

The Song of Zechariah

Rich Nathan
December 16 & 17, 2017
The Songs of Christmas
Luke 1:57-80

One of the clearest signs that Christmas is coming, along with the five pounds of catalogs that you receive in the mail every day, in addition to the Christmas cookies that are everywhere in the office, and all the decorations and the crowded malls and shopping centers and the fact that all the items you want to buy online are now sold out, is the playing of Christmas songs everywhere you go. Christmas songs are played on radios. They are the background to commercials this time of year. You hear them through loud speakers at Easton as you walk through that fake little city. Christmas songs are played in grocery stores.

I mentioned last week some of the health benefits of singing. Singing improves our mental sharpness. Singing lowers our blood pressure. Singing is good for our lungs. Singing helps people with depression and reduces feelings of loneliness, leaving people feeling relaxed, happy and connected. People who sing have reduced levels of cortisol, which indicates lower stress and a healthier immune system.

Scientists tell us that all the benefits of singing that I listed last week are increased exponentially by group singing. Group singing connects us to people who we're singing with. Have you ever noticed that when you walk with someone that you synchronize your footsteps with theirs. Singing syncs us up with each other. We get bonded together when we sing.

If you really want to maximize health benefits, sing with other people.

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Singing in a group

Lots of folks don't want to sing in a group anymore. They are self-conscious, we don't like the way our voices sound. By the way, for those of you claim to be tone deaf, almost no one is truly tone deaf. You may sound like a frog, but to be truly tone deaf would mean that you can't recognize a melody when it's played. Almost no one is that bad.

It really is sad that in America today, people rarely sing together anymore. Choral singing groups which were incredibly popular in the 1940's and 50's and 60's have almost disappeared from most towns in our country. Where people used to gather around a piano and sing at home or sing together at parties, today singing is left almost

entirely to the professionals. We download music and we listen to it or we listen to a band on stage or listen to someone sing a solo. But outside of singing “Take me Out to the Ballgame” during the 7th inning stretch or mouthing the words to “Carmen Ohio” at a Buckeye game, just about the only Americans who regularly sing together these days are those who attend church.

By the way, here’s one more reason that church is good for you – because it’s the only place that you get to sing in a group and group singing is good for you. But why is church the one place in America these days that people still sing. I asked this question last week, but why does virtually every church across the globe throughout all of history take a portion of their service to sing? While the singing may vary from Gregorian chants to contemporary worship songs, why is it that, other than the very odd exception, every church throughout all of Christian history takes a portion of their gathering time every week to sing?

Last week I mentioned a few of the reasons. Singing is a way we praise God. Singing is a way we pray to God. Singing is a way that we prepare ourselves for spiritual battle. I want to mention one other really significant reason today that we take time every week at church to sing.

Singing is not only a way to praise God and to pray and to engage in spiritual warfare, but singing is a way for us to teach.

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Singing is a way to teach

Scriptures tell us that God’s Word is ministered among God’s people not only through Bible reading and biblical preaching, but also through singing. Here’s what we read in Colossians 3:16.

Slide Colossians 3:16

¹⁶Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

I don’t think that the teaching value of singing is appreciated these days. Singing is a powerful form of teaching ministry. For some churches, singing is just a way to pump up the crowd to get people ready for the main event which is preaching.

I think of the wonderful hymn, “In Christ Alone”.

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In Christ alone, Who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe!

This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save.
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied;
For ev'ry sin on Him was laid—
Here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain;
Then bursting forth in glorious day,
Up from the grave He rose again!
And as He stands in victory,
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me;
For I am His and He is mine—
Bought with the precious blood of Christ.

Could we do better in teaching the gospel story than singing “In Christ Alone”?

Let me speak affectionately to some of you about the tendency to come in late to avoid singing because you're here for the teaching. The teaching portion of church doesn't begin when the preacher gets up to preach. The teaching portion of church is happening throughout our “worship” or singing. Indeed, there is almost no better way that you could teach yourself good theology, that you could fill your heart with truth better than to sing great worship songs. The Apostle Paul tells us that the word of Christ dwells in us richly through songs.

As I said, Christmas is a time of singing. It's a time of song. Today I want to continue this series on “The Songs of Christmas” in a message that I've titled, “The Song of Zechariah”. Let's pray.

