

# Zechariah's Song

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[ 0 : 00 ] So let's turn to Scripture this morning to Zechariah, song in Luke chapter 1. And we're going to... today and next two Sundays, we're going to look at the various songs of Advent as we think about the birth of Jesus.

Now, I don't know if... I'm not sure if Blue Peter is still on the television, probably not anymore. But for some of us here, Blue Peter was a staple children's program growing up.

And one of the things they did on Blue Peter when the likes of John Noakes and Peter Purvis, I think is the name of the other one, and Valerie Singleton, we're on it, really showing my age here, was that they would always make something.

And usually they made it out of toilet roll holders or empty cornflakes packets, boxes, things like that. And what they would do is they would always say they were going to make a spaceship or something and they would start... and they would say, here's something we did earlier and they would bring it along and it would be already prepared.

And that was always the kind of way it worked on the show. They would always bring on something they'd prepared earlier. And all the grown-ups who watched it said, nah, they've cheated.

[ 1 : 15 ] It hasn't really worked that way because when we tried it with the toilet rolls, they always got soggy or something happened and it never worked out. But it was always important that they showed that there was preparation to what they did.

And if you're a home DIY person, then you'll know the importance of preparation if you're going to be painting a room or wallpapering or decorating whatever you happen to do. It needs to be prepared and you need a plan for what you're going to do just as the people in Blue Peter did.

And even for Christmas, you're all planning for Christmas, one way or another. And whether it's the Christmas meal or whether it's the presents or whatever it is, there'll be preparation going on.

That always just reminds us that most of the things we do in life, we don't necessarily just act instinctively or on a whim or without counting the cost.

It's not all reactive and it's not all an afterthought. And that's really very important when we think about the birth of Jesus and when we think about what has happened because it is absolutely not just random that Jesus was born.

[ 2 : 25 ] Because and of course we know this, it's all in God's sovereign plan, right from the beginning of the Bible, right to the birth of Jesus, we recognize it's part of His God's sovereign plan.

God is, if we are planners, God is the planner extraordinaire. There is no one who plans like God. And indeed, God only has one plan.

There only has ever been one plan. In His perfection, He doesn't need to change plans. He doesn't need to make other plans. He doesn't need to fine tune plans because His perfection and the reason our plans change is because there's imperfections in us and in others and in the circumstances we find ourselves in.

But He's the eternal God. And it was always the plan of God that He would enter into humanity in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, becoming a human being.

That is the most central and most significant and most important reality in the history of the universe. It's the most significant event and it is right at the core and the center of God's plan.

[ 3 : 37 ] Now, the church or the Bible has a very low rating in society.

Maybe in your life, the Bible and church is a very low place, even though you're here today. Maybe not. But it's interesting, isn't it, that with all the purposes and all the plans that are being made and all the government bodies that are coming together and working out the future of the universe, hands down the gospel, trumps, transcends, surpasses and exceeds every other plan that is currently happening in the universe.

Infinitely more significant. And we want to make it speak into our lives because all of our lives are part of this plan. We're all embraced and subsumed into God's greater plan.

And we're going to look at this second song because it speaks very much into God's purpose and God's plan. Sung by or prophesied by or spoken by, certainly poetic, the dad of John the Baptist, Zechariah.

John the Baptist, a last great Old Testament prophet, cousin in law of Mary, or Zechariah at least, or Elizabeth was a cousin in law of Mary, Jesus' mother.

[ 5 : 09 ] And John is the forerunner of Jesus, the one who comes to prepare the way, the messenger that opens up the way for Jesus prophesied about, expected by the people and now spoken of to Zechariah.

I'm just going to look quickly at two things, the singer and the song. It's very simple. We're going to look at the singer and we're going to look at the song.

And we didn't really, if we had more time, we would have read the first section of chapter 1 and you can maybe read that when you get home, which speaks about the birth of John, the Baptist being foretold in the time of Herod.

And the angel goes and speaks to Zechariah, who is John's dad. And of course, Zechariah, can I doubt what's happening, which is why he is struck dumb for the period of the pregnancy, which I mentioned earlier, because he didn't believe.

We'll speak about that in a minute and we'll think about him. So I want to look at Zechariah first. His name means Jehovah has remembered. So even there's significance in his name, Jehovah has remembered.

[ 6 : 25 ] And he's an Old Testament priest who worked in the temple, a religious leader, someone who was soaked in the Old Testament, who knew the Bible very well.

