

Zechariah's Song

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you very much, guys. And let me add my welcome to Graham's. Let's just bow and pray one more time before we take a look at God's Word. Father, this morning as we come to your Word, we come from different weeks, some of us from good, some of us from bad, and we ask for your strength.

Lord, we ask that in this service that the words of our mouth, that the meditations of our heart would be pleasing in your sight. Our Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Christmas is often an absolutely crazy time of the year, isn't it? So my wife Sabina and I, we recently moved closer into the center of town, and two weeks ago on a Saturday, we had a wonderful idea that we were going to walk around town.

Not a good idea at all. See, we thought that we'd just wander a little bit around the Christmas market, that we would run a few errands on Prince's Street and be home in no time.

And we, how wrong we were. See, the town was packed. People are running all over the place. Cars are honking their horns. The Christmas market is what we describe probably as a human maze.

[1 : 1 8] It's unbelievably busy. It was noisy and it was busy. And so we decided, as everyone, every normal person would do probably, is to go sit in a coffee shop, find some peace somewhere.

And so I stood in line for about 20 minutes on the Costa Coffee on George Street. Christmas music blaring at full blast on the speakers. There was no peace to be found in this city at all.

But that's Christmas nowadays, isn't it? It's just busy. It's noisy. It's frantic. The last words that pop into our minds when we think about Christmas are silent night and peaceful.

But this morning we're going to look at a portion of Luke's gospel that leads up to the Christmas story. And we see a completely different tale than what we live today. We do actually find silence.

The beginning of Luke is quite strange because we see two songs that praise God, but both of them have two different backstories. So last week we looked at Mary's song earlier on in Luke chapter 1.

[2 : 2 8] And it would be helpful if you have that chapter open in front of you. And maybe you remember how the angel appeared to her in verse 28. And then in verse 38 you hear her response to the news that she's going to have a son.

She believed the angel. Despite her fear, despite her confusion, despite this being impossible that a virgin would have a son, she believed.

And this morning we're going to look at the story of a priest. And in sharp contrast with Mary, Zechariah the priest didn't believe what the angel said when he appeared to him.

And so although both Mary and Zechariah sing songs of praise to God, the beginnings of their songs, the context of their songs are very different. So just before we dive into the song, let's look at that context very briefly.

So as we break into the life of Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke chapter 1 verse 5, we're told that Zechariah is a priest and that his wife is of priestly descent.

[3 : 38] Verse 7 tells us that these two were godly people. See these were the kind of people you wanted at every single prayer meeting. Every single word they said would kind of lift you up.

They were the people you wanted to be like. They were godly examples. And what does it say? They were righteous in the sight of God. And they obeyed the laws and commandments blamelessly.

These are godly people. But there were two problems. One personal problem and one global problem. So in verse 7 you see the personal problem.

It tells us that Elizabeth was not able to conceive. And so undoubtedly for them they struggled. This was a discouragement. And even in their struggles and pain they're still godly examples.

So that's their personal problem. And then the second problem is that Zechariah is a priest during a time where God was not speaking. This happens at the end of 400 years of silence from God.

[4 : 50] They had what we know as the Old Testament and they studied it because it spoke about and it taught about God. And so they devoured the Old Testament.

And that's why when Zechariah's song was read out to us you probably noticed that this man seems to have done some thinking about the Old Testament. And that's exactly what happened because not only was God silent but in the months running up to John's birth Zechariah was silent.

So look at verse 11 of chapter 1. An angel appeared to Zechariah as he was in the temple and we know from verse 19 that that's the angel Gabriel.

And Gabriel says that he will have a son and they are to call him John. Now step back from this a second and what would you expect from this godly, blameless man in the sight of God to respond?

Surely you'd expect him to believe and to be enthusiastic. Sadly not. Verse 18. How can I be sure, Zechariah says.

[6 : 03] And as a result of his unbelief, Gabriel says in verse 20, the Zechariah will be silent and not be able to speak until all of that has come to pass.

So imagine the next nine months for Zechariah. He was mute and you see that in verse 22. He was also deaf and you see that in verse 62.

For about nine months Zechariah was silent. And that means that he had time to ponder. Time to contemplate. And time to think about his unbelief.

Time to think about the promise given to him by Gabriel. And time to ponder the greatness of God. And God's faithfulness. Just imagine for a second if this Christmas time we took time to be silent.

As the world buzzes around us, as people rush around buying that last minute Christmas gift. Because the 10,000 underneath the Christmas tree aren't enough. Imagine if we just took a little time to be silent and ponder who God is.

