

Dec. 18, 2016

Zechariah's Song of Christmas Hope

Luke 1:67-79

B.I: The joy of Zacariah's song flows from the promise that those who sit in darkness will soon God's Light – the Messiah

LTS: Luke 1:5-25

Of course we are all familiar with the Christmas story of Mary and Joseph, the manger, the wise men, and the birth of God's Son, Jesus. But there were actually two conception miracles recorded for us at the beginning of the gospel of Luke. One, of course, involved Joseph and Mary and the other Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Zechariah who was a common, inconspicuous priest of Israel, and his wife Elizabeth were old and had never been able to bear children. By the time the story picks up in Chapter one of Luke they may be in their 70's or 80's. Zechariah's duty as a temple priest was to serve at the Alter of Incense inside the temple proper. This was a rare privilege for a priest. It was a duty that was assigned by lot and a priest might only get to serve in this capacity once in a lifetime. But for this particular day Zechariah had been chosen.

Now the duty of the priest serving at the Alter of Incense was rather simple. A crowd would gather outside to watch the priest enter the temple as if he were approaching God on their behalf. As the people waited in anticipation of his return the priest entered what was called the Holy Place where the Golden Lampstand and Table of Showbread stood. He would pour the incense upon the Alter of Incense thus creating a sweet-smelling smoke that would rise from the Alter. This represented the prayers of God's people. And as he did this he would pray a prescribed prayer that other priests had prayed for generations before him. Essentially the prayer was a plea to God that He would send the Messiah and rescue Israel from oppression according to His promise.

What made this moment unique not only for Zechariah but for the whole nation of Israel and everyone who would ever read about thereafter was that on this day God actually sent his highest-ranking messenger-angel, Gabriel, to answer Zechariah's prayer. As we read a few moments ago, Gabriel appeared and said to Zechariah (1:13),

Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go *as a forerunner* before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

This message was more than a little shocking to Zechariah. The text Gabriel quoted was the final verse of the O.T. It was a verse about the One who would come as the promised second Elijah. He would serve as forerunner of the Messiah. He was the one whom Isaiah said would come to prepare the way for the Lord. Isaiah said (40:1-5),

Comfort, O comfort My people, says your God. ‘Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, That her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the LORD’S hand double for all her sins. A voice is calling, ‘Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.’⁴ “Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; and let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see *it* together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

You can imagine Zechariah was more than a little shocked by all of this. No priest had ever received an answer to the prescribed prayer delivered by an angel from heaven. Moreover, The angel was announcing that it was time for the Messiah to come. The hope of Israel was about to arrive! But what shocked Zechariah even more was when Gabriel said that the promised forerunner to Messiah would come through Elizabeth, his elderly wife! Zechariah was about to become a Daddy! And he was 70 or 80 years old! This was more than a little shocking! You get the idea here that the news of the promised Messiah was great, but Zachariah was none too happy about having to learn how to change diapers during his “golden years!” So he says to Gabriel (Lk. 1:18), “*How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.*” In other words, “Prove it!” Prove to me that Elizabeth and I are going to have a son!

To this the angel replies,

I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.”

For nine months, then, Zechariah the priest was unable to speak. And I think he was unable to hear as well, because after the birth of John (1:62) his neighbors “*made signs to him*” to communicate. If he could hear, why didn’t they just speak?

Now think about this. What would it be like to go for nine months without the ability to hear or to speak? No listening to your iPod. No more TV or any kind of conversation with others except by tablet (or iPad). Life would be very, very quiet.

Now I don’t know about you, but having some weeks or months of quiet somehow seems appealing. To have time to do little else but to read and to think... my oh my. What a gift. Yes, it was an act of discipline upon Zechariah, but isn’t it true that every God-ordained discipline is also a God-ordained gift? We don’t know what Zechariah did for nine months, but I bet he did a lot of thinking. I bet he thought up a strategy for how better to answer an angel of the Lord next time one appeared! More importantly,

however, I suspect he thought and read long and hard on the O.T. promises about the coming prophet of God who would serve NOT as priest, but as Forerunner to Messiah. And then, after nine months of thinking, the child is born and Zechariah suddenly bursts into a prophetic song, NOT primarily about his son, but about the Messiah whom his son would introduce to the world.

As we come to our text for this morning, John the Baptist had just recently been born in fulfillment of God's promise through Gabriel. On this particular morning the baby is 8 days old – the day he would be Named and Circumcised. This would be an important day. Not only because Zechariah would have his voice miraculously restored, but because his son would become an official member of the house of Israel and begin his life as a future prophet of the Lord.

