

The song of Zechariah

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Preacher: David Calderwood

- [0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 1, and we're reading from verses 57 through to 80, which is the end of the chapter. Zechariah is being struck dumb because he didn't believe Gabriel when Gabriel told him that he and his wife, as an aged couple, they were going to have a baby.
- 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.
- [1 : 1 7] 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 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. Well, good morning, everyone.
- [2 : 5 9] For those who don't know me, my name's David. I'm one of the pastors here. Our world longs for peace. Everywhere and every day, we just see hostility and violence break out.
- Rarely do we see peace break out. But boy, we're used to seeing hostility and violence break out, aren't we? From the biggest picture where it's war, Ukraine and everywhere around the world.
- Terrorist attacks, conspiracy theories and the bloodshed and the mayhem they caused this week in Queensland. Road rage.

Even coming down to the micro picture of our own families. Hostility breaks out so quickly and so easily, doesn't it? Even here at church, you can get into trouble for changing the sermon title, mucking up small groups and, dare I say it, mucking up the children's title.

My goodness me. So there's always a breakout, isn't there? We long for peace. We long for safety and stability and rest.

[4 : 08] Peace and rest go together. We just want to know that in our world of chaos, that all is well for us. Everywhere and every day, I think therefore people are searching for peace.

Numerous different pathways to just try and find that peace that is so critical to us, to our sense of well-being in this world. The problem is that most of the pathways our world offers us to peace are so shallow and so fragile that we know they're so easily lost.

And therefore, even as we chase for these peace things, we're actually becoming more anxious and even depressed because the things we look to for peace, we just know could evaporate before us in just a moment.

Everywhere and every day, people are looking for peace in the wrong direction. But the historian Luke, whose word we're looking at this morning, he wrote a biography of the life of Jesus, one of the four biographies.

Luke points us in a totally different direction when it comes to the issue of peace. He's convinced that he's discovered the secret, unlocked the key to real peace, real safety, real rest in this chaotic and uncertain world.

[5 : 44] And remember, he's a historian, and he promised that all his stuff was compiled on the basis of solid research. He says this stuff because he believes it.

He's got good reason to believe it. Historical, substantial reasons to believe it. And he believes that peace has come into our world in the person of Jesus Christ.

He believes that peace, the peace that everybody's looking for, comes from God. And that lovely phrase of having broken into our world in the person of Jesus.

I said a minute ago that peace rarely breaks out. Well, Luke's telling us this morning that peace does break out. It has broken out in our world. And he showcases, therefore, in the early part of his writings around about the birth of Jesus, he showcases several Christmas songs inspired by Jesus, some even before Jesus was born.

Last week we looked at Mary's song, and that showcased God's grace and mercy. Grace and mercy coming to us in our world in Jesus.

[7 : 07] And Zachariah's song this morning we're going to look at adds to that because he adds not only to grace and mercy, but he adds to the concept of peace. The promise of peace.

Peace which God says he will establish. Peace that God says he'll bring to us in our world through the kingdom of Jesus.

And that causes Zachariah to overflow or burst into song. That song, as I said last week, doesn't necessarily mean it was sung.

It's just a picture of an overflow of an expression of delight. Oh, and thanks. Because Jesus will deliver the life of peace, the life of rest, the life of security that we all long for.

Now just stop there at that point. We'll dig into these concepts in a minute. But just stop at that point and just imagine that. Imagine what Luke is telling us, that we can have a life of peace without fear.

[8 : 23] Wouldn't that make you want to sing? Well, let's jump into the text and see how Zachariah and Elizabeth were blown away by an immediate and personal experience of God's grace, mercy, and peace.

Now, by the way, if you're a visitor and you didn't get one of these, you can just nab one off the back table, I think, if there's any left. Just a sermon outline, some of the points I'll be saying. So, go back to the stuff that Gareth referred to when he was doing the reading.

