

Anticipation!

Luke 1:57-80

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for December 20, 2020

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Summary: The Christmas story is full of singing. From Mary, to Zechariah, to the angels themselves, songs and hymns of praise echo throughout heaven, heralding the coming of the Messiah on earth. Today, let's explore the meaning and impact of one of these songs. What caused a lowly, faithful priest to explode into heavenly, prophetic singing? Join us today to discover Zechariah's song.

Days were dark and difficult for a middle-aged composer named George who had recently suffered a stroke.

His health had finally been broken by an anxious and difficult life. The stroke had paralyzed the left side of his face, causing intense pain.

Most days, he could barely afford to pay his rent and was facing the possibility of debtor's prison. He was despondent and discouraged — frankly, life was dark and despairing.

One night in 1741, depressed and defeated, he wandered the lonely streets deep in thought trying to come up with a plan — some hope in life.

When he returned to his home, an envelope had been dropped off by a friend. His friend had wanted to encourage him, and he had simply copied off a number of verses — Biblical prophecies of the coming Messiah.

George Handel read through them, then tossed the pages aside and crawled into bed, but he couldn't sleep. Biblical phrases he had just read kept coming back to his mind — *the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light . . . it is the glory of God . . . Hallelujah!*

He got up and went to his piano and for the next 24 days, didn't stop writing. For three weeks straight, he composed, hardly stopping to eat or sleep, refusing to see anyone.

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Finally, a friend managed to get inside the apartment where he found George Handel surrounded by sheets of music strewn everywhere; tears were streaming down his face as he said to his friend, “I do believe I have seen . . . the greatness of God.” And Handel’s Messiah was soon completed.

For 400 years in Israel’s history, there had been little to sing about. Following the prophecies of Malachi, between Malachi and the Gospels of the New Testament, there has been no word from God. No prophet of God spoke either words of judgment or words of encouragement. It was a time which came to be known as the 400 years of silence.

But then, the most amazing things began to happen. Angel sightings, supernatural events, surprising joy — and music being composed again.

And from the most unlikely places.

In a village overrun by Roman soldiers where immorality was legendary, a teenage girl composes a song rich with Old Testament passages, a song of her own Savior and the miracle of her conception, though yet a virgin.

In fact, as Luke’s Gospel opens — just in the first 2 chapters, you have as many as 5 songs, and the theme running throughout them all is joy.

For the first time in 400 years, choruses of Hallelujah are beginning to echo

throughout the land.

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This was all such good news leading us to great joy.

Following Mary's song of joy, an old priest, well past his prime, has had a surprise baby boy born to his elderly wife and him. They live out in the country, away from the religious power players of the nation.

Yet God has chosen their miracle baby to become the next prophet — following Malachi — and their son will introduce the Messiah.

And now it's this old priest's opportunity to start singing — or more than likely what would have sounded like chanting — as he delivers his own composition of joy.

Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves, let's go back to where we left off, in **Luke's gospel account, chapter 1; now at verse 57:**

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they

came to circumcise the child.

Luke 1:57-59a

This was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant — the mark of a Jewish male in obedience to the law — which would

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have given John the necessary credentials as an Israelite prophet.

R. Kent Hughes, [Luke: Volume 1](#) (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 66

We're told here that everybody they know have shown up for this joyous ceremony and time of celebration which traditionally included the naming of the son, on his 8th day.

And it was customary in these days to name a son after his father or grandfather, especially if they were highly esteemed men.

Bruce B. Barton, [Life Application Bible: Luke](#) (Tyndale, 1997), p. 30

And who was more highly esteemed than a faithful priest of many decades who happened to have an angel visit him with the news that the Messiah was on His way.

So if anybody was going to be named after his father, this baby would certainly be Zechariah Jr.

In fact, notice the family drama that's breaking out here at the ceremony — the middle part of verse 59 tells us that:

*they would have called him
Zechariah after his father,
but his mother answered,
"No; he shall be called
John." And they said to
her, "None of your relatives
is called by this name."*

That's the Biblical way of saying, "Are you crazy? Nobody in your family is named

nothing in John that even sounds like Zechariah."

The neighborhood is in an uproar! I just have to wonder, who gave the neighborhood a vote? Where did they come from!

