

CHRISTMAS: A SEASON OF JOYFUL SONG

SERIES: JESUS, THE SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

One of the reasons why people from all around the world who have some degree of Christian background or influence love Christmas so much is because of the many wonderful songs we hear at this time of year about the Babe who came into the world to save mankind from their sins. Even if one does not believe that Jesus is the Christ, the incarnate Son of God, the Christmas songs and spirit seem to bring a feeling of peace to people's souls for a few weeks each year.

Fortunately for believers in the Age of the Spirit the Holy Spirit places a song in our hearts and we find ourselves wanting to sing a new song unto the Lord 365 days a year. Paul encouraged the believers in Ephesus to "...be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of the our Lord Jesus Christ, to God the Father" (Eph 5: 18-20).

This spiritual reality has always been true of the people of God, whether they lived in the land of Israel in the days of Moses or they are living in the church age. Moses was instructed by God to write a song for the people so that they would be reminded of his love towards them, and so that they would remember how easily they could stray from that love (Deut.32). David spent years writing and gathering songs to sing to the one and only Living God. Six different times in the Psalms, David and other poets encouraged the people of Israel to sing to God a new song because of who he is and what he was doing among his people.

The songs we sang this morning have good theology and good tunes, but unfortunately they are not new songs born out of new adventures which contemporary Christians have had with our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. These songs rather were written by happy and grateful Christians in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. We now consider them to be traditional Christmas carols. As a result, our contemporary society is left in a spiritual vacuum by the lack of new songs based on the scriptures and on personal experiences with the Lord. We need new songs, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that capture the hearts and imaginations of our generation so that people might understand the spiritual darkness in which they are living and see the light that is available to lead them out into eternal life. Unfortunately, that spiritual darkness caused by Satan encourages our secular world to write such uninspiring Christmas songs as "I saw mommy kissing Santa Claus," "Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer," "Blue Christmas," and, "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas," not to mention the songs sung by rabbits, chipmunks and pigs.

My hope this morning is that the stories of Elizabeth, Mary and Zacharias will encourage and motivate us to write and sing new songs unto the Lord, born out of new experiences with our wonderful Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; for Christmas was and should always be a season of joyful song for the Christian community and the dark world around us.

In Luke 1:1-38 we saw that Christmas is a season of mystery. First, there was the mystery of timing, of God's control over time. The Sovereign God invaded the political darkness of Rome and the spiritual darkness of Israel, determining that it was time to fulfil the Old Testament prophecies that one day the Messiah would come to earth. Then we saw that in the mystery of barrenness God could bring life out of death. God sent the angel Gabriel to a humble senior citizen priest in Jerusalem to inform him that his prayers would be answered. His barren, aged wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son to be named John, the forerunner of the Messiah, as prophesied in Malachi. Finally, we saw the mystery of the virgin birth, and that "with God all things are possible."

This is the mystery of the incarnation: God in the flesh, Jesus Christ himself. These mysteries, which are made known to believers by spiritual revelation, are to be proclaimed to all who are willing to listen, for in them are

found the words of eternal life.

Our story opens as the two godly women come together in the home of Zacchaeus, in Judea.

I. The joyful new song of Mary, Luke 1: 39-56

Now at this time Mary arose and went with haste to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it came about that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice, and said, "Blessed among women are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she who has believed that there should be a fulfillment of what has been spoken to her by the Lord."

After hearing the good news from the Angel Gabriel that Elizabeth was with child, Mary was led of the Lord to travel from Nazareth to the home of Elizabeth to confirm that good news and to share her own good news of her pregnancy and the forthcoming birth of the Messiah. It appears from other texts that she did not inform Joseph, the man to whom she was engaged, at this time, but she would do so in three months when she returned home heavy with child. The pressure then would be great. She must have thought of the possibility of Joseph rejecting her and her story of a "virgin birth," the birth of the Son of God. This would leave Joseph with only two choices, either stoning or divorcing her. But for now, as she entered the home of her kinfolk, when Elizabeth heard the voice of Mary, the yet unnamed child leaped within her womb. Also, this daughter of the priestly line of Aaron was filled with the person of the Holy Spirit who gave her the voice of a prophetess and special revelation concerning Mary. This enabled her to break out in prophetic blessings even before Mary could share with her.