Slide Luke 1:57-66

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

⁶¹ They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill

country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

According to Jewish tradition, Jewish boys are named on the eighth day at their circumcision, what Jews call their Bris, which is from the Hebrew word berit or Covenant. Family members and close friends gather to watch Jewish boys become part of God’s Covenant people through the ritual of circumcision.

Traditionally, Jews name the child for a family member. In recent centuries, always for a dead family member to preserve that dead family member’s memory. The name that I was given at my bris was Yaakov David, which in English is Jacob David. That’s my Hebrew name – Yaakov David – but my mother didn’t like that name so she named me Richard Owen. She said that the rabbi said that it didn’t matter I could have one Hebrew name at my bris and another American name and it was all the same.

Back in the first century, it mattered if you name a child for a relative.

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The naming

Here’s what we read in verse 13:

Slide Luke 1:13

But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.”

The name John means:

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John = the Lord has been gracious or the Lord has shown favor

Names are really important in the Bible. They speak about a person’s character. They speak about a person’s destiny. When God gave somebody a new name, it means that God is giving them a new destiny. A new future. An expanded horizon. So, for example, when God says in the book of Genesis that he is going to change Abram’s name – Abram means “exalted father” – but God says, “I’m going to change your name to Abraham” which means “the father of many nations”. God tells Abram that he’s not just going to be an exalted father of the Jews, but the father of many nations, of everyone who has faith in me. That’s why you as a Gentile can say, “If you trace back my spiritual lineage far enough, my spiritual lineage goes back to Father Abraham, just as much as you Rich, who are a Jew can trace your spiritual lineage back to Father Abraham.”

God gave Abraham a new name, a new destiny. To be a saved person is to have God select a new name for you. God didn't just select John the Baptist's name. He didn't just select Jesus' name. He didn't just select Abraham's name. God selects your name when he saves you. In the act of salvation, God overrides the choice of name that your mother gave you or that your father gave you. Do you realize that? This is why I love the old worship song, "I will Change Your Name".

It goes this way:

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I will change your name
You shall no longer be called
Wounded, outcast, lonely or afraid
I will change your name
Your new name shall be
Confidence, joyfulness,
Overcoming one
Faithfulness, friend of God
One who seeks My face

Talk about the teaching ministry of singing! What this song is telling us and what the scripture tells us is that to become a Christian is to go through a name change. God changed your name as much as he changed Abraham's name, as much as my mother changed my name. To become a Christian is to be given a new identity. "I used to be like that, but now I'm like this." To be a Christian is to be given a different destiny. "I used to be headed in that direction, but now I'm headed in this direction." To be a Christian is to have a different trajectory for your life, a different future.

Let me ask you a question. Has God given you a new name? Are you aware of a different destiny for your life because you've become a follower of Jesus? You have different ambitions, different desires, and different dreams. Do you like the direction your life is headed, friend? Do you like where you find yourself at right now? Have you considered becoming a follower of Jesus and signing up for the future that God has for you?

This story is about naming, but the story is also about:

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The sign

John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, suddenly being healed of muteness (his inability to speak) is a sign. It points beyond itself to a much deeper meaning.

When we first meet Zechariah, he's in the Temple. There God makes Zechariah a wonderful promise: he and his wife Elizabeth, who have been unable to have a child, will miraculously be able to conceive in their old age. When Zechariah hears the promise of the angel of God, his reaction is one of unbelief.

Slide Luke 1:18-20

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹The 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. ²⁰And 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."

Have you ever wondered why Zechariah experienced this specific judgment? Why was Zechariah rendered suddenly unable to speak? Why did Zechariah have to be silenced for nine months? And why, when John was presented publicly for the first time, was Zechariah suddenly able to speak?

Slide Luke 1:63-64

⁶³He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.

Because this judgment on Zechariah and his sudden speaking is a sign. Zechariah is a symbol of the nation of Israel. For centuries, the nation of Israel experienced no word from God. The rabbis taught that prophecy was silenced after the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi in the Old Testament, due to Israel's unbelief. The silence of God – not hearing God say a word – is always seen by God's people as a judgment from God.

We read in Psalms:

Slide Psalm 74:9

We are given no signs from God;
no prophets are left,
and none of us knows how long this will be.