[7 : 14] And what he has done and what he has promised to do. Because that is exactly what Zechariah did. Now he didn't have a choice.

But I wonder if our response after a time of thinking, a time of silence, would produce such a wonderful song of praise. And so Zechariah's son is born.

And they take him to the temple on the eighth day to be circumcised and named as was the custom in that day. And Elizabeth says that his name is to be John in verse 60. The people asked Zechariah what he thinks.

And he wrote on a board in verse 63. His name is John. And then miraculously his mouth was opened. And out came this marvelous song about what God has done and what God will do.

So that's how Zechariah starts his song. By praising God for what God has done. Verses 67 to 75. What God has done.

[8 : 19] So this whole song is about God saving his chosen people. The song is sometimes referred to as the benedictus or the blessing.

Because Zechariah starts his song by praising God for the things that he has done. So in Mary's song she said that she was blessed in verse 48. In the beginning of this song Zechariah turns to bless God for his faithfulness.

To give thanks to God for his faithfulness. But the question that I was pondering is how and what exactly is Zechariah talking about? Well verse 68 answers our question.

It says this. Praise be to the Lord the God of Israel because why he came to his people and what did he do?

He redeemed them. Now when in Israel's history did God come and redeem or save his people? Well one of the most well known times is probably the Exodus story.

[9 : 25] In the Old Testament Israel were slaves in the land of Egypt. And they were told beforehand by God that that would happen. They would be there for 400 years. Then God sent his servant Moses to take the people out of Egypt.

And into the land that he had promised them in Genesis chapter 12. You can look that up later. But Pharaoh wouldn't let Israel go. He'd lose his workforce.

Who would build his temples? Who would build his empire? No he said I will not let my people go. And so what did God do? Well he came and he saved.

He sent plagues on the land and the last one was the worst of all. All of the first born sons in the houses in Egypt would be killed unless they sacrificed a lamb and put its blood on a doorpost.

God stepped into a terrible situation of enslavement and rebellion against him and he rescued his people. I think that's the event that Zechariah is singing about in this first part of the song.

[10 : 31] The big event of history in the history of Israel where God stepped in and saved his people. God has been faithful and Zechariah knows that.

And so God must be praised for his goodness and his faithfulness to his covenant, to his promise to his people. That he would bless them and that they would be a blessing to the world.

And God promised to raise up what Zechariah calls in verse 69 a horn of salvation. Now this horn is an Old Testament image of strength and of power.

The Psalms use this language to describe God as the one who saves his people. And these Psalms also point forward to the promised one. The one who would come and bring about salvation from our lasting enemies, sin and death.

But that's me jumping ahead a wee bit, getting too excited. See at this point Zechariah is stating that God promised years before this song even left his lips, that he would send someone to save his people.

[11 : 41] And that he would do that from the lineage and family of David, that Old Testament king, the king after God's own heart. So what has God done?

Well, he set in motion a plan years and years before David was even born. That one day a horn of salvation, that God would come and would redeem his people.

One who would deliver God's people from their enemies, verse 71. One who would show mercy to Israel's ancestors, verse 72. One who would redeem God's, remember God's covenant with Abraham.

One who would rescue God's people from their enemies, verse 74. And one who would enable people to serve God without fear, in holiness and in righteousness, verse 75.

Who is this promised one? And what has God done? Well, God promised to come and redeem his people. And he did that at the Exodus, but he also did that because he set the plan in motion to send Jesus Christ, his own son, God in the flesh, into the world.

[12 : 53] God in the flesh stepped into the mess and ruin that we call life on this earth. And he saved us. See, Zechariah grasped that Jesus coming was a long promised visitation from God and saw that God was being true to his word.

He rejoiced in God's faithfulness, singing about it because it is so wonderful that he couldn't keep it in. And his silence was broken.

And what burst forth through his lips was a song that was months in the making. Months of contemplating who God is and what he has done in the past and months of thinking about God's faithfulness.

God promised to come down and save his people from the enemies that stopped them from serving God without fear and in holiness and righteousness.

That is what God has done. That was God's plan all along. What's your response this Christmas? Zechariah is praising God for his plan to come and redeem the world.

[14 : 03] He's telling us about this great, trustworthy and faithful God who created this world and who deserves our praise. But God doesn't save people for them to come to him and be passive.

God has come and saved his people for them to be active, for us to serve him. God's plan is far bigger than what we celebrate on December 25th.

