

## **Introduction**

Peace is a prized commodity. The trouble is, it is hard to come by. And what is more, there is a lack of agreement about what peace really is. If you consult WIKIHOW on the internet, you will find a number of different methods they suggest to gain peace. It is suggested that you find a quiet place by relaxing your mind for 12 minutes in the morning, taking a walk in nature, or turning off the music. A second method is relaxing your body by focusing on your breathing, resting your eyes, or relaxing in a chair. Third, the writers suggest concentrating on stillness. You can count backwards or eat a raisin slowly, being conscious of all the ways you experience it, taste, touch, texture, and smell. These methods seem to equate peace with inner relaxation. In the scriptures, we learn that peace is far more than that. We also learn that the experience of true peace required a visitation of God. This visitation is what Zechariah announces in the prophetic song he sung when his son John was named.

[Read Text and Pray]

The birth of Jesus is coupled with the birth of another baby boy—namely John. In anticipation and preparation for the advent of his own son, the Lord God sent one to prepare the way. His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were among several other prominent couples in the Bible who were well-advanced in age and who were childless. Think of Abraham and Sarah and the parents of Samson. But the Lord was merciful and ordained that even in their old age they give birth to John. When he was born and the day came for naming him, Zechariah opened his mouth. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, he spoke praise to the Lord and declared a 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 and peace. Zechariah erupts in praise because of the wonder of the salvation God was bringing to his people. As we carefully examine the words of this prophecy, we observe four broad aspects of that salvation. We spent the entire time last week looking at the properties of it. There remain three aspects which Zechariah highlights. And we will consider them this morning.

We start with . . .

### **I. The Promise.** (The Promise of Salvation)

It is abundantly clear that the Holy Spirit, speaking through Zechariah, earnestly desires that the message of praise he expresses communicate that the God who is being praised is one who keeps his word. Intermingled with the nature of God's wonderful provision of salvation is the fact that God is fulfilling what he has already indicated he would do.

He has visited, redeemed, and raised up a horn of salvation (v.70) AS HE SPOKE BY THE MOUTH OF HIS HOLY PROPHETS FROM OF OLD; (v. 72) to show the mercy PROMISED TO OUR FATHERS, and to REMEMBER HIS COVENANT, THE OATH THAT HE SWORE TO OUR FATHER ABRAHAM. Here we have reference to PROPHECY, PROMISE, COVENANT, AND OATH as thematic terms. In PROPHECY God foretells through a prophet what will happen. In PROMISE God speaks as to what he will do. In COVENANT, he formally obligates himself. In an OATH, since there is no one greater than himself, God swears by himself. The writer of Hebrews explains that God's desire in doing so was to be as convincing as possible. Each of these stresses that God is willing to give assurances of what he will do and then to bind himself to fulfill these assurances, and to demonstrate that he will not change. His word is fully trustworthy.

I want to point out a few examples of these promises. Zechariah declared that they were from of old. And the oldest promise of God concerning his great salvation came in the Garden of Eden right in the midst of the curse. In fact he was speaking to the serpent through whom the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit had come. And he said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." This was a promise of future deliverance from the wicked enemy, the devil. A descendant of the woman would step on his head, and though he would wound that descendant on the heel, the heel of the descendant would render to the serpent a mortal wound. Hebrews 2:14 confirms that Christ through death has destroyed the devil. The oldest promise made has been kept.

Zechariah also mentions God's oath to Abraham. God's covenant with Abraham promised a descendant through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. A childless old man wondered to God how he could know he would possess the land. The scene that followed is one of the more unusual ones in the Bible. God told Abraham to cut in half a heifer, a goat, and a ram. When the sun had gone down, the Lord symbolized himself as a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch and passed between the pieces. It was his way of saying, if I fail to keep my word, may I be as these pieces. Essentially, he was saying, if I fail to keep my word, may I cease to be God. God could make no higher guarantee than to put his own self on the line. In essence he made an oath guaranteed by himself. The Lord was assuring Abraham of the veracity of his promise. Zechariah would have us know that Jesus is the descendant of Abraham God promised, through whom the nations are blessed. He brings people from every tribe and tongue and nation out of the duress of sin and into the family of God.

