

December 11, 2016 by Steve Brandon



The Song of Zechariah

Luke 1:67-79

1. Jesus (verses 68-75)

2. John (verses 76-79)

Christmas is a holiday filled with tradition. We decorate our homes inside and out. On the inside we set up Christmas trees and hang stockings by the fireplace. On the outside we hang lights and Christmas wreaths.

We send Christmas cards. We wrap presents. We bake cookies. We purchase poinsettias. We say, "Merry Christmas."

We eat too much. We spend too much.

But one of the traditions that is, perhaps, front and center above all is our music. At Christmastime, we bring out the Christmas music. Rarely played during the other months of the year, we get our fill of it during December. It's played on the radio. It's played in the stores. It's played in our homes. We sing Christmas hymns at church.

The songs that are sung at Christmas are called, "Christmas Carols." These tunes are all over the map. Some are fast, like "Jingle-bell, Jingle-bell, Jingle-bell rock." Others are slow, like "Silent night, holy night. All is calm. All is bright." Some of them are totally fiction and frivolous. "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer had a very shiny nose. And if you ever saw it, you would even say it glows." Others speak clearly of the incarnation, "Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown, When Thou camest to earth for me;"

But there are Christmas songs that are eminently Biblical that we just don't sing today. They are found in the Bible. They are found in Luke, chapters 1 and 2. So today, I encourage you to take a copy of God's word and open up the Luke, chapter 1.

If you simply thumb through chapters 1 and 2, you will find four sections of poetry. Two in chapter 1, and two in chapter 2. The first one is found in chapter 1 and verses 46-55. This is Mary's Psalm of praise after hearing that she would be the mother of the Messiah. The second one is found in chapter 1 and verses 67-79. This is the prophesy of Zechariah, shortly after his son, John, was born. The third one is found in chapter 2 and verse 14. This is the anthem of the angels at the birth of Christ. The fourth one is found in chapter 2 and verses 29-32. This comes from the mouth of Simeon when he set his eyes upon Jesus.

Over the next four weeks, we will be looking at the songs of Christmas. I'm entitling this series, "Songs of Christmas." These four passages of Scripture technically aren't "songs," as we think of them today. There was no music for them. They weren't written in rhyme and meter. But, they were poetry, and they could easily be sung as songs of Christmas.

In fact, throughout the years, people have sung these passages. These passages are known as "canticles"--that is, a "song of praise" taken from a Biblical text other than the Psalms. [\[1\]](#) These canticles are sung regularly in many of the liturgical churches in the world, often in Gregorian chant and often in Latin. But sung, nevertheless.

It's simply that they aren't the sort of popular song that has caught on to be sung congregationally in our day and age. It would be good for us to be familiar with them. And this Christmas, we will be looking at these "canticles. This week, we will be looking at the song of Zechariah, found in Luke 1:67-79. Let's begin by reading the text:

Luke 1:67-79

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

Zechariah, of course, is the father of John the Baptist. His story begins way back in the beginning of the gospel of Luke. He was a priest (1:5). His wife's name was Elizabeth (1:5). Though they were both "righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (1:6), they had no children (1:7), because Elizabeth was barren. Like Abraham and Sarah, they were advanced in years (1:7) and were now beyond the time of having children.

Now, it so happened that one year, he was "chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense" (1:9). This was a daily affair for the priests; once every morning and once every evening, the priests would enter the temple and keep the incense burning on the altar according to the command of the Lord (Exodus 30:7).

I would suspect that Zechariah had done this on a number of occasions, especially being old and having served for years as a priest. But this time was like no other. When he entered into the temple, he encountered "an angel of the Lord" (1:11). This angel was standing right there in the temple, just to the right side of the altar of incense (1:11). And obviously, Zechariah was afraid (1:12). But the angel said to him (Luke 1:13-17), ...

Luke 1:13-17

... "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."

That's all well and good, but it's difficult to believe. I don't care what sort of super-natural experience you have. When you and your wife are past child-bearing age, and you are told that you will have a baby, it is tough. When Sarah was ninety, she heard that she would have a baby, and she laughed in disbelief (Genesis 18:11-15).

And we have Zechariah here failing to believe the angel. And so, the angel said to him (Luke 1:19-20), ...

Luke 1:19-20

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

And so, Zechariah came out of the temple unable to say a word. Soon afterwards, he returned to his home (1:23) in the hill country of Judah (1:39), as a priest without his voice may have difficulty in his duties. And lo and behold, his wife, Elizabeth conceived (1:25). Can you imagine all that swirled in his mind in these days? I'm sure that he re-lived his encounter with Gabriel over and over in his mind.

