

The Hymn Of Zacharias

Luke 1:57-80

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Have you ever noticed that birds like to sing at dawn? They get very party-happy at dawn. They really like to sing. We lived in a home once where right outside our bedroom window—and I slept right up against that window—there was a tree that was filled with birds that loved to sing at dawn, especially in the springtime. I did a lot of research on this. I Googled, “Why do birds sing at dawn?” After all my research, I found out that we don’t know why birds sing at dawn. I just wasted an hour; we don’t know why birds sing at dawn. Some think they sing at dawn because of the barometric pressure or the moisture in the air; their song carries longer. Mainly male birds do the singing, and they do that to attract a mate. A male bird is singing to a female bird to come his way. So guys, if you’re trying to win the heart of some gal, maybe you can sing outside her window at 3:00 a.m. See if that wins her heart—or you might lose her.

The birds are also trying to mark their territory. Sometimes birds are singing to tell other male birds, “Don’t come into my territory. This is my territory. I’m looking for a mate, so stay away.” But birds sing just before the daylight comes.

So it’s no surprise when we turn to Luke 1 and learn that “the Dayspring from on high has visited us,” verse 78; that Christmas is God visiting us bringing us the new day, the dawning of a new day. The world had been lying in darkness, but a new day is dawning.

It’s no surprise that the narrative passage around the nativity is filled with songs. First we had Mary singing, and now we have Zacharias singing. Then we have Simeon singing. We have Hannah singing, and we also have the angels in Luke 2 singing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men with whom God is well pleased.” They sang in the heavens at the coming of the Savior’s birth. I think that’s interesting because Christmas is about joy, and it’s about singing. It’s about singing songs of the coming of the Savior into the world.

So there is another song in our passage. It is a song commonly called The Benedictus. It is a song of Zacharias. The name Benedictus is taken from the first word in the Latin in verse 68: “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel.” It is a song of praise and blessing. It’s a song of thanksgiving. It is a song of praise to the faithful God Who always keeps His promises.

I’ve preached from these passages so many times over the years, but one thing that really struck me again as I was studying for these messages is that one of the themes that runs through this passage is the faithfulness of God to keep His promises. What a wonderful thing to meditate on at Christmas: God is faithful and God keeps His promises. What God has spoken cannot be broken. What God says will happen does happen. God’s Word is sure. He’s a faithful God Who always keeps His promises. That theme runs through this passage.

There are two sections to this long narrative we’re going to look at. The first is verses 57-66. It

is the setting or background for the song. The second section is the song in verses 67-80, the song or hymn of Zacharias. Let's look first at the setting or background of Zacharias' song in verses 57-66.

Luke records in verse 57 that "Elizabeth's full time came." The idea in "full time" was not just that it was time for her to give birth, but it was time to fulfill God's promise that He had made to Zacharias the aged priest and husband. Elizabeth and her husband, Zacharias, were beyond the age of child-bearing, but miraculously God allowed her to get pregnant with this child. He would be John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. John would anticipate the coming of the Savior.

So the "appointed time," as some render that, "came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son," verse 57. God had promised, in Luke 1:13-17, that Zacharias would have a son, and his name would be called John. God is faithful and always keeps His promises.

Verse 58, "When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her." Isn't it interesting that Elizabeth gives birth to this son, and the Scriptures refer to it as "great mercy to her." The Bible says that children are a gift from God. The fruit of the womb is His reward; that they're blessings given to us by God.

Verse 59, "So it was, on the eighth day..."—that is, the eighth day of John's birth—"...that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. His mother answered and said, "No..."—in the Greek this is emphatic—"...he shall be called John. But they said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.' So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, 'His name is John.' So they all marveled. Immediately his mouth was opened..."—that's Zacharias' mouth was opened—"...and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God. Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, 'What kind of child will this be?' And the hand of the Lord was with him."

Then in verse 80, referring to John, it says, "So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel." Verse 80 caps off the episode with John the Baptist. It shows he grew and became strong and was in the desert until the day of his showing unto Israel. So God is faithful; He promised Zacharias that he would have a son, he would be forerunner of Messiah and his name was to be John. God always keeps His promises.