But suddenly, unexpectedly, after nearly four centuries of silence, God is on the move again. God is returning to Israel. God's kingdom is breaking in. With the birth of John the Baptist and even more with the coming birth of Jesus six months later, God is going to speak again. So the end of Zechariah's silence points to a more profound and more wonderful end to God's silence for Israel and for the world.

God is removing the judgment of silence. God's kingdom is breaking in. You always know that the kingdom is near because we hear the voice of God again. Zechariah is a sign of the end of judgment and the inbreaking of the kingdom because God's voice is recovered through the ministry of Zechariah's son, John the Baptist.

So, what is the content of Zechariah's song? The song is called the "Benedictus" from the Latin translation of the first few words, or even better "Blessed be the Lord". Jewish prayers almost always begin with "Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God." Zechariah begins his prayer with "Blessed are You." Why is Zechariah praising God? What is this song about? Why is Zechariah blessing God? This is a song of God's redemption.

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A song of God's redemption

Slide Luke 1:67-71

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David

⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

⁷¹ salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—

We find the word "redeemed" in verse 68.

Slide Luke 1:68

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

To redeem someone is to save them or to buy them out of slavery at a high price.

What are we saying when we say, “God redeemed”? Why do we sing so many songs and hymns about redemption? By redemption one thing we’re singing about is that God with a mighty hand delivered us from enemies who were too strong for us. That’s what Zechariah says in verse 71:

Slide Luke 1:71

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

And verse 74

Slide Luke 1:74

to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear

What Zechariah is saying is when God comes into the world, He deals with the bullies. All the people who push others around. All the loud mouths and braggarts. All the folks who abuse and use and mock and criticize. Why does Zechariah rejoice? Because the bullies are finally going to be dealt with. Have you ever been bullied in your life? Someone stronger than you, someone better connected than you, someone who had power over you, abused you. Have you ever been bullied? I’m so grateful for the anti-bullying movement that’s been happening in America over the last 15 years in our public schools and the incredibly important #MeToo movement. This may prove to be one of the most consequential social movement of the last decade.

When I was six or seven years old, there was a bully on our street. He was easily a head taller than me and probably weighed 40-50 pounds more than me. He would take his father’s tools, this really happened, out of his father’s tool cabinet in the garage and he’d come up behind me and hit me in the back of the head with a level or a saw. One time he came up behind me with a hammer and hit me in the back with a hammer. Knocked me right to the ground. So, I went home crying, I told my mother what happened and she went down the street. She said to his father, “Listen, you need to lock up your tools because your son is taking your tools out and hitting my son with them. You need to lock them up.” His dad said, “What I don’t see I’m not going to do anything about.” The classic bully raised by an enabling parent who won’t deal with it.

One day, this kid, his name was Brett, pushed my older sister. My sister was three years older than me and about Brett's height and my sister pushed him back. Then Brett tore her shirt and ripped a gold chain off her neck. My older sister just lost it. She punched Brett in the face, knocked him to the ground, sat on his chest and just wailed on him. She bloodied his nose, blackened his eyes. All the kids on the street stood around and just cheered my sister Jayne on. "Hit him again!"

Well, as justice would have it – Brett's dad came down the street and told my mom that my sister had bloodied Brett's nose. My mom smiled and said – you guessed it – "What I don't see, I won't do anything about."

There's something so wonderful when a bully finally gets it. When an abuser finally gets his comeuppance. When a boss has been sexually harassing young women for years finally gets exposed and his reputation is shredded. When a molester finally gets defeated in an election or drummed out of office. When a harasser is fired from their big corporate job. When a selfish, greedy person who injures others through their greed is finally punished.

Zechariah is singing, "Finally, the bullies, the oppressors, the abusers are going to be dealt with!" What does all of this mean for you and for me? Why do we sing songs of redemption at Christmas? Who is it or what is it that is abusing us? Who is bullying you and me? For some here, your bully may be a person – your spouse, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a parent, a child. By the way, listen to me now, if you're being abused, would you email me? I want you to know that the church is here for you. We care about you. We love you. We want to stand with you and try to offer help to you.