This is often what people do who live through life-changing events. They think long and often of those days. They reflect upon the game that they won or the award they received. They remember details about the day when their child was born. They remember the day when they came to faith in Christ. People remember where they were when they heard of the events of September 11th. They remember the day she said, "Yes."

Zechariah surely remembered well the day as well. I would think that he remembered the exact day on the calendar. Say, perhaps it was December 15th. I am sure that the image of the angel was impressed upon his mind. I am sure that Zechariah well remembered what the angel was wearing.

With nobody to talk to, perhaps he had an internal conversation with himself that went like this:

"OK, what did this angel say? He said that we would have a son. How did this angel know? Doesn't he know how old I am? Doesn't he know how old my wife is? He said that I should call his name John. Why John? There isn't anybody in our family named John. (Luke 1:61). He said that I would have joy and gladness. Of course, wouldn't any father have joy and gladness in having a son? Will my joy be special? He said that many will rejoice at his birth. Why will many rejoice? Aren't we just simple folk, who live in the country? How will many rejoice?

He said that he will be great before the Lord. Doesn't every father believe this about his son? But if all of these other things are true, what will this mean? What does it mean that he will be great? He said that he must not be filled with strong drink. Are we supposed to raise him in accordance with the Nazarete vow? He said that he would turn many to the Lord. What more could I hope for in a son? He said that he would go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah. What does this mean? We are all waiting for Elijah? Could he be Elijah?

He said that he would make people ready for the Lord. He said that he would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. This is exactly what Malachi prophesied! He really could be Elijah! What does the Scripture say?"

And surely that sort of conversation took place in his mind for months as he and Elizabeth awaited the birth of their son. I have no doubt that Zechariah began to scour those passages in the Old Testament that spoke of Elijah. I bet he devoured 1 Kings and 2 Kings, reading all about his quirky ways and the miracles he did and the victory won on Mount Carmel and his amazing chariot ride into heaven.

I bet he devoured the prophesy of Malachi 4:5-6: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

This captures the heart of what Gabriel had told him on that day in the temple, that Elijah would come before the days of Messiah; that Elijah would turn the hearts of people back to the Lord.

Then, Mary, his sister-in-law, comes to visit. And she told of her similar encounter with Gabriel, appearing and prophesying about a child that is coming. In her prophesy, Gabriel told her that she would have a child, virgin though she was. And sure enough, Mary became pregnant, just as Gabriel had prophesied.

And Zechariah had three months to listen to Mary talk about these things. He had three months to think and inquire and ask. He had three months to go over it again and again with Mary.

My guess is that Mary's presence caused Zechariah to think long and hard about the Messiah. And what it means that Messiah is coming! Mary would be his mother. And that Zechariah's own son would be Elijah, to prepare the way for the Messiah.

I say these things because the first things that came out of the mouth of Zechariah after having been mute for nine months was all about the Messiah and all about the role of Elijah, who would to prepare the way of the Lord. So, let's pick it up in verse 57, ...

Luke 1:57-66

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. 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.

And then comes Zechariah's prophecy. My outline this morning has two points. They are really easy:

- 1. Jesus (verses 68-75)**
- 2. John (verses 76-79)**

Because that's what Zechariah talks about in these verses. He talks about Jesus (in verses 68-75). And he talks about John (in verses 76-79).

I find it interesting that after naming his son, John, Zechariah doesn't speak first of him. He speaks first of Jesus. I also find it interesting that in the twelve verses of Zechariah's prophecy, eight of them are devoted to the Messiah, and only four of them are devoted to his son.

This speaks to the priority of Jesus in the Christmas season. Yes, John was important. Jesus even said of him that "among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11). Yet, Jesus is far more important. John was a man, sent from God. Jesus was God, coming from his throne.

So, let's look at our first point.

- 1. Jesus (verses 68-75)**

Let's begin in verse 68, ...

Luke 1:68

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

This is the message of Christmas--that God has seen us in our affliction; He has seen us in our sin; and He has come and redeemed us in Jesus. As a result, He is to be praised. He is to be blessed.

What is remarkable here is that Zechariah spoke these words even before Jesus was born. In some regards, Zechariah steps back and

watches all of redemptive history unfold. What began with an angelic visit to him in the temple, telling of unbelievable things, continued with an angelic visit to Mary in which even more unbelievable things were spoken. Unbelievable things like virgin births.

