



Sermon Growth Guide

December 10, 2023

Zechariah's Song



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Sing We Now - Zechariah's Song

Luke 1:67-80

Key Verse: Luke 1:68

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.”

Big Idea: God oftentimes fulfills His promises in surprising and dramatic ways, and our response is to joyfully praise Him.

Foundations

Advent and Christmas are seasons where the playlist of life changes from what we normally listen to, to songs about joy, peace and the coming of Jesus to redeem humanity. The birth of Jesus was accompanied by many *songs* (prophetic and celebratory poetry) which flowed from the hearts of those connected to the Savior's birth.

Today's scripture is Luke 1:67-80 and is known as *Zechariah's Song*. Zechariah was a priest and was married to Elizabeth. Both were of old age and were childless. Zechariah had been selected to burn incense in the Temple and there the angel Gabriel came and announced that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a child and they were to name him John. Zechariah questioned Gabriel about this and for his disbelief, Zechariah was unable to speak until John's birth.

To be childless in that age and culture was an embarrassment and had a social stigma. In Luke 1:24 we read that Elizabeth conceived but kept it hidden for five months. She offered these words of thanksgiving, “Thus the Lord has done for in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

When the time came for John to be born, there was much rejoicing, and upon the announcement of his name, Zechariah's speech was restored and he became filled with the Holy Spirit. *Zechariah's Song* is what flowed from his heart in response to what God had promised and delivered.

Understanding God's Word

Read Luke 1:1-80. There are a lot of verses to read, but it's important to understand today's passage in the full and proper context.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had much to celebrate. After years of barrenness they were now parents. But their child was no ordinary child. John was to be a prophet and the one who would prepare the way for the birth and ministry of the Savior, Jesus.

As you read *Zechariah's Song* in verses 67-79, what themes do you notice? How is the character of God described? What promises of God are included?

Applying God's Word

In what ways has God intervened in your life and turned disappointment and frustration into joy and thanksgiving?

How have you seen the promises of God fulfilled in your life?

When you consider that there are several hundred prophecies in the Old Testament about the coming and mission of the Messiah, and that Jesus fulfilled those prophecies, how is your faith affected?

Witnessing God's Word

Your story is an important one to tell, especially regarding how God has been at work in your life. And good news is always worth sharing! Is there a particular God-moment in your life that you can share with others?

I have noticed we spend more time preparing to celebrate Christmas than we spend celebrating Christmas. Why is that? Doesn't that seem like an unhappy accident? We take hours and hours decorating, gathering gifts, preparing schedules, sending out invites, or, at church, setting up musicians and choosing liturgies and getting the info out so people can be invited, and then it all goes away in an hour or two (or more if you're in the choir). At home the presents are ripped open in a heartbeat leaving only the hangover—cleaning up, recovering rest and figuring out what you can return. We prepare more than we celebrate.

It's not an accident. God shapes us more in the waiting and expecting than in the moment. The weeks leading up to Christmas are called Advent, a Latin word meaning "the coming to"—the arriving, the onset. But that's not the name we give to December 25th, it's the name we give to this season of waiting when we know the arrival is pending. We are held in suspense. The suspense we feel for four weeks is only a thin shadow of the deep suspense we find in the history of God's people in the Bible. Waiting and waiting for God to move. Longing for a change. How long, O Lord? The prophets waited and the people longed and the time just stretched and stretched. God shapes us in the waiting.

We are taking time to study the songs of the birth of Christ in Luke. **Sing We Now.** No event in human history inspired more songs than the birth of Jesus. If Mary's song was a rebel song, Zechariah's Song is a prophet's song; it's a song of hope. Hope is critical to life, isn't it? When people lose hope they try desperate things. I don't know how anyone could survive without hope. Where are you developing in hope, growing in hope? Where is God stretching you to wait with hope? These are the things that shape us. A marriage is not defined by the wedding ceremony. It is defined by years and years of little things, small faithfulnesses,

steady self-sacrificing loving acts. We are shaped more by days of waiting and uncomfortable watching with hope than we are with the consummation or the celebration of the thing itself. Let's sing a song of hope today.

Zechariah is Elizabeth's husband. We met Elizabeth last week when Mary went to see her. Elizabeth was pregnant herself at an old age with a child we know as John the Baptist. The Gospel of Luke starts the story of Jesus with Zechariah and Elizabeth. It starts with Zechariah the priest doing his ordinary, regular, faithful work. It is in the ordinary days, the ordinary moments, that's where the Lord is working on you. Now, you would work your whole life waiting for the opportunity to offer the incense which each priest got to do only once. Zechariah's name finally came up. This was the pinnacle of his career. As he stepped inside, an angel appeared to tell him he and Elizabeth were to bear a child. Zechariah doubted that. "Eh, we're a little too old." That was the last word out of his mouth. "The angel said to him, '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. 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 appointed time.'" (Luke 1:19-20) "You don't tell me what's possible; I tell you!" Nine months of silence. Nine months with no voice. Waiting and watching uncomfortably, with hope. When John is born, so is this song. Zechariah is set free. A song comes out of silence. The early church described the birth of Jesus as God's Word spoken out of silence. The prophets were silent for 400 years. Have you ever sent a text then waited and watched the blinking bubbles? You need a word! It's uncomfortable to wait. It's hard to hope, isn't it, that the word that comes will be good. "What is he waiting for? Why is she struggling with her reply? Oh no! Finally, a word comes. Nervous face emoji? What does that mean?"