Zechariah also mentions the house of David to whom God made a covenant that one of his descendants would reign eternally on his throne. Jesus is the eternal Davidic king. And as the scripture says, "the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). And not only that, numerous texts in the Old Testament are promises of God that sins will be forgiven and redemption will be granted. Take Psalm 130:7-8, for example, "O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities." It can be said that the whole of the Old Testament is a collection of promises made. And Zechariah is announcing here at the birth of his son, the forerunner of the one to come, that God has kept his promises. He has not forgotten. He has not forsaken his people. God is redeeming His people in the coming one. He has kept his word. We look back and say, "Amen! God has kept his promises!" We affirm what Paul wrote the Colossians, in Christ Jesus God "Has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14).

Many matters of importance are communicated through the humble birth of Jesus in a stable in the small town of Bethlehem. However, one of the most important is this: God keeps his word. He keeps his promises. He would rather cease being God than to fail to do what he has assured he will do. He puts himself on the line for the sake of his word. And what an important assurance for us!

When the Scriptures declare "no good thing does [the Lord] withhold from those who walk uprightly," (Psalm 84:11) you can be sure of it. When the Scriptures declare that the Lord will "remove our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west," (Psalm 103:12) it is for certain. When the Bible asserts that the Lord "is mindful that we are dust," we can be sure that the Lord has invested himself in fulfilling that word to all of us. When the Lord announces that a descendant of the woman will deliver a lethal blow to the serpent, be sure that Jesus took care of

that. And when the word of God assures us that Jesus will return one day in the same way he was seen ascending to heaven, you can be sure he will. God does not get in a hurry for sure, but he is always right on time and he ALWAYS does what he has said he will do.

So, trust him! Trust him for salvation. Trust him to take care of what concerns you. Trust him to do it right. And if you trust him for salvation, trust him to carry you to his side the moment that you breathe your last on earth. God not only wants you to trust him, he gives more than sufficient reasons to do so.

We move next from the promise to . . .

## **II. The Prophet.** (The Prophet of God's Salvation)

Zechariah addresses the prophet of God's great salvation down in verses 76-77: "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." So Zechariah addresses the son whom he has just named John. He says he will be the prophet who goes before the Lord."

A. Zechariah speaks as though John has a calling of high privilege—prophet of the Most High. And it IS a position of high honor. This high position of honor is I think part of what Jesus was getting at when he said of John that among those born of women no one was greater than John the Baptist. But it is also for how John served. He embraced his role honorably. He was willing and glad to serve Christ and not serve himself. As Jesus emerged and began his public ministry, John told his followers: HE must INCREASE and I must DECREASE. This is the way the life of every Christ-follower must be characterized. Christ must INCREASE and I must DECREASE. Every Christian must come to the place at which we acknowledge and embrace our calling to die to self. To truly love others is to recognize and embrace that we do not serve ourselves but we serve the Lord. We exist for his purpose not our own. And by the way, His purpose is the BEST! Marriages and families suffer when we live for ourselves. Churches suffer when we serve ourselves. All relationships suffer when we refuse to die to ourselves. But they flourish when those who follow Christ, follow John's example of living to serve Christ.

B. Zechariah also points out that John's purpose was to properly prepare the hearts of the people to receive the person and ministry of the coming one. How was he to do this? As a prophet he was to give KNOWLEDGE to his people. He was to give knowledge of salvation. He was to address and inform the THINKING of the people about what was involved in salvation. We repeat it regularly, but the Jews were looking mainly for a national salvation. They were looking for a redeemer who would lead them in throwing off the political powers that dominated them. What they needed to know, however, was that true salvation involves knocking off an enemy far greater, far stronger, and far more threatening than the Roman Empire.

Zechariah identifies the knowledge of salvation that was needed. It was to know that REAL and TRUE salvation involves the forgiveness of sins. Sin was the great enemy of the Jews and sin is our great enemy. The reason for all trouble and conflict and oppression and affliction and sorrow and sighing in the world is because of sin.

