

Introduction

Christmastime is a season of music. It is a season of singing. Christmas carols make up a sizable section of most hymn books. There are whole radio stations devoted to playing the music of the season nonstop for an entire month. People who would never sing a hymn to God belt out songs like "Joy to the World" and "O Come All Ye Faithful." For those who know what Christmas is really about, we can't keep from singing. It is no wonder. What we celebrate has always been visited by songs of praise to God. The night of Jesus's birth angels appeared to shepherds who were out in the fields with their sheep. One of them announced the birth of Messiah in Bethlehem, and he was joined by a multitude of the heavenly host lifting up their voices in praise to God. This morning I want us to consider another Christmas song, one that seems to me to get lost in the shuffle. I want us to consider the prophecy of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. We find it in Luke 1:67-79.

[Read Text and Pray]

The birth of Jesus is coupled with the birth of another baby boy—that being John, the son of Mary's relative, Elizabeth. God prepared the world for Jesus by sending John as his herald. So the birth of John was intricately tied to the birth of Jesus. Mary went to visit Elizabeth soon after learning that she would be the mother of Jesus, and when they greeted one another, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. The birth of John itself signaled that the wait for God's people was over. The salvation so long ago promised was now at hand.

Mary had embraced the word spoken to her by the angel with curiosity but without doubt. However, Zechariah, the father of John, was skeptical when the angel told him he and Elizabeth would have a son in their old age. And so he was made to be unable to speak until the son was born. After writing on a tablet, "His name is John," Zechariah's speech returned and he began to praise God. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, and what came out of his mouth was a divine word of prophecy. I am calling it "Zechariah's Christmas Song." The substance of what he said—and this is the main point of his prophecy—the substance of what he said is that the Lord God of Israel has come to bring his people redemption according to his promise. Zechariah erupts in praise because of the wonder of the salvation God is bringing to his people. Zechariah extols the Lord God of Israel with words common in the scripture to express praise, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel." Likewise, the Apostle Paul opens his epistle to the Ephesians, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Numerous times in the psalms we hear the exclamation, "Blessed be God." And Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, in the aftermath of the exodus exclaimed, "Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians."

The father of John the Baptist is suddenly able to speak, and after these 9 or more months of not being able to talk, what does he say? Does he praise God for being restored in his ability to talk? Does he praise God for the fact that after all those years of being childless he now has a son? Well I am sure he was doing that, but the first thing he does is praise God for the wonder of God's great provision of salvation. A lot of people celebrate this holiday for a lot of different reasons. But for the followers of Jesus, the celebration of Christmas is the celebration of God's gift of salvation through the baby whose birth introduced him to the world.

Four aspects of that salvation fueled Zechariah's Christmas praise—the properties of it, the promise of it, the proclaimer of it, and the provider of it. We will cover the first of these four aspects today and

the other three next week. As we focus on the essential properties of this salvation this morning, we discover that Zechariah highlights four features of what is involved in God's saving work.

I. The Visitation of God.

God's work of salvation involves a visit from God. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has VISITED . . . his people." We need to start here with the understanding that a visitation from God is not a mere social call. If I visit you, I might come over for a while, sit and talk, and we will enjoy each other's company and hopefully encourage one another and such. But a visitation from God in the scriptures is a mighty intervention of God to do what only he can do.

Let's go back into the history of Israel. After Abraham began to follow God and the Lord made the promise to give to his descendants the land of Canaan, he and his son and grandson lived as outsiders in the land. Abraham's grandson, Jacob had 12 sons, one of which, Joseph, was sold into slavery and taken down to Egypt. At the time of the great famine, Jacob and his other sons moved down to Egypt where Joseph had ascended from the position of prisoner to the place of prime minister. On his deathbed Joseph declared to his brothers: "I am about to die, but God will VISIT you and bring you up out of this land to the land he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." He repeated himself. "God will surely VISIT you and you shall carry up my bones with you from here."

Years later God appeared in the burning bush and called Moses to lead Israel up out of Egypt. And here is what he said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry. I know their sufferings and have COME DOWN to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a land flowing with milk and honey." What Joseph referred to as a visit the LORD referred to as "coming down." The exodus from Egypt was brought about through a mighty visitation of God. He came down and brought the people out.

As you know, the Israelites eventually entered the promised land and divided it among the tribes. But they were unfaithful to God and in the course of time the Jews were taken away from the land and exiled in Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah, however, was God's mouthpiece to inform the people of a visitation from the Lord. The Lord declared through Jeremiah, "A day is coming when I visit them. Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place."

A visitation of God for his people stands out as a mighty stepping in, a "coming down from heaven" in which God acts decisively and wonderfully to save his people from their distress. God is ever present. He is always at work through providence. However, when God VISITS, he is acting in extraordinary and demonstrable ways that make it clear that it is God. So he visited at the exodus and so he visited after the exile when HE moved the heart of Cyrus to restore his people to the land.

