

Song of Zechariah

Luke 1:67-79

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As a priest, Zechariah would have been a teacher of the law. He would have instructed God's people in the word, in the covenant. As a teacher, as a pastor, I cannot imagine being mute for nine months. My family can. It might be welcomed. But imagine that, someone whose life is given in service to the people as a teacher of the people being silent for nine months. What would he say? When he spoke, those who were gathered with him marveled. After he had received the vision and he was struck mute, he could only describe with what we can imagine were his hands of what he saw, but not able to speak of it. And then silent for nine months. And then he would break out in song.

And this is a song which I encourage you to hear with ears as best you can, not only where you are in this moment, but also, we're called to imagine being in his shoes and being in the shoes of those who would hear him. Because we are on the outside looking in. Those who are part of the Gentile nations are brought in to the kingdom of God. But this is a Jewish high priest who's singing to the Jews of what is about to happen. We get to listen in, and then as we get to the end of looking at this word together, we're going to apply.

So, how do we apply this word which is a song to Israel but also a song of invitation to the Gentiles? How are we to apply it now for us? So, let's look together at this song, 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."
[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me.

Now, Lord, we ask that you would open our hearts that joy may enter in. That we are called to be a people of Christ, a part of His kingdom, according to the promises of our God. That you are our God, and we are your people. That you call us through the work of Christ to be a people of righteousness and peace, and to follow Christ. Lord, help us, we pray, to hear this song from Zechariah, for it was important for him to sing and to prophecy. And, therefore, it is important for us to hear it. Help us, we pray. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

So, together as we look at this song, I want you to see in your outline we're going to be looking specifically first, at the work of God Himself in the verbs that we will see there. First, "the Lord has visited," 67-75. And then as Zechariah turns to "preparing the way," this is John's vocation, in 76-77. And then he switches from seeing his son as the subject of the song, and he begins to sing of what Jesus would do, and that is "guiding our feet" in 78-79. And then, why is this important for us and how are we to apply it?

So, the Lord has visited. In these few verses here, 67-75, I want you to see – and I've already pointed to it in the actual outline title, which is "the Lord has visited" – that is of the first verbs that you will see in these

few short verses that point to the work of God. And what it says here, and he's speaking of the Lord God the Father, and the first thing he acknowledges is that in His visiting us, that He is coming, that He is going to be incarnate with us. How it was going to be? Zechariah doesn't fully understand yet. But he knows that the Lord is coming. As the word tells us, Israel has been in exile, not in the promise land. God's presence was not with them. He had been waiting. He had been quiet. He had been silent. No prophecies had come. And now, not only just a prophecy. The Lord is going to be present. And if you've ever read or spent any time in the Psalms, you will see the longing of the Psalmist is the longing of Israel to be in the presence of God. Because to be in His presence is to experience His salvation.

Notice what he says here. It says it in so many words when he says this, "And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited us,'" now, notice the next word, "and redeemed us." That's the next verb. So, to be present with God – for God to be present with His people – is synonymous with the whole idea of redemption. We've looked at this in other songs. The idea of being a redeemer means He's rescuing them. He's not just visiting them. He's not giving them a word of knowledge. He's doing something that is very practical, that is very experiential. That is, He's literally rescuing them from the oppression of their enemies. We'll unpack that in a moment.

But then he says in verse 69, "and has raised up a horn of salvation for us." This idea of raising up, it is the announcement that the inauguration of the kingdom of God is now in the present, not in the future. It is now in the present. That this horn of salvation, this One who would be raised up from the house of His servant David, now they're beginning to hear what is going to be this fulfillment of all the promises in the Psalms, of this One who would come as a branch of Jesse. This would be the One who would come as the Lord's salvation. So, it's something else which happens. So, notice the Lord is visiting. He's going to be present. To be present with Him means they get to experience His redemption, which is being rescued from their enemies. And then he says He's raising up the announcement of: the kingdom of God is coming. But it's something else. That this salvation isn't something that is a series of lines of sentences which are to be assented to. No, the salvation is a person.