Go back to chapter 1, verse 6 and 7. And we'll just put this in context. Chapter 1, verse 6. Zachariah and Elizabeth, Zachariah is a priest, his wife Elizabeth, they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

But they had no child because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. There you are.

You've set yourself in the whole of your life to honour the Lord. Connection back to Malachi again. Yet, at the same time, you were childless.

[9 : 45] And so, what that meant for you in those days was you were living in shame. Because in those days, to be barren, to be without child as a couple, was to be thought to be under God's judgment, to be people under God's disfavour, displeasure.

And so, you've got this sort of terrible mix for this couple, determined to serve the Lord and be glad in their service of Him, and yet living a lifetime of shame.

And they're old. They're old. That chance of a child, humanly speaking, has passed them by. And suddenly, because of God's miraculous intervention, we jump into the story then this morning, suddenly, well, nine months later, you're actually holding the child that you'd always wanted, the child you'd always longed for.

And you're bursting with thankfulness because this little miracle child showcases a personal experience of how God delights to save or reverse the fortunes of His people.

They turn them from shame into a position of honour and delight. Look at chapter 1, verse 25. Chapter 1, verse 25.

[11 : 18] Try that one. Yep. I'm on the wrong page here. We'll get there eventually. Chapter 1, verse 25. Thus the Lord, Zacharias says, thus the Lord has done for me in the days when He looked on me to take away my reproach among people.

The birth of John turns disgrace and shame to honour and joy for Zacharias. Same sort of things in chapter 1, verse 58. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child and they would have called him Zacharias after his father but his mother sorry, and her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her and they rejoiced with her.

Mercy spilled into shame turns to honour and delight and thankfulness. God's grace and mercy delivers comfort and hope and peace into their restless anxious lives.

The naming of John as God directed it says it all that John actually means grace and mercy. Their miracle child was destined to be a key player among God's people.

John would be as we're told in the song as it was rehearsed in the song John would be God's messenger bringing grace and mercy and peace to God's people and that means the reversal of God's judgment forgiveness a new opportunity praise God as he deserved to be praised.

[13 : 03] If you look at chapter 1 verse 65 suddenly their fortunes among the locals were turned around fear came on all their neighbours and all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea.

Now what was Zachariah and Elizabeth going to do now? A lifetime of shame? Were they going to sort of puff their chests out and say well actually no you lot look we're now blessed and favoured by the Lord.

No they didn't do that at all. They very quickly pushed the focus onto their child and then onto Mary's child as we'll see in a moment. Why did they do that?

Because they knew it was their child who would be used as a key player in God's salvation plan. Just like Elijah of old and Zachariah and Elizabeth were just delighted to be part of God's intervention God's plan as it were.

and indeed their own names add to that focus the showcase here that Luke's bringing to us. Zachariah means God remembers his covenant.

[14 : 15] Elizabeth means God is absolutely faithful. So their personal experience is a zoomed in picture of what is about to happen in God's world at large.

an experience of God's grace and mercy bringing peace. So if that's their personal experience then how much more would they want to sing?

How much more would they want to honour and praise the Lord when they think of what they've experienced now being applied globally? And so Zachariah rehearses then an immediate global experience of God's grace and mercy and peace and salvation.

What did Zachariah have prayed for all his lifetime? Well he had prayed that the Lord would establish his kingdom and establish his covenant would save his people as he had promised that they bring the new age of salvation.

Now it's happening and he's part of it. Verse 67 Zachariah's song is actually called a prophecy.

[15 : 32] That shouldn't trip us up because I think that just tells us that it is a song but it's actually meant to be something that we then in subsequent generations join into.

It's meant to be written down and recorded and learned from and joined with. Shaped and inspired by God's spirit Zachariah's song is a model to us then of God's commitment to salvation.

In his grace and mercy God comes to his people. So if you look at the very first lines there verse 68 the thing that bubbles up into praise is in the first sentence.

God would personally come into his world. God would actually drop in as it were and visit his people to redeem them for he has visited and redeemed his people.

A few years ago I watched a documentary in America. A group there were trying to help Vietnam war veterans many of whom are homeless and in really bad state.