Finally, as we see from the early section of chapter 1, he was a genuine believer. He was a godly man and he was waiting for the Messiah.

He understood and knew his Old Testament and he knew a Messiah was to come. But he was an Old man. He's served a long time and he himself and his wife had had no children.

And there was 400 years silence from heaven since the last prophetic message in Malachi.

God hadn't spoken. They felt abandoned and far away from him. Nothing was being said from heaven. What on earth was going on? And then Zechariah is the first person to hear a message from heaven as the angel Gabriel breaks the silence.

[ 7 : 39 ] So at the beginning of chapter 1, which we didn't read and I hope you'll be able to read. Zechariah before Mary, Zechariah before anyone else.

He was given this message, this big deal. He was being told by the angel from heaven whom he was really afraid of by the way, that his wife would bear a son and it would be the forerunner of the Messiah.

The Old Testament Elijah coming back as it were. Big deal. And I think it's great today. You're all sitting here and I'm standing here and we're all very ordinary.

We're all very ordinary. He really takes notice of us outside of our own loving family circle and a few colleagues and friends. But isn't it great in God's economy that He brings this most significant and important message to someone who is ordinary and quite unremarkable and unnoticed really in the world other than God made him remarkable and noticed by including him in Scripture.

He's so beautiful and it's so unexpected that God uses Zechariah to a message to Zechariah to break the silence of 400 years to someone who was un...

[ 9 : 00 ] No one would know about Zechariah if it wasn't for the fact that God spoke to him. He wouldn't be remembered in history. No one would know what his grave was. But God speaks and brings significance and importance to ordinary people's lives by his intervention and that's very true for us as well.

We are believers today, particularly that we have found this amazing truth and know this amazing truth for ourselves. So Zechariah, just for a minute or two, let's think about, he was faithful. Verse 6, we can look at some of the verses even though we didn't read them today.

And verse 6, we're told, he walked blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. So he was a faithful believer in that Old Testament way, waiting for the Messiah, trusting in the Messiah who was to come.

And you know, that's really hard for us today to be faithful. So I'm going to apply that quickly to our own lives as Christians, as followers of Christ, if we are followers of Christ today. It's so hard. But wouldn't that be a great description that would end up on our tombstone, our gravestone, tombstone, gravestone, that we are faithful? Even if it's nothing else, it's said we were faithful Christians.

[10:05] What a great description. Because we live in a world and our hearts are so often prone to be unfaithful, betrayal, easy believism, complaining and denying and walking away from the living God.

Yeah, what a great aspiration and a great ability for us to seek by God's grace that we are known as faith. It's a great aspirational prayer.

Lord, today help me to be faithful to You. Whatever transpires, whatever happens, whatever difficulties and trials come my way, help me, Lord, today to be faithful to You. He was faithful. So we also see and know that He was a believer who knew sadness in His own life. Verse 7 tells us that they had no child. They were both advanced in years.

And in verse 25, in connection with that, when the angel speaking to Him, the angel said, you know, or Elizabeth says, the Lord has done this for me in the days when He looked at me to take away my reproach among the people.

[11:11] So there's this sadness in their lives, maybe in lots of different reasons, but certainly one of the reasons that they were an old married couple, but they had no child. Now, and wrongly, that became a reproach, a shame as it were in the society they lived in.

That wasn't right. People said, oh God, we'll be judging them for something they've done wrong. Clearly wasn't the case. But nonetheless, Elizabeth felt that reproach among the people, and Zechariah, maybe felt there was no child to follow the family line, which was so important in ancient Near Eastern culture that he lived in.

And it was his lifelong prayer. In verse 13, the angel says to him, don't be afraid for your prayer has been heard. Now, your prayers generally, your prayer has been heard.

You will have a son. So he prayed for it. He said, oh man, prayed for a long, long time.

Tremendously important. So he knew sadness and he knew that sense of emptiness because of that reality.

And very often we don't think of that. Everyone here will have their own unique sadness.

[12:31] And whatever your sadness is today as a Christian, don't stop praying about it. Zechariah just kept on praying. He must have thought, there's no point anymore.

I'm not going to have my prayers answered. But he kept praying. Remember that in your sadness is to take them to the Lord in prayer. I'm not saying we will not have sadnesses, but take them to the Lord.

What is the subject of our prayers? Are they kind of shallow and sack that's just on the surface? Are we allowing the sadnesses that we feel to just govern and dictate our prayers to the living God?

