

**Zechariah's Song:
Blessed be the Lord, Who Has Redeemed His People**

Luke 1:67-79

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

*68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
69 and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
72 to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
74 that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Introduction: What Does It Mean to Bless the Lord?

"Bless the Lord, O my soul!" So begins one of my favorite psalms, Psalm 103, and the chorus of a very popular worship song, "10,000 Reasons." But what do we mean when we sing, "Bless the Lord!"? Last week, we said that when Mary sang, "From now on, all generations will call me blessed," she meant not that she would be considered exalted or worthy of high honor but that she would be considered blessed by God, fortunate, highly favored, given much grace and kindness from God. In the local vernacular of 2016 America, we might even say that she was "lucky," except we know that luck has nothing to do with the matter. So, is this what we mean when we sing "Bless the Lord!" Is this what the opening line of Zechariah's song means, that God is well off, blessed, fortunate? I think I can understand what it means when we say that God blesses me, but how can we bless God?

Well, the confusion between the Song of Mary and the Song of Zechariah comes largely from the fact that we use one word in English to translate two different words in the original Greek. Mary sings that all generation will call her *makarizo*. Zechariah, on the other hand, sings "*Eulogetos* the Lord God of Israel" *Makarizo* means blessed, fortunate, favored, well-off, happy. *Eulogetos* literally means spoken well of or highly praised. We do reflect this when we pronounce things carefully: "all generations will call me blessed." "Bless-ed be the Lord God." So, when we bless God, we speak well of Him, praising His name. It does please God when we praise Him, but our praising does not make Him any better off.

So, why does Zechariah praise the Lord? Last week, we saw that good worship music focuses on praising God for who He is and what He has done. Mary's song praised God for His favor to her and to all of His people and focused on God's strength, mercy, holiness, sovereignty and faithfulness. We'll see some of the same emphases in Zechariah's song today.

One key difference between Mary's song and Zechariah's song comes in the introduction, where we're told that "Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied." So, we're explicitly told that Zechariah's song is a prophecy.

A. What the Lord God Has Done, vv. 68-69

*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
69 and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old*

By the power of the Holy Spirit filling him, Zechariah is able to see very clearly what is really happening. His son, John, is not just a miracle baby given to an older couple; he is being given to play a vital role in what God is doing as God is visiting and redeeming His people. Zechariah knows that, after so many centuries of waiting, God is now, at last, visiting and redeeming His people through the horn of salvation He is raising up in the house of David, in perfect fulfillment of the words of the prophets.

Like Mary's song, Zechariah's song is rich with the language of the Old Testament. While Mary's song is most heavily influenced by the psalms, Zechariah's song is more heavily influenced by the prophets, especially Malachi, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

What does Zechariah mean when he says that the Lord has visited His people? During the Christmas season, we may go visiting family and friends, but that's not the kind of visiting in view here. This visiting is the kind that Jesus names in Matthew 25, when He separates the sheep from the goats. He commends the sheep by saying, "When I was in prison, you visited me." Now, what is the difference between visiting your family for Christmas and visiting someone in prison? Well, one is a social activity (or obligation) while the other is an act of mercy and compassion.

So Zechariah understands by the Holy Spirit and praises God for looking upon His people with mercy visiting them with compassion. But God doesn't just visit. Because He is God, when He has compassion for His people, He is able to bring redemption. But what kind of redemption does He bring?

Some people have looked at the language in Zechariah's praising of God and have concluded that he was expecting a political deliverance, like almost everyone else in Israel in his day. They say Zechariah envisioned Jesus as a military-political warrior-Messiah. Certainly the language of his praising is strong with themes of deliverance from enemies:

He "*has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David*" – 'Horn' refers to authority and power, especially authority and power to conquer enemies. Think of how a ram or a bull uses its horns and you'll get an idea of the meaning of this word. Moreover, a reference to the house of David evokes memories of the warrior-king who slew Goliath and led Israel to victory over the Philistines.

Further, Zechariah sings, "*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*" – That certainly seems like a powerful deliverance from enemies.

But Zechariah is prophesying by the power of the Holy Spirit, so he can't be mis-guided or mistaken in his expectation of a redemption that would bring a strong deliverance from the enemies of God's people. Here's what we forget sometimes in our desire to distinguish between the expectations of the Jewish people for a political Messiah and what Jesus actually did by coming and dying on the cross: Jesus was and is a warrior-King Messiah who gives His people victory over all of our enemies. He did come to do battle with our enemy and to redeem us by bringing us freedom from the oppression of our enemies. The problem the Jewish people had was not that they expected a warrior-Messiah who would fight and overthrow their enemies and deliver them from bondage, it's that they mis-understood who their real enemies were and what their real bondage was.