John the Baptist would be the last prophet of God in Israel. There had not been a prophet in Israel for 400 years. Zechariah understands the significance of what is happening. He also knows that Messiah was already growing in the womb of a young girl named Mary. And he knows that because Mary was Elizabeth's younger cousin, and when she went away to spend time at Elizabeth's house after the conception of her baby by the H.S. something amazing happened. When she entered the house, Elizabeth cried out Blessed *are* you among women, and blessed *is* the fruit of your womb! And how has it *happened* to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy.

Zechariah knew what was happening. Angels are appearing, and miracles are happening, and the promises of God are being fulfilled. He knows that the fulfillment of God's covenant to David was about to come to pass. The sun was about to rise shining light in the darkness. And yet, before Messiah comes, Zechariah's son John would step onto the scene and begin preparing the people for Christ's arrival. The New Covenant would soon be established by which sins would be atoned so that sinners might be saved.

Now Zechariah, still mute and deaf, is holding his baby in his arms. His friends and neighbors who had gathered for the event of his circumcision suggest that his name should be Zechariah after their father, but Elizabeth responds, "No! His name is to be John!" When they protest that no one in their family is named John, everyone looks to Zechariah for a decision. Taking a tablet in his hand he writes "his name is John." And in that very moment, after 9 months of silence, Zechariah's voice springs back to life! The text says, "His tongue was loosed and he began to speak in praise to God." And what he says in that beautiful moment is what is found in the text before us this morning.

Read. Luke 1:67-79

I see two major divisions to Zechariah's song of hope:

I. Praising God for the "Horn of Salvation" (68-75)

II. Praising God for the “Sunrise upon Darkness” (76-79)

I. Praising God for the “Horn of Salvation”

1. This prophetic word (or song) is often called the *Benedictus*, which means “Blessing” because that’s the first word of song. In the Bible when someone “blesses” God it means that they are praising and worshiping Him. In this case, Zechariah is praising Jehovah, the covenant-keeping God, for remembering His covenant with Israel.

2. Notice that he says that God has “visited” his people. When we think of someone coming to “visit” we usually think of one coming to bring greetings or to share in some kind of fellowship. But the word “visit” here has a more personal complexion. It means “to care for” or “to look after.” It’s the same word that used in Matt. 25 where He says “*I was sick and you “visited” me.*” He means NOT simply that you stopped by to say “hello,” but that you came a took care of me, comforted me, and helped me until I was well.

3. In this sense Zechariah recognizes that God is getting personally involved with Israel. He has not left His people without aid in their suffering. Through the Messiah He will come to bring comfort and healing, and Most Of All Salvation. He calls it Redemption. What kind of redemption is it?

4. The question is, from what or whom will Messiah save His people? Let’s look at the clues in the text.

- A. (v. 77) “to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. That’s New Covenant language.
- B. (v. 74-75) “that we... should serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness,”
- C. (v. 70) “to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

5. Under the inspiration of the H.S., Zechariah is praising God NOT for political or national “redemption,” but the spiritual redemption God promised in the OT; namely, that one day He would give forgive his people’s sins and given them a new heart. This is what Jesus came to accomplish. And this has been the experience of so many in this room who were once alienated and hostile to God, but one day God’s Spirit came and transformed your heart so that you found Jesus Christ to be the most precious thing in all the world. In Him you were reconciled to God by grace, through faith. You were forgiven all your sin and you discovered new desires for God and His word that you had never known before. This is the miracle of the salvation.

6. We see this use of the term “redemption” in Heb. 9:12-14 where we read that Jesus entered once for all into the holy place, having obtained *eternal* redemption... through His own blood.” In other words, by His death all who trust in Him are saved.

7. In v. 71, He says we will be “*saved from our enemies.*” Then in v. 74, He speaks of

being “*delivered from the hand of our enemies so that we might serve Him without fear.*”
Who are the enemies from which God’s people are delivered?

8. We know the answer to that question from a broad knowledge of the Bible. Again and again in Scripture Jesus is pictured as the one who conquers Satan and his allies, sin, death, the grave, hell, all the hosts of evil (Gen. 3:15; Jn. 12:31, 32; 16:11, 33; 1 John 3:8; Rev. 5:5; 12:5,9,10; 17:14; 19:11-16).

9. He would not only be the suffering Savior, but the mighty Conqueror! Notice the picture Zechariah uses to describe this Redeemer. In v. 69 he is called “The horn of our salvation.” Now we need to be careful not to misunderstand what “horn” means here. He is not referring to an OT trumpet. He’s not speaking of blowing the horn of victory. Rather, He is speaking of the horn of a mighty Ox.

10. Hendrickson explains that “the horn symbolizes POWER; in fact destructive power! The illustration is to that of a wild Ox, or bull.”¹ The phrase “horn of my salvation” is used twice in the O.T. (2 Sam. 22:3; Psa. 18:2). In both cases the phrase is used in reference to great power to deliver and protect.