That's what he wants us to take them. And when you look at others today in St. Columbus, you remember, don't criticise them or condemn them or judge them.

That's God's place. But remember your own sadnesses before heaping unnecessary sadness and isolation on others. Think of their situation.

[13:35] We're not God. We're not asked to know people's hearts. But we live in a society where there's precious little mercy and encouragement, 21st century Scotland.

So let your Christian faith evidence a different spirit with other people. Relative to their sadnesses, even though we might not know them.

Sensitive how we respond and react and wonder why they speak in a certain way, act in a certain way towards his sadness. He knew sadness. And very encouragingly, I think for us as well, he was someone who struggled to believe.

We saw that before, you know, that he who struck them, verse 20, and the people were waiting for Elijah, for Zechariah, Friday in slip, and they were wondering as delaying the temple when he came out, he was unable to speak.

Because Gabriel had said to him, you'll be silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place because he did not believe my words. Don't blame him for not believing the words.

[14:40] He was an old man, his wife was an old woman, they weren't going to have a child. And he struggled to believe, even though Gabriel came and then the angel spoke to him and said, you're

going to be the father of the great, last great Old Testament prophet, the one to come before, just before the Messiah.

He was terrified by the encounter and he struggled, but yet he still struggled to believe it. How often have maybe you said, well, I just wish Jesus was in the room with me.

Then I find it easy to believe. Or the angel Gabriel came down and spoke to me, then of course I would believe. But he struggled to believe, he struggled to understand and he doubted.

And the being struck dumb was actually a mercy. It wasn't a judgment, it was a mercy, it was given to encourage his doubt, I think.

Because you know, this will happen, you'll only be dumb for a little while and it will remind you that I've come and I'm here and you're waiting and there'll be a nine month period. It's okay, it's fine, you'll have this and you will need to know and see who I am.

[ 15 : 50 ] And that's great, that's comforting, is that comforting to us today? I hope so. Because doubt is always with us to one degree and another, it's comforting. And doubt will always be with us, but it's never with God.

It is never God who doubts, never God who thinks, well, maybe my plan's not right here, maybe the way I'm treating you is not right here. Maybe I should change the way I'm doing things with you. So never that way with God, it's us always who are struggling with God's will and God's purposes. But God knows and He helps us to believe as we go to Him. And He will allow things to enable us to believe. So there we see a little bit about the singer.

And now we come to a song, this prophetic poem of praise that is given, is filled by the Holy Spirit, which means that God speaks this poem into His heart and life and into His ability to reflect it in song.

And it's a message that God wants to reveal. And so He's inspired and is prophetic. And it happens on the eighth day of John the Baptist's life, his circumcision, and he's going to name the child.

[ 17 : 09 ] There's no evidence that that always happened at the period, but it certainly seemed to happen here. And there's an anticipation, people know about it, so the family and friends and others that you know, it seems to be talked about and they're all gathered together.

And of course everyone else knows what a name should be. We see that a lot, don't we, in laws and grandparents and friends and that will say, oh, you're not going to call them whatever, you need to call them whatever.

And so they were all gathered and they all had a good idea that we're going to call them Zechariah. He said, oh man, it's going to, you know, reflect this honour that's due to Him by calling them Zechariah.

But no, the angel had given me the name John. He's going to be called John, that's what he's going to be called. And that is the name he was given.

I don't think it's explained anywhere why, but that is the name that comes from God for the messenger of the Messiah. And this prophecy is not just for the immediate context, it's for all time, it's for all of us, it's hugely significant and important because it's set in the context of the Old Testament anticipation of the Messiah coming.

[ 18 : 35 ] Now the presumptions they made about the coming of the Messiah were for the most part all wrong. They were looking for a guy in shining armour to come and to get rid of Herod and get rid of the Romans and reign on the throne of David.

So they misunderstood the coming of the Messiah, but nonetheless they were expecting the Messiah to come. And what we recognise is that John the Baptist was coming in the spirit of Elijah in verse 17 of the first chapter, the game which you didn't read, we're told, and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord our God and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the Father and the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

So we're told that he's coming in the spirit of Elijah and it's very interesting. We talked about 400 years, silence, you know, the last word of the Old Testament, the last prophetic message that came from God.

Verse 5, chapter 4 of Malachi says, Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of children to the fathers.

So we've got this last word of the Old Testament and then we have this coming of John in the spirit of Elijah's at war with this courage and message of reconciliation that Elijah had in his day.