Elizabeth's first words to Mary were, "Blessed among women are you." Ever since Genesis 3:15, every woman of God in Israel hoped that she would become the mother of the Messiah and the Savior of mankind. Now for the first time in all those thousands of years, a young virgin girl from Nazareth was selected by the one and only God of Israel to be the vessel of the incarnation.

"...blessed is the fruit of your womb," continued Elizabeth. The child whom Elizabeth was carrying in her womb that day would some thirty years later say to the child whom Mary was carrying, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "...and blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord." This term is the same word used in Psalm 110:1 by David for the Messiah. Elizabeth knew that her husband-priest had been made deaf and dumb because of his unbelief, so she wanted to bless the mother of the Lord because, after hearing the plans of the Lord, Mary believed and submitted to the his will, saying, "Behold the bonds slave of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word."

Verses 46 through 56 give us Mary's new song:

And Mary said,

"My soul exalts the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For he has regard for the humble state of His bonds slave;
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me;
And holy is His name.
And His mercy is upon generation after generation
toward those who fear Him.

He has done mighty deeds with His arm;
He has scattered those who are proud in the
thoughts of their heart.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones,
And has exalted those who are humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things;
And sent away the rich empty-handed.

He has given help to Israel His servant,
In remembrance of His mercy,
As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and his offspring forever."

And Mary stayed with her about three months, and then returned to her home.

As we look at this song of praise it is obvious that Mary has a deep knowledge of the Old Testament, of Genesis, the Psalms and the prophets. Her song clearly reflects the joy of the song of praise sung by the formerly barren Hannah after she discovered that the Lord had opened her womb for her son Samuel (1 Sam.2:1-10). In Mary's song we see the character and the plan of God toward Israel and toward all who place their faith in Him. She was humbled by God's mercy.

First, Mary recognizes that God is her Savior (46-48). Her heart is filled with a desire to magnify the Lord God of Israel, and she rejoices in "God my Savior." In Psalm 34, David, Mary's great-grandfather, wrote a song of praise to God after he escaped from the Philistines. He praised the Lord God of Israel because God answered prayers, delivered him from fear, saved him from all his troubles, sent angels to guard him, and saved the brokenhearted and crushed in spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, Mary chose this psalm to praise the Lord because it was a known Messianic psalm. As she recalled it, she must have realized her joy would one day turn to sorrow as she remembered that Psalm 34 also has the words "...He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken." To be chosen of God so often means that we will receive at one and the same time a crown of joy and a cross of sorrow.

Her song recognized that God is the Savior of the Jews. They hoped that God would deliver Israel from the hated Roman enemy, but in reality the Savior would come to rescue men and women from the devil and his angels and from the power of sin and death. Mary praised this wonderful Savior because he had regard for her, a nobody on this earth but a true bondsman of the one and only living God. She also realized that from that moment on all generations would call her blessed of the living God for being chosen to bring forth "...a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11).

In verses 49, 50, Mary sings that God is our strength. As she thought over the events that had occurred in the weeks before her visit to Elizabeth, she was overwhelmed by the concept that "the Mighty One has done great things for me." She recalled once more the angel's words, "with God nothing is impossible." "His name is holy," continued Mary. His name was to be set above all names in heaven and earth, because he is also a merciful God to all who fear him, said Mary, quoting another of David's psalms, Psalm 103:17.

And third, Mary sang that God is our warrior Judge (51-53). She observed the works of her mighty God and used seven verbs in the past tense, yet they are verbs which can also be understood as prophetic words of the future. She saw God as a God of victory (Ps.98:1) who was able to judge and defeat the proud and to remove ungodly rulers from their thrones; and at the same time she saw God as the righteous Judge who will exalt the humble and meet the needs of the hungry (Ps. 107:9), sending the rich away empty-handed.

Now, using the prophetic verbs in light of the spiritual ministry that Jesus had on earth during the days of his ministry and continues to have in the Age of the Spirit, we could read this section, 51-53, as follows: Christ will bring in the spiritual kingdom of God and do mighty spiritual deeds with his arm. He will spiritual scatter the proud Satan and his angels and will bring down all the spiritual rulers and powers from their thrones. He

will then exalt the spiritually humble (Matt.5:3-12) and those who spiritually hunger for righteousness, and send away the rich empty handed.