Yet, Gabriel's words came true. The redemptive actions were underway. John had been born. Jesus was to be born in a few months. And what God began, Zechariah was confident that God would finish.

This is the reality of God's working in the world. What God begins, he accomplishes. What God promises, he fulfills. And God was bringing salvation to his people, which is what verse 69 addresses.

Luke 1:69

and has raised up a horn of salvation for us

in the house of his servant David,

Here we see the Biblical saturation of Zechariah's mind.

There are a few instances in the Old Testament where the LORD is described as "the horn of salvation."

The illustration speaks of the strength and power of God to save.

Psalm 18:2

The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,

my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,

my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

Zechariah's allusion to the house of David in verse 69 is an allusion to the power of God to keep his promises. When it comes to the promises that God made to bring the Messiah through David, they are simply too numerous to count. Perhaps the most foundational comes in 2 Samuel 7:12-13.

2 Samuel 7:12-13

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

In this promise, Zechariah was placing his hope. He was placing his hope in the word of the prophets (as verse 70 says).

Luke 1:70

as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

The prophets spoke promises like Isaiah.

Isaiah 9:6-7

For to us a child is born,

to us a son is given;

and the government shall be upon his shoulder,

and his name shall be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace

there will be no end,

on the throne of David and over his kingdom,

to establish it and to uphold it

with justice and with righteousness

from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Zechariah was seeing these promises beginning their fulfilment. And what started in doubt on that day in the temple, has come into fruition into full faith. Zechariah believed that the Messiah was coming to save. Verse 71, ...

Luke 1:71

that we should be saved from our enemies

and from the hand of all who hate us;

And of course, this is how Israel saw their Messiah--primarily as one who would rescue them physically from their enemies. And who can doubt their interpretation of a government being on the shoulders of the Messiah (Isaiah 9:6). And of the increase of his government and of peace without end (Isaiah 9:7).

And surely, this is in the plan of God. But, what the Old Testament prophets, and the disciples and Zechariah, failed to see was the mystery

that Christ would come first to redeem us spiritually from our sins and only later would he redeem us physically when he establishes his kingdom. But, either way, it is a message of mercy and grace.

Luke 1:72-75

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.

Here's the hope of Zechariah: that the coming of Jesus is a fulfillment in God's merciful covenant to Abraham.

Do you remember the covenant? By God's sheer mercy and grace, he chose Abram. There was no reason for choosing him. He was from the city of Ur of the Chaldeans, a wicked, idolatrous city. While in Ur, his family served other gods (Joshua 24:2). And yet, God chose to extend his mercy to this man. God told him to go to a land that he would give to him (Gen 12:1). God promised that he would be the father of a great nation (Gen. 12:2). God promised to bless him abundantly (Gen. 12:2). So much so, that "in you" God said, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

In Galatians 3:8, Paul notes how this is really a preaching of the good news that God would justify the Gentiles by faith. "In you shall all the nations be blessed" (Galatians 3:8). So great was the blessing to Abraham, that it has come to us. It has come to us through Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem. The one that Zechariah only knew by promise, but that we can know through the pages of holy Scripture.

The aim and the end of God's merciful dealings with us is that we, ...

Luke 1:74-75

... might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Is this where this Christmas season finds you? Serving the Lord without fear? Serving the Lord in holiness? Serving the Lord in righteousness? Serving the Lord in all of your days?

This is where Zechariah's prophesy leads us this Christmas season. It leads us to a holy and righteous life.

Let's move on to my second point, Luke 1:67-79

2. John (verses 76-79)

At this point, Zechariah turns his attention to his own child who was just circumcised. He says, ...

Luke 1:76

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

This all came true in John's life. He was called a prophet (John 21:26). He went before Jesus to prepare his way.

As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ...

Luke 3:4-6

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough places shall become level ways,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

John came to prepare the way by calling Israel to repentance. As is often the case when God moves in the lives of his people, there is a connection with repentance. Because God looks to the humble and lowly, not to the high and mighty.

John was a preacher. In Matthew 3:2 we read his words, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand." His main message was repentance.

He was fulfilling verse 77, Zechariah's prophecy, ...

Luke 1:77

to give knowledge of salvation to his people

in the forgiveness of their sins,

His message is found in Luke 3:3: "And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Their baptism was a symbol of their repentance, a symbol of cleansing, washed through and through. This is the symbolism of Christians baptism as well. We are immersed in the water as a sign of the complete cleansing that we have found in Christ.

Now, as good as the baptism of John was, it still was not enough. John knew this. He knew how much better Jesus was than he.

Luke 3:15-16

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 11, 2016 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canticle>