

## **We Sing with Zechariah**

Luke 1:67-80

*by Michael G. Lilienthal*

Greetings, you people, for whom God has remembered his covenant and promise,

Learn today what this means. I am sure, as the Scriptures are also sure, that when you understand the significance of this promise being fulfilled for you, that you will not be able to keep silent, but you will burst forth and **Sing with Zechariah**.

Remember this Zechariah: the angel Gabriel visited him and told him, “[Y]our wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John,” and gave him several details about that son’s purpose (Luke 1:13). But Zechariah said, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (1:18). Because of his doubt, Zechariah was cursed with silence: “And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time” (1:20). And so, for more than nine months, Zechariah was mute. After so long silent and at the birth of his son, this Spirit-inspired song was really the only thing that could come out of his mouth. It is a song of salvation, and a song of remembrance.

### **I. We Sing of Salvation**

This song in fact beautifully teaches us the truths of salvation in poetry and music, teaching us both what has happened and what will happen. It begins in the way much traditional Hebrew praise song begins: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel”! With the first word we are prepared for the tone of the whole song: we are praising, speaking

well of, our God. This is the central point of this psalm. Everything else comes from it, i.e., we see why God is to be praised.

It is because “he has visited and redeemed his people.” In what way has God “visited” his people? That is in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. God himself stepped out of his heavenly throne and into the cloak of humanity, becoming human as he was conceived in the womb of Mary. Prior to Zechariah’s song, while Elizabeth was pregnant with John, Mary heard the news from the same angel Gabriel: “you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus” (Luke 1:30-31). Then, “Mary arose and went with haste into...the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!’” (1:39-42).

See how the Holy Spirit was instructing and using this whole family! John was to be the forerunner of the Christ, and would preach, filled with the Holy Spirit, as Zechariah sings: “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.” Elizabeth his mother, when she saw Mary, was filled with the Holy Spirit and recognized that Mary had become the mother of God and that in her womb was the Savior of the world, the Son of God. Zechariah, now, filled with the same Holy Spirit, sings of how God “has visited and redeemed his people / and has raised up a horn of salvation for us.”

“Salvation” is central to the instruction being given in this song. Three times is the word “salvation” chanted by Zechariah. First in reference to the “horn of salvation,” the horn being the symbol of strength in many animals, of power. Therefore Zechariah uses symbolism and metaphor to sing that God has raised up one who is powerful to save. He knows that the Savior has come – and how fantastic, even in the form of a baby yet unborn! This little one still growing in the womb of his mother held the horn of divinity in his hands! And he would use that power to save the people. Do you know how often the Gospels use the word “salvation”? All over, you’d expect. But actually, aside from a few places in John’s Gospel, the word is only in Luke’s Gospel. The same is true of “Savior,” and of all the Gospels, Luke’s uses the verb “to save” more than the rest.

This isn’t because Luke is teaching something different from the others in his Gospel. Rather each of the four Gospels has a different angle from which it views the redemption story, and each has a different emphasis. The particulars of that is a fascinating study for another time, but one of Luke’s emphases is on salvation, rescue from peril. And another of his emphases is on *names*. In Zechariah’s story, one of the key features is the naming of his son John. When he receives his voice back, Zechariah “spoke, blessing God,” referring to God by the significant name, “the Lord God,” a doubling-up of God’s name, which, in Hebrew (יהוה אֱלֹהִים), “occurs forty times throughout the OT,”<sup>1</sup> and in Greek (κύριος ὁ θεός), only a handful of times in the New.

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<sup>1</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 51.

The theme of names continues with the naming of Jesus, as Gabriel instructed Mary (and later Joseph, cf. Matt. 1:21).

Take a look back at salvation, for a moment. Do you know what “salvation” is in Hebrew? יְשׁוּעָה. Taking that word, there’s a very popular name, which is the Hebrew for “the Lord is salvation”: יְהוֹשֻׁעַ. In English that’s Joshua. Do you know what it is in Greek? Ἰησοῦς. Jesus. With all of Luke’s and Zechariah’s emphasis on “salvation,” they are pointing directly and clearly to one individual: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Zechariah sings of the “horn of salvation” we mentioned. He sings that, because of this horn, this visitation from God, it would mean the fulfillment of God’s promise “that we should be saved from our enemies.” Salvation, you see, is not just some abstract thought. Salvation means something concrete: it means rescue. It means a rope ladder thrown down to you in the pit. It