

The Song of Zacharias

Prelude to Bethlehem – Part II

Luke 1:5-25; 57-79

Introduction

There was a time in history when little singing was heard. For four hundred years, the music all but stopped. No prophet spoke for God and no composer wrote anything new from God. This time in history has been called, “the four hundred silent years”. These were the years between the last page of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. The heavens were silent and these four hundred years were dark indeed.

David Gooding wrote,

The night had been long and, for Israel, at times very dark. But through it all – through times of national success and disaster, through the conquest and the monarchy, through the exile and return – hope had persisted that the night would end and, as Malachi put it, “the sun of righteousness would arise with healing in his wings.” (4:2)ⁱ

Yes, there was this promise of a coming dawn; of the rising of sunlight like the world had never seen before. This was the last Old Testament promise that the Messiah’s daybreak would appear on the horizon of history . . . eventually. No one knew, however, when this promise would be fulfilled.

There was certainly little for the Jews to sing about during these days. Their nation had become shackled by religious tradition and their spiritual leadership was corrupt.

In addition, there were political challenges in their day. Luke’s gospel opens in chapter 1, verse 5, with the words,

In the days of Herod, king of Judea . . .

If there was ever a reason for singing to be silenced, it is the mention of Herod’s name. He was the Roman ruler over Israel and was insanely jealous of his throne. He had killed two of his sons who posed a threat to his rule, and had executed his own wife after he heard a rumor that she was plotting to poison him. He placed his favorite son in jail and then, had him executed after he tried to escape from prison.

Herod had taken the title, “King of the Jews”. He seethed with rage when visiting dignitaries from Persia came to him and asked, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?”

No one had that title except Herod. He was the King of the Jews. So, he ordered that every little boy in the region of Bethlehem be put to death. Hundreds of young boys were killed. The only music during that time, was the dirge of Jews lamenting their children.

When Herod finally died, diseased and insane, Roman historians wrote that he had stolen to the throne like a fox, ruled like a tiger, and died like a dog.

For the Jewish people, the dawning of Messiah’s day was about to come to pass. They did not know it though, and would have never dreamed it possible.

Isaiah, however, had prophesied that, before the daybreak of Messiah, a forerunner would be born whose task in life was to simply announce the coming of the Messiah. The birth of this forerunner would bring about a burst of music – a musical prelude to Bethlehem – a song that had not been

heard for four hundred years. And to this day, it is perhaps, the most ignored Christmas song in the world.

The Introduction of Zacharias

Before we get to the lyrics of this song, let us allow Luke to introduce the composer and his wife. Look at Luke, chapter 1. We will begin in verses 5 through 7.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.

Stop for a moment. The composer and his wife were missing the music they longed to hear. It was the music of the laughter of a child; the lullaby of the mother.

According to the text, they had prayed long and hard for a child. Like Hannah before her, Elizabeth had begged God for a baby, but time had slowly erased their hope.

There was also the Old Testament stigma and superstition related to barrenness, which gives us an understanding of their sorrow. The Jewish rabbis were speculating that seven types of people were unable to intimately walk with God. Their list began, "A Jew who has no wife". In other words, single men were considered less able to worship God than married men. Their speculation continued, as they added to the list, "A Jew who has a wife and has no child". In this era, childlessness was even considered valid grounds for divorce!ⁱⁱ

That is why verse 6 is so incredible! It tells us that,

They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

It would have been understandable for them to think, "Why bother?! God isn't doing His end of the deal. Why serve Him? It isn't paying off."

The thing they wanted most of all and prayed to receive over the passing years of their lives, was withheld from them.

What does it take to stop you from serving and worshipping God? What is the one thing that He has withheld from you that tempts you to stop singing in your heart unto the Lord?

What I love about this story, is that God would select, from among approximately 20,000 active priests, this man named Zacharias. In the eyes of his people, he was an old man who had not made any significant contribution in the priesthood. His wife was a descendant of Aaron himself, and even had the name of Aaron's wife, but to all around her, she was serving under God's displeasure.

In fact, when she does indeed conceive, she says, in verse 25,

. . . [God has] taken away my disgrace among men.