You may say, "I'm not being abused by any person so why do I need a redeemer? What enemy is so strong that I need someone to help set me free? What am I trapped by?" The Bible says that all of us are born with sinful natures that the Bible calls "the flesh" which keeps saying to us, "More" in some area of our life. We crave "more" in some area that we are powerless to control. The "more" may be food, drugs or drink, sex or work. We all have a fallen part of us that craves more. More approval, more acceptance, more relationships, more recognition, more money, more stuff. Craving for more takes different shapes for each of us. There is a part of each of us that desires to cooperate with supernatural evil. There is in each of us a terrible bent, a twist, a brokenness inside, a part of us that says, "I know I shouldn't be going after this, I know it's stupid, I know it's self-destructive, I know this can't work – it's never worked before. Nevertheless, I'm going to do it anyway."

There is a part of us that conspires against Holy God. And we can't be rescued by self-help. The downward pull of sin is too great for our weak resolutions. We need a

Redeemer. Someone to save us from the bully of our flesh. Someone bigger than us, stronger than us, more powerful than us. That's why we sing at Christmas because God has raised up a redeemer.

Why does Zechariah sing? He sings a song of God's redemption and he sings a song of God's faithfulness.

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A song of God's faithfulness

Slide Luke 1:76-79

⁷⁶And 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,
⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Have you ever wondered what people thought about before TV was invented? Before radio? Before the internet? Before newspapers? What would someone like Zechariah, who was a devout Jew and a priest, fill their minds with all day long? Someone like Zechariah, someone who was devoted to God before all the media was invented, would have filled his mind with the Word of God. He would have spent his days meditating on scripture thinking about it, mulling it over, praying over it. And as Zechariah considers what's happening in his own life, his encounter with an angel, an extraordinary promise of that angel to him, then Elizabeth's sudden pregnancy in old age. As Zechariah mulls over what's happening and then Mary's pregnancy that Elizabeth must have told him about.

Zechariah experiences all of these events through the lens of scripture. Every single phrase in Zechariah's song is drawn from the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible has opened up to him.

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Luke 1:76 corresponds with Isaiah 40:3-5.

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Luke 1:77 corresponds to Isaiah 40:1-2

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Luke 1:78 corresponds with Numbers 24:17

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Luke 1:79 corresponds with Isaiah 9:2, 6

Zechariah saw that the whole Old Testament was being fulfilled in his day. Everything the Old Testament pointed to, everything that God had promised regarding bringing salvation to the world, is all happening in Zechariah's day through his son, John the Baptist, and in particular the one John the Baptist will point to – Jesus.

Jesus is the fulfillment of God's purpose for Israel. But unlike unfaithful Israel, Jesus is the faithful Son who chooses to love and obey God. Jesus fulfills Israel's national destiny to be light to the world and to bring all the nations in the world to God. Jesus is Noah's Ark that saved God's people from destruction. Jesus is the ram caught in the thicket that God supplied in place of Isaac. Jesus is the patriarch Joseph, loved by his father, rejected by his brothers, sold to the Gentiles, unfairly punished, but eventually becoming the right hand man of the king, who accomplishes the salvation of many.

Jesus is the prophet greater than Moses. He is Jonah in the depths for three days, but raised. He is Amos warning us about a coming judgment. He is Jeremiah weeping over the nation as he sees judgment coming. He is Ezekiel prophesying the Temple's destruction. He is Isaiah preaching comfort and good news to those in captivity. Jesus is the wisdom of the book of Proverbs. He is David's Lord in the Psalms. He is the Passover Lamb, the Day of Atonement, and the Sabbath Rest. He is the exodus from Egypt, the end of the Babylonian exile, the Kinsmen Redeemer. He is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, and the Mighty God of Isaiah 9.

Do you get it? Do you understand what Zechariah understood? Do you get why Zechariah was singing? Everything – every prophet, every prophecy, every sacrifice, every bit of the law, every promise, every symbol – everything Israel was or ever hoped to be was fulfilled in Jesus, the one whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. It all points

to Jesus. Jesus is the center. Jesus is the meaning. Jesus is the climax. Jesus is the culmination of God's 2,000 year history with the creation of Israel.

As we approach Christmas this year, let me ask you a question: do you know Jesus? Do you have a relationship with Jesus that's making a real difference in your life right now? I'm not asking you about what you did five years ago or ten years ago or whether as a child you may have had some acquaintance with Jesus. I'm asking you, friend, a simple question: do you have a relationship with Jesus that's making a real difference in your life right now? If you say, "I don't. I don't have a relationship with Jesus that's making a real difference in my life right now, but I'd like to." I want to pray with you.

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Luke 1:57-80

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