

PM Luke 1:57-80 Zechariah's Song - a Song of Sunrise

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[0 : 00] Chapter 1, concluding our mini-series on Luke 1, the events leading up to the birth of Christ.

We're looking tonight at the Song of Zechariah in verses 57 through to 80. So Luke 1, verse 57. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

And her neighbours 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.

[1 : 11] 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 neighbours.

And all these things. And all these things were talked about throughout 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.

[3 : 12] 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.

Well, let me ask you to turn, please, to Luke chapter 1, which we read earlier, concluding our mini-series on this first chapter of Luke.

We're going to look tonight at the last part, from verse 57 down to the end, but in particular, words that you'll find towards the end of Zechariah's prophecy, verses 78 and 79.

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.

[5 : 06] The song of Zechariah, as it's called, has the distinction of being the very last prophecy given before the birth of Christ.

I call it a song, though like Mary's song in verse 46, it doesn't actually say that Zechariah sang it. merely says that he was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied saying these words. But as with Mary's song, it is in a poetic form, and that's the reason why it's usually called a song.

It is sung in some churches. Way back in my distant past in the Church of England, we used to sing it at the morning service.

It's known there as the Benedictus, from the first word in the Latin. This is, as I say, the last prophecy before the birth of Christ.

[6 : 25] For hundreds of years, Israel had been waiting for the Messiah. God had promised, straight away after the fall in Genesis 3, that mysterious seed of the woman.

The one who would overcome the terrible effects of the fall and bring life in place of death. The one who would crush the serpent's head.

And successive prophets had spoken of him in ever-increasing detail. David had spoken about him in the Psalms.

Then all the prophets from Isaiah to Malachi speak of him, predicting his birth and his death and his resurrection.

They'd spoken of him as the Saviour. They'd spoken of him as the King. All Israel were longing for him to appear. And now the time had come.

[7 : 42] Zechariah speaks of him here as the sunrise. Hence the sermon title on the notice sheet, A Song of Sunrise.

The authorised version and the New King James version translates it, The day spring from on high has visited us.

The NIV says, The rising sun will come to us from heaven. In other words, it is the dawn of a new age.

Light is about to come flooding into this dark world of ours. And Christ is that light.

Now Zechariah undoubtedly has Old Testament prophecy in mind here. We're told he was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 44] But when the Holy Spirit inspires someone to speak in Scripture, he doesn't usually just give completely new thoughts. He builds on what he's already spoken and guides people to look into the Word of God.

Perhaps the most obvious Scripture that Zechariah would have in mind is Malachi, chapter 4, verse 2, But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

You may remember that the angels promised to Zechariah back in verses 16 and 17 contained several references to Malachi. And my guess that Zechariah would have been avidly reading Malachi and thinking about it in the nine months since then.

But there are also echoes of Isaiah. In Isaiah 9, verse 2, The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in deep darkness on them light has shone.

He's virtually quoting that here, isn't he? And Isaiah 60, verse 1, Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

[10 : 15] All of these ancient prophecies and many more besides were coming together now in Christ.

The promised sunrise was about to come. Now I have to admit I don't often see the sunrise.

I'm a night owl rather than a morning lark. And for most of the year sunrise is too early for me. Even if I do get up on time you can't really see the sunrise from our house.

We have a magnificent view to the west and we see some wonderful sunsets. But to the east there are hills and trees and now there are two big houses going up as well.

So we don't see the sunrise. But I do know that the sunrise is one of the most glorious sights in all creation.

[11 : 26] I have seen the sunrise over the sea and been transfixed by it. I've watched as that first glimmer of light breaks through the darkness on the horizon.

And then suddenly the sun's rays break through and within minutes the whole world seems to be full of light. That is the image that Zechariah sets before us here.

I want to consider that sunrise this evening under three headings. The sun rising upon Israel.

The sun rising upon the world. And the sun rising upon each one of us individually. But first let's just look through the story.

The context is the birth not of Christ but of John the Baptist. The forerunner of Christ. Nine months previously the angel Gabriel had appeared to Zechariah and promised him that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son.

[12 : 45] They would call him John and he would be the herald of the Messiah. He was to prepare the way of the Lord and to prepare a people ready for the Lord.

Zechariah at first had been unable to believe it because he and Elizabeth were both old, and he was struck dumb for his unbelief.

But the word of the Lord came true as it always does and John had now been born and neighbours and relatives had come to rejoice with them.

On the eighth day as the custom was he was circumcised and named. And everyone was amazed that they said he was to be called John.

John. In the normal course of events he would have been called Zechariah after his father or at least some other family name. But no Elizabeth said it was to be John.

[13:55] Zechariah confirmed that in writing. Remember he was still dumb. And then verse 64 his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed and he spoke blessing God.

A literal case of Psalm 51 15 O Lord open my lips and my mouth shall show forth your praise. Fear comes upon everyone news spread and they all wonder what will this child be?

But Zechariah filled with the spirit responds in song. It's a song not primarily about his son though he does mention him.

It's a song about Christ. John was to be the herald of Christ and therefore his father also focuses upon Christ.

