

## Zechariah's Song - Benedictus - Luke 1:68-79

### Scripture Reading: Luke 1:5-17

#### Introduction

The passage we just read introduces us to the main character of our study this morning, Zechariah

From that passage, we learned that Zechariah was a priest who was married to the daughter of a priest

We also learned that Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, had not been able to have any children and were now, so it seems, well beyond the normal age for child-bearing

But we also saw that their barrenness hadn't led to bitterness as the text says that they *"were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord."*

They provide an excellent example as they continued in obedience and service despite what had to be the great disappointment of their lives

And that was no small thing because it could have easily gone the other way

After all, their union was sort of like the star quarterback marrying the head cheerleader in Jewish society, and people were likely all excited to see the couple start a family - but it wasn't to be

Then we read that it was in the course of Zechariah's service that God ordained his division of priests to be on duty at the temple

And God gave Zechariah the honor of a lifetime when he caused the lot to fall on Zechariah, meaning that he was chosen to burn the incense at the altar [**Proverbs 16:33**] *"according to the custom of the priesthood."*

If you're unfamiliar with the layout of the temple, the altar for the incense was in the Holy Place right outside the curtain that separated it from the Holy of Holies where the High Priest alone was allowed to go once a year

As the chosen priest entered the Holy Place alone, he would see only a few things in the room - the golden candlestick, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense where fire had been prepared

Taking a censor full of incense he would pour it on the coals of fire and offer a prayer to God as the rising smoke symbolized the prayers of the people rising up to God as a pleasing aroma

Being chosen to burn the incense was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience and Zechariah had prepared for the possibility of being chosen his whole life just as all the priests did even though many would never have the privilege

Then, while Zechariah was alone performing his duty, the angel, Gabriel appeared with a message from God

And it was great news for Zechariah because Gabriel told him that the prayers that he and Elizabeth had offered so many times in their child-bearing years but had likely given up on long ago were being answered in the affirmative

Things may not happen according to the timing we prefer but we must always remember as we read in **Isaiah 59:1** – *Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear*

God had heard their fervent prayers and, at long last, was giving them a son and that son would be named John

He would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the time of his birth, and he would be used mightily of the Lord in preparing the people for the coming Messiah

Wow! Talk about a banner day!

Zechariah should have been thrilled but he had a problem that's revealed as the account continues [**Luke 1:18**] - *Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."*

We learn something from Zechariah's response here – we learn how not to talk to an angel!

## **I. Zechariah's problem**

Thinking back to when Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her she was going to bear God's Son we see a completely different response even though the two responses appear quite similar

Mary's question "How will this be?" showed a desire for understanding because, as she explained, she had never been with a man and, as far as she knew, that was the only way to become pregnant

Mary didn't doubt that she was going to give birth; she simply asked how it was going to work

Elizabeth actually testified that Mary didn't doubt the God's promise in **Luke 1:45**

But Zechariah had the problem of disbelief - he doubted the message Gabriel brought from God

Like Sarah who laughed when God told Abraham that she would bear him a son, Zechariah's response was something akin to, "Do you expect me to believe that?"

From a purely human perspective, his reasoning for being skeptical was understandable - after all, as he said, he was an old man and his wife was advanced in years

According to Zechariah's understanding, it was too late for God to give them the child they had fervently prayed for because they were too old

He was at peace with the fact that God, in his sovereignty, had decided to withhold the blessing of a child and he couldn't easily be moved off of that paradigm

And, that's actually kind of amusing because, as a priest, Zechariah knew of the account of Abraham and Sarah and he knew that old age is no barrier to God - but still he doubted that God could do the same for him and Elizabeth

And Gabriel was less than amused by Zechariah's challenge to his message

Look at his answer in verse 19 [**Luke 1:19**]

*"I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."*

I expect Gabriel made that pronouncement with such force that Zechariah felt it

Gabriel means "mighty man of God" and he is mentioned by name four times in Scripture and each time he is shown bringing a special message from God to someone

Then, after identifying himself to Zechariah, Gabriel tells him he is on a mission from God to deliver the message of John's impending birth

Basically, Gabriel is making it very clear that Zechariah has offended God by disbelieving his message and he drives the point home with what he says next [**Luke 1:20**]

*And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.*

This was in part a sign to Zechariah but it was also a form of rebuke because every time Zechariah tried to speak for the next nine months he was reminded of his unbelief that had offended God