Remember what we talked about the last couple of weeks? That salvation isn't a paragraph we're called to check off whether we believe it or not. Salvation is Christ. He doesn't just have salvation in His hands and gives it out. He doesn't point the way to salvation. He is salvation. So, life with this One is salvation. So, inferred here very strongly is, to experience the Lord's rescue, to know His visitation is somehow going to be bound up with this One.

And then these words, so, He has visited, He has redeemed, He has raised up. And then it says, "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," we must be careful, friends, not to spiritualize this. This is a priest of Israel saying, our enemies who raise up their voices to hate us, to oppress us, they will be defeated. How that's going to happen? Zechariah doesn't fully know. But enemies are really crushed. A people who were once in exile are now going to be released from exile and brought into the presence of the Lord.

But he says this, "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," he's remembering – we've talked about this before – that the Lord never forgets. Forgetting is a passive way of not remembering. Remembering is, you are choosing to remember something. And then when the Lord says, I will not remember your sins, it's not that He forgets our sins. He chooses not to bring them to account upon His people. Here, he's saying, He will remember His covenant. And we've already heard it read this morning in Ezekiel 37,

My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall have one shepherd. They shall walk with my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever. And David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them, and I will set them in their land, multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forever, my

dwelling place shall be with them. And I will be their God and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel when my sanctuary is in their midst forever.

So to say, from Zechariah's lips in verse 72, "to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant," that phrase, "to remember his holy covenant" is to take everything that he's just sung and shrink it down in just a few words. To remember His covenant, as we've just heard read from Ezekiel 37 is that there will be a king forever. That God will give them a land. That God will be in their presence. His sanctuary will be there forever. What has he just sung? The Lord has visited us, He has redeemed us, He has raised up a horn of salvation, and He has remembered His covenant. Israel is experiencing the coming of the kingdom of God and the release from exile.

This is his song. I cannot even in my best imaginative way, I cannot imagine what it would have been like for Zechariah, a priest, to announce this to the people of Israel. But he's now saying, this is what the Lord is doing. And to demonstrate that, he says, look what the Lord is doing, because there's going to be someone who's preparing the way.

And so, from shifting to looking at what the Lord is doing in bringing about the kingdom of God, he now shifts to the one who will be announcing it as a prophet. In preparing the way, he turns in verses 76-77. He's announcing what will be his son's vocation. And when he says here, he says, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways." And then he unpacks in just a few short words what this vocation will be, this preparing the way will be summed up in two ways. It will be, he's announcing that there's a deliverance from and a repentance as well; a deliverance and a repentance.

What is the deliverance from? Well, he's already said it. It's deliverance from their enemies, their oppression. But it is also bound up with this whole idea that, you will prepare His ways – meaning the Lord, the Father's ways. You will prepare for the Lord's coming, and it will be in the Son. But he says, "to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins." Now, he's already sung what the content of this knowledge of salvation will be as well as the forgiveness of sins. You might have thought that I skipped over it just a bit, but when he says in verse 74 that we are "being delivered from the hands of our enemies" and "might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." Okay, that this one, John the Baptist, will come announcing that the Lord is bringing deliverance out of exile. But it is bound up with being in relationship with the God who is present, which will mean a knowledge of His salvation, which means they have to repent.

What caused the exile of God's people Israel? It is because they turned from the Lord, and they turned to the gods of their enemies in trying to make peace instead of trusting the Lord. They took up foreign gods and they disobeyed the Lord, did not remember His covenant. And so, He sent them into exile for their disobedience. Here He's bringing them out of exile saying, yes, I am rescuing you, but I will also sanctify you, which means you must repent of your idolatrous ways. You must turn from dependence on anything else or any other foreign god, of trying to make peace with the enemies. Rather, you are to seek to follow me in my ways. And in so doing, you receive forgiveness. Not that their obedience brings about the forgiveness, it's that it's so united together. To walk in His ways is to experience that forgiveness because forgiveness is the way of the Lord. He's already sung it, the mercy of God.