There is a huge backstory of God's faithfulness and God's deliverance and of God's calling people to himself. Time and time again, what is your response this Christmas?

Will you consider who God is and what he has done? I'd encourage you this Christmas time to be silent. To sit just for a few moments or a few hours and ponder.

The truths that this song declares of a faithful, promise-keeping, trustworthy God who calls people to himself and who frees them from their enemies. This is the God that planned Christmas.

[15 : 16] And who is calling you to himself. Will you listen and will you respond? Or if you are a Christian this morning, are you living out these truths?

It's so easy for us to pass by the significance of the Christmas story. God has called us to himself. He came into the world and saved us so that we can serve him without fear, in holiness and with righteousness.

So how can you be serving God? How can we be serving God with our lives? Well, a small step is that this time of year gives us the perfect opportunity to go and tell the world the great news of our great God.

Take the leaflets that you received on your way in to the carol service. Pray for friends and family members to give them to and then give them to them.

Pray for people to invite to a life explored course that will be running at the end of January, beginning of February. Where we discuss the big questions of life and think about who God is.

[16 : 21] Take the opportunity this Christmas time to tell people about the great God that you serve. And to tell them about the significance of Christmas.

Tell your story. And tell them of God who is trustworthy, who is mighty. Tell them about the horn of salvation that he has raised up.

The God who shows mercy and the God who has freed us from our enemies. That is what God has done. He has come down and he has redeemed his people.

The second thing that we see in this song is what God will do in verses 76 to 79.

What God will do. Now remember that this song was written before the birth of Jesus. And so as we think about the truths that Zechariah is singing, we need to remember that they're in the past for us.

[17 : 20] But they were yet to come for him. So Zechariah changes focus in this section of the song. And he first of all praises God for who his son will be.

And then he praises God for who will come after his son. So in verse 76, Zechariah sings and rejoices in the office of his son.

He is to be a prophet of the most high. Meaning that he is to be a spokesperson of God. So a prophet is someone who foretells and forth tells the message of God to his people.

Now remember there'd be no prophets, no spokesperson of God for 400 years. And so this is marvelous news. And so you can imagine Zechariah's excitement, can't you, to know that there's going to be a new revelation of the God that he loves.

New information about who he is serving. A new revelation of what God is going to do. And then imagine that excitement increase as he realizes that his own flesh and blood will be that mouthpiece.

[18 : 32] What is this boy going to do? Well his name will be John and in verse 76 it says that he will go before the Lord to prepare the way for him.

Now if you've ever been to a large music concert, you go, you pay to see, you pay usually tons of money to go and pay, to go and listen to one band. But as you arrive is normally an opening act.

See they're usually less well known. They play similar music. And they are to, they're kind of a warm up event for what is to come. They set the stage for the real deal.

They create the atmosphere of excitement and expectation for the headline band that will soon be on stage. That is what John was. He was an opening act.

John is the show that leads to the main event. He is just a sign pointing to the main attraction. And his job is to prepare people.

[19 : 34] To whet their appetites for what is to come. John's job is to give people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

Because that is the world's biggest problem. Sin is the thing that cuts people off from God. That is the fatal diagnosis of every single human heart in this world.

That each person in this world at their very core is in rebellion against God and cut off from him. And John is the one to come and proclaim that that problem as big as it is can be solved.

That this fatal diagnosis has a cure. Now John isn't the one who can grant salvation or the one who can forgive people of their sins.

He is just the voice preparing the way for the one who can forgive sins. And the one who unveils the mystery of God and his plan to reconcile people to himself.

[20 : 38] So that's Zechariah's praise of God and rejoicing in his son who is to point to a greater sent one. A greater person, a greater truth because by the mercy of God, verse 78, the rising sun will come from heaven.

Now there's something special about seeing the sun rise, isn't there? Not normally at this time of year because it happens at nine o'clock when we're all sitting in our desks at the office. But in the summer, so I'm told, if you wake up early enough and you climb off the sea and it's a lovely clear day and you see the sun come over the horizon, you can't help but smile.

You see the beauty of God's creation. The sun rising is an indication of something new. It's a new day. It's another opportunity to live, another opportunity to enjoy the good things that God has given us.

And verse 78 describes the arising sun coming from heaven. And what will this sun do? It will shine on those in darkness, on those living in the shadow of death to guide our feet.

Where? To the path of peace. What does this mean and who is this sun? Well, just like the rising sun is a sign of a new day and a new beginning, so too the birth of Jesus is a sign that something new is going to happen.

