

# THE PRAISE OF ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH

*SERIES: TO MAKE READY A PEOPLE PREPARED FOR THE LORD*

**By Doug Goins**

King David, the sweet singer of Israel, wrote in Psalm 40, “I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry...He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.” The Apostle John described that new song of redemption in Revelation, using the Greek word *kainos*, which is defined, “unaccustomed or unused, not just new in time, but new as to form or quality; of different nature from what is contrasted as old.”

That is an accurate description of the hymns from the dawning of the messianic age that are recorded by Dr. Luke in his gospel, which we have been studying these past few weeks. Last week, we heard the “new song” proclaimed by Elizabeth and by Mary; worshipful adoration expressed in the context of patient waiting and intimate friendship. Today, in Luke 1:57-80, we will see that a “new song” of worship comes from the lips of Zechariah, the first words he utters following nine months of dumbness.

Zechariah’s hymn of devotion is sung after he has waited on God, waited as part of the people of Israel who were given up to exile, in words of the prophet Micah, “...until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth;...” (Micah 5:3). Zechariah had waited all his life for the seemingly impossible birth of his own son, impossible because of his wife Elizabeth’s barrenness. Now he has waited through nine months of dumbness, resulting from his disbelieving response to God’s word given by the angel Gabriel.

Zechariah’s hymn is sung in a setting of family celebration—the circumcision and naming of his baby boy. This was an occasion of great joy, marked by friends and family, with music, dance and feasting. Verses 57-66 describe that event. The first two verses describe the joy God gives Elizabeth at the birth of her baby. Verses 57, 58:

**Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son. And her neighbors and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.**

In Israel, the birth of a child was an occasion of great joy. When the time of birth was near at hand, the family, friends and local musicians gathered near the home. I wonder how our local hospitals would feel about having a band ready to play in the hallway outside the delivery room! Perhaps some of you couples who have not yet had children would like to consider that. With this particular birth, the joy of the family and neighbors of Zechariah and Elizabeth grew out of a realization that a merciful God, a God who cares about the helpless, had given the gift of new life to this faithful couple.

Next, Luke records the circumcision of John. Verse 59:

**And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child...**

It is important that we understand the significance of this rite. On the eighth day following the birth of a son, the father would take a sharp knife and cut away the loose skin surrounding the head of the male sex organ. Thus the son would fall under the Abrahamic covenant and receive all the blessings which God had promised Abraham if, as he grew up, he followed in the faith of Abraham, a faith lived out by the patriarch even before he was circumcised.

That covenant relationship, initiated by God, is described in Genesis 17:10, 11. Addressing Abraham, God said, “This is my covenant, which you will keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.”

That sign was given for important reasons. Every time a Hebrew boy relieved himself, he was reminded that he was a “son of the covenant.” As an adult, every time he had sexual intercourse with his wife, he would be reminded of his relationship with the living God, who was faithfully fulfilling his promises to Abraham through the birth of children. If the Jew went into a prostitute, he would be reminded that he was a son of Abraham who had made a covenant with a holy God. Thus he would be warned before he entered into immorality. Every time he washed himself he would be reminded of the God who cleansed his heart. Every day of his life he was reminded of the covenant that God had made with Abraham. His life was not his own. God had set him aside as a chosen vessel. Spiritually, circumcision was an outward sign of an inner commitment to God, symbolizing God’s desire for man to have a circumcised, pure heart.

The naming of the baby results in a heated family discussion. Verses 59b-64:

**...and they would have named him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said, “Not so; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your kindred is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all marveled. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.**

Zechariah comes to the moment in the ritual circumcision when his son’s name is to be announced. The family and friends assume the boy will be named for his father (a common custom), and in his father’s silence try to name him Zechariah. Elizabeth rejects that. Her “Not so” is very emphatic. But the family brushes aside her desire to call the boy John. They try to rule out that break with tradition. Not having the right to name the child themselves, they enlist the help of Zechariah.