At Zechariah's time, some 540 years after the return to the land, the Jews have lived under Babylonian domination, then Greek domination, and finally Roman domination. Where is the hope of the great deliverer? No prophetic voice has been heard for 400 years. Zechariah breaks the prophetic silence announcing that the Lord God of Israel has visited yet again. He has come down to do a mighty work of salvation for his people.

And this time it is the consummate visitation of God. For we learn from the angel's appearance to Zechariah that his son was to prepare the people FOR THE LORD. And we learn from the angel's appearance to Mary that her son was to be called SON OF THE MOST HIGH. When Mary came to visit Elizabeth, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, wondered aloud, "Why is this granted to me that the mother OF MY LORD should come to me?" This is the consummate visitation of the Lord

because he is not only coming in power. He is not only coming in great demonstration. This time he is coming IN THE FLESH. He is coming as the God/man. As Isaiah prophesied, "the virgin would conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Immanuel" (God WITH US.)

God had been with Israel when he brought them out of Egypt. He appeared in the form of a pillar of light and a pillar of smoke. Now he was not merely appearing but was literally going to be present as a human being. He became flesh and his glory was seen, felt, touched, and heard. His incarnation was truly a visitation from God.

Visions of a baby in a manger between two exhausted parents in a stable visited by shepherds will likely dance in our heads these next days. As they do, let us marvel. These visuals are reminders of the day when God truly visited. He was here not only in Spirit but in flesh and bone. And it had to be that way for him to accomplish the rescue to which all other biblical rescues point.

II. The Redemption of God.

Zechariah said, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people." As with the idea of visitation, redemption has its roots in the exodus of God's people from Egypt. God's bringing the people up out from under the rule and tyranny and oppression of Pharaoh was an act of redemption. When God called Moses to go lead the people out, he said through Moses to the Israelites, "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you." The Jews of Jesus' day were looking for such a redemption again—this time from Roman tyranny. But God always had a greater, more wonderful purpose for his people than mere political redemption. And it is clear that Zechariah's prophecy has this greater redemption in mind, for he speaks of forgiveness of sins for the people of the Lord.

The epistles of the New Testament explain God's work of redemption for souls. The breaking of God's law puts us under the curse of God's wrath. All we are law-breakers and by nature are under the curse of condemnation. But Christ's arrival marks the consummate work of God in buying his people out from under that curse. Paul explains it to the Galatians, saying, "Christ REDEEMED us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." Again he says, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman born under the law, to REDEEM those who were under the law." God's bringing the sons of Israel out of Egypt out from under the curse of Pharaoh with its tyranny and enslavement is but a type, a picture by which we gain insight into his greatest work of redemption, namely, the bringing of his people out from under the curse and slavery and tyranny of sin and Satan through the work of the one whose arrival Zechariah's son John would announce. The price of redemption is a ransom paid. And Peter declares of believers in his first epistle: "you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot."

Brothers and sisters, our state by nature is one of heavy burden. The prince of the power of the air is a burdensome taskmaster. He tempts and he accuses and he tempts again. Correspondingly the law of God calls for our condemnation. Thus we are captives in need of a redeemer if there is to be any hope for us. And he who was born according to the promise of God, Jesus, came to redeem. He came to buy his people out from under the weight and burden and curse of sin and death. Rightly does Zechariah exclaim, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has redeemed his people." He has done it in Jesus Christ, whose incarnation and birth we celebrate!

III. The Deliverance of God.

Salvation at its core is the rescue of God from our ultimate endangerment. And that ultimate endangerment is God's own wrath due us as sinners. When we talk about being saved by the blood of Jesus, what is it we are saved from? Ultimately we are saved from God himself. But we do have other enemies. When we come in to the family of God as his children, God's enemies become our enemies as well. Sometimes those enemies are people and always those enemies are the world, the flesh, and the devil.

But Christ's coming was to bring deliverance to the people of God from ALL their enemies. Zechariah celebrates the destruction of the enemies of God's people. He praises God for his visit and his redemption, but also for his raising up of a horn of salvation. Now to me that is an odd phrase, "horn of salvation." The mention of a horn is common in the Bible, but it has always caused me to pause and ponder. What is a horn of salvation?

Well, let's start with horn. Several animals in the bible are associated with their horns—the ram, the ox, and the bull. And those horns were their weapons of defense and attack against their enemies. So one's horn is his weapon of attack and thus represents his power and strength. When one's horn is destroyed, his weapon of attack is removed. When one's horn is exalted, his overcoming strength is made known. Now let's add to our consideration the fact that a horn was located on each corner of the altar of incense and the altar of burnt offering where sacrifices were presented to God. What do those horns there tell us? There is power in prayer and power in sacrifice.