And so, this one, this son would come announcing a deliverance, this long desired deliverance. Though, they don't know how it's going to look yet, because guess what? It's not going to look like the overthrow of the Roman government. That's what we get to see on this side. So, this deliverance from enemies is not merely spiritual. It is practical and real. It's that though Rome might still be the tyrant, you are not beholden to them. They are not your salvation. I am. But it must involve repentance, turning from dependence on anything other than me, to serve me without fear, in righteousness and holiness.

And this is the knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of sins. To be forgiven as an Israelite here is to be taken from exile into the presence of God because exile meant that they were walking in disobedience. Now the Lord is bringing them in His mercy. Not that they deserved it, but in His love, He's drawing them. But

here's the beauty. It's not just for the Israelites. Because it says that this will also be for the nations. This will also be for all those who are under the great sunshine of the earth. This is not just for the Jews. It is also for the nations. The same as the case there. Not only just for Israel.

So, how do I say that? It's because another Jew one chapter over, Simeon, says something else. In chapter 2 of Luke, Simeon, in coming to visit the Lord in His birth, he says these words, "He took the Lord into his arms and he said, 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for your glory to your people Israel.'" There it is, what Zechariah is singing about that his son would prepare the way. One chapter later, Simeon in taking up the Lord Jesus as he was presented at the temple, he takes him to his arms and he says, I have seen salvation. That's the person. And he's saying, it will be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles." So, guess what? We, too, along with the Israelites, are called into this deliverance from our enemies as well as we're called into the forgiveness of sins, which means repenting of our idolatry.

That has always been the case for God's covenant. That Israel was to be a light on a hill, a blessing to all nations. And now He is coming. And John the Baptist will be announcing this deliverance, this forgiveness, this baptism of repentance.

And now, finally, he turns from John's vocation to the subject of Jesus Himself. In verses 78-79, he says, "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." What's beautiful is he changes his pronouns in these last verses. He now is including himself. He shall visit us, verse 78. 79, "to give light to those who sit in darkness," "to guide our feet," our feet. So, here is a priest who's now prophesying of what's getting ready to happen, is now saying what's about to happen will also change even how I view myself. It will even change my position. Because as a priest, I now will bow to the King of Kings and to the Lord of Lords. He will now guide Israel. He will now guide our feet.

And when he sings of this and when he includes himself, in this guiding, he's pointing when he says "the sunrise" speaking of what the coming of Jesus would look like, he describes Him as the sun that is in the sky. But it's not us going up to Him. It's Him visiting us. The love has walked among us. The incarnate God is now here. And he says, He's come "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." And by the way, "those who sit in darkness in the shadow of death" describes what that first advent was like. It was sitting in darkness in the shadow of death in the midst of exile. It was mourning and longing.

But now the Lord has come. And in so doing, he's announcing that Jesus in guiding our feet, He is the way. He is the truth. And He is the life. Because he uses an infinitive here when he says, "whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light," meaning shining on those who sit in darkness. This infinitive that he's using here of shining or to give light has with it this import of to teach, to bless them, but also to enlighten, to open their minds, to open their hearts to see that He is the One who has come. God has visited us. And He is the way. He's going to guide us. He's going to guide our feet into the way of peace. That word "peace" is a very old word meaning "shalom." It's not just being happy and our clothes not being wrinkled and having enough food. It means to flourish, to know what it looks like to live as a human, to walk in obedience, to reflect the image of the God who has made us, to take the gifts that we have been given and to give them in service to Him and to love each other well well as He has loved us, to forgive one another as He has forgiven us. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life because He is the one who guides our feet.

And yes, this guiding us is calling us to be a people who don't just experience this shalom, this flourishing, and we don't over-spiritualize it where it's just: I get some forgiveness of sins, I read my Bible, I feel pretty good about it, and it's just me, myself, and Jesus. We flatten out the gospel if that's what we think merely the gospel teaches. It also has very practical ramifications. It changes the way I work, it changes how I see the direction of the use of my gifts and my talents. It's not just for filling up my bank account. It's not just for putting food on the table for my family. I can actually use my work as a lawyer, as an engineer, as a doctor, as at teacher, as a parent. And I can use it and say, Lord, take my gifts and let them be used in your service, that I might bless wherever I go and with whoever I'm with. And in so doing, we bring flourishing.