And he would know about Christ both from prophecy and from his conversations no doubt with Mary.

[15:13] Mary had been with them remember for the past three months. Although Zechariah couldn't speak to her he could listen to what the angel had said to her.

And together with Elizabeth they could study the scriptures. I used to visit a man in Gainsborough. He was a West Indian a radiant Christian but he'd had an industrial accident and as a result he could hardly hear and could only speak in muffled words.

And so we communicated with a writing tablet and it worked. I would write something down in big letters and he would peer at it and work out what it was and then he would get a pen and he would write on this board as well a reply and we had lovely fellowship with each other.

So my guess is that Zechariah over those months was having good fellowship with his wife Elizabeth and with Mary who had come to stay with them a while.

[16:33] He must have been full of praise during those months even though his lips were sealed and now when his lips are opened it all comes gushing out.

So we can divide this song into three parts. There's a blessing upon God in verses 68 to 75 a prophecy about John 76 to 77 and then the prophecy about Christ on which I want to focus 78 and 79.

First a blessing upon God 68 to 75 blessed be the Lord God of Israel he begins for he has visited and redeemed his people.

Twice in this song he speaks about God visiting his people. Here and again verse 78 you have that expression.

God visiting his people can be good or bad. He can visit us in mercy or he can visit us in judgment. But here it's clearly in mercy.

[17:55] God has looked down seen his people in need and come to rescue them. Indeed quite literally he has visited them in the person of his son.

He has in mind no doubt another great visitation in Exodus. Exodus 4 31 Moses told the Israelites that the Lord had visited them and seen their affliction and he would lead them out of slavery in Egypt and he did.

He rescued them with a mighty hand with signs and wonders and he brought them to the promised land. Psalm 106 verse 10 recalls that and it describes it as redemption.

He saved them from the hand of the foe and redeemed them from the power of the enemy. Words which Zechariah will virtually quote in verses 79.

Now redemption means to buy back something that was lost and a price must be paid. the price in Exodus was the Passover lamb.

[19:24] Zechariah is looking now for a new and greater redemption and the redeemer is Christ and the price to be paid will be his blood on the cross.

Whether perhaps he hoped for the deliverance of Israel from Rome I don't know. Many people did in those days. But it seems to me he's looking beyond that to the ultimate redemption.

Redemption from sin. Mankind is in bondage to sin. In bondage to Satan. Those are the real enemies. And Christ has come to deliver us from both. death. And that terrible price that he must pay is his death. As John the Baptist will himself say later Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Zechariah sees this as the fulfillment of prophecy. God has he says raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

[20 : 47] As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old. Where did he say that? Well one place was in Psalm 18 where David himself said the Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer my God my rock in whom I take refuge my shield and the horn of my salvation.

the very same phrase. God had promised to David a descendant who would reign forever and all the prophets spoke of that king.

Now he had come. He had come he says that we might be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Not just from the Romans. but from spiritual enemies as well. And he has done this he says in fulfillment of his covenant.

Verse 72 to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant. The oath which he swore to our father Abraham. man. That's what Mary said in her song wasn't it?

[22 : 04] Verses 54 and 55. One can imagine Mary and Elizabeth talking about this in those three months and Zechariah joining in with his tablet.

Encouraging one another the covenant is about to be fulfilled. God had said to Abraham that he would make of him a great nation.

He would bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him. And through him all the world would be blessed.

Now the Messiah had come to fulfill that. and the result will be not just a great nation but a holy people.

Verse 74 that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

[23 : 12] Zechariah now turns to John his son. One can imagine him holding him in his arms as he prophesies in verses 76 and 77 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.

Virtually repeating what the angel had said to him nine months previously. Zechariah believes it now and he's thrilled at the prospect.

His son will be the herald of the Messiah. He will preach repentance and he will preach Christ. He will point out to people their sins yes but also he will show them the way of forgiveness of sin through the Lamb of God.

God. But he doesn't linger upon John. It's very striking that John was the star attraction of the occasion wasn't he?

Here's the baby who's being circumcised. You go to any event concerning a baby today and everyone's looking at the baby. But Zechariah isn't focused on the baby John.

[24 : 44] He turns again to Christ. And we have this prophecy in verses 78 to 79 that Christ will be the sunrise bringing light into the world.

Now as I said I want to think of this in three ways. Three subheadings if you like. This is the real heart of what I want to say tonight.

First the sun rising upon Israel. Zechariah was an Israelite and very naturally his first concern is for his own nation.

Just as our first concern should be for our nation. For Scotland where we live and for the whole of the United Kingdom. Israel was going through some very dark times.

The glory days of David were long since gone. A thousand years had passed since then. Back in David's day Israel was a powerful nation.

[26 : 04] Admired and feared by the nation's roundabout. But not anymore. Because of their sins they had gone into captivity in Babylon.

And even when they returned from exile still they were not free. They were ruled first by the Persians then by the Greeks and at this time by the Romans.

But worse than that God had gone silent on them. For 400 years there had not been a word of prophecy.

