

# THE CRESCENDO

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## Hearing Christmas Through the Song of Zechariah

Text: Luke 1:67-80

### Introduction to the Scripture

If you have or had an iPod for Christmas, what are the songs that would go on your playlist? We can all find tunes that work just fine to soothe the savage shopper within us, or to bring a tear of nostalgia to our eye, or even serve as fine background for eggnog sipping. But I mean, what would you play to help the deep meaning of these days reach that place of great need in the depths of your soul? If you were with us last week to hear the Song of Mary then you know that the Gospel writer Luke suggests to us several fine options. Today I'd like to invite you to listen with me to the next tune on Luke's playlist. It's the song we find on the lips of the priest Zechariah today. Just as Mary's Song become known as the *Magnificat* because of the Latin word for "magnifies" in its first verse, this song of Zechariah has traditionally been known as the *Benedictus*, because in Latin it opens with the words "Benedictus Deus Israel" – "**Blessed be (or praise be) to the Lord, the God of Israel.**" Let's listen to the song and its setting together... *[Reading of the Scripture]*

### The Day the Music Died

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth lived in a period of history when it seemed to many people like the music of God's grace had completely stopped. Just like tales still circulate today of people who heard Elvis live or were there when the huge hands of Rachmaninoff made a concert piano roar, there were stories still alive in Zechariah's the time of the days when the great prophets of God, had played the major venues of Israel.

The last of these great moral musicians had been the mighty prophet Malachi. Like so many prophets before him, Malachi sang of God's weariness and heartbreak over the covenant-breaking selfishness and superficiality of his people and that God was going to take action to change it decisively. He promised that a day was coming when "**the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.**" "**Suddenly, the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple.**" And just so that you don't miss it, "**I will send my messenger who will prepare the way.**" And then in his final recorded words -- actually the last words in the entire Old Testament – Malachi sings it again: "**Before that great... day of the LORD comes... I will send you the prophet Elijah. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.**"<sup>1</sup>

It went like this, this song of the prophets. Stanza 1: God is going to send a Messiah who will make things right. Stanza 2: This Messiah will bring tremendous blessing to Israel. Stanza 3: God's going to use his followers to bring light to the nations, just like he promised to Abraham millennia before. And Stanza 4: We're going to know that ultimate act is beginning, because just before the lights come up on that Messiah,

another powerful prophet in the line of that awesome prophet Elijah will come out on stage to warm us up.

This was the promise of God sung by the prophets and, poetically speaking, thousands in Israel lined up to buy tickets for the event, and talked about how excited they felt about the concert of the new kingdom soon to start, and then they waited as the curtain remained down and the stage stood silent for one-and-a, two-and-a, three-and-a, four... *hundred* years. To be exact, between the last words of Malachi and the first words of the New Testament, it was 420 years. Four centuries of silence.

### When God Is Silent

By the time Zechariah and Elizabeth were born, most people in Israel had given up listening for the sound of God's music. Oh they hauled out recordings of it occasionally. They'd read what the prophets had said; but hardly anyone believed that God actually did LIVE concerts anymore. To quote Don McLean's famous song, American Pie, "a long, long time ago" was "the day the music died." Just a few still expected to hear something from God and the parents of Zechariah and Elizabeth were apparently among them. They named him Zechariah, meaning "**God remembers**" and her Elizabeth, meaning "**Oath of God**" or "**God's promise.**" When the two kids eventually met and married, their names together formed the refrain, "**God remembers God's promises.**" How many, I wonder, joked about that at their wedding reception? "Sure God remembers his promises. That explains why we've got an immoral lout like Herod running our country and are paying taxes to Rome? God's kingdom is at work. His Messiah's just around the corner. The Elijah-like preparer of the way is tuning up his strings. Right."

The joke of Zechariah and Elizabeth's names became even more acute later on, as Luke 1:6-7 makes clear. Luke says: "**Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.**" In Genesis 17:1-4, God had made this promise to Abraham: "**I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers... You will be the father of many nations.**" Zechariah and Elizabeth had been as faithful as Abraham, "**but they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.**" In other words, not only had something as big as their prayer for a Messiah not been answered, but their prayer for something as relatively small (and socially essential) as a baby had met with total silence from heaven.

Some of us understand that experience, don't we? Sometimes we yearn and pray and nothing changes. Sometimes we trust and obey and nothing happens. "I thought you promised that you would never leave me nor forsake me. I thought you promised that all things would work together for the good for those who love you. I thought you promised that those who waited on you would have their strength renewed. I thought you promised. So where's the trumpet sound of your voice? Where's the melody line of

your providence? Where are the violins of your grace? Why has your music stopped, God?"