My gift, I think, is talking. And He's called me to use that talking not for myself, but to render it in service and to preach. And I'll be done in just a minute, I promise. I know you Ravens fans. Don't worry, the game is later. I'll get you there. I know. Go Ravens.

That said, so, this is my gift. Your gift may not be preaching. Your gift may not be evangelism. Does that mean you're not involved in evangelism? Making a meal for the hungry is evangelism. Teaching others is evangelism by the way in which you do it.

My friend whose son just became a teacher this year, it was like he finally found the thing he was supposed to do. He got into his room at a local high school, and he completely plastered the walls. He's a crazy person, but it's really beautiful. And plastered on the wall is this enormous phrase, "You are deeply loved." Does he talk about Jesus in his classroom? No. Is Jesus there in that classroom? Yes, by the way he loves his students, by the way he cares for them and shepherds them, by the way he responds to them and doesn't respond to them. That is his gift being rendered in seeking the flourishing and the peace.

We are called as God's people not just individuals but called to be God's people, to be shalom for Columbia, Howard County, and be part of what God's doing around the world in mission and in mercy. What will that look like?

Let me give you one picture as I close. Allen Little, who's a reporter for the BBC, one of his earliest assignments was to be in war torn Yugoslavia, and specifically, Sarajevo while they were still undergoing the civil war there. And on one particular day as he rounded the corner which was his normal practice, he was going on his reporting and when he did, he rounded the corner and what he saw shocked him because of its striking incongruity with everything that was around him. There sitting on a stool was Vedron Smilovitch, he was a cellist with the Sarajevo Philharmonic. He was dressed in a full tuxedo with long tails. And he had his cello, and he was sitting on this seat, but he was surrounded by nothing but rubble. And he was playing an Italian sonata, an adagio in G minor, and he was playing it. But what made it so unusual was because he was sitting in the very same place that the day before, 22 people were killed by mortar fire because they were waiting in line to receive bread.

And so, Smilovitch for 22 days came to that very spot, that very chair, and he played that piece over and over again. I don't know all of Smilovitch's gifts, but his one gift was most certainly playing the cello. And he was bringing beauty and shalom in the midst of death to enable people to lament. That is a gift. It may not be your gift, but it doesn't matter. You can use that gift not just to receive forgiveness, to be about what Jesus is doing and to use our gift of forgiveness and be vessels of salvation to those around us.

As the reporter would say,

"The world saw Sarajevo merely as a city that was warring and factious with seething hatreds. But this cellist, he was playing out of a deeply human need and impulse for artistic expression. And that cello rebuked me and reminded me that we are not merely beasts of the field. We are educated urban people, and not just hungry mouths to be fed."

It lifted this man to do the job he was called to do. And so, you have that gift. This church has a gift. Just imagine, we have enough engineers in this room to build lots of things. What would it look like to say, Lord, how can you use the engineers of this body? How can you use the gifts of this body collectively to bring about shalom in the ministry of the gospel, in mercy and mission this coming year? How can we be a blessing because we've been blessed?

The Lord has visited. He has come announcing His covenant, remembering His covenant from of old. And it has been announced that He has come to deliver us from our enemies and to forgive us of our sins. This One Jesus would come to guide us into His peace. Because we have received peace, we can be vessels of it. CPC, let's pray, Lord, what does that look like for us? What does that look like for you? I know the Lord has something in store. Let us have courage without fear to pray, Lord, have your way with us that we might glorify your name.

Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would now enable us to pray this. Lord, I thank you for the many relationships, the gifts, the talents that you have given us. I thank you for the salvation that you have given to many. But Lord, that we might not be full and simply happy with ourselves, that we might be a people who seek to give it away, a people who have received salvation might be vessels through which salvation might flow in the kingdom of God. As we await your return, we are not called to be a people of idleness, but a people of action encouraged to walk in the way of peace, to work for peace, to glorify your name that others might know that Jesus is Lord. In His name we pray. Amen.