

ZECHARIAH'S JOY

Luke 1:67-80

Jennifer Hamady, a psychologist, author, and voice coach writes...

Children don't need to understand the composite of sand in order to play on the beach. They don't have to know the molecular structure of water to splash around in the waves and to lose themselves in tasting the raindrops that land on their tongues. Why do I sing? I sing to open up. I sing to share. I sing to discover who I am. I sing to discover who I want to be. I sing to transcend my body. I sing to expand out the boundaries of my emotions, to feel more, to be more. To grow. To fly. I sing to tell the story of what I've learned, and to ask others to share their stories with me. I sing to feel. I sing to love.

We sing to express what words and thoughts alone cannot.

John Wesley said, "Singing is as much the language of holy joy, as praying is of holy desire."

If you get the Advent story right — you don't merely respond with intellectual agreement. When you get the story of Advent right — there's a deep-soul stirring joy filled response that leads to singing.

THE VISITATION

Zechariah was a priest in Israel, and his wife Elizabeth was barren. And Luke tells us that they were righteous. Now that's important because often people mistakenly saw barrenness as evidence of unrighteousness. But Luke doesn't want us to make that mistake — Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous — and yet they were unable to have children. And now in their old age, they'd given up hope of ever having children.

Then Luke tell us that one day while Zechariah was serving in the Temple doing his priestly duties, he was visited by an angel. The angel said that Elizabeth would bear a son and they were to name him John. The angel would go on to tell Zechariah that his son would be a prophet to prepare the way for the Lord to visit and rescue his people.

Luke 1:18-20

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "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."

Zechariah didn't believe Gabriel's words and demands evidence. His posture is one of doubt seeking validation instead faith seeking understanding. So —the angel gives him evidence and a rebuke — He becomes mute and unable to talk for the duration of his wife's pregnancy. And finally, John the Baptist is born and it's time to give him his name.

Luke 1:62-64

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.

Zechariah's speech is restored. He praises the Lord because God has visited his people to bring about redemption.

Luke 1:67-70

67 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,

Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and his song is a mix of praise and prophesy. Zechariah says that God is to be blessed and honored with praise because He has visited and redeemed his people.

Now — Throughout the Old Testament, this idea of God visiting people occurs over and over again. It means that God is present in a special way for a purpose. When God comes to visit, it's not for casual conversation and hanging out. It's usually for one of two purposes — judgment or redemption...justice or grace. Now just to be really clear — God is to be praised for both his justice and his grace. The Bible never pits the justice of God against the grace of God. Both are intrinsic to his character.

God is right and loving to punish sin — and God is right and loving to extend mercy. It's his prerogative as God to decide how he administers his justice and grace.

That said — here Zechariah praises God for visiting his people to redeem them through the promised Messiah.

In fact, he bookends his song with the idea of God's visitation through the Messiah. Here in 68 we see that a horn of salvation has been raised up in the house of David and at the end in 78 he says — the sunrise shall visit us from on high.

What's the horn of Salvation from the House of David?

Animal horns were often used as weapons for fighting and protection. They became symbols of strength, power and victory. And they were also used as trumpets to sound battle cries and victories. They were a symbol of salvation.

Here's an example in Psalm 18:2...

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.

And now Zechariah says — Jesus is the horn of salvation who has come to visit his people and bring redemption. A title applied to Yahweh — the Lord God — is also applied to Jesus — whose very name Yeshua — means — Yahweh saves. But not only is Jesus the horn of salvation, he is the sunrise from on high in verse 78...

Luke 1:78 because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high

This has all the imagery of light from Isaiah 9:2 where the prophet says...

Isaiah 9:2

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

Jesus is the Light of the world who shines in the midst of our darkness. So here, the book ends of his song are about God visiting his people to bring redemption. This visitation is both a visit from the Horn of Salvation from the line of David and the sunrise from on high. As the son of David, Jesus is fully man. As the sunrise from on high — he is the Son of God. In Christ, the earthly and the heavenly dimension come together.