B. What the Lord God Had Promised, vv. 70-75

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

⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies

and from the hand of all who hate us;

⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers

and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us

⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,

might serve him without fear,

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

So the redemption God promised is the redemption Zechariah praised Him for now bringing about. Zechariah specifically says that this redemption and this Messiah is what God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets long ago. It had been 400 years since the last prophet spoke promises to God's people, but Zechariah knew these promises and praised God for keeping them.

God promised to deliver His people, and Jesus was sent by God to accomplish this deliverance. Our enemies as the people of God are sin, Satan, death and hell. These should terrify us much more than Rome or Washington, DC, the Russians or the Chinese, ISIS or al-Qaeda. Their power is greater, their deadly intent more focused and relentless, the consequences of their destruction more lasting and severe.

But how exactly did God promise this salvation through the holy prophets?

Well, Moses was the first holy prophet, and he promised that God would later raise up a prophet for the people and that they should listen to Him. Jesus is the prophet Moses promised.

Through David's prophetic gifts in the Psalms, God promised one who would be king forever, seated at God's right hand. God promised that this One who would be the king would be rescued from death, would be a priest as well as a king, and would be the Son of God. Psalms 2, 16 & 110 especially foretell these things.

Through Isaiah, we get the clearest picture of this Savior among all of the Old Testament prophets, that He would Immanuel (God with us), that He would be mighty God and the prince of peace, that he would be born of a virgin, that He would suffer for His people's sins, and that he would bring deliverance to the poor and oppressed.

Jeremiah and Zechariah told that He would be a branch raised up from the root of Jesse's tree.

Jeremiah further called Him "The Lord, our righteousness."

Ezekiel and Zechariah said He would be the Great Shepherd of God's people.

Daniel prophesied that he would be "one like a son of man" whose dominion would be everlasting and world-wide.

Micah said He would be the Shepherd-King born in Bethlehem whose origins are from everlasting, who would be great to the ends of the earth.

And Malachi said He would be “the Lord whom you seek” who would suddenly come to His temple.

Zechariah’s song makes it clear what kind of deliverance from enemies God would bring His people when he concludes the first half of his song by declaring the purpose of God’s visiting and redeeming His people:

*“ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”*

The goal for God’s people is not political freedom or national independence, which had so often led God’s people into complacency and idolatry. No, the goal was that they might be able to worship God rightly, without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him. If the goal is this kind of worship, then it makes sense that Jesus was focused on confronting the Pharisees, the scribes and the rulers of the Temple in Jerusalem. These religious leaders were more responsible for keeping God’s people from worshipping Him rightly than the Romans were.

Even more so than corrupt priests and legalistic Pharisees, sin and Satan keep God’s people from worshipping Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness. Only redemption from our sins, only forgiveness and new life, only release from the oppression of our flesh and the devil can bring us into a truly right relationship with God and allow us to worship Him rightly. This is what Jesus had come to do and what Jesus alone could do.

Because of Jesus’ redemption, fear is removed. We no longer fear condemnation for our sins because He has already been condemned in our place. We need no longer be overwhelmed or weighed down by the guilt of our sin, because He has borne the guilt of our sin in His body on the tree. Because of His perfect righteousness given to us, we can serve the Lord in righteousness. Because of His sanctifying work in making us holy to the Lord, we can serve the Lord in holiness.

C. What John the Baptist Would Do, vv. 76-77

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,*

Half-way through his song, Zechariah now turns his attention to his son, John. It shows us much about the heart of this godly man that this song, which erupts from his lips during the naming of his long-awaited newborn son, is so heavily focused on God and on Christ. He is thoroughly centered on the God who has sent redemption to His people and on the redeemer God has sent.

In prophesying the role his son will play in God’s redemption, Zechariah echoes Isaiah 40:3-4 and Malachi 3:1

A voice cries:

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain. – Isaiah 40:3-4*

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple – Malachi 3:1

John the Baptist was called to a preparatory role; he was the forerunner and not the Messiah. But this didn't seem to bother Zechariah. He knew that salvation for Israel would come from the house of David and not from the house of Levi, and he was a Levitical priest and not a descendent of David. Just like Mary, who might have complained about her role in God's redemption, so Zechariah might have grumbled about being the father of the forerunner and not the Messiah himself. But faith accepts the role God assigns with joyful gratitude for being included in God's story of redemption at all.

