us from our enemies.

[ 12 : 24 ] And that's why a lot of people in the New Testament were confused about Jesus because he never killed anybody. He never slew the Romans. And yet in the Old Testament, we were taught to look for the one who would deliver us from our enemies.

And what you realize is what Zechariah can probably see, but we so often miss, is that Jesus is not, when he doesn't kill a human being, it's not that he's not fulfilling his promise.

He's fulfilling it in a way that we could have never imagined before him. Ephesians 6 put it like this. When Paul talks about who our enemies are, he says, we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in the high places.

Jesus Christ has come to deliver you and I from our enemies. And it's not people. It's all the spiritual forces in this world. If nothing else, take away from this passage that you have an enemy.

That there are forces in this world that actively want you, that want to keep you chained to the powers of sin and death. And Jesus Christ has offered to come and rescue us from that in a way that we could have never rescued ourselves.

[ 13 : 39 ] It tells us that we need a savior from our enemies. That's what this passage does. But then he doesn't stop there. You see in verse 74, what kind of salvation is he bringing? He rescues us from our enemies.

And then verse 74, that we, being delivered from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all of our days.

When I was in college, I always feel this a little bit in wherever station I am in life. I'm always wondering a little bit, what is God's will for my life, right?

And you've, I'm sure you've had that before and you've probably had seasons where it felt extremely painful to figure that question out. What is God's will for my life? And you feel that in college because it feels like the whole world is open to you and you wonder, what does God want me to do?

And what you see in this passage is really the answer, what is God's will for my life is often more simple than we give it credit for. God shows us here what his will for our life is.

[ 14 : 41 ] It's that having been delivered from the powers of evil, that we will serve him without, without fear in the holiness and righteousness before him all of our days.

And I think that's, Zachariah presents that to us as, as a hope of the gospel that you might become a servant of God.

And it's worth asking yourself today, does that appeal to you? You know, if you think about what are my goals for five years from now and for 10 years from now, if I were to tell you, you know, is one of your goals to be more of a servant of God, more devoted to holiness and righteousness?

Does that sound nice to you? Does that sound good and beautiful and something worth seeking after? Because Zachariah says that he says that that is what Jesus has come for is not just to free us from evil, but to save us in order to devote our lives to God.

And Christmas is a time where we stop and say, what did Jesus come for in the first place? Part of it is that we can look up to him and we're able to serve him because his Holy Spirit is in us.

[ 15 : 51 ] Okay. But then one more thing I want to notice about the past is you see in verse 74, excuse me, in verse 68, at the very beginning of this song, he says, blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and has redeemed his people.

Zachariah is talking about something that has not happened yet. Jesus has not gone. He's not even been born. He's not gone to the cross. And yet Zachariah in this moment is so certain of the promises that God has made through Jesus Christ that he can talk about it like it's already happened.

He has visited us. He has redeemed us. And, you know, all of you and I live in what sometimes theologians call the already, not yet.

And even if you never heard that, you know what it means. God has made all these promises to you and I. He tells us we've already got all the riches in all the heavenly places in Jesus Christ. And yet you and I live in a world of suffering.

You may be going through grief today. You're struggling with sins that you have. So we live in this already, not yet. We've got all these promises God has made to us and he says they're already yours. And yet we don't always feel that.

[ 17 : 05 ] We don't live in that quite yet. We live in the already, not yet. And that's what Zachariah is saying. He's saying, you know, Jesus Christ has not gone to the cross yet. He's still, Zachariah is still struggling with sins.

But he's so convinced of God's promises that he says, for me, it's already happened. That's how sure I am of what Jesus is going to do. A lot of people use D-Day to explain this.

You know, they say on D-Day, the war was far from over in World War II. But the day that the Allies landed and secured those beaches in Normandy, in hindsight, effectively, the war was over.

It was just a matter of time before they marched their way to Berlin. And you can say that's the same thing with this already, not yet. We're waiting for all the promises of God to be fulfilled.

And yet, because Jesus has already gone to the cross, we're certain that victory is already assured, that we've already got victory in our hands. It's just a matter of time until it all comes to fruition. Okay?

[ 18 : 07 ] So the prophet comes to you and I in Christmas in our grief and says, your grief is real, sin is real, all the darkness of this world is real, and you have been delivered if you believe in Jesus Christ.

Okay? And then lastly and briefly, why does Christmas come with a prophet? Because in John the Baptist, John the Baptist prepares the world for the coming light.

And you see that in verse 77 where he actually begins to talk about, where Zachariah talks about what is his son going to do? And he says there in verse 77, he comes to give knowledge of salvation to his people.

Even if you just stop there, that speaks to the power of words. You know, so often what we look for, what people look for when they come to church, what they look for when they come to a worship service, is they look for the feeling.

They look for the religious high. You know, they want the worship service that takes you to the next level in what you can feel. And, you know, if you're praising God, you know, hopefully your heart does lift and you feel so joyful that you can shout.

[ 19 : 15 ] But don't discount the power of words and the power of logic. Because what Zachariah is saying here is that his son is going to come first and foremost to teach, to help people understand, open up their Bibles, to help them understand who Jesus is so that they can be prepared for what he's going to come to do.

You can know a lot about God and not love God. But if no one's ever told you about God, if you don't understand who Jesus is, then you can't love him.

There's a value to taking time with these kids and saying, this Jesus, he was, God set him, God set him apart all the way in the book of Genesis. That's how special he is.

But then, as we work towards an end, let me point out this idea of tender mercy. Who is John the Baptist going to do? What is he going to do? He's going to come to give knowledge of salvation to his people and the forgiveness of sins because of the tender mercy of our God.