As a matter of fact, their efforts to get his help become humorous. Forgetting that he is dumb, not deaf, they act out their question, making signs and gestures to him. Zechariah, of course, could hear perfectly well; he just couldn’t talk. A friend who is a paraplegic told me that most people yell at him when they speak to him. He has to tell them he’s not deaf, just disabled. Finally, when the family gives Zechariah a board covered with wax on which to write, his response is very definite: “His name is John.” He did not say, as Elizabeth had, that the child would be called John (verse 60), but “His name is John.” The matter was not open to discussion. The angel Gabriel had named the child and Zechariah accepts that. He writes the name as an accomplished fact.

The passage tells us that Zechariah startled his friends and family twice. First, with his decisiveness in writing John’s name; and secondly, by suddenly regaining his voice following nine months of silence. In the words “his mouth was opened,” and, “his tongue loosed” (verse 64), it is clear that the God, who had taken away his ability for speech, had restored that faculty. His writing of John’s name was an eloquent confession of faith, in marked contrast to his faithless questioning of Gabriel’s authority nine months earlier.

In a moment, we will look at Zechariah’s blessing of God (verses 68-70), but we need first to look at the result of Zechariah’s words of worship and praise. Look at the community’s response, verses 65, 66:

**And fear came on all their neighbors. 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.**

In a word, they were awestruck. That is the meaning of the word “fear”, deep reverence. Beyond that, however, they took to heart the truth, the facts of the event, and the message of Zechariah’s hymn, which followed.

Verse 65 gives us a clue as to where Luke collected these stories which are not recorded in the other gospels—they circulated among the people in the Judean hill communities. They told him of the question, which was on everyone’s lips (verse 66), and as William Barclay renders it, “What will this child turn out to be?” In light of this extraordinary sequence of events, this is a very perceptive question.

My wife and I have had the joy of gathering in our home with family members and Christian friends to dedicate each of our children to the Lord, very much like Elizabeth and Zechariah did here. These were times for Candy and me to commit ourselves to being God’s instruments for good in raising our children in a godly Christian home. Those were also times of committing our children to the tender care and sovereign will of a loving Lord, trusting his authority and purpose to fulfill his plans for each child. On each occasion, the question asked of John was on my heart as well: What would God do with this little one’s life, with all its unfolding potential? Through the years, my children have enjoyed the Bill Gaither song, “I am a promise, I am a possibility with a capital P. I am a great big bundle of potentiality. And I am learning to hear God’s voice, and I am trying to make the right choice. Because I am a promise to be everything God wants me to be.” I hope my children sing that song with understanding, reflecting their hearts toward the Lord Jesus. That expresses every Christian’s prayer for his children.

In our story this morning, the question about John’s future life-course carries an even greater portent in light of his promised miraculous birth and predicted ministry.

I read this news item in a San Francisco newspaper a couple of weeks ago:

*A pregnant woman, who had been buried with her two dead children in waist-deep mud for almost three days after a volcanic eruption in Columbia last week, gave birth to a girl minutes after volunteers pulled her free, rescuers said yesterday. Doctors and volunteers worked for 60 hours to extricate 25-year-old Carmen de Moreno from the mud and collapsed walls that were pinning her inside her wrecked home in Armero.*

*Throughout the rescue, Moreno, who was eight months pregnant, wore a surgical mask to protect her from the fumes of the volcanic mud and the decomposing bodies of her two children, whose bodies lay at her feet, relief workers said. Finally, workers with shovels, saws and drills, pulled her from the sludge. Moreno told doctors that she could not feel her child moving, so doctors performed an emergency Cesarean section at the site to save the child. Her husband had [already] been pulled from the mud. His sister said officials had told him by telephone that his wife was dead. “Now we see in the paper that Carmen and the baby are alive,” she said, “but he doesn’t know.”*

In light of this extraordinary birth, I wonder what will this child turn out to be? What special thing will God do with Consuelo Moreno?

Zechariah and Elizabeth name their son John, “the grace of God.” The Bible records his magnificent life and ministry—what this child turned out to be.