In the verses that follow we see that Zechariah's time of service at the temple ended, he returned home, Elizabeth became pregnant and hid herself for five months until the arrival of her cousin Mary which we looked at last week

John was coming just as God had said in spite of Zechariah's unbelief

Skipping ahead to verse 57 we read about the birth of John and the dispute that arose when it was time to name him

All the relatives were there and they were determined to name him Zechariah after his father according to custom but in verse 60 [**Luke 1:60**] we see Elizabeth announce that he will be called John to the shock of the crowd

Finally, after much angst, someone thought to ask Zechariah if he had an opinion and, asking for a tablet he wrote, “His name is John” and, when he did that, God gave him back the ability to speak

And the first thing Zechariah had to say was to declare a blessing to God and he began to prophesy

Remember, the prophetic voice of the Lord had been silent for 400 years so it is no small thing to read in verse 67 [**Luke 1:67**] *“Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied”*

We find Zechariah’s prophecy or “song” in verse 68-79 where it is broken down into two sections

The first contains Zechariah’s praise and the second concerns Zechariah’s prophecy concerning his son, John

Let’s look now at Zechariah’s praise as we find it in verses 68-75 [**Luke 1:68-75**]

*“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.”*

## **II. Zechariah’s praise**

Zechariah’s song is known as *Benedictus* because its first word in the Latin Vulgate Bible is *Benedictus* which means “blessed”

And as soon as God returned the ability to speak to Zechariah he opened his mouth in praise to God in the same manner as David does in **Psalm 103:1-5** where he writes:

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!*

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.*

God is certainly worthy of praise and blessing simply because he is God – but Zechariah, like David, has another reason for his praise and we see that in verse 68 after the word “for” [**Luke 1:68**]

*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, **for** he has visited and redeemed his people*

The specific reason Zechariah is lifting praise to God at this time is for the redemption of his people - for salvation

I want you to notice that there are five mentions of redemption or salvation, or deliverance in Zechariah’s song and four of them occur in this first section of the song

Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, Zechariah came to understand that God was doing a work that was so certain that he could speak of it in the past tense because, even though it was still in the future, redemption would take place

So let’s look at the three things Zechariah reveals about redemption, or salvation, in his song

### **A. Salvation is God’s work**

First, he tells us that **salvation is God’s work**

In **verse 68** we read that God has visited and God has redeemed - God saw the helpless state of mankind and chose to visit us

In **verse 69** it is God who has *raised up a horn of salvation for us* - of course referring to the then still future Christ

And in **verses 71 and 74** we see that we are *being saved* and *being delivered* - we cannot save or deliver ourselves

In Genesis 12 we read how 2,000 years before Jesus was born, God promised Abraham that he would bless all the families of the earth through him and now, in Jesus, God was fulfilling that promise

God planned it, foretold it, and fulfilled it in spite of the frequent disobedience of his people and in spite of the disbelief of Zechariah

And God did it all of his own volition and not because we earned it or deserved it as Paul writes in **Ephesians 2:8-9** about salvation:

*By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Mankind has always wanted to be the source of its own salvation and perhaps that has never been truer than it is today as many try to assure us that we are worthy of salvation and God is obligated to save everyone

But, as the Bible makes clear and as we see in this passage, salvation is God's work according to his mercy and grace and salvation isn't dependent on us at all

The next thing Zechariah reveals in his song is that salvation is through Christ

## **B. Salvation is through Christ**

While the name of Jesus isn't mentioned in Zechariah's song at all, his presence in it is unmistakable

In the Bible, the horn is a symbol of power and strength just as an animal uses their horn to attack and defend

And our passage says God *"has raised up a horn of salvation from the house of his servant David"* [**Luke 1:69**] which is a clear reference to Jesus who we know is descended from the tribe of Judah through David

In other words, the metaphor of raising the horn of salvation means God caused the Messiah to appear in history

Then, in **verse 76**, Zechariah refers to Mary's baby as "Lord" and in **verse 78** as "the sunrise" from on high that gives light to those who dwell in darkness

Jesus identifies himself as the *"light of the world"* in **John 8:12** and says that those who follow him will not walk in darkness and he declares that salvation is through himself alone in **John 14:6** where he unequivocally states –

*"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me."*

And in **Acts 4:11-12** we see Peter, who was also filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaim to the religious leaders' council –

*This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*

We could look at many other proofs that Jesus is Messiah but we can see clearly that Zechariah is talking about Jesus as the way to be saved

So we see from Zechariah's song that salvation was from God and according to his own initiative and according to his promise - that salvation is the product of God's mercy and grace and not according to anything we have done