Remember Zacharias had not believed the angel's message, and because of that, he was struck dumb; he couldn't speak. There is also indication from this story that he couldn't hear, as well. In verse 62, it says, "So they made sign to his father—what he would have him called." Evidently he couldn't hear and he couldn't speak, so they're doing signs. "What's the baby's name?" It's very cool when people do sign language. So they're doing charades with

Zacharias.

At eight days, the male child would be circumcised. It was a big party—not for the baby but for the people. In the Jewish custom of the Law, circumcision was a sign of the Covenant. So at eight days, they would circumcise the child, and everyone would gather together and they would name the baby. For eight days, you didn't have a name for your baby. They named him when he was circumcised. Now the cousins and relatives and neighbors are getting together, and it's awesome and they're excited and it's a boy. Zacharias was promised not only a child but that it would be a male child. Maybe the neighbors hadn't heard the story about the angel, so they were excited. Every Jewish family wanted a male child to keep the name of the family going.

They naturally thought his name was going to be Zac Jr. or little Zac or Zac II. But his mother was very adamant. As I said, the Greek language was very emphatic: "No; he shall be called John." John is a beautiful name, as I mentioned. The name John means "God is gracious" or "God hath shown grace." I love that. Everyone freaked out; they said, "No one in your family has that name!" It was customary that you would take someone's name in the family—usually the name of the father.

So they turned to Zacharias and asked, "What's the deal? Your wife wants to name him John. There's no one in your family by that name." Then Zacharias asked for a writing pad. A writing pad in those days was a piece of wood. It was a pre-IPad. It was a piece of wood with a thin layer of wax over it. They would take a stick and make the indentations of letters and figures in the wax. "His name is John."

And the moment he said that, his mouth was opened, his lips were loosed and he began to praise and worship God, which is our text of the hymn of Zacharias. The hymn of Zacharias is not focused on John, but it is focused on Jesus. John is the forerunner of Messiah. He comes first, preparing the way of the Lord, as the Old Testament prophesied He would come.

In this song of Zacharias, there are three reasons why he praises God. Number one, he praises God, because God kept His promise to David, in verses 67-71. "Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied saying..."—When anyone is filled with the Spirit, their lips are opened to praise God or to proclaim the Gospel—"...Blessed is 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, who have been since the world began; that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us."

Notice in verse 69, "...in the house of His servant David." God gave King David a promise. It's recorded in 2 Samuel 7. What happened was that David wanted to build God a temple. God just had a tent at that time. They had a tent in the wilderness called a tabernacle. When they got established in the land during the time of the Davidic dynasty, God was still dwelling in this tent. David had this beautiful cedar house. So he thought, I want to build God a house. He

called Nathan the prophet to him and said, "I want to build God a temple. That's my dream. That's what I want to do." Nathan the prophet said, "That's a great idea, David. Do all that's in your heart." The Bible said he turned and left the chamber of the king, he got outside and God spoke to Nathan and said, "No. You have to go back to the king and tell him that he cannot build Me a temple. He is a man of war and has blood on his hands. But tell him something else. Tell him that his son Solomon will build a temple, but then I will build David a temple."

In those words, God was telling David, through Nathan, that David would have a great-great grandson Who will be the Messiah, and He will "sit on your throne for ever and ever and ever." This is what is called by theologians the Davidic Covenant. God made an agreement. He made a promise with David. "You can't build me a house, but I'm going to build you a house, in that you will have a great-great grandson Who will be the Messiah. He will sit on the throne of David, and He will reign for ever and ever and ever. Of His kingdom, there will be no end."

We get this quite often on Christmas cards. Isaiah prophesied over 400 years before Christ was born in Isaiah 9:6-7. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace, there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this."

Many times in the Old Testament prophecies, the first coming of Jesus Christ, the first Advent, and what we know as the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, which is still future to us, are often combined together in one verse or one passage. That's what you have here in the song of Zacharias and in the prophecies of Isaiah in the Old Testament. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given." That's Christmas. That's the first Advent of Jesus Christ. "The Son is given" speaks of His divinity; "a child is born" speaks of His humanity.