This is a poetic and lyrical reference to the divinity and humanity of the Messiah — Jesus Christ. Does Zechariah fully understand all that he's saying — probably not. Is the Holy Spirit inspiring a song to be sung by the church as we marvel at the humanity and divinity of Christ — absolutely.

Zechariah sings for joy, praising God because all of us live in a land of deep darkness. On our own, we're powerless to shine a light powerful enough to overcome the darkness.

The reason we're joyless and joy-deprived is because we look around and see a world of darkness and come to the right conclusion that it needs light. Then our culture tells us to look within for light. And when you start looking inside you come to the same conclusion that despite a few flickers...there's a lot of darkness in there.

And if that were the end of the story — it would be despair and gloom. But God being rich in tender mercy gives us the Light of the World to bring about redemption that produces a joy that's not contingent or based on circumstance.

Zechariah sings for Joy because God has not left us alone on our own to die in our darkness — He has visited us in the person and work of his Son, Jesus Christ and he can't help but to sing.

So, what fuels your joy? What causes you to sing? Is it that God has visited you? Do you have the song of Advent in your heart?

THE VINDICATION

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people...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.

Now Zechariah's song praises God that He shows mercy and remembers his promises to deliver and vindicate his people from their enemies. Zechariah ties God's mercy and covenants together. God in his mercy chooses to love and bless us — not because of our loveliness or deservedness — but purely because he has decided to bless us and show us favor and mercy.

We aren't deserving of God's favor — The reason God is merciful and gracious to us is because God is rich in mercy and love. That's it.

Ephesians 2:4–5

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.

God extends his mercy on believers while we're still in our sin — in our deadness — in our undeservedness — simply and beautifully because He is merciful. If you are asking — but why us? How does God determine who He will extend mercy to? The answer from the Bible is — I don't know. The Bible doesn't give us insight into how God chooses — just that he does so because He is the God of mercy.

Deuteronomy 10:14–15

Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day.

Moses says the reason God choose his people is because he decided to set his heart in love on them. And then if that weren't enough — God binds himself to his people through covenant. Covenants in general establish relationship between two or more parties based on promises to each other.

So when God binds himself to his people through covenants, He decides to be our God and we become his people.

Since creation, God has desired to create for himself a people who would thrive and flourish and enjoy him forever. But sin entered into our world and broke that relational bond. And because God is merciful, he works to redeem what's been lost. That's the essential storyline of the Bible. And as God works out his plan, he establishes several key covenants to work out his plan.

There's a covenant with Abraham to create a people of his own possession. There's a covenant with Moses to establish law and order. There's a covenant with David to provide a Messiah-King. And then as the storyline of the Bible unfolds the scope, depth, and breadth of the covenants increase.

Then as the Old Testament comes to a close, God reveals the New Covenant. This New Covenant expands the scope of God's people from it's Jewish origins to include people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. There's a deepening spirituality as God's presence moves from the Temple to the hearts of men and women.

The Bible calls this — The New Covenant.

We see this in Jeremiah 31 where God says that...

Jeremiah 31:31–34

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Also check out Ezekiel 34 and 36. There God talks about replacing our heart of stone with heart of flesh. He talks about bringing peace and restoration even rebuilding the ruined places and replanting the Garden of Eden.

This is God's New Covenant with humanity — That he will gather for Himself a people and give us a peaceful place to live — a rebuilt home to dwell with God forever. The Old Testament promises the New Covenant. Jesus accomplishes the New Covenant. And the rest of the New Testament applies the New Covenant.

Now — why is all this New Covenant History important?

Because Zechariah is saying — all those promises that God made hundreds of years ago are coming to fulfillment through the visitation of God's Messiah — Jesus Christ.

God has remembered his holy covenant and his praises God that he is seeing those promises realized right before his very eyes. Now, when the Bible says that God has remembered his holy covenant it's not that God has forgotten it or lost track of it.

That is impossible for an all-knowing and all-powerful God. This is the Bible's way of saying that God is bringing his promises into fulfillment.

Then, Zechariah goes on to talk about God saving his people from their enemies in verse 71 and 74. This song is a Holy Spirit-inspired mix of praise and prophecy? Here's where the prophecy part comes into play. Zechariah says that God will save his people from their enemies.