So, the coming Messiah whom John will proclaim is a horn of salvation raised up by God to empower his people and destroy their enemies. Let's work this out. Zechariah says that God has raised up this horn of salvation in the house of David. He is talking about a king. And he is not talking about one of his descendants because Zechariah was from the house of Levi. But remember the announcement of the angel to the virgin Mary concerning the son she would bear: "the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

David was a warrior king who destroyed his enemies and brought rest to the people. And so it is with Jesus but in a much greater way. Every cosmic enemy of the people of God will be put under his feet so that the people of God will ultimately know complete peace. And the way that this king will achieve victory over his foes is depicted by the horns on the altar. It is by sacrifice. It is in the death of Christ that we live. He is exalted because he humbled himself even to the point of death on the cross.

The writer of Hebrews said it like this (Hebrews 2:14-15):

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

You know, the devil is like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour, and he does. But if you are in Christ, greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world! You have been delivered if you are in Christ. All who hate you cannot hurt you. You even have the power to resist the efforts made by your enemies to hurt you. It really will help us to see temptation for what it is. It is Satan's attempt to destroy us. Peter says that the desires of the flesh WAGE WAR AGAINST our souls. But the Lord God in Jesus Christ has raised up a horn of salvation for our deliverance. And we need to bring this fact to bear upon every temptation we experience! If you are in Christ, the enemy has been

defeated. You have been delivered from his power by the power of Christ. It is a fact. You CAN endure temptation. You can withstand the appeal and the attraction to sin because in Christ you have died to its power. In Christ you are able to resist. So do that. Resist anger and malice. Resist lust. Resist the temptation to deceive, to steal, to be prideful.

Christmas celebration is about so much more than a little baby in a manger. It is rooted in who that baby was and is, and the fact that he is the horn of salvation God has raised up to destroy our enemies!

IV. The Purpose of God.

Why this visitation, this redemption, this deliverance? Zechariah addresses that too. We see it down in verse 74: "that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." Again, this purpose was depicted in the exodus. You may remember that when Moses approached Pharaoh to appeal for the people's release, it was in order that they might serve the Lord (Ex 7:16).

To serve the Lord is the purpose for our salvation. Yes, it is to visit us in divine power. Yes, it is to remove our fear . . . fear of our just condemnation, fear of enemies that threaten. Yes, it is to redeem us out from under the burden and weight of our sin. Yes it is to bring joy and peace where there was misery and turmoil. Yes it is so that God be glorified. And yet, all that is known as we serve God without fear in righteousness and holiness. People are saved to serve God just as the Israelites were saved to serve God to be a people for his own possession, a people whose lives radiate the nature and love of God. Peter explains, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9-10). If we have come to Christ, we are NOT our own; we have been bought with a price. We exist for his glory. We serve HIM. That is why he saves.

I think many people look at salvation as something they can receive with few or no strings attached. They certainly live like it. They live like their money really belongs to them, their time really belongs to them, their purpose on earth is to be comfortable and enjoy as much fun as possible. There are times when we all live like this. But we were not saved to serve ourselves. We have been saved to deny ourselves and follow our savior by taking up a cross to ourselves. We were saved to be full-time servants, to live a life consumed with doing his will.

Mary embodies such a life. When the angel informed her about the favor of God and how she was going to conceive and bear a son, she wondered how this could be since she had not known a man. The angel said it would be miraculous and that her child would be the son of God, and that nothing would be impossible with God. Mary's reply is priceless. She said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word."

What do you do when God bursts in to your life and says, "I have plans for you," and those plans don't look anything like what you envisioned? What do you do when God's commands for how you are to live fly in the face of your fleshly inclinations? Well, do not spend your life arguing with God or resisting his plan. Do not spend your life disobeying God and experiencing the misery of disobedience. Respond like Mary. Let his word and his direction be your pursuit for his glory. And I will tell you there will be some pain along that path. There was for Mary. But remember, the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. There is no greater peace, joy, or security than being a servant of the Lord, attending to his will,

following his path. So don't bellyache and bemoan that your path isn't what you'd hoped. Rejoice in your salvation and remember you were served by Jesus to be saved and you were saved by Jesus to serve.

Conclusion

Visited, redeemed, delivered, and saved to serve—these are the aspects of God's great salvation for which the Holy Spirit produced exultation in Zechariah. Let them produce the same joyful worship in you as we bask in the glory of God's great and wonderful gift of Christ to us! If you are not following Christ today, you do not have this wonderful salvation. You don't know God. You are languishing under the burden of sin. You are living a life only worth being judged. Your enemy is God. It is a waste. The baby whose birth we celebrate calls you to come. He calls you to deny yourself, to repent of sin, to trust in his great saving work. There is nothing more urgent, vital, wise, or appropriate that you could do!

Prayer

Benediction

O come all ye faithful, joyful, and triumphant;
O Come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem
Come and behold Him, born the king of angels.
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!