The Bible teaches very clearly that Jesus Christ was conceived in the womb of a virgin, Mary, by the work of the Holy Spirit and that Jesus Christ was actually God and man in one person. One person; two natures. Fully divine; fully human. A human without sin, but fully human. It's called the hypostatic union; two natures in one person. Divine and human, Jesus Christ. No one before Him and no one after Him was the God-man. He came to redeem man back to God; He could lay His hand on God and lay His hand on man and bring the two together. Emmanuel is His name or "God with us." Christmas is God coming down in the form of a little baby.

So Zacharias speaks of Christmas, but then he goes on to say, "And the government shall be upon His shoulder." When does that take place? At the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. One of the things you need to make sure you don't miss at Christmas is the excitement of knowing that if God kept His promise that Christ came the first time—fulfilling over 300 Old Testament prophecies—then God will keep His promise, and Christ will come again. Jesus Christ will return. That's what excites me about Christmas; to realize God is faithful, and God keeps His promises. If God promised and it happened the first time, why won't it happen the second

time? Jesus Christ will return, and He will sit upon the throne of David.

I believe in a literal, visible, glorious return of Jesus Christ. Christ will return as King of kings and Lord of lords and that every eye will see Him. “For as the lightning that shines from the east to the west, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be,” the Bible says. He’ll descend onto the Mount of Olives and go down the Kidron Valley—it’s the trip we make when we go to Israel, which we’ll do in just a couple of months. We walked down that road. Jesus goes in the Golden Gate and comes into the city of Jerusalem.

We hear so much today about Jerusalem. Should Jerusalem be the capital of Israel? It’s going to be the capital of Messiah. Jesus is going to move His embassy there. He’s going to put His throne in Jerusalem. The Bible actually prophesied that in the last days Jerusalem will become a burdensome stone around the neck of the nations. It’s very significant that Jerusalem becomes this burdensome stone to all the world. What do we do with Jerusalem? Who gets Jerusalem? Jesus gets Jerusalem.

Jesus comes to fulfill His promise to David. That Davidic Covenant: that your Son will sit on your throne and will reign forever and ever, and “of the increase of His government and peace, there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.” I thrill at Christmastime when I realize that God is faithful, and He keeps His promises.

At His first coming, in verse 68, He came to redeem us. “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people.” That’s Christmas. He visited us; “God with us” or Emmanuel. He has redeemed His people. To redeem means to buy and set free. We are in bondage to sin. Jesus came to give His life upon the Cross to purchase our redemption.

So we have the Incarnation—He visited us; and then you have redemption—He redeemed us. This is the Christmas message. He came to buy us and set us free. It’s a picture of being in prison, the prison doors are opened and we are being set free. How? By the blood of His Cross. Jesus paid the price of our redemption to purchase our salvation and to set us free.

Notice in verse 69 that Jesus is our “horn of salvation.” That word “horn” in Bible language is symbolic of power. The horn of the animal is the place of power. They used it as a figure of speech for power. So it’s the power of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ.

Then also in Jesus’ Second Coming, He will save us from our enemies, verses 70-71. I believe he is referring to what we believe to be the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. “...as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who have been since the world began; that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.” When does this happen? When Christ comes again. When He sits upon the throne of David and rules in righteousness. The Bible says that “The nations of the earth will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears will become pruning hooks. Nations will not lift up sword against nation, neither will they learn

war anymore.” There will be peace on earth, as God predicted, through the Messiah, but not until He comes the second time. This is being predicted in verses 70-71. So Jesus came to set us free from the bondage of sin, and someday He will come and sit upon the throne of David.

There is a second reason in the song of Zacharias why he praised God or blessed God. It’s in verses 72-75. The song is like an Old Testament survey. He praised God because He kept His promise to David and because He kept His promise to Abraham. Zacharias sings, “...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.” Again here, we see the dual coming of Christ. We have Christ coming first to redeem us, to forgive our sins and Christ coming the second time to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords.