How would John the Baptist prepare the way for the Lord? By preaching. He would preach and proclaim to the people the knowledge of salvation and the way of forgiveness. These lines here, which Zechariah spoke about his son's ministry, make it even clearer that Zechariah understood the kind of redemption God was sending. He knew that he and his people needed salvation in the forgiveness of their sins.

As one whose job it was to slaughter animal sacrifices and sprinkle their blood on the altar and then enter into the holy place to burn incense before the Lord, he knew that our sins must be forgiveness if we are going to approach a holy God. He knew that it was our guilt that kept us alienated from God. And so he also knew that if his son was going to prepare the way for the Messiah, it would be by proclaiming to the people the way of salvation, the redemption coming for the forgiveness of their sins.

D. What Jesus Would Do, vv. 78-79

*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."*

Well, if John would prepare the way, what would the Messiah Himself do? Notice first the tender and poetic way that Zechariah describes the coming ministry of the Messiah. Because of the tender mercy of our God. God is not sending the Messiah out of anger against His enemies but out of mercy for His people.

Because of God's tender mercy, the sunrise shall visit us from on high. Here Zechariah is again recalling the language of Malachi. Malachi 4:1-2 says, *"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall."*

Zechariah has already stated that the enemies of God and of God's people will be defeated, which is what Malachi 4:1 says. Now he focuses on how those who fear the Lord will receive the benefit and blessing of the rising of the sun of righteousness. *"The sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings,"* Malachi said. Jesus would later weep over Jerusalem and say, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"* God sent John the Baptist and then Jesus with a message of forgiveness and salvation for His people, but their stubborn hearts and selfish agendas kept them from coming to the only one whose wings could heal their brokenness.

But for those who do come to Jesus, He gives light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. He does this by guiding our feet into the way of peace. All of us by nature sit in darkness. We live in a dark world, a world that rejects its Maker and seeks its own wisdom above God's. We are born in sin and live in sin, choosing to rebel against God's good ways. And because we sit in the darkness of our sin and rebellion, we sit under the shadow of death. It is

just a matter of time before death comes and overtakes us forever, dragging us down to an eternal separation from the God we have rejected all of our lives.

By the mercy of God, and by His tender mercy alone, this is not the end of the story for everyone. For God's people, for those whose hearts are changed by the rising of the sun of righteousness, we are brought out of the darkness, out of the shadow of death. He brings us out by guiding our feet into the way of peace. What is the way of peace? It is the way of receiving, believing, knowing, resting and following Jesus. He Himself is the way and He Himself is our peace, so when we walk in Him, we are walking in the way of peace.

Conclusion: What Should We Do?

Well, we have heard a beautiful song of praise, one that glorifies God for what He does in sending His Son to redeem His people. Zechariah has sung of the Lord God of Israel who keeps His promises and redeems His people. He has sung of his own son, John the Baptist, who went before the Messiah to prepare the way, and he has sung of the Messiah, the sun of righteousness who rises with healing in his wings. We know what God the Father did in sending redemption. We know what John the Baptist did in preparing the way for Jesus. We know what Jesus did in bringing us the way of peace. The only question left is: What should we do? How do we respond?

Well, where do you stand in relation to this redemption? Are you in the place of stubborn Jerusalem, refusing to come and find shelter in the wings of Jesus? Are you in the place of darkness and the shadow of death, content to sit in rebellion against God, refusing His redemption? Or perhaps you are in the place where you have received Jesus as Lord and Savior, but you are still living in fear, still feeling unable to serve the Lord without fear, in righteousness and holiness all of your days. Maybe that's because you're still secretly in love with the darkness, still clinging to shadows of death. Or maybe it's because you just haven't truly believed that Jesus is your righteousness and that you are free in Him. Or maybe you do know the Lord and are not living in fear of judgment, but some deep pain or some shameful secret is keeping you from singing His praises from the heart with joy and gratitude.

What should we do? No matter where you stand, there is only one thing any of us can do, what all of us must do: Come to Jesus. Come to Him, confessing your sins, Come to Him, confessing your fears and doubts. Come to Him, believing in His finished work, trusting His tender heart of mercy, resting in the good news of the salvation He alone gives. Come to Him, for He alone will be your way of peace, and he promises that anyone who comes to Him will never be cast out.