[16 : 48] The forgotten generation they called them. They were trying to get them into homes and the documentary was one particular African-American soldier in a really bad way.

He managed eventually under this group to be given a small one-bedroom unit and he was delighted. His very first visitor the next day was Michelle Obama.

She was the patron of this group of people who were actually trying to give homes to Vietnam veterans. So here was this guy and he was in bad shape.

He hadn't really cleaned up or anything. He was just there in his house so excited. His first visitor was the first lady of America. And she just came in.

Of course there were cameras there but as far as you could see it was just a very ordinary thing. She came in and sat down and he offered her a cup of coffee and she said yep she would have a cup of. There they were.

[17 : 49] He was blown away. Now why was he blown away? Well he actually told him. He could not believe that somebody so important would come to him in all his humbleness.

All his dirtiness. To see how he was doing. To have a cup of with him. It was a very powerful picture. Well I think it's a great picture that we can use here.

God doesn't hold back waiting for his dirty lost people guilty people to come to him. He knows jelly well. Remember what we said in Malachi?

God knows jolly well his people wouldn't come to him. So what does God do? He takes the initiative and comes to his people. He comes to them at their point of need.

He comes to us at our point of need. That's God's character. Grace and mercy. Coming to those who lack peace who are anxious to give them peace.

[18 : 58] God cares deeply for his people. He wants to have relationship. The relationship, the good life that he created them for. the relationship and good life which ultimately only he can give.

So he visits us in our place. He comes to show us what he has on offer.

A home. A real family. Real hope. And he does that for people who otherwise are homeless and hopeless and fearful.

people. That's an amazing statement just by itself. And one we should never lose when we think about Christmas. This is God coming to us in our need.

So familiar to us and yet so powerful when we think about it. Not only does he come to us but he redeems his people. Verse 69 again. He has visited and redeemed his people.

[20 : 03] How does he do that? Well he has raised up a horn of salvation for us. That's an Old Testament picture of a powerful saviour figure in the house of his servant David.

This is Messiah. This is the long promised, long awaited king and saviour, Messiah, whom God said would come to deliver the salvation, promised.

Come to redeem or save his people. And so Zechariah has moved the spotlight from himself and Elizabeth, from his own son. He's now speaking about Mary's child yet to be born.

Jesus would be God's specially equipped saviour. Jesus would come and do what no other prophet or king before him had been able to do.

He would come and he would deliver God's people from their sin. He would deliver them into peace and hope. He would destroy their enemies.

[21 : 11] We'll say more about that in a minute. He'd bring them into a place of safety to enjoy the good life. And why? Why is all this happening? Well, Zechariah knows very well why it's all happening.

It's a very simple answer for Zechariah because God said that's what he would do. God remembered his covenant, his covenant with Abraham, his covenant right through the Old Testament, repeatedly saying, yes, I'm doing this.

It is on track. From Abraham's time, God had promised he would show mercy on his guilty people and not destroy them.

Remember how the Lord describes his people in Malachi 2? He says, well, I know jolly well that you guys have never, ever had a heart to obey me.

And yet I will still keep my covenant and my promise to you that I will come to you. You won't come to me, but I will come to you as I promised. God and he delivers them, not just redeems them, but he delivers them into fear-free acceptance and relationship with himself.

[22 : 25] Look at verse 74 and verse 75. We're delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

redeeming, Jesus' redeeming work would mean deliverance from being held prisoner by their enemies and deliverance into a new state of safety and security and acceptance and obedience.

And verses 76 through 79, his son John, he realized, would be part of that dawning edge of salvation. salvation. He would be the prophet, ultimately the final prophet that would be the one that would introduce God's Messiah, God's Savior, Jesus.

How would he do that? Well, he would actually help God's people develop a new sense of their sinfulness. And by that, then, a new sense of their need for God's grace and mercy, a new longing for it.

So, in God's plan, the two things would marry up just as God's people became more and more aware of their need to be saved. Up pops Jesus, the Savior.