[ 20 : 13 ] And his poem is full of Old Testament language and images of God's characters. And as he spoke that, and as the people heard that, they would immediately have resonated with it as being a fulfillment of prophecy, full of anticipation.

God's plan, God's plan being unfolded. And the more we understand as believers in the New Testament who have the whole completed Scripture, the more we know God's word, the more it dovetails into one message, one plan, one salvation, one purpose for all humanity in all of God's time, great timeless themes of hope and of salvation.

And so he speaks of a few things here. Very quickly look at them. First is thanksgiving, 68 to 70. Blessed be the Lord God for he's visited and redeemed his people and raised salvation up for them. And as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from his old. So Zechariah links it into all the Old Testament prophecy and is full of thanksgiving and blessing.

It's called the Benedictus by many. A song of blessing and of hope, he speaks about the King David.

[ 21 : 39 ] And now we know that Jesus comes as the greater King David, all of which is prophesied. The one who brings for us meaning and freedom and identity and life and love through his intervention and not in John the Baptist, but the Jesus who he is proclaiming into the battlefield of our confusion in our world where we are scrambling around in the dark for meaning with his plan of love and redemption.

And we should each time we gather share that thanksgiving and thankfulness before the living God. Do you know the, probably the deepest sin of all?

Thanklessness, drifting into God's presence with a whole long list of requests before we've even bothered to thank Him.

To thank Him for the majesty and the marvel of the fact that ordinary unnoticed people like ourselves are plucked from Adam and the Midi into his nearer presence through Jesus Christ. Forgiveness and hope and future, death is defeated. All these things that we should be thankful for as we come into His presence and He begins with this sense of thankfulness.

[ 22 : 58 ] It's a good way to start a prayer. If we ever struggle to start prayers, it's a good way to start. But there's also spiritual understanding in this song that He sings, verses 71 to 75.

He speaks about the need for being saved from our enemies. And this covenantal salvation, and it's a salvation that delivers us from the hand of our enemies, bringing us hope and righteousness and forgiveness.

It's not a physical enemy, speaking of here, it's a spiritual enemy. And there's this recognition right through the Old Testament, right through the Bible, right into today that we face a malevolent enemy.

If there's God and the reality of God we believe in Jesus Christ, then there's also an enemy of our souls, the evil one Satan himself, who has from the beginning been powerful and wise and subtle enough to keep us in his deceitful clutches and in the dark spiritually.

Who once, as destroyed and separated, his cunning and persuasive power has always proved too alluring for the human race.

[ 24 : 16 ] And his, his, his, his battle cry has always been, you can live without God, you don't, you don't need God. Right from the beginning, that's been his cry.

And that is the battle we've always faced. And as believers, it's still the battle that we face where we're tempted to believe we can live quite happily without God in our lives.

And that is what he will always whisper to us. And so the reality of this prophecy remains our reality that our deepest battle is a spiritual battle.

It's not a battle with, with a secular world outside as it were. Our deepest battle is a, is an unseen battle that first begins in our hearts.

And without the living God and without the Messiah and without the Savior, it always ends up in defeat and death for us. The only break ever was Jesus.

[ 25 : 16 ] Not John the Baptist, he died, it was Jesus. The only, the incarnate child who at 33 years of age or so broke the grip of death and walked out of the grave victorious.

Death couldn't hold him. Not anyone who trusts in him is the Messiah, and that is the biggest battle that we face today is to recognize that everything that happens in our lives, that takes us from, turns

us away from Jesus, comes from this source, the enemy of our souls, the enemy of our lives. And God's plan is the only plan that defeats him. So thanksgiving, spiritual understanding, verses 76 to 77 speaks about forgiveness.

You my child, Zechariah at this point starts talking to his child, as it were, the eight-year-old, eight-day-old child, and also to all of us.

You child will be called the prophet at 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 sin. That's the message, wasn't it?

[ 26 : 33 ] He was a wild man. He had locusts and wild honey. He lived in the desert. He was mad to look at, probably long hair. He didn't go to the hairdresser, all these kind of things.

He was known as a kind of wild man, and he had the message of repentance and forgiveness of sin, repent and turn to the Lord. And Zechariah prophetically speaks into that.

With this great recognition, not just for John the Baptist, but for all of us, it remains an absolutely significant, isn't it? The very heart of a new relationship with God is that we recognize our need for repentance, that we recognize that we are sinners before a holy God.

How unfashionable is that? How uncool is that to speak about a holy God before whom we are sinners? That's 19th century talk and preaching, isn't it?