If you do not grasp that sin is your greatest problem and your greatest threat, you will never truly appreciate the gospel. The gospel is good news. But it does not make sense as such if you do not understand the really bad news first. And the bad news for all of us is that we are really bad. There is nothing more heinous in human beings than our sin and hostility against our creator. We are breakers of his holy law. We serve other gods than him; we presume to worship with unauthorized

and inaccurate ideas about who God is. We do not honor parents. We lie; we adulterate God's good gift of sex. We steal and we covet what is not ours. Our sin is treason against our Creator. We are dead. We are darkened in our understanding. We are unclean. We are unholy. We stand condemned. Here is why we need forgiveness. And John was to prepare the people for Jesus's coming by preaching their need for forgiveness of their sin because that is the problem Jesus came to fix.

And like John, the disciples of Jesus are called to proclaim the same message. We are to be witnesses unto Christ that he came into the world to save sinners. And all who will repent of sin and believe on him will be forgiven. They will be saved. Are you saved? Have you come to realize you are a sinner? Have you come to see that it does not get any worse than that? Are you believing on Jesus for the forgiveness of your sin and reconciliation with God? Talk about God's promises! How about this one, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes will not perish but have eternal life"? Believe it and preach it.

Now that brings us to . . .

### **III. The Provider.** (The Provider of God's Salvation)

Zechariah continues in verses 78-79. He asserts that because of the tender mercy of God, "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 in the way of peace." Remember how we stressed last week the visitation of the Lord? It is God's drawing near to perform a mighty, mighty work of deliverance. And here it is. Here is that visitation! It is the visit of the sunrise! The coming one whose path John is to prepare, who is himself the Lord, is set forth here as the sunrise from on high. We are to envision the image of the dark of night. And we are to see with our mind's eye the radiance of the sun rising. And just like sunrise, the coming of the light marks the end of the dark of night. Only this shining is more brilliant than the sun because this is the sunrise from on high. Those sitting in the darkness and in the shadow of death have seen a GREAT light!

The Lord promised that his light would shine gloriously upon the land which languished in darkness. Listen to Isaiah 60:1-3.

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Is this not amazing? When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the light of the world shone in brightness amongst a people imprisoned in darkness—deep spiritual darkness. Soon the magi, king makers, arrived in Bethlehem! Eventually, people from every tribe and tongue and language have come to the light of the world as their Savior too. And in Christ their righteousness is brought forth as the light and their justice as the noonday (Psalm 37:6).

God himself is light and there is no darkness in him. As Zechariah prophesied, he has shone like sunrise from on high in Christ. And those who come to the light will themselves shine with his brightness. We will be brought out of darkness in our minds and understanding as well as in our lives and in our deeds. And we will know peace. By his light Christ guides those who follow him in the way of peace. You know, you hear that word a whole lot this time of year. Peace. Peace on earth. For the world, peace means an absence of war or an absence of conflict or perhaps some kind of inner relaxation. When it comes to that kind of peace, Jesus did not come to bring it. Jesus

made the declaration, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." He was speaking of the conflict there is because of loyalties for or against him.

But the way of peace that the Provider of salvation came to bring is peace between repentant sinners and God. It involves forgiveness and reconciliation. It involves inward peace as well because the inner storm has been stilled, the storm precipitated by the guilt and shame of sin and the reality of judgment. And those who have this peace make peace by bringing the message of peace to other sinners who also need that same peace.

Light pierces darkness and brings sight. It puts the sin conflict between God and his creatures on display for those who will see it. Peace intrudes upon conflict and brings calm and replaces fretting and hostility and anxiety.

We live in a world that is full of hostility and fretting and stress and anxiety. Everyone is stressed out and at odds and full of uncertainty. But as surely as Jesus is the antidote for sin, he is also the only solution to the absence of peace all around us. We will never know peace until we are anchored in Christ.

### **Conclusion**

As we turn from Christmas and anticipate a new year, we should not turn away from the message of Christ's birth. The Old Testament is a book of promises made. The New Testament is a book about God's promises kept. As we look back at God's promises and how he has kept them—even the promise to send a forerunner to prepare the way of the Lord and the promise to shine light to people who walked in darkness and bring them peace—As we look back at how God has kept his promises, let us look forward with hope that he will continue to keep them. And out of that hope, let us boldly proclaim Christ and deeply indulge in the light and the peace he came to bring.

### **Prayer**

### **Benediction**

May your hearts abound in hope and peace. As Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."