In verses 54,55, Mary sings that God is merciful in keeping his promises. Mary recognized that in the past as well as the present, Israel was being judged of God, according to Deut. 28, for their disobedience and apostasy. But if they would repent of their sins, God would extend mercy to them and fulfill the covenant he had made with Abraham. This covenant was the foundational hope of Israel, for God had promised to bless the people of Israel by the seed of Abraham, through the coming of the Messiah. Abraham believed by faith that his barren wife Sarah would one day give birth to a son. He believed that he would have a great name, a land, and a multitude of descendants. Mary understood that the Son within her womb would be that very one in whom all the blessings that God promised Israel would be fulfilled; and likewise the blessings would be upon all who believed within the Gentile nations.

Mary remained with her cousin Elizabeth for three months and then, heavy with child, headed home. She was acutely aware that Joseph might reject her and divorce her, or have her stoned for adultery. She did not know that the angel of the Lord had already prepared Joseph to receive her after he was told "that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit, and that they should call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt.1:18-25). When Mary arrived home, Joseph took her as his wife and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son.

Christmas is a season of joyful song. Mary is such a wonderful model to help us understand how to worship our Lord and Savior. She had spent years reading and being taught the word of God, and she had allowed the word to be hidden in her heart. Then, when an opportunity arose when she wanted to truly and accurately worship the Lord, she was free to sing a new song unto him. Her song was not based on some feeling of what she thought the Lord might be like, or the Lord she wanted to have match her feelings. She sang a new song based on the truth of his character, as revealed by the only Living God to the prophets and recorded in scripture long ago. She sang a song to the God who is the Savior. He is all knowing, mighty, holy and merciful. He is able to defeat Satan and his armies. And he will lift up the humble. The only Living God who has spoken keeps his word.

The other night Ed Woodhall and I were reminiscing about the season of new songs we had a PBC in the mid '70's. One was a song written by Pam Mark entitled "Mary and Joseph." In the song, the couple have a conversation regarding Mary's pregnancy and the circumstances surrounding it, following Mary's arrival in Nazareth from her visit with Elizabeth. Mary's fears are calmed as Joseph too breaks into song, saying that an angel had appeared to him and told him what would happen. In the 70's, when young men and women heard truth from scripture they sometimes put that truth into song. I hope these days come back again for we need new songs to penetrate our dark world and expose people to the light of the truth.

Mary's heart was filled with the joy of the Lord and she expressed that joy in a song composed from the Old Testament scriptures. Zacharias the priest, the husband of Elizabeth, also burst into a new song of joy upon the birth of John the Baptist. This is what we will see as we continue in Luke 1.

II. The joyful new song of Zacharias, Luke 1: 57-80

Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she brought forth a son. And her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her. And it came about that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father. And his mother answered and said, "No indeed; but he shall be called John." And they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name." And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called. And he asked for a tablet, and wrote as follows, "His name is John." and they were all astonished. And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God. And fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked of about in all the hill country of Judea. And all who heard them kept them in mind, saying, "What then will this child turn out to be?" For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him.

Finally, the years of barrenness, disgrace and sorrow are turned into a great season of joy, for Elizabeth gives birth to a son. All her neighbors and relatives had the proper biblical prospective about children, as stated in Ps. 127:3: "Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward." They understood that in Elizabeth's case, "...the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they rejoiced with her" (v.58).

The relatives and neighbors all had an idea of what name they should call this newborn child. They wanted him named Zacharias, in honor of his father. But Elizabeth was informed by her husband of the instructions given to him by the angel Gabriel when he had appeared before him some nine months earlier at the Temple in Jerusalem: "...your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John (gift of God; Jehovah is gracious)".

So Elizabeth insisted upon the name John. But the relatives insisted that it should be Zacharias because the name John had never been used before within their family. Elizabeth would not change her mind, however, so they turned to the deaf and dumb priest and made signs to him, asking by what name the child should be called. Zacharias replied, "His name is John." And at that moment John began to speak again for the first time since the angel Gabriel visited him in the temple. The old priest himself immediately began praising God, and the people became fearful because this was no ordinary child. They asked, "What then will this child turn out to be? For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him."

We find Zacharias' new song of blessing in verses 67-80:

And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
For he has visited us and accom- plished redemption for His people,
And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of David His servant--

As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old--

Salvation from our enemies,
And from the hand of all who hate us;
To show mercy toward our fathers,
And to remember His holy covenant,
The oath which He swore to Abraham our father,
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.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
For you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways;
To give to His people the knowledge of salvation
By the forgiveness of their sins,
Because of the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Sunrise from on high shall visit us,
To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace."

And the child continued to grow, and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until of the day of his public appearance to Israel.