In verses 67-79, we have Zechariah’s hymn. First, its introduction: verse 67:

**And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying,...**

This is an expansion of Luke's introductory statement of verse 64, after God loosed Zechariah's tongue, when he spoke, blessing God. Mary's hymn of praise, the *Magnificat*, was a natural expression of her lifestyle of worship before the Lord. Zechariah's hymn, or "Benedictus" ("Blessed," in Latin), as it has been known through church history, must be understood as the result of the Holy Spirit coming upon him. Like Elizabeth, when she was in the presence of Mary, Zechariah was allowed to understand spiritual realities. He was granted illumination to speak prophetically, a shining forth of God's revealed truth. Verses 68-79:

**"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 perform the mercy promised to our fathers,  
and to remember his holy covenant,  
the oath which 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 the days of our life.  
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,  
through the tender mercy of our God,  
when the day shall dawn upon 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."**

The theme of this hymn is established in the twice-used word "visited." Verse 68 says, "He has visited and redeemed his people," while 78 says, "When the day shall dawn upon us from on high." The King James version expresses verse 78 more clearly, "...whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us..." Thus both the opening and closing verses speak of the God who has visited his people, the God who will visit his people.

This word (*episkeptomai* in Greek) is used only one other time in the New Testament. This is where we get our English word "episcopacy, episcopal," meaning oversight, guardianship, or government; the episcopacy of God that expresses itself in redemption, in salvation. This song is a celebration of God's government of grace, the visitation of God in the form of a Savior, a Messiah.

Zechariah begins by expressing gratitude for the coming of the Messiah. Verses 68-70:

**"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,..."

He expresses thanksgiving for God's redemptive action. "Redemption" means to be bought back at great cost. He uses a phrase used in temple worship in giving thanks for the "horn of salvation," a phrase already applied to the Messiah in the Old Testament psalms: "I will raise up a horn to David" (Psalm 32:16). This figure is taken from the horns of a bull, where the power of the animal resides. Just as the strength of that animal is symbolically concentrated in its horns, so all the delivering power granted to the family of David for the help of the people Israel will be concentrated in the Messiah. All of this is coming in fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic witness; ancient promises of divine origin and purpose now to be realized in Jesus the Messiah.

In verses 71-75, Zechariah expresses gratitude for the redemption to be accomplished in the Messiah's coming; what that redemption will actually mean:

"...that we should be saved from our enemies,  
and from the hand of all who hate us;  
to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,  
and to remember his holy covenant,  
the oath which 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 the days of our life."

Here Zechariah sings about the nature of God's ultimate action—a great deliverance. He describes from what we have been saved; and to what we are saved. We are saved "from our enemies," "from the hand of all who hate us," and from fear itself. Our greatest enemy is Satan, who hates the work and the people of God. We are opposed by an evil world system which is controlled by dark forces of destruction.

But through our "horn of salvation" we are saved from bondage to sinful adversaries even from the fears they can create in us. We are saved, or delivered, to "serve him...all the days of our life," to live lives in grateful submission to his saving grace. We are saved to serve "in holiness," in wholeness, living lives of attractive wholeness in a fragmented world. We are saved to serve "in righteousness," living in right relationship to God, clothed in the righteousness of Messiah himself. All of this merciful saving activity is based on the trustworthiness of God's Word, his "promise," his "holy covenant," the "oath he swore to Abraham."

In verses 76 and 77, we can imagine Zechariah's gaze being fixed on his baby son. Here he reviews the promises of the angel Gabriel, and summarizes the identity and mission of John, "the forerunner."

"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,..."

These verses are, in a sense, a parenthesis in Zechariah's sweeping survey of God's plan of redemption. We might have expected that, as a new father, Zechariah's song would be all about John. But like Elizabeth, in

her choice to humble herself before Mary, Zechariah understands John's important, but subordinate, role in salvation history.