Had God forgotten his people? Of course not. Christ had come as the saviour of Israel if only they would believe in him.

He is still to this day Israel's Messiah. That thought should be in the back of our minds as we watch the news these days with all the violence and all the tragedy unfolding in that land.

[27 : 21] we are so used to regarding Christianity and Judaism as two completely different religions. We need to remember that Christianity is rooted in Judaism.

Christ is Israel's Messiah first of all. Hence Paul says that he preaches the gospel to the Jew first and afterward to the Gentile.

The blessings of the covenant had been extended to us. We praise God for that. But we still need to pray today for Israel to come to Christ.

But of course he's not only Israel's Messiah. second consider here the coming of Christ is also sunrise to the world.

Jesus said I am the light of the world. John contrasts John the Baptist and Jesus by saying that John the Baptist was not the light but came to bear witness about the light.

[28 : 42] The true light which gives light to everyone was coming into the world. The world was indeed in darkness before Christ came.

As Isaiah says darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples but the Lord will arise upon you and all nations shall come to your light.

The world still is in darkness today without Christ. They are as Zechariah puts it in verse 79 sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death.

They're in the darkness of ignorance first of all not knowing God not knowing the truth wandering about blindly following their own deluded ideas.

They're in the darkness of sin captive to their own lusts which destroy their lives and bring them into judgment.

[29 : 55] They're also in the shadow of death having no hope beyond death and being powerless to avoid it. Don't misunderstand me I'm not saying that everything is terrible out in the world there was much to admire in Greek and Roman civilization and there is much to admire in the world around us but at the end of the day as Paul says they are without God and without hope but all that was about to change with the coming of Christ the gospel of Christ brings light and life and peace to all who believe it dispels the darkness of ignorance because Christ is the truth it dispels the darkness of sin because Christ died for our sins it dispels the darkness of death because

Christ overcame death and gives us eternal life Christ has come he says to guide our feet into the way of peace peace first of all with God God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself being justified by faith we have peace with God peace also with one another as we learn to regard one another as fellow Christians as brothers and sisters the Bible holds out no prospect of peace in the world for the simple reason that the world doesn't believe but within the church there should be peace because Christ came to bring peace but all of this is very general let's now personalize it Christ came to bring sunrise to each one of us individually that sunrise came when we first came to faith in Christ now I know that some of you have been blessed with a Christian upbringing and maybe you've believed since childhood and you can't really remember a time of darkness and you can't really remember a time of sunrise but if that's truly the case then I hope you at least know now that you're walking in light the sunrise has come even though it may have been very early in your life others of us who came to faith later in life we can certainly remember the darkness I can remember being in the depths of despair before

I was saved and Christ was a glorious sunrise to me dispelling the darkness filling my soul with light darkness can take on many forms there are some who have been delivered from a life of crime there are some who have been delivered from the power of drugs there are some who have been delivered from the power of religion religion false religion can be the worst darkness of all the apostle Paul is the supreme example of that there he was a proud Pharisee obeying the law as far as anyone could in every detail convinced that he was walking in the light persecuting Christians because he honestly thought they were wrong and then the true light shone on him he saw Christ on the road to Damascus as a bright light brighter than the sun so bright he was blinded by it and had to be healed by a humble Christian called Ananias so interesting that Zechariah the priest was struck dumb and Paul the Pharisee was struck blind it takes a lot doesn't it for God to

deal with religious people but Paul like Zechariah had come to a joyful faith in Christ the darkness had gone the light had come Paul speaks of conversion in terms of light shining into our souls in 2 [35 : 23] Corinthians 4 verse 6 God who said that light shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ he spoke of his own ministry in Acts 26 as turning people from darkness to light persuading them to come out of the shadows and enjoy the sunrise he says in Ephesians 5 verse 14 awake o sleeper and arise from the dead and Christ will shine upon you perhaps we might think of it perhaps this is a trivial illustration I don't know but imagine that you've woken up before your husband or wife or whoever else might be in the house and you've looked out of the window and there is a glorious sunrise and everyone else is still asleep wake up wake up look out of the window see this glorious sight that's how we are as

Christians isn't it amidst a sleeping world saying wake up and look Christ has come see the glory of the sunrise and we need not limit it just to conversion there are times when darkness comes upon us even as Christians the darkness of doubt the darkness of discouragement the darkness that comes on us when we fall again into sin in every case look to Christ look to the sunrise and let his light come flooding into your soul and for the church also there are times when the church goes through times of darkness perhaps we might say that the church is in a state of darkness throughout much of Scotland today times when the church is struggling times when many in the church are going astray what should we do again look to

Christ the rising sun of Zechariah's day is now high in the sky his light is still shining even if ours sometimes seems to be rather dim he can still fill his church afresh with light Zechariah still had to wait another six months before Christ was born it would be another 30 years before Christ would begin his ministry and the chapter ends with John growing up waiting for that day I wonder if Zechariah was still alive when John was saying behold the lamb probably not he was an old man already but it didn't matter he had seen this by faith the sunrise was coming may we all know the sunrise in our own hearts amen