Just as his wife Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit some three months earlier when she blessed her relative the virgin Mary, so now the aged priest is filled with the Holy Spirit. He blesses the Lord and prophecies of John's future ministry on behalf of the long awaited Messiah to the neighbors and relatives at the circumcision ceremony. Zacharias is led of the Spirit to do the same thing that Mary had done in her song. He

reaches into the Old Testament to cast light on the present situation, and also applies the scriptures to the future.

First, he says, God is the redeemer of Israel (68-70). Redemption can be personal or national. In this context, Zacharias sees both. He looks back to all the promises of God through the prophets of old in which the God of Abraham promised that he would bring "salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us" (Psalm 106:10). We must remember that the Jews were at that time oppressed by the might of Rome. Quoting this psalm, Zacharias offers hope to the people. Just as God had sent a deliverer in the person of Moses to bring his people out of Egypt long ago, so now God was sending the final Deliverer from the house of David. A thousand years earlier the prophet Nathan had prophesied of David in 2 Sam.7: "When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will rise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you and I will establish his kingdom ...I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me ...your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever."

Second, Zacharias says, God is our deliverer (71-75). The final fulfillment of this national redemption would come from the house of David in the form of the Messiah. God would accomplish this out of a heart of mercy and faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham. In gratitude, the Jews would serve the Lord without fear and live in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of their lives. In Jeremiah 31 we have the new covenant: "...this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the Lord, 'I will put my law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'" This new covenant and the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit would enable them to serve God in holiness and righteousness forever. Thus Zacharias refers to the covenants which God had made with Abraham, David, and Jeremiah. Unfortunately, this promise was set aside for Israel because they would reject their Messiah. One day, however, according to Romans 9-11, God will fulfill his promise to Israel.

But the Abrahamic Covenant (the eternal covenant, the new covenant) is still in place on a spiritual level for all, Jew and Gentile alike, who place their faith in Jesus the son of David as their Lord and sin-bearer. They will personally experience spiritual salvation, forgiveness of sins, and deliverance from the kingdom of darkness and the power of Satan, sin, and death. They will receive a new heart and be given the gift of the Holy Spirit who will enable them to serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness.

Third, God is merciful, says Zacharias (76-79). Referring to John's character and ministry, he says that his son would be the prophet of the Most High. While other prophets looked forward to the coming of Messiah, John would introduce the Messiah. He would go before the Lord to prepare the way (Mal 3:1). His message would be about salvation, not from the Romans but from bondage of sins, and this would be accomplished by the forgiveness of their sins (Jer 31:34).

Because of the tender mercy of God, Zacharias continues, "the Sunrise from on high shall visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death." This is a reference from Mal. 4:2: "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness (the Messiah) will rise with healing in his wings." As the sun brings light into the darkness, so the Son will bring light into the spiritual darkness of men's hearts. As a result, the Prince of Peace will be able "to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The passage concludes with the word that John continued to grow up, strong in spirit, and that he lived in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance in Israel.

This morning we sang an old, traditional Christmas hymn, "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing," written in 1738 by Charles Wesley. He wrote this within a year of his conversion to Christ, while the inspiration of his newly-made contact with God was still fresh. The original poem had ten stanzas, verses filled with the beautiful truth of the birth of the Messiah and of his reconciliation. Wesley wrote a new song about his own personal experience with the Savior. Mary, too, sang a new song, one filled with the joy of her own personal experience when she heard the news that she would be the mother of the Messiah, and her song was followed by the new song of the father of the forerunner of Messiah. What an encouragement these songs are to us. Let us strive to foster a close relationship with Jesus and his word. Then let us allow him to produce new songs of praise to him, melodies that will be light to the dark world around us, some perhaps with ten or more stanzas.

Christmas is a season of joyful songs. Let's take advantage of this Christmas season to not only sing traditional songs born out of the hearts of believers in centuries gone, but also to ask our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to so move us that we will write new songs of praise to him born out of our most recent spiritual experiences with him. And then may many of us be so bold as to ask him to inspire some of us to write Christmas music that will capture the hearts of those around us who sit in darkness. Israel was a singing community, and the church is to be a singing community. Our songs can be used by our Lord to draw many to him as Lord and Savior in the days to come. May we be known here as a loving, singing community of believers whose hearts are filled with praise to the Lord for delivering us out of our spiritual darkness and giving us the gift of salvation out of his heart of mercy.

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