Zechariah's song is a great word, a clear word. It is poetic and balanced, full of truth and stocked with Scripture. It sits in a structure called the chiasm; the sequence of ideas in the first half is reflected back in the second half. A-B-C-D-D-C-B-A. A "CHI" is a Greek letter we would call "X," or in jolly old English, "a cross," two parallel lines twisted together. So, this is called a chiasm. Try to look at the whole thing and watch for these terms going in and then backing out: coming, people, salvation, prophets, enemies and fathers or ancestors. Not all translations get it in order. Those terms come in like a train, then back out in reverse. What's at the middle? What's at the twist? It's at the end of verse 72. Covenant. "To remember his holy covenant." Sometimes you have to look back to see ahead.

"His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.'" (Luke 1:67-68) God is getting involved and has come to his people. "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David." (Luke 1:69) A horn is a symbol of power. What is coming is not an empty promise but one with the power to save. Let's say you have a problem with your kitchen sink before Thanksgiving meal or something. Your wife says, "Okay, I called my dad. He's on the way." "Well, does he know how to unblock a sink disposal?" "No... But he's on the way." You need someone to come with some power to make things better. This promise has teeth. It has a horn, in fact. "(As he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us." (Luke 1:70-71) Saved. Set free. But free for what? Free to serve the Lord. "To rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." (Luke 1:74-75) We all serve something. You are never so free as when you bend the knee

before Jesus and serve Him alone.

Here Zechariah turns to his newborn son, John. "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him." (Luke 1:76) John the Baptist is the last of the prophets. He is the prophet capstone. Think about it, what were the prophets doing but inspiring faith in the coming of the Messiah? What were they doing but preparing hearts with hope for the coming of Jesus? The coming of Jesus impacts the past as much as the future. All who put their hope in Him. Some hoped forward; we hope backward. All who put their hope in Him are saved. "To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." (Luke 1:77-79) The teeth in the promise is the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. Do you know you are saved? Do you know the forgiveness of Jesus? That is the rising sun over the darkened land; that is the overcoming life that shrugs at the shadow of death; that is the way to a life of walking with your feet on the path of peace.

Zechariah's song is a prophet's song, sung over the chief and capstone of all the prophets, John the Baptist. That's how Jesus would later describe him. "Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'" (Matthew 11:9-10) Which is itself a quote from the prophet Malachi. Sometimes you have to look back to see ahead. What were all these prophets saying all along? Sometimes you only find hope for the future when you turn around and look back. We all have 20/20 vision in the rearview mirror. What if it all makes sense when you look



back? You can see more how it all fit. Can that give you hope? What you are going through right now that you don't understand, one day maybe it will make sense too. The footsteps of the Lord you see behind you leading you up to here, they tell you God will be faithful to walk with you all the way through what you are facing. Where do you find your hope?

At the center of this song, at the heart of the twist of the chiasm, at the intersection of the cross, what do we find? Covenant. "...to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham." (Luke 1:72-73) What is at the center of any genuine song of hope? God, and that God is faithful, that God is good, that God will keep His promises. A covenant is a contract. With a contract you say, "You keep your end of the bargain, or else," and the contract describes what will happen to you if you break it. How can God have a contract with us? "Do it, God, or else!" Uh. Or else, what? But God does keep His promises. I've heard God's covenants described as a self-written job descriptions. God says, "This is what I'll do. You can count on it." God promises. That is the basis for hope.

In the desert places of life, in the dark places, in the seasons of waiting and aching in a turmoil you cannot fully understand, sometimes all you have to hold onto is hope in the promises of God. God promises. That's where you will truly learn to love God. The waiting is where God shapes us. We learn to love God not because of what He has done for us but with confidence in who He is. It is where we learn faith. God promises. That's it. That's enough. It has to be. You don't have anything else, only a song of hope. But God does keep His promises. God keeps His covenants at His own expense.

Sometimes in the ancient world, to make a covenant, you killed an animal. Sorry. You split an animal in two pieces and the one making the promise

walked in between the pieces saying, in effect, "If I don't keep my side of the contract, let this happen to me." God made a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. But here's the remarkable thing, Abraham didn't walk through the pieces on the bloodied path, God did. The presence of God moved through the pieces. "If I don't do it, let it be so for me." When God made a covenant with Noah, He put the bow in the clouds and the business end of it faces upward. If you put an arrow in that bow, the rainbow, the arrow would fire up at the heart of God. Let it be to me! When God made a promise to David to build a house, David said, "I'll build it. Let me pay for it. I'll pick up the tab." God said, "No, David. I will establish the house of the Lord at my own expense." God keeps His promises at His own expense. What is the basis of your hope? What is the core of your song of hope? What connection happens at the center, at the twist? When God makes a covenant, He keeps it. He keeps it at the cross. Chi is the first letter in Christ. X-mas is Christmas, see? Chi, X, marks the spot. Chi, X, is the cross where God keeps all His promises to you at His own expense. Where else would you rest your hope?

Some of you have been attending and exploring a relationship with Jesus. Now is the time to begin that relationship, to rest your hope in Jesus. I want to invite you to pray with me today, all voices together, join in this simple prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, I have been singing the wrong songs; You came and died for me to forgive my sins; You opened heaven for me at your cost; teach me to sing a song of hope; and give me faith to follow You. In Jesus' name, amen.