Hovering over this godly couple were the clouds of sorrow and the rumors of shame. Who would have imagined that when God began to tune up the musical instruments of messianic songs, after four hundred years of silence, He would choose this priest to deliver the music of hope to the world?!

Look at verse 8.

Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division

An estimated 20,000 men were serving as priests during the days of Zacharias. There were so many of them that they were divided into twenty-four divisions. On any given day, fifty-six priests would be serving in the temple for a one week period. Each priest performed this duty twice a year. After their week of service, they would return to their home, where they made their living.

So that there would not be any contention, jealousy, or jousting for position, lots were cast to determine which job each priest would perform each day. We know, from Jewish writings, that a priest could only have the honor of offering incense once in his lifetime. It was a ministry inside the holy place, just outside the holy of holies. The burning of incense signified that the prayers of all of Israel were ascending to the nostrils of God who was pleased with the offering.

Many of the approximately 20,000 priests never had the honor of offering the incense. Notice what happened in verse 9.

according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

Suddenly, Zacharias is facing the most important moment of his priestly office. He had been chosen for the incredible honor of standing for all of Israel inside the holy place, while the Jews knelt outside to pray.

Let me describe it for you. The temple had been rebuilt by Herod in an attempt to win popularity with the Jews. It was a massive white structure with gold plated doors. When the priests, who had been chosen to enter the holy place, walked up the stairs to enter within, they would strike a gong which was located at the door. The sound would be heard throughout the city. All of the people, who were not able to make it to the temple, knew the time was near to fall on their knees and pray. Three chosen priests would walk into the holy place. One would clean the altar of incense, one would straighten the loaves of shewbread, and the third would trim the wicks on the candle stand. They would then retire and leave, except for one priest. The remaining priest would be the priest that had the privileged position of sacrificing incense.

When the other two priests had left, an instrument sounded. Upon hearing that sound, the entire group of fifty-two priests would fall to the ground. All of the people who had come to worship would also prostrate themselves. Everyone in the city would pause to kneel and then, silence would envelop the entire city. Why? Because the chosen priest was about to sprinkle incense over a live coal on the special altar. The puffs of sweet smelling smoke going up would represent their worship, their prayers, and their communion with a gracious, holy and forgiving God. What an awesome moment.

The heart of Zacharias was no doubt beating wildly. His aged hands were probably trembling with awe and excitement. And, just as he poured out the incense, he became aware that he was no longer alone. Look at verses 11 and 12.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him.

Why was Zacharias afraid? Because this could have been a messenger of judgment; a messenger of God's displeasure, not to mention that angels had not been seen for four hundred years! Continue to verses 13 through 17.

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been

heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.

You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.

It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

The angel is quoting from the book of Malachi! The four hundred years of silence are over. God is speaking again!

So, what is the message to Zacharias? He and Elizabeth are going to have a baby and that baby will become the prophet who will introduce the Messiah to the world.

Wow! What news! What incredible news!

Zacharias said to the angel, "Praise be to God, for He has answered our prayer and His power is able to bring the womb to life and perform His will among the sons of Israel."

No! He did not say that, did he?! That is the revised version of what he wished he had actually said. Verse 18 gives us his actual words.

Zacharias said to the angel, "How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."

Just as Abraham and Sarah did not believe God's promise of a baby boy to be born in their old age who would be the forefather of the Messiah, so Zacharias does not believe the promise of a son who will be the forerunner of the Messiah.

The angel responds in verse 19.

The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."

There is a play on words in this verse that is lost to the English reader. Zacharias said, "I am an old man," and the angel said, "I am Gabriel".

In other words, “You might be an old man, but I am Gabriel. Your wife might be advanced in years, but I stand in the presence of an eternal God.”

This is the same angel who stood before Daniel and announced the Messiah’s kingdom. Now he stands before this country priest and announces the imminent birth of the Messiah.

Continue to verses 20 through 22.

“And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.” The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute.