John — where did that name come from? You can't name him John — there's

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Has there ever been a time when your friends and family, even with good intentions, have pressured you to do something you know God did not desire? How did you respond to them? Did you follow God's will or their expectations?

But Elizabeth is refusing to budge, and Zechariah can't even speak yet, because he's still under the discipline of God for his earlier unbelief.

So here's Elizabeth, terribly outnumbered, but unmoved; she's evidently quite the firecracker — in spite of the entire family and the entire neighborhood insisting on Zechariah, Elizabeth says: "He's going to be called John."

I mean, nobody would tangle with this 80- year-old new mother. She's obviously learned from her husband writing it all out for her earlier, that Gabriel told him this

was God's choice to name their son, John — which means, God is gracious.

That's the message God wanted Israel to hear from His prophet: not just a message of repentance from sin, but a message of the forgiving grace of God.

But none of the neighbors are buying it; the family can't believe it; Uncle Henry and Aunt Myrtle and all the cousins are beside themselves — but Elizabeth won't give.

But they are convinced that she's choosing a name without Zechariah's consent — she must be out of line; and we know that because of what they do next; **verse 62** — they ask Zechariah.

Adapted from Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Volume 1* (Baker Academic, 1994), p. 167

Notice:

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."

Luke 1:62-63

He gets a tablet — this word refers to a wooden tablet covered with wax. And he writes something amazing here. He confirms what Elizabeth said earlier in **verse 60**, but he uses a different tense of the verb. He doesn't write, "He shall be called John", he writes: "His name *is* John!"

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It's already settled! What's more, he was already John, in the womb, before he was born. He's not being named today at this ceremony; he was already named before any of you showed up with your vote.

He was named "John" by God, a little more than 9 months ago.

And with that statement of obedience and humility, God reopens Zechariah's ears and mouth. And immediately, Zechariah begins to speak words of praise to God.

We're told in the next verse — I love this — that ***"fear came on all their neighbors."*** (v. 65)

That's the last time they will every try to name somebody else's baby.

Well, actually, the word can be translated ***"awestruck wonder"*** — they were filled with a sense of awe as Zechariah no doubt was finally able to tell them all about the angel Gabriel and the message from God.

They were filled with awestruck wonder; they are completely blown away; they know something supernatural was

taking place with this elderly couple and their newborn son.

Let me tell you, Messianic music is being heard in the land, once again.

Now Zechariah has been composing his own version of the Hallelujah Chorus — it's loaded with Old Testament passages and allusions — perhaps as many as 33 different connections to the Old Testament.

And he begins to sing — more like chanting, according to their custom — chanting these lyrics; this is Zechariah's Spirit-inspired masterpiece.

There are several stanzas in this composition, depending on how it's outlined; I'll break it down into three stanzas.

We'll call the first stanza:

The prophecy of Zechariah about God's salvation

Beginning at verse 68:

Blessed by 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.

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That stanza, by the way, was one long sentence. I'm not sure when Zechariah breathed!

You might have noticed that Zechariah is singing about the future in the past tense — He *has* visited us; He *has* redeemed us; He *has* raised up a horn of salvation.

These are called prophetic past tense verbs. He's singing about the future as if it has already come to pass — it was as good as done.

Hughes, p. 74

The Apostle Paul does the same thing in the New Testament where he speaks of the believer ***already seated with Christ in heaven (Ephesian 2:6)*** — by faith in Christ you're already there!

The salvation God provided you by faith in Christ alone is eternally secure; your reception into Heaven is in the future, but it is spoken of as if it's already happened. it's as good as done!

The moment you trusted in Christ for your salvation, you were redeemed, glorified, raised, and seated in heaven, in the mind of God who sees the

past and the future all at once.



Do you trust God's promises enough to presume that they have already happened? What promises from God are you trusting in today?

You're already there — guaranteed!

Now, in stanza number 2, you'll notice how Zechariah turns his attention to his son and literally sings to him about his prophetic ministry.

This stanza is:

The prophecy of Zechariah about the ministry of his son

Notice v. 76:

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."

Luke 1:76-78a

Can you imagine this scene — there hasn't been a prophet for 400 years. And now, Zechariah is holding a prophet in his arms. He's singing now directly to John — ***"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High . . . you're going to go before the Lord, our redeemer."***

I can't help but believe Zechariah's singing is interrupted with tears — both his and Elizabeth's — and maybe even Uncle Henry.