It doesn't bother us now that that's what we are. We're gods in our own minds. We don't need God at all. Why should we repent?

[ 27 : 41 ] That is a destructive talk. Yet by faith, we see our lovelessness, not so much the general morality, but the lovelessness of our hearts, the selfishness that often shoves other people and God out of the way and a rebellion against them, which says he doesn't really matter.

He's not that significant. He's not that important. We can be the nicest people in the world, but when our eyes are opened to the living God, we recognize we need to be made clean.

We need to be made right. We need a new heart, not new behavior. New behavior will come with a new heart, wouldn't it? It's a new heart we need.

It's new life, not just new morality. We can buy new morality. We can live new morality. We can preach it.

We can principalize it. We can do what we like. We can all have new morality, but no one can have new life and God honoring morality. Without Jesus Christ and without His grace.

[ 28 : 59 ] So for Thanksgiving, spiritual understanding, forgiveness, and lastly, but very importantly, beauty. He speaks about beauty in the last two verses, 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 and to guide our feet into the ways of peace.

That's what we know. That's what we see when we see Jesus. When we meet with the risen Savior, the same God from Genesis to Revelation, this one plan, we see His nature most powerfully revealed through the journey into the prophecy of John, the preparer of the way, and then into the incarnation.

God, the Son, and the womb of Mary coming into this world, where He exposes and reveals His tender mercy.

That's such a beautiful phrase, tender mercy. And that's what He reveals, because He understands and He knows, and He's committed, committed all the way to the cross and to the pit of hell on Her behalf, committed to forgiving and redeeming and bringing life to all who will come to Him and ask Him to be their Savior.

Never will turn anyone away who comes to Him and seeks forgiveness. He is tender in His mercy. Boy, do we need tender mercy in our lives.

[ 30 : 48 ] Light in the darkness. Both in the reality of what we see around us and maybe in your own personal experiences, so many shadows, so much darkness for so many people.

But it's a wonderful image that we all understand, isn't it? We all understand a dark room. Many of us still stick our hand round the door to put the light on before we go in, because we're afraid of the dark.

All of us know what it's like to be terrorized by darkness at one degree or another. And many here know what it's like mentally to be in darkness and the horror and terror of that.

And He says that He brings light into our darkness. That is what the Messiah does as we live in the shadow of death.

And He brings light even into that horrible place and peace. Peace is what He brings. Guide our feet into the ways of peace.

[ 31 : 53 ] He knows that we suffer from this peace and He knows that that's in the world in which we live. But the nagging insecurities of life, life, He can release us from the dis-peace of that.

Peace in it, not from it. Peace in it as we come through it because we have this foundation and this strength, the supernatural gift from God that can't be worked out, can't be gained by our own wisdom, is a gift from Him, it's a thing of great beauty.

And I do think we all, I certainly do and I'm sure some of you do also, need to recapture the beauty of our salvation and not take it for granted and not just regard it as insignificant or unimportant.

What is prophesied here is exactly what is offered and exactly what we've experienced and we need to come out from the shadow of death and from our places sometimes of drift and backsliding from Him and recapture His beauty.

And if you don't know Jesus, then I challenge you with all the love in my heart to trust in His rescue plan. It's the plan.

[ 33 : 18 ] That isn't another one. It's not Jesus plus, it just isn't. And consider His claim on you as your Creator and Lord and pray that it will become real.

And pray for it tonight and come again with our carol service. It's the one service of the year that we can usually guarantee a huge number of people who don't normally come to church or who are not Christians, who don't necessarily think about the gospel in their lives and we want them to think about it with, to be attracted by the message that they hear as well as challenged by it obviously. So please pray this afternoon about that and that people will see the beauty. We can't make them see the beauty, but pray that they will see. And that will be easier if we are seeing it ourselves, isn't it?

So we pray that we will see the spiritual understanding, the thanksgiving, the forgiveness and the beauty of what Zechariah prophesied for us today.

Let's pray. Father God, help us to understand your beauty and the amazing reality of who you are. And for those who sense the darkness creeping in, which we all do at various times and to various degrees in our lives, may your light shine very strongly, may there be great peace, great thanksgiving and a great understanding of where our priorities lie as people, even if the world in which we live and its philosophy, secular philosophy will tell us not to be stupid and not to believe in these things.

[ 35 : 08 ] We ground our faith in the historical reality of God who broken our existence and who came to rescue and redeem us. His one purpose is one plan, which is made known to us through Scripture.

We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.