[23 : 56] John would teach them that their greatest need was not deliverance from their political enemies, military enemies. John would teach them their greatest need was deliverance from the enemy within.

See, what had happened was that God's people had come to think of salvation as been livered from all the enemies out there. So, they thought, well, okay, if we can get rid of the Romans, we can get rid of all these people, and then Israel will be great again.

And we'll be able to be God's people as we're meant to be God's people. Well, John's mission, as has the prophets before him, being to say that not right.

You need deliverance from the enemy within. It's your hearts that are the problem, not your geopolitical circumstances. And this is what Jesus comes to deliver, deliverance from the enemy within, deliverance from rebellious hearts.

Deliverance from the guilt of that rebellion, the sin and the offense that it causes. Deliverance from the fear of not being acceptable to God because of their sin.

[25 : 10] Deliverance from the fear of ultimately being rejected by God because of their sin and their failure to live under his rule. And in that bleakness, in that darkness, we have a metaphor working here, as we saw in Malachi, that Jesus, therefore, would be like the brilliant sunrise after the long, dark night of misery and sin.

And once again, God's people would bask in the sunlight, in the warmth, in the newness that that sunrise of Jesus would bring. Quite literally, Zacharias says, that Jesus would deliver them from darkness and the shadow of death into the new light of life.

Quite literally, Jesus would be the light of the world. And so, we just pause there and flesh out that metaphor a little bit. Death does cast a shadow over life, doesn't it?

I was just listening to the TV last night and they were talking about a show about Harry Houdini. And he was known as the man who cheated death and avoided death until death caught up with him.

I thought, that was a really interesting way of saying that. It was almost as if he had done something amazing. But no, he was just like the rest of us. It just hadn't caught up with him. Death casts a shadow over all of life.

[26 : 45] And when we're young, I think, we don't think about it. I certainly didn't think too much about death whenever I was young. Or perhaps we just ignore it when we're young. But here's the shadow because we know the jolly well that 100% of people die.

Death will come to all of us. No matter how hard we try and avoid it. And death forces us to ask the big questions of life, doesn't it?

Well, okay, what then? Is there a God? What will I have to say to him? What will he have to say to me? Well, Zacharias tells us here that Jesus will remove all of those fears of death.

Why? Because he will deal with our sin, which is the thing that makes us alienated from God. He will make us acceptable to God. He will bring us into a new relationship with God and therefore the fear can dissipate.

Now imagine that being spoken by somebody like Zacharias. Remember what Zacharias was? He was a priest. What does that mean? Well, it means that every single day of his life he had been in the temple, which I picture in my mind, whether this is a good picture or not, but this is a country picture.

[28 : 14] I just picture it like an abattoir. Blood and guts everywhere. And if you've been involved in the killing of animals up close, there's a distinct smell and the smell never gets nicer after you do it for a long time, believe me.

It's a distinct smell of death. And there was Zacharias day after day offering sacrifices. Why? Because he cared for his people and his role as a priest was to be an intermediary to try and provide the sacrifices that would allow the relationship between the clean God and his dirty people to continue to deal with sin.

And now he gets a glimpse that this is all coming at an end. He's going to be out of a job because Jesus would offer a sacrifice once for all.

Deal with our sin once for all. Make us acceptable to God once for all. And that will guide our feet into the way of peace.

Imagine the joy that would have brought to Zacharias. this Jesus would restore relationship with God forever.

[29 : 41] But there's one more thing that Zacharias throws in here. Because ultimately God takes us home to be with him forever in rest and peace.

The idea of guiding our feet into the way of peace. It's again a picture of a pathway. It's pushing us down a particular pathway in life. If you look again at those verses 74 and 75.

The idea of a wonderful freedom to serve the Lord without fear all our days. Now, one of the things I know in my own life and one of the things I'm bumping up against as I speak with people here on every day, every week of my ministry is the fear that can get into our heads and can get into our hearts.