It was the custom of the priest to stand on the porch, after leaving the holy place, to give a blessing to the people. But Zacharias’ tongue which had uttered unbelief, was struck speechless – and he would have nine months of silence.ⁱⁱⁱ

Can you imagine his frustration? He was supposedly the mouthpiece for God and he had the news of the century! He had news from God that had not been heard for four hundred years, yet he cannot utter a single sound.

Look at verse 23.

When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home.

I would imagine that he is driving that mule way over the speed limit. He hurries through the front door motioning for Elizabeth to get off her rocking chair and come over into the light. He tries to talk with his hands.

“What is it Zacharias?!”

He motions, “Two syllables, first letter is a ‘B,’ rhymes with ‘maybe.’”

She just cannot guess and is not getting the story, so finally, he writes it out for her, “You’re going to have a baby.”

Elizabeth probably patted him on the head and said, “You need a good cup of tea.”

“No, no, no, I know it’s true. You’re going to have a baby.”

She asks, “Who told you?”

“An angel told me.”

She says, “Maybe you need something stronger than tea. An angel told you I was going to have a baby?”

“Yes! And this baby will be named John. He’s going to be like Elijah of old; he will bring revival to Israel and introduce the Messiah to our people.”

Look at verses 24 and 25.

After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, “This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men.”

The Song of Zacharias

Now, skip ahead to verses 57 through 64.

Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son.

Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her.

And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father.

But his mother answered and said, “No indeed; but he shall be called John.”

And they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name.”

And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called.

And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, “His name is John.” And they were all astonished.

And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God.

Through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, a joyful Zacharias begins to sing a prophetic hymn. He is probably chanting it, like the priests did in this day, and it is probably broken periodically, by emotion and tears.

Four stanzas to the song of Zacharias

There are at least four stanzas to Zacharias’ song. Let us listen to them.

Stanza #1 – Israel’s salvation

1. The first stanza is about Israel’s salvation.
Look at verses 68 through 71.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people,

and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant –

as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old –

salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us

Stanza #2 – God’s sovereignty

2. The second stanza is about God’s sovereignty.

Look at verses 72 through 75.

To show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant,

the oath which He swore to Abraham our father,

to grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear,

in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.

Stanza #3 – Zacharias’ son

3. The third stanza is about Zacharias’ own son.

Notice that Zacharias begins to sing to little baby John, in verses 76 through 77.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways;

to give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins

Stanza #4 – The Savior

4. The closing stanza is about the Savior.
Look at verses 78 and 79.

Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us,

To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

What a great name verse 78 includes for our Savior! What a great name for our Savior that is often overlooked. The name is, “Sunrise,” and He is coming, “. . . to shine upon those who sit in darkness . . .”.

Peter wrote in I Peter, chapter 2, verse 9b, that, . . . *you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light*

Before we close, I want to tell you the meaning of the composer’s name, his wife’s name, and their son’s name. They are highly significant. The name:

- Zacharias means, “God remembers”;
- Elizabeth means, “the promise of God”;
- John means, “the grace of God”.

If you put the names together, you have the story of redemption. God remembers, His promise, and delivers to mankind, His grace.

Conclusion

That is not just true for them, by the way. Just as God remembered them, so He remembers you. God has not become so busy that He has overlooked your disappointment. He has not become so overworked that He has misplaced your prayer request. God knows. God’s plan, God’s way, has simply yet to be revealed.

Like Zacharias and Elizabeth, who kept serving and trusting, we should keep serving and worshiping. They learned to desire Him more than anything or anyone else.

When you are like Zacharias and Elizabeth, you will not be perfect, but you just might find God’s Spirit composing, within your own heart, a song that you can also sing. It will be a song like the song of old Zacharias; a hymn to sing, all year long.

A hymn of your own; of your own salvation; of the demonstration of God’s sovereignty in your own life; of the wonderful timing of God in delivering not only to the world the news of the Messiah, but to your own heart the gospel of this One who is your everlasting Sunrise; the light of the world; the Savior; the One who brought you out of darkness and into a marvelous light.

Sing the song of Zacharias.

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ⁱ Charles Swindoll, The Origination of Something Glorious (California, IFL Publishers, 1994), p. 19.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, Luke, Volume One (Wheaton, IL, Crossway Books, 1998), p. 26.