[22 : 09] And Zechariah catches a glimpse of that in his song. He praises God for the glorious new thing that is going to begin with the life of Jesus. And that thing is that Jesus has come to bring light.

See, the Bible describes our natural state before God as us being in darkness. As us separated, cut off from God and in a terrible situation. And the truth is that the Bible says we actually love our darkness.

Psalms 107, you can look that up later, it uses this language to describe humanity in terms of in prison. We are bound in chains. Cut off from the world and all that is good.

Cut off from light, but living in darkness, a place of pain, a place of affliction, a place of suffering and turmoil. And the truth is that each of us is naturally born into this darkness.

That state of separation and rebellion against God. That is the diagnosis of every human heart. And yet the glorious truth of the Christmas message, my friends, is that Jesus Christ was born.

[23 : 25] To do what? To shine light into our darkness. This Christmas, when you see pictures of a cute little baby Jesus in a manger, as you watch nativity scenes of this weak, crying infant that seems so helpless and dependent on people, remember that he would grow up to be the person who shines the light of truth into the darkness of human hearts.

Remember that he is the one who would cast out darkness by the power of God. And he is the one who would defeat darkness. As he hung on the cross and he cried his last words, it is finished.

And my friends, the glorious truth is that that means death is defeated. Sin forgiven. Satan destroyed.

Life given. Relationship restored. This is Jesus. The light of the world. This is who we celebrate. This Christmas, look beyond the crib to the cross of Jesus and see how, through his sacrifice, we've been brought near.

How once we were in darkness and enemies of God, but now we've been offered to become his children and given a place at the table. All because of Jesus.

[24 : 51] Jesus, thank you. This psalm gives us a marvelous account of what Jesus would do before he was even born.

An account of how God came to save his people. Jesus, God in the flesh, stepped into this broken world of darkness to save his people, verse 68.

Release them from their fears, verse 74. Forgive their sins, verse 77. Take people from darkness to light, verse 79. And to guide them on the path of peace, verse 79.

This is Jesus. This is God's great plan of salvation that has been in motion for thousands of years. And this is the true meaning of Christmas. What's your response?

Will you listen to Zechariah's words and see how great God is? See the great things that God has done and the things that he will do? We are in a better place than Zechariah was because we stand on this side of the cross.

[26 : 00] We can look back and see the life of Jesus and we can see the fullness of God's mercy. We see and we know the end result of God's salvation plan.

That people have been reconciled to God. That is the call of Christmas. Will you listen? As we draw to a close this morning, Christmas gives us the great opportunity to sit and to ponder.

And I'd encourage us all this Christmas to take some time and be silent. Forget the hustle and bustle of the Christmas period. Find even just a few moments to remember the significance of Christmas.

Go beyond the crib and look to the cross. If you're a Christian, rejoice and give thanks because Christmas is the time that God stepped down and redeemed his people.

And your identity is no longer to be found in darkness or in imprisonment or lost. But you are found. You're in the light. Your new identity is found in Jesus.

[27 : 10] Tell people that groundbreaking reality. Share with people your story and your joy for Christmas. Tell people the reason for the season.

And if you're not a Christian, I'd encourage you to do the exact same thing. Take time. Even today and be silent. Think about how for thousands of years, God was waiting and working out a plan of salvation to save people.

A people who constantly reject and rebel against him. Take time to ponder how God didn't just send anybody to solve the problem of alienation from God.

But God took it upon himself and stepped into this world. These aren't the actions of a man in the sky who rejoices in people's suffering. These aren't the actions of a God who doesn't care.

But these are the actions of a God who loves his people. And who wants them to be in right relationship with him. Think back to Zechariah.

[28 : 22] And how after months of silence he sang. How after months of pondering he praised. I pray that this is our response to God this Christmas.

As we take time to be silent and to ponder who God is and what he has done. As we go into a week of busyness.

Of frantic shoppers and of noise. Let's take time to ponder. Time to be silent. And think about the amazing truth that God came.

And God redeemed his people. Let's pray. Just take this opportunity to spend a minute in silence.

Pondering the significance of Christmas. And the God who came and redeemed his people. Our great God.

[29 : 23] Creator and redeemer of this world. We honor you. We praise you and we adore you. We thank you that at Christmas we celebrate how you came into our messy world of darkness.

And you redeemed. You brought light into our darkness. And you brought life to death. Thank you that we can look beyond the crib to the cross of Jesus.

And see how you in your great mercy chose to save a sinful people like us. Jesus, thank you.

Amen.