What a moment!

His ministry is described as one preparing the way for the Messiah.

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He's literally going to be the advance agent for Jesus Christ — *he will prepare the way.*

That expression was rooted in ancient history where good roads weren't the norm. Most roads were simply tracks across fields and as they led into towns, they were often rutted and muddy; the wheels of the carts would often mire down and get stuck.

If a king were traveling to visit a town, a lot of effort would be put into preparing the road leading into and through the town. It would often be leveled and drained and raised and paved with stone pavers for the royal chariot or carriage.

Charles R. Swindoll, [Exalting Christ the Son of God](#) (Insight for Living, 1987), p. 19

Early in the Roman Empire, those raised roads paved with stone pavers were called *highways* — they were called highways long before we called them highways.

And to this day, there's nothing like a good highway to get you where you're going. About a mile from my home, they're building the next section of Interstate 540. When they finish — sometime, I hope, before the rapture — I will be able to hop on it and in less than 15 minutes loop around to the Airport exit

— it won't take me 30 minutes; I'll be able to take the Airport exit, turn left at the light and in less than 15 minutes, pull into Cracker Barrel. Is that great or what?

Nothing like a good road.

John is going into spiritual road construction; he's going to announce to

the world that the King is on His way —
the royal Son of the Most High is coming.

John is going to build a highway with his
preaching for the Messiah to ride directly
into the hearts of those who will believe.

With that in mind, Zechariah's final stanza
describes this Messiah; this is:

The prophecy of Zechariah about the coming Sunrise

Notice verse 78 – the middle part:

*“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.”*

Luke 1:78b-79

What will the Savior, the Son of God do?

- He will release those captured by
the darkness;
- He will rescue those facing
inevitable death and eternal
judgment
- He will give inner peace to those
who know nothing of it.

This is a bleak and yet realistic
description of the human race –
throughout human history:

Adapted from Bock, p. 193

- living in darkness and despair

- facing inevitable death and
judgment

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- hungry for peace and satisfaction

The world here is described realistically: darkness, dying and despairing.

But the sunrise is about to break into the dark and despairing world.

Zechariah sings: ***the Sunrise from on high is on His way!***

- The Apostle Peter wrote that Jesus Christ was like a day dawning and a morning star rising in your hearts (***2 Peter 1:19***);
- John called him “the bright and Morning Star” (***Revelation 22:16***);
- Salvation is described as being rescued from the power of darkness and being brought into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (***Colossians 1:13***);
- Our mission as believers is to declare the praises – to sing the hallelujah’s – of those who have been called out of darkness and into this marvelous light (***1 Peter 2:9***);
- And we are promised that in the end, in the kingdom

of everlasting light, that we, the redeemed will actually shine with the brilliant light of the sun (***Matthew 13:43***).

The sunrise is on His way.

John’s Gospel will open by giving us the three reactions to the dawning of the sun and the coming of Christ.

There are those who won't recognize Him. He was not recognized for who He was — the true light which gives light to everyone (John 1:9).

There are those who won't recognize Him.

And there are those who will reject Him.

He came into His own, but His own did not receive Him (John 1:11).

Go out there today and:

- Ask people if they'd like to live forever and they'll say, "Yes!"
- Ask them if they'd like to live without sickness and disease and sorrow and they'll say "Yes!"
- Ask them if they'd like to live in in a beautiful paradise forever and they'll say, "Yes!"
- Ask them if they would be willing to follow Jesus and they'll say, "We want everything you've described, but we don't want Him."

There are those who won't recognize Him.

They are those who will reject Him.

But there are those who will receive Him.



Do you know anyone who needs to receive Him this Christmas season? How can you share the truth of the gospel with that person?

By the grace of God, their eyes are opened to the light. John's gospel goes on to describe this reaction — ***But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12).***

Those who receive Him are freed from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light ruled by the One who is called the Sunrise — the King of Light — whom we will one day see with our own eyes.

And in the meantime, we have every reason to sing Hallelujah to our Redeemer.

George Handel would take this song of prophecy from Zechariah and turn it into music.

*The people who sit in
darkness
and in the shadow of death,
have seen a great light —
the sun is rising —*



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and the light of His gospel

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*will rescue us from eternal
death;*

*and lead our feet into the
perfect peace of God.*

No wonder believers sing — hallelujah!

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