God not only made a promise to King David, but God earlier in history made a promise to Abraham, the first Jew who ever lived. He was a pagan in Babylon, and God called him out of Ur of the Chaldees, God revealed Himself to him and He made promises to Abraham. It’s called the Abrahamic Covenant. “I will make thy name great. Thou shalt be great. Thou shalt have many children. This land I promised to you.”

Then God made a promise in Genesis 22:18. “And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” The fact that it’s singular—“seed”—is not talking about the Jewish people; it’s talking about the Messiah. So through David, the Messiah would come and through Abraham, the Messiah would come. In Genesis 12, God made a promise to Abraham; in Genesis 15, He made a promise to Abraham; and in Genesis 22, He made a promise to Abraham that the seed would be Christ through Abraham’s lineage. If you study the genealogy of Jesus, you find that it goes back to David and back to Abraham. Abraham’s great-grandson will be Messiah, the Savior of the world.

What happens when the Messiah comes? What will He do? In verse 72, He will bring mercy; in verse 74, He will bring deliverance and freedom from fear; and in verse 75, He will bring holiness and righteousness. It’s a picture of what He does for us as Christians. He comes to us in His mercy, verse 72, “to perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant.” “It’s of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed.” “His faithfulness is new every morning.”

Secondly, God delivers us, verse 74. That He would “grant to us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear.” For Israel, that would be at the Second Coming, but for us spiritually, that would be right now. It’s when God forgives us and sets us free from Satan’s power.

Thirdly, that we might walk in holiness and righteousness, verse 75: that we would live “in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.”

So the promises have their fulfillment in Christ's first and Second Coming. It has the fulfillment in our lives when we trust Him and are saved by His mercy and delivered from the power of Satan. God brings freedom from fear. He produces His holiness and righteousness in our lives. What a picture that is. We have the reason that Christ came. God kept His promise to David, and God kept His promise to Abraham.

The third and last reason why Zacharias blesses or praises God in this song of Benedictus is because God has given us a new covenant, verses 76-79. "And you, child..."—now Zacharias begins to mention his son, John the Baptist—"...will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His way..."—Zacharias is talking about his son, John, who would go before the Messiah, Who would be Jesus—"...to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death; to guide our feet into the way of peace." So Zacharias is thankful that God kept His promise to David, that He kept His promise to Abraham and now he's thankful that God kept His promise and given us the new covenant. Zacharias is focusing on God's ministry and message, which would be the new covenant.

John, the forerunner of Messiah, was, of course, prophesied in Isaiah 40:3 and other passages; that he would go before or prepare "the way of the Lord." A footnote to this is in the Old Testament where you have the prophesies of John the Baptist that say "prepare ye the way of the Lord," it's in all capital letters—LORD. It indicates that it refers to Jehovah or Yahweh. In the New Testament, it is referring to Jesus. So the inference is clear that Jesus is Jehovah, or He is the Lord, for which John was the forerunner.

John was the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament preachers. That's why Jesus said, "Among those born of women there is not one greater than John the Baptist." He was calling people to repent and to turn to God. He would point the way to Messiah, Jesus Christ. The new covenant that he would introduce is given in Jeremiah 31 where God said that He would forgive our sins, He would write His laws upon our hearts and everyone would know Him, from the youngest even unto the eldest. So the new covenant was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ.

What would Jesus, in this new covenant, bring to us? He first would bring us the remission of our sins, verses 77-78. "To give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission..."—or "the forgiveness"—"...of their sins..."—and that would come to us—"...through the tender mercy of our God." Remember before Jesus was born, the angel told Joseph to call His name Jesus? Why? "For He shall save His people from their sins." The name Jesus, Yeshua or Jehovah Yeshua means "God saves" or "God is salvation." That was the very purpose for which He came.

Speaking of the remission of our sins, the forgiveness, the carrying away of our sins—when John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God that carries away the sin of the world." In the Old Testament, a scapegoat was used. We have that terminology. A goat

would be used, they would place their hands symbolically on the goat and pronounce their sins. Then the goat would be chased off into the distant hills. It was a picture of our sins being carried away. I don't know what they did if the goat turned around and came back. Freak-out time. You see the goat going over the hill and you say, "Thank God my sins have been carried away." Then the next morning there's a goat on your porch, and you say, "My sins have just returned." You start throwing rocks at the goat.

Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God Who carries away our sins. In the new covenant, God says, "Your sins and iniquities I will remember no more." That's good news. Jesus came to bear our sins and to carry them all away so that we could be forgiven. What a picture that is.

Have you ever been in debt? Sure you have. Think of a mortgage. You sign on the line that you're going to pay for the rest of your life. What a blessing to be debt-free, that your mortgage is paid. Any time I have a bill that says "Paid in full," I'm happy. It's paid for. Jesus paid a debt He didn't owe. We owed a debt we couldn't pay. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." "There is no one righteous; no, not one." There is no way we could get to heaven, so He came to rescue us, forgive us our debts, cancel our sins, to open the prison doors and to set us free.

Notice the second figure of speech or terminology used to describe Christ's coming used in verses 78-79. It was the picture of a dawning of a new day. That's why I introduced my sermon with the birds singing in the morning. It says, "...through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us." That's a description of Christmas. Christmas is the dawning of a new day. That's a great verse for a Christmas card. That's Jesus: "...to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death." So He came to set us free; to carry away our sins. And He came to bring the dawning of a new day, because the world was in darkness.

What a dark world it was before the birth of Jesus Christ. Man was living in ignorance and darkness. He came as the light of the world. He came to bring us into the light; "to bring us out of darkness into His marvelous light."

Thirdly, He came to bring us peace with God, verse 79. "...to guide our feet into the way of peace." In Romans 5:1 it says, "Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." That's awesome.

The Bible teaches that before we're saved or born again or converted, we're at war with God. The Bible says that the natural man or the carnal man is at enmity with God. He's not subject to the law of God; he's fighting against God. The etymology of the word "peace" actually has the idea of being brought together. As one. We're separated from God because of our sin. God is holy; we're sinful. But through the blood of the Cross of Jesus Christ, we can have peace with God; we can be made one with God. The truth is, once we have been forgiven of our sins, we have peace with God. Then, and only then, can we have in our souls the peace of God. The Bible says there is no peace to the wicked. When our sins are forgiven, we have this peace

with God; we're at one with God. I love that old hymn It is well. It is well with my soul.

You're not really ready to live until you've found that your sins are forgiven and you have peace with God. You were created to know God and to have fellowship with God. There's an emptiness in every human being that can't be filled with anything until you find God, and He fills that longing in your heart. Then the peace of God fills your soul and fills your mind. What a blessing that is. When Christ was born, the angels sang "Peace on earth. Good will toward men." Where is that peace? In Jesus Christ. It's found in a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. So Jesus comes to forgive our sins, to bring us the light of a new day and He comes to bring us peace with God.

So my question in closing is, has your debt been blotted out? Are your sins forgiven? Do you have peace with God? Are you right with God? Are you ready to die and go to heaven? Do you have the light of God in your heart? Have you been taken out of darkness? Are you living in His glorious light? He is the light of the world, and He came to "light" every man. Do you have the peace of God in your heart?

God always keeps His promises. Do you know what God has promised to do for you? To forgive you of all your sins. To make you His child. You can have a clean heart before a holy God. You can be born into His family, and you can have the hope of heaven, eternal life. Not because you're good. Not because you're religious. It's because you've taken the hand of Jesus Christ.

The Cross of Jesus Christ is God's Christmas tree. Jesus died on the Cross, God's Christmas tree, so that you can have a gift this Christmas. You know, when you open your gifts at Christmas, you don't pay people for them. They're gifts. Hopefully, they take the price tag off before they give it to you. But God's price tag is the death of His Son. It's free to you. It's a gift to you, but it cost God the life of His only Son. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him..."—or "trusts in Him"—"...shall not perish but have everlasting life." That's the gift of Christmas. The gift is everlasting life. The package it's wrapped in is Jesus Christ.

Do you want the gift? Then you have to take it. Receive Christ. You do that by faith. If you haven't trusted Jesus as your Savior yet, I want to give you that opportunity right now, to invite Christ into your heart this Christmas.

Let's bow our heads in a word of prayer.