We struggle to serve the Lord, but we're fearful. Well, Zachariah is talking here about freedom from fear, freedom to serve the Lord.

Now, what's the basis of that freedom? What's the basis of freedom from fear? Well, it's simply Jesus and taking Jesus at his word that he will reconnect us to God, having dealt with our sins, and having dealt with our sins, there's no longer any reason for God to be alienated from us.

[31 : 21] The relationship's restored forever. And the end point of that? Salvation, peace, rest.

I spoke earlier about that Vietnam veteran. He was blown away that Michelle Obama would come to visit him, but the end of the story was actually even more surprising, because after having her cup of tea and her biscuit, and that's literally what it was, a cup of coffee and a biscuit, that's literally what it was, she said to this guy, now, I've come to your place and you've made me at home, I want you to come to my place, and I want you to feel at home and make my place your place.

Well, can you imagine the consternation that Vietnam vet felt? It was such a beautiful finish. The old soldier was overwhelmed, from homelessness to the White House, from shame to honor, and that was the deal.

She said she had come to his place and her intention was to take him back to her place. Such a great picture of salvation. God comes to us, seeks us out, pursues us when we would have no regard for him, fixes the mess that we've made through our rebellion and our sin, takes the punishment that's due to us on our behalf, makes us acceptable to God when we have no right to be even near God, and caps it all off by saying, now I'm going to take you home to be with me forever.

forever. We lose all that as we celebrate Christmas and focus on a little baby. Of course, Christmas begins with a little baby, but no ordinary baby.

[33 : 30] God's King and Savior coming to do all of that. He sorts out our heads, he renews our hearts through the power of the Spirit within us, he gives us new desires, new attitudes, new delight in serving him, and finally he makes clear that he won't be finished with us until he has us back at home in heaven with him forever.

Now, the promises all leading up to being saved, he's delivered on. Why do we find it so hard to accept that he'll deliver on all the promises he makes to us after we're saved?

we need to take Jesus at his word. Sin has been dealt with, freedom from fear of death, new life, and ultimately heaven.

Now, surely that's something to make you sing about, isn't it? Now, two parting thoughts then. If you're a believer, then you've got lots to sing about.

And let's sing from the song sheet that Jesus gives us. Let's not go through and cross out the words we're not sure about and write in our own interpretation, because nothing we're sure will write in a lot more fear and uncertainty again.

[34 : 59] But then we won't be singing from Jesus song sheet, will we, if we do that? But it may be that you're here this morning and you actually think you've got nothing to sing about because you're still living in the shadow of death, living in fear, desperately trying to find community.

You're not actually a believer. You're still longing for a place of safety, you're still longing for security. You're still longing to find a way to live when life seems so fragile and uncertain and lonely.

Well, the song sheet says it all. Turn to Jesus. He's come to you in this world, in your situation.

life. He's offering you your very heart's desire. And he's gently challenging you to give up looking for these things elsewhere, as you've been doing, and find them in him.

him. And he promises that his light will dispel darkness and fear in your life. And he tells you that his light is already shining.

[36 : 28] What you need to do is step out of darkness into his light and be healed and feel the sunrise warm you through and through and comfort you.

and give you that sense that yes, all is well in the world, in Jesus. Pray with me. Lord, the words here, in some ways, are just so simple and so clear.

Jesus is light and life and peace. He has come to us. You have pursued us, Lord, when we wouldn't pursue you. You've pursued us. You've brought us to Jesus and you've brought Jesus to us.

Lord, for those here this morning who have not yet turned to Jesus, but are searching for peace, I pray, Lord, that you might just fill their minds, flood their hearts with the fact that Jesus is what they've been looking for all along.

And for those, Lord, who are already believers but struggle to take Jesus as word and therefore still fearful, I pray, Lord, that we might actually just be able to go back to singing from your song sheet, the song sheet that quite literally says, Jesus has done it all and all to him we owe.

[38 : 01] I pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks very much for listening to me. Thank you so much for listening to me. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.