

ZECHARIAH'S SONG

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[0 : 0 0] Lord, as we come to share your word now, open our eyes to your presence, our ears to your voice.! Through your Holy Spirit, speak into our minds, speak into our thoughts, take hold of our hand and fill our hearts with your grace this very day.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Zachariah was a priest who was steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures.

As Zachariah breaks forth into song, his words reflect his Old Testament heritage. And this song sounds partly like something from the Psalms or like a message from the prophets.

It sounds just like an Old Testament reading. It doesn't sound quite like it belongs in the New Testament. Some of it sounds maybe strange to our ears.

But that's part of the great value of this song. Zachariah's song reveals the deep faith of the Jewish people as they wait patiently and look forward to the Messiah's birth.

[1 : 1 0] For hundreds of years, the people of God had been waiting for a Messiah to come. And now at last, he's almost here. And these words of Zachariah bring us to the very edge that separates the Old Testament and the New Testament.

What we have here is really a snapshot of Jewish faith. And these words uttered just a few months before Jesus' birth takes us behind the scenes and tells us what the coming of Jesus meant to the people who had waited so, so long for him to arrive.

And the theme of this song is not really hard to find. And Zachariah uses one key phrase at the beginning and at the ending of his song. Verse 68 says, Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.

And then verse 78 says, The rising sun will come to us from heaven. Both verses mean to visit personally. It's the very word Jesus used in Matthew 25 when he said, I was sick and you visited me.

The word was used in the Greek Old Testament for God visiting his people. Visiting his people in order to bring them great blessing.

[2 : 3 7] It has the idea of seeing someone in distress and intervening personally in order to revive their marriage. ministry.

All of that is on Zachariah's heart. And at long last, God has visited his people. At long last, God has kept his promise.

At long last, God has arrived on the scene. The visitor from heaven has come to us. It's perhaps hard for us to grasp the magnitude of this thought.

For 4,000 long, dreary years, God seemed to neglect his people. Nobody appeared more forgotten than the Jews suffering under Roman rule.

Reduced to an obscure province in the Roman Empire, they were rejected. They were overlooked and despised. And then nearly a thousand years had passed since the glorious days of King David.

[3 : 42] And over 400 years had passed since their last prophet, a man named Malachi. So on the lips of men and women, one question towered above all the rest.

Has God forgotten his people? The prophet spoke of one who would come from heaven. He spoke of one who would be born of a virgin, born in David's royal city.

One who would sit on the throne of his father, David, and rule over the house of Jacob forever. He spoke of one who would rule the nations, redeem his people, restore Israel to its former glory.

He spoke of one whose name was called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. But perhaps the prophets were wrong.

Perhaps it was not to be. Perhaps it was all a dream. Simply wishful thinking by generations of mystics and seers.

[4 : 52] So many years had come and gone. The generations rolled on. Still, there was no word from heaven. Perhaps God had given up on his people Israel.

Perhaps he was now working with the Greeks or the Romans. Perhaps Israel was relegated, a second-rate country whose best days were long in the past. So no one took the prophets of old seriously.

When they spoke of a Messiah, it looked like a cruel hoax. Had God forgotten his people. It certainly appeared that way.

But as they waited, waited throughout the darkest of dark hours, the faithful remnant in Israel never gave up. They never gave up believing that God would surely, somehow, sometime, someday, keep his promises.

The generations came and went without any word from the Lord. However, the hope, the hope of divine visitation never waned completely.

[6 : 06] It was always a flickering flame of belief that God would indeed visit his people and fulfill his ancient promises. And now, at last, after all those years, the moment has arrived.

As Zechariah looks down at his infant son, he remembers the words of the angel earlier in chapter 1, verse 13. Zechariah says, And that can only mean one thing.

The Messiah is on the way. The long wait is over. And John's birth is the start of this prophecy fulfilled. Zechariah's song is all about one great truth.

That God has at all last visited his people. In the verses that follow, we learn five specific facts about the divine visitation and the blessings that flow from it.

Fact one, its purpose. Here, Zechariah focuses on the great purpose for the coming of Jesus to the earth. He came to save his people.

[7 : 49] Zechariah mentions God's saving purpose in verse 68 he has come and redeemed his people verse 69 he has raised up a horn of salvation for us horn of salvation is a biblical metaphor for a powerful saviour strength and horn the word horn itself symbolizes strength in verse 71 he says salvation from our enemies verse 74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies and in verse 77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins Zechariah is telling us that God did not visit this planet simply to see how we're doing he knew how we're doing that's why he came we were in trouble he came to save us that's what Christmas is all about it's a celebration of the love God showed the world the love God showed the world by sending his son fact two it's fulfillment as a godly Jew

Zechariah can't get over the fact that God has at long last kept his promises all that he said he would do he has at last begun to accomplish Zechariah says about the promise of the Messiah it was promised by the prophets verse 70 as he said through the holy prophets of long ago it was cherished by their fathers verse 72 to show mercy to our fathers the point is clear God is now doing what he promised to do the prophets saw it coming not every detail and no one saw it clearly but they knew they knew in their hearts the day would come when God would visit his people they knew it was coming they just didn't know exactly when it would happen and this truth leads to a crucial conclusion about Jesus he must be great because the preparation for his coming took 2000 years this is no small event his coming is the biggest event in history history is really his story all that came before him pointed to him all that comes after looks back to him he's the centerpiece of history the demarcation between yesterday and tomorrow in the birth of Jesus we have come to the crux and pivot of history