And we see that God's salvation comes to us through the person and sacrifice of his Son

But there is one more thing that regarding salvation that Zechariah shows us in his song - salvation changes our purpose

## **C. Salvation changes our purpose**

Notice first of all, that this is also a gift from God as we see in **verses 73-75** that God, in fulfilling his promise of salvation to Abraham, "grants" deliverance from enemies in order to facilitate lives of holy service to him without fear

This part of Zechariah's prophecy is aimed specifically at Israel and is still waiting to be fulfilled in its strictest sense because Israel won't truly be free from her national enemies until Jesus returns and all Israel is saved

However, we are safe in appropriating this truth for all who are followers of Christ today because when we believed, God the Father *"delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."* [**Colossians 1:13-14**]

Still, it comes as a surprise to many people when they learn that God doesn't save us in order that we might idle our lives away in carefree contentment

I really hate to break it to you, but God's primary purpose for his saving his people isn't to make them happy, it's to make them holy so that, as righteous vessels, they might be fit for his service in the world

Now, that doesn't mean that there is no happiness, or better yet, joy, in the life of a Christ-follower

Actually, in most cases the Christian life is a life of great contentment and gladness but that's a consequence of a life rightly lived not the purpose of it

Happiness is not the aim salvation and those who think they can simply pray to accept Christ and then live however they like are deceived

True salvation brings about a transformation that enables us to be the servants God intends for his people to be

Clearly the theme of the first part of Zechariah's song is salvation and the focus of salvation is Jesus who is still unborn

And although Zechariah hasn't yet met him, he praises him, loves him, and is passionate about him

Now, in the second part, we see him turn his attention to his newborn son, John as he prophesies about him

### **III. Zechariah's prophecy**

Look with me at verses 76-79 [**Luke 1:76-79**] –

*“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.”*

When I was a new father, it seemed all I wanted to talk about was my baby girl

And those family members and friends who were there for John's circumcision and naming probably expected to hear the words of a proud papa once Zechariah had his voice back

But Zechariah's order of speech in putting Jesus ahead of John was completely appropriate and in keeping with the truth that John himself expressed some 30 years later in **John 3:28-30**

*“You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.”*

John was the one referred to by the prophet, Isaiah, in **Isaiah 40:3** as a voice crying

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God”*

And that, as you recall was the mission the angel Gabriel said would be John's when he announced his impending birth to Zechariah back in **Luke 1:16-17**

Zechariah wasn't slighting his little boy; he was merely putting things in their proper order as he praised his God first and then turned to prophesy about his son

And Zechariah began to reveal what he had been told by God through Gabriel

First, in **verse 76**, he told how John would be a prophet of God and prepare the way for the Christ

Then, in **verse 77**, he says that John would give his people, Israel, “knowledge of salvation” which is to say, knowledge of the coming Christ, his cousin, Jesus who makes possible the forgiveness of sins

Sin damages our relationship to God and makes everyone who is born God's enemy and the forgiveness of sin through Christ is the only way to be reconciled to God

And that was the message of John as he baptized with the baptism of repentance in the area of the Jordan River according to the tender mercy of God

Verse 80 [**Luke 1:80**] tells us that John

*“grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel”*

And we can read about his ministry in Luke 3 and see that all of what Zechariah prophesied came to pass

## **Conclusion**

Still, John’s message of repentance, as necessary as repentance is, was only half of the story

While one cannot be fully reconciled to God if they are willfully continuing in their sins, one must also turn to Christ and accept his sacrifice made on their behalf

When a person does that and places their complete trust in Jesus, they are immediately taken from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the light of the *“sunrise from on high”* as Zechariah put it

The Bible testifies that Zechariah was a righteous man who walked blamelessly in all God’s commandments

And yet we saw at the beginning of the sermon this morning how he was filled with doubt

The world is filled with people who are honorable and perhaps even externally righteous but who have never accepted the free gift of salvation that Christ offers - and perhaps it’s because they doubt its reality

But the message of Christmas is that salvation was born into the world and is available to all without cost

And that is the message of Zechariah’s song

That God has done what is necessary to reconcile everyone who sits in darkness to himself and thereby bring them into the light

That no one needs anything to commend themselves to him except their brokenness and a desire to be made whole

And that when anyone comes to him he promises to transform them into one of his useful servants for his glory

Let’s pray

**Luke 1:5-17 (page 855)**

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And 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.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."