I've been through seasons in my own spiritual journey when I haven't been able to hear the divine music or see the Conductor's hand moving and I've just gone through the motions. Sometimes God can seem so silent for so long you begin to wonder if his music was real in the first place. Do you understand that? It had to be that way for Zechariah when in Luke 1:13 a messenger from God suddenly appears to Zechariah and tells him: "Guess what? God HAS remembered his promises to you and to all of Israel." The Angel Gabriel goes on to sing a tune eerily like the prophet Malachi's last words: **"Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John... And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."**

In other words, the Messiah's Concert is about to begin, and your son will be the opening act Malachi foretold. Can you blame Zechariah for saying, as he does in Luke 1:18, "Wait a minute. Is this another one of those false promises? Are you selling me a ticket to another one of those 'we're not really sure when it's going to start' concerts?" **"How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."** To that, **"The angel answered, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.'" Isn't that just like God? There are times when I have such questions to ask God. I want to know where and when and how and why his purposes will be accomplished and He simply dodges the questions. He says: "You are on a need to know basis with me and you don't need to know." That is, basically, what the angel Gabriel says here: "I'm speaking on God's authority. Here's what you need to know. I'm not telling any more." And then the angel confers upon Zechariah something which looks like a curse but, which by the end, I hope you'll see is actually a blessing. **"And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."****

### **The Day the Music Returned**

If you listened to the scripture lesson read earlier today, then you know that the promise of God, spoken through Gabriel, did indeed come true at the proper time. Elizabeth was indeed given a baby. He grew up to be the mightiest prophet since Elijah, a man of whom Jesus said in Luke 7:28: **"I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John."** You know that Mary too bore a child and what became of him. And you also know that Zechariah got his speech back when all this happened. The song Zechariah goes on to sing tells us something very important about Christmas and accounts for why I have entitled this message "The Crescendo." *Crescendo* is an Italian word meaning "growing." As most of us know, in musical terms, a crescendo is when the music grows louder and louder till it reaches a peak. In Zechariah's Song we hear getting louder and louder a message about the nature of the salvation that the coming of Christ brings.

At this point in history, the Jewish people have a very fixed mental model about salvation. They think of salvation almost completely in external and material terms. If the Messiah ever did come, his job would be to throw off the oppressive yoke of Rome, the external enemy of Israel. He'd return them to the material prosperity they'd enjoyed under King David and Solomon. And this view of salvation persists to our time. To this day, people often look to God to help them throw off their external enemies and build up their material well-being. "Oh, God, deliver me from my creditors, from the tax man, from that person who bugs me, from these godless people or those people with other gods. Save me from that political party or from that Christmas party! Deliver me from my physical infirmities; help me pay all the bills I've racked up; empower me to stay popular and upwardly mobile."

Don't get me wrong: God clearly cares about our external and material life. This is one of the beliefs that sets Christianity apart from most other religions. The biblical worldview holds that God highly values the needs of the body and the structures of the physical order. Jesus would not have taught about money and justice, interceded in conflicts, healed diseases, and fed people as he did were that not true. Historian Rodney Stark has recently written a provocative book that details how Christian principles and communities have lifted the economies and liberties of entire societies in which they took root.<sup>2</sup> And yet the radical message that is rising toward a crescendo in Zechariah's song is that the salvation Christ brings is first and foremost of an internal and relational nature. I say *toward* a crescendo because Zechariah doesn't fully get this yet. He still speaks in verses 71 and 74 of how God will act to save us **"from the hand of all who hate us"** and **"to rescue us from the hand of our enemies."**

And yet, as he sings at the end of verse 74, Zechariah is starting to see that, somehow, through the birth of the child Mary carries, God is going to do something more wonderful than protect them from Grinches and fill up their stockings. He is going to restore them to relationship with Him. It will be out of the health of this internal relationship that will flow salvation in the other senses. God is going to make it possible for his people **"to serve him without fear"** and to live in **"holiness and righteousness before him all [their] days."** As Zechariah sings in verse 77, God will **"give his people the knowledge<sup>3</sup> of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,"** not by their own action, but **"because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven."**

What's not clear, of course, is whether or not Zechariah could fully perceive how this would happen. As he gazed into the face of his baby boy John, or patted the belly of his cousin-in-law Mary, could Zechariah have possibly known where the Crescendo of God's saving grace would reach its peak? But we know. It would be 33 years later and atop a hill outside Jerusalem. It was there that God showed us what holiness and righteousness in the flesh fully look like. It was there that God showed us the perfect pitch of his mercy. It was there that Amazing Grace was sung with its original words: **"Father, forgive them; they know not what they do."**<sup>4</sup>

## When We Are Silent

There is a moment in the magnificent Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah that remains most significant for me. The crescendo is building higher and higher till it feels like the voices can't possibly maintain the intensity nor the building contain the glory. And then just before the choir explodes with the final "Halle-lujah!" there is a moment of near perfect silence. Do you know the moment? I always wish it were just a bit longer than it is. I want time to take in the wonder of who God is and what He's done in Jesus, and let that draw me to Him – before the last Hallelujah is sung and the glory passes by.

No wonder Zechariah's Halle-lujah is so powerful and remembered. God gave him *nine months* of silence to contemplate the glory. Can you take even a moment of quiet right now to contemplate it yourself? Here's what the Song of Zechariah and the reality of Christmas tell you. God hears and remembers his servants, even when He seems silent. God keeps his promises to his children, even when you don't see Him working or like His timing. God offers you salvation, even though it might not be the external or the material fix you want. Because of his tender mercy, God extends to you forgiveness of your sins and his friendship forever if you will but receive his grace. What do you say or sing to that? Here's what I do: **"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel."** Praise be to the Lord. Halle-lujah. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Malachi 4:2, 3:1, and 4:5-6

<sup>2</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*. New York: Random House, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> When you hear the word "knowledge" in Scripture, think "experience." The biblical understanding of knowledge is of a holistic, life encompassing knowing.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 23:24