Zechariah is telling us something very crucial God has visited the world in the person of Jesus and nothing will ever be the same again fact three is transformation in verses 74 and 75 Zechariah speaks of the transformation Jesus will make in the lives of those who follow him his coming produces emotional transformation to enable us to serve him without fear his coming produces ethical transformation in holiness and righteousness all our days his coming produces spiritual transformation to enable us to serve him so many people live lives of quiet desperation they feel there's no answer to the question why am I here Zechariah makes the answer very clear

Jesus came to admit us to the joyful service of God this is God's ultimate purpose for us he saved us so that we might fulfill the highest calling in the universe serving God without fear in righteousness and holiness forever he came so that we were lost and who were lost in sin might be lifted up into the service of God he came so we who served another master might serve God our creator he came so we who feared death might serve God free from fear forever he came so that we who lived in fear of punishment might be so completely forgiven and we would never fear punishment again he came so we who once did not please God might be pleasing to him forever he came so that we who were unrighteous might be made righteous that's the transformation brought about by the coming of Jesus to the earth fact four it's message now Zechariah considers the significance of the infant son he holds in his arms in verses 76 and 77 he speaks directly to his son John and utter specific predictions about his future he says you will be a prophet of God you my child will be called a prophet of the most high you will prepare the way of the Lord you will go on before him to prepare the way for him you will proclaim the knowledge of salvation by preaching the forgiveness of sins to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins and this is exactly what John the Baptist did his whole mission was to make the nation ready for the coming of the Messiah

John was a prophet a preparer a preacher of salvation John was God's messenger and he began his ministry by I'm sure you know going out to the desert region around the Jordan and preaching the doctrine of repentance from sin and multitudes of men and women flocked to hear his message he baptized many people and so helped prepare the way for the coming of the Lord and later when John saw Jesus he cried out behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world but at this moment in our reading John is only eight days old but his father clearly sees the work God has called him to do it's a wonderful thing to discover our place in God's plans and to fulfill our mission in life whether our part be great or small

[15 : 28] John was the man God chose to prepare the way for Jesus and Zachariah plainly saw it and included his infant son in the song of praise to God fact five its impact Zachariah has spoken of the purpose the fulfillment the transformation and the message of the great blessings the coming of Jesus brings to the earth and now in one final burst of praise Zachariah speaks also of the impact that this brings it's light it's light to those who are in darkness verse 78 the rising sun will come to us from heaven it's a pardon to those condemned to death verse 79 to shine on those living in darkness in the shadow of death and also in verse 79 it's a guidance a guidance to those who have lost their way to guide our feet into the path of peace just imagine as an example a group of camels and merchants moving along slowly through the

Middle Eastern desert somehow they lose their way and now are lost in the darkness during the cold night the enemies draw near and make ready to attack them death is not far away then the darkest moment of the night when all hope seems lost a light from on high suddenly shines on them the enemies are scattered and death disappears in the bright light the leaders see the path they had lost and taking courage they resume their journey confident now they're going the right way friends this is the difference that Jesus makes when he comes into a life the shadows flee away when he comes in we find the path we thought we had lost forever when he comes in despair is gone for our feet have found the path of peace that's the liberating impact of Jesus you know if we look at Christmas this way we see it in a new light nothing like this has ever happened before

God has visited his people and nothing will ever be the same again he's come to save his people he's come to release them from their fears he's come to forgive their sins he's come to guide them on the path of peace and these words are for each one of us as you know next Sunday is the beginning of the Advent and Christmas season and we ought to ask some crucial questions do we believe it really happened do we believe Jesus came with us in mind have we ever entered into the things Zechariah talked about these words of Zechariah are just words until they become true for us has that ever happened in our lives as you know Christmas is only a few weeks away jingle bells jingle bells jingle all the way

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas let's put up the tree let's wrap the presents send some Christmas cards let's stand under the mistletoe that's great but if that's all Christmas means to us we've really missed what the season's all about Christmas is not just about snow and candy canes and hanging up our stocking Christmas is about the mind-blowing truth that God has at last visited his people all the rest is window dressing as the commercials keep telling us there are only 32 shopping days left until Christmas day but think about what else that means there's also 32 praising days till Christmas 32 singing days until Christmas and 32 worshipping days until Christmas how are we going to spend the days that are left for us before Christmas finally arrives the dominant theme of

Zechariah's song here is set clearly before us God has visited his people in the person of Jesus and now that same divine visitor comes and knocks at the door of our hearts will we open the door and let him in he comes and knocks can we hear the sound echoing in our heart he stands patiently at the door waiting for us to open and bid him enter good news the visitor from heaven is here at last while we like Zechariah of old drop everything and welcome him into our heart or are we too busy this year to be bothered with Jesus how silently how silently the wondrous gift is given so God imparts the human hearts the blessing of his heaven no ear may hear his coming but in this world of sin where meek souls will receive him in still the dear Christ enters in and so he does and may that be our experience this coming advent and Christmas season as we wait patiently to celebrate

[21 : 30] Jesus' birth let's pray heavenly father we thank you for our time together today may we like Zechariah and Elizabeth and trust in your timing trust in your plan for our lives even when we don't understand it help us to wait patiently not lose heart the best is yet to come in Jesus' name we pray Amen