John's ministry, as a prophet, would be a radical new presence because for centuries Israel had heard no prophetic voice. He was called of God to prepare the nation Israel for the coming of Jesus; to make them aware of their sinfulness; to arouse in their hearts a sense of need for forgiveness of sin. Israel had lost the understanding that Messiah was coming to bring a spiritual and moral salvation. It had been replaced by a misguided nationalism that looked to Messiah as a political deliverer. John's ministry was to restore a biblical view of salvation.

Our narrative speaks of the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophetic vision of John's life and ministry. The last phrase in verse 66 says, "For the hand of the Lord was with him." Verse 80 completes that word,

**And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel.**

Both of these verses speak of the thirty years of preparation of John. I commend to you the first 22 verses of Luke, chapter 3. There you have the account of how wonderfully God used John in the life of Israel exactly as Gabriel, Zechariah, and all the other Old Testament prophets said he would effectively minister.

In the final two verses of the hymn, Zechariah answers two questions: why would God visit us and how God would visit us. Verses 78, 79:

**"...through the tender mercy of our God,  
when the day shall dawn upon 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."**

Why did God visit us and deliver us? This verse says because of his "tender mercy." "His passionate empathy" is a better translation. "Tender mercy" is but one word in Greek. It is a strong word, meaning "bowels, viscera." Have you ever been so affected by something that your insides churned? That captures the description of God's compassionate response to our need for a Savior. Isaac Watts has a hymn that sings of this emotional response of God. It has been sanitized in our modern hymnals, but originally the words said,

*With joy we mediate the grace of our High Priest above.  
His heart was filled with tenderness, His bowels yearned with love.*

Grace was extended to the world because God cared so much. He could not allow us to continue in the destructive lifestyle to which we were captive. That is why he visited us.

How did he visit us? Through the entrance into the world of his Son, "the dayspring."

A wonderful picture is painted in these closing verses. Here is an opportunity for us to use our imaginations, to go back in time and imagine ourselves to be part of an ancient Near Eastern caravan traveling through the desert. Actually, this is a caravan of humanity of which we're all a part. We are lost in the desert. The black night descends. There is no moon or stars. We huddle together for warmth, fearing for our safety. Thoughts of death from exposure, wild animals, starvation, enter our minds and conversation. We wait through a seeming eternity of darkness.

But just when things seem most desperate, suddenly a bright star, an unprecedented astronomical visitation, appears on the horizon and lights up the desert. Filled with new courage and hope, we arise. The brilliance of the star helps us discover a main caravan route we had missed, a road that will take us back to civilization, to life itself.

Jesus is that “dayspring,” that life-giving star, the light that was promised centuries earlier. Isaiah wrote, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (Isaiah 60:1). Malachi wrote, “But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise,...” (Mal. 4:2). And again, from Isaiah, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isaiah 9:2).

Do you know what the real gifts of Christmas are?—the presents that Jesus offer which are listed in the last two verses of our text? He offers light where there is darkness; life itself in the face of death; and peace in the midst of turmoil and confusion. He can shine his saving light on our spiritual ignorance, our alienation from God, the fear of death itself, our stumbling in the dark, our exhaustion and despair. His saving light gives us knowledge of God’s grace; forgiveness for our sin; removes our fear of sin, death and hell; provides reconciliation with our Father God; gives our life on earth meaning, purpose and direction; and peace within ourselves, with God, and with everyone around us.

This visitation, this episcopacy, this government of God is not just ancient history. His salvation, his redemption is ours to enjoy now through the forgiveness of our sins that only Jesus Christ, the Savior-Messiah, can offer. Let us remember the words of David, “I waited patiently for the Lord; He inclined to me and heard my cry...He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.”

This Christmas season offers us the opportunity to sing that “new song” as never before, either as a believer new in the faith, or as one whose “joy of salvation” has been restored through these refreshing narratives of preparation, which inform our understanding of the Christmas event.

We can sing Wesley’s great Christmas hymn with a renewed heart of thanksgiving:

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all He brings,  
Risen with healing in his wings.  
Mild He lays His glory by,  
Born that man no more may die;  
Born to raise the sons of earth,  
Born to give them second birth.  
Hark! the herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the New-born King.”*

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