Now — Here — Zechariah is primarily looking forward. This is a prophetic, forward looking declaration of what God will do — He will deliver us from our enemies. Now those listening to him sing would have primarily thought he was singing about their current enemies — the Romans who occupied Israel.

While it's true that God delivers us from oppression and persecution, the New Testament never guarantees us complete and total protection and deliverance from our enemies today. In fact, the New Testament tells us to expect persecution and trials. And here's the Christian's hope — no matter the trial or persecution — even to the point of death — none of it will be able to take away the eternal life we have in Christ.

So...when you combine the mercy of God, with the covenant of God and with the deliverance of God — you get Vindication. Vindication is a great word. It means to be free from allegation or blame — to be justified. It also has a semantic range that means to be defended and delivered from attack.

In Christianity — God's people are vindicated in both senses of the word.

We are justified — our sins are forgiven and we're free from allegations and blame. The New Covenant promises that God will forgive our iniquity and remember our sins no more. And because we're in Christ, we are more than conquerors so that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Romans 8, Paul brings these two ideas together in a profound way...

Romans 8:31–39

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When the mercy, promises, and deliverance of God come together — we are vindicated in every sense of the word.

Then as this stanza comes to a close Zechariah tells us why God vindicates us...

Luke 1:74–75

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

Why are we redeemed? Zechariah gives us the reason. That we might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. We aren't freed to go and do as we please. We've been set free to serve the Lord with time, our talents, and our treasure. Because of what God has done for us — that should produce a holy desire in us to serve him with everything we have. Not dutiful reluctance — but impassioned gratitude mixed with a joy-filled desire to live out the life He's given us.

THE VICTORY

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.”

In these last verses, Zechariah speaks over his son. He tells him that he will go before the Lord, the Messiah to prepare the way. His work is preparation for the visitation of the Messiah.

In this last stanza, Zechariah speaks to the comprehensive victory of God through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the sunrise from on high — the Light of the World who came to shine his light into our darkness. In Christ, we have the forgiveness of sins through the tender mercy of God.

I love that phrase — the tender mercy of God. It speaks to life and death of Christ. Jesus became tender and vulnerable to bring about the mercy of God. Jesus became the man of sorrows so we could become a people of joy.

That’s why Jesus came. Listen to Jesus’s own words on why he came....

Luke 5:32 — I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Luke 19:10 — For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Mark 10:45 — For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

John 12:27 — “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.

Jesus came to accomplish salvation for his people, to forgive them of their sins, and to guide our feet to the way of peace. Zechariah says without the sunrise, we all sit in darkness under the shadow death. But Jesus Christ — the great sunrise comes and conquers darkness and defeats death.

Paul explains it this way in 1 Corinthians 15...

1 Corinthians 15:20-26

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

That is the comprehensive victory of God through Christ. Jesus accomplishes God’s plan of redemption. He comes and visits his people in the flesh to vindicate us in every sense of the word and to accomplish the comprehensive victory of God so that even death itself is destroyed.

And while his first Advent dealt the decisive blow to sin and death, his second coming — his second Advent will deal the final blow so that sin and death are destroyed forever. That’s why Advent is marked by singing and joy. Jesus accomplishes the victory of God.

Duke Kwon

“Advent, Christmas, and the hope of Christ’s return means that violence and oppression and injustice and sin itself—even death itself—have an expiration date. Advent means also that the new heavens and new earth, the perfection of this world and our own hearts in Christ, have a guaranteed on-time arrival.”

That’s why we sing at Christmas. Not because of sentiment. Not because of tradition. Not because of nostalgia. We sing because in Christ — we have life, place, and meaning.

We sing because in Christ — we have the guarantee that violence, oppression, injustice, sin and death itself have an expiration date.

***O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight***

***Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel***

Seven Mile, do you have the songs of Advent in your heart? Do you rejoice that God in Christ has come to visit us? Do you rejoice that God in Christ has vindicated us? Do you rejoice that God in Christ has accomplished his victory?

No other rejoicing will lead to sustaining, soul-stirring joy. Christians sing because God in Christ has come.