If you ever get a chance to go down to the stockyards here in Fort Worth, you will usually find an old cowboy out there on the street holding a rope that’s fastened to the neck of a gigantic Longhorn Steer. And he will let you climb up on his and take a photo of you sitting there for free... and for a generous tip. Now, when you see that giant beast, he is usually calm and gentle. In fact, he hardly moves even when you climb onto his back. But imagine in your mind what it would be like if an inner-city gang showed up on the street and began threatening the life of the Ox’s caretaker. They begin pushing him around and knock him to the ground. One of them pulls out a knife to stab him. But then, right at that moment that otherwise gentle creature suddenly goes berserk! Enraged he rears up on his hind legs and then thunders down, running at the trouble-makers with head swinging and horns sweeping through the air. The man with the knife goes flying through the air and lands in a heap the street. Others are trampled or scared away by the awesome ferocity of this mighty beast intent on saving his master!

10. It was typical in the OT to refer to a ruler as a powerful horn. The image of Messiah here is the image of a mighty ruler or King (like David) who was unafraid of danger and would dive into the battle to protect his own. You may remember that in the book of Revelation the rulers of nations are referred to as “horns.” Zechariah knew that Christ our king, our Ruler, was about to arrive on the scene and like a might bull would pin to the ground and impale our spiritual enemies to the death! Do you see, beloved? This is your Champion! This is your Messiah. This is your Savior! This is your King. Satan prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, but Satan’s enemy is infinitely more terrifying than that lion. Jesus Christ is the mighty Redeemer King who ultimately kills the roaring lion. He is the “Horn of our salvation.”

11. The enemy receives a just and holy wrath. In contrast, however, his own people (72)

¹ William Hendricksen, *Luke*, (), 124

receive the mercy God promised to our fathers as promised in his holy covenant. It was an oath, which God had sworn to Abraham, and it was an oath He had sworn to David. It was a covenant that promised one day we would be delivered from our enemies so that we might serve the Lord in true righteousness and holiness w/o any fear forever.

12. Here it becomes clear that though Zechariah is speaking to his son, he is NOT speaking about his son. Why? Because the one he is speaking about is a descendant of David (69). Zechariah, however, was a descendent of Levi, as would be his son, John. No, Zechariah was not saying that his son would be the horn of our salvation, but that the coming Messiah would be our refuge, our protector, our wonderful merciful Savior.

13. So Zechariah's first words after nine months of silence were praises to God for the "Horn of Salvation." But then, in the remainder of this prophetic song of hope he praises God for the Sunrise upon Darkness.

II. Praising God for the "Sunrise upon Darkness"

1. The question that arises now is, how does John the Baptist relate to the redemption that Zechariah has just revealed? At this point Zechariah speaks directly to his infant (8 day old) son.

Read. 76

2. This is a direct fulfillment of the prophesy delivered by Isaiah many years previous. Earlier we read those first 5 verses of Isa. 40 where the Isaiah foretold that a voice would cry out "Clear the way for the Lord!" And you will remember that when John actually did appear in Israel to begin his ministry, some thought he might be the messiah. So they ask him; "Who are you? Are you the Messiah?" To which he responded (John. 1:23) "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said."

3. Before anyone would meet the Messiah, John the Baptist would go forth and announce his arrival. What a marvelous privilege would be John's! He was actually the one who would announce that Israel's salvation had come. It would not be a political salvation but a spiritual salvation. It would be the promise of ultimate reconciliation with God through the forgiveness of sins. And it would be motivated NOT my man's inherent worth, but by God's tender mercies.

4. And what would that salvation be like? It would be like the sun rising upon a land of perpetual darkness. In this land people "sit" in hopeless and bondage to their sin. But when the "Sunrise from on high" arrives, the darkness is banished, and the shadow of death is permanently dissipated. And in its place comes forgiveness and fullness of joy!

5. Light in Scripture refers to the knowledge of God (Psa. 36:9), life in the glory of God (Eph. 4:15, 24; 5:8,9), and laughter (gladness. Ps. 97:11). When the Sunrise from on high comes, He drives out hopelessness and replaces it with joyful laughter that comes from confidence in the fact that the Savior has rescued us from our enemies. "Jesus, by His

presence, teaching, deeds of mercy and power, would fill the hearts of all his followers with the joy of salvation”²

6. Did you realize that this is what Christmas is all about? Have you ever thought of Christmas as the time when we celebrate the “Horn of our salvation” and the “Sunrise from on high?”

The joy of Zecariah’s song flows from the promise that God has sent a mighty rescuer to redeem sinners and that those who sit in darkness will see God’s Light – the Messiah who is none other than Jesus Christ. This is **Zechariuas’ Song of Christmas Hope**.

² Hendricksen, 129