And I love that idea because I imagine, you know, Zachariah is here holding this tiny little baby. And he's looking at this baby who is so tender, tender and mild, right?

[ 20 : 30 ] That's what one of the songs says about Jesus as a baby. This tender little baby. And he says, you know, because of the tender mercies of God, this baby is going to come. And this baby is going to prepare the way for Jesus.

But also, this is a funny image to me because when I think about John the Baptist as a grown man, the last thing I would describe him as is tender, right?

He grew up in the wilderness. He wore camel's hair. He ate strange food. He ate locusts. He was, by any stretch of the imagination, not a normal person.

And he comes off to me as very gruff. You know, he'll say things like, just a few chapters later in Luke 3, he'll say, he'll look at the crowds and he'll say, you brood of vipers.

Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? And then he'll go on to say, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. And even the way that he talks about Jesus, often his language is harsh.

[ 21 : 31 ] He says this about Jesus. He says, his winnowing fork in his hand will clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat to burn. He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

That's how he describes Jesus. Really hard. I mean, to me, he's the definition in a lot of ways of a fire and brimstone preacher. And yet Zechariah here talks about John as if he is the one who's coming to tell people about the tender mercies of God.

So how's that possible? And the reason is, if you think about it, it makes sense. Anytime you and I confess the gravity of our sins, the more we recognize how serious our sins are, and the more we recognize what our sins really deserve, if they're as bad as God says that they are, anytime we do that, you know, we're magnifying the gravity of our sins.

But in the exact moment, if we're doing it right, we're also magnifying the mercy of God. Because, you know, if all God saved us from was a little sin, then his mercy can't mean very much.

But if he saved us from an eternity apart from God, if he saved us from sins that we could never atone for ourselves, then, my goodness, what does that say about his mercy?

[ 22 : 46 ] I mean, anytime John emphasizes the simpleness of the people in front of him, implicitly, he's magnifying the mercy of God that he would allow them to come and repent and deter me.

Okay? And, you know, John knew he wrote Amazing Grace. He put it like this. When he was an old man, he said, I remember two things very clearly in my old age.

I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior. And if you can't see that you're a great sinner, then you'll never see that Christ is a great Savior. Because it saves you from what?

From a little bit of sin? No. A great sinner needs a great Savior. Okay? Now, let me close with this. Tender.

God's tender mercy. It accomplishes... God's tender mercy is to forgive us of our sins, but it never stops at that.

[ 23 : 52 ] You see the way that Zachariah describes what God's mercy accomplishes? He says, because of the tender mercy of our God, and let me say, tender here doesn't mean soft, really.

Tender means from the heart of God. From the deepest place. You know, the word in Greek. People always told me in seminary, don't ever quote Greek in the pulpit, because people don't like that.

But this is the one word that I always quote. It's the tender here is the word splagza, which is, it sounds like what it is. It really means guts. And so what it literally translates to is, this mercy is from the bowels of God's unfailing love.

You know, when you feel love for someone in your guts, that's what it's talking about. It's saying God's love for you, his mercy to you, is not just something that he throws out, just in case you might, like we feed the birds sometimes.

His mercy to you is from the depths of who he is to offer you his love. And that love doesn't just stop with forgiveness. You see what he says there in verse 79. And he says, 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 in the way of peace.

[ 25 : 07 ] You know, in the book of Isaiah chapter 59, one of the ways that Isaiah describes people who are lost is he says, the way of peace they have not known.

And he describes, if you read that the whole chapter, he describes people who are running to and fro in every direction. And they're running in every single direction except for the way of peace.

They don't know peace. And here he describes it as they're sitting down. So whether you're running about not knowing peace or you're sitting down not knowing peace, he's saying the light that Jesus is coming to bring is one that will guide you in the way of peace, which is to say, it's not just that you're forgiven.

It's that Jesus Christ has come to show you how to live, how to live through the power of his Holy Spirit because you have to be guided by the light but he's not going to forgive you and leave you there.

He's going to forgive you and bring you into a life that you could have never imagined. The way of peace he calls it. Okay. And I'm going to close with this.

[ 26 : 08 ] And I'm really, I'm serious this time. I'm really closing with this. John the Baptist was described by Jesus as the greatest man who had ever been born of a woman.

He's the greatest man who ever lived. And yet, given that that's the case, it's all the more surprising how little the New Testament actually says about him. And even his own dad, when describing who he will become, almost everything that he says about who he will become is really just describing who Jesus is and kind of every now and then saying, and my son's going to talk about that.

John the Baptist was always meant to point beyond himself and to point to Jesus so that people would see that John's not the light, but that Jesus is the light.

And if someone ever came along and wanted to follow John for John's sake, they would have missed the point because John was always pointing to beyond himself. And I think, you know, one way to close, to think about Christmas this year is Christmas, the celebration, the festivities, the candles, all these things, the decorations.

They're always meant to point beyond themselves. And if you stop at just the celebration, you miss what's actually trying to be communicated, which is that a Savior's here.

[ 27 : 25 ] Just like Zachariah says, that redemption is here. If all it is to you is candles and presents and beauty, you're going to miss it, just as if you followed John for John's sake.

And Christmas is just like John in the sense that they're supposed to point us beyond themselves. And the invitation this morning is to see in Christmas what Christmas is pointing to. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we praise you that you have sent us your son and that you have sent us prophets to explain to us who your son is so that we might better worship him.

And we thank you for what's often been called the last prophet of the Old Testament, John the Baptist. And the way that he proclaimed to us our need for Jesus, the need for repentance, and the hope of Jesus.

Help us to live in the light of that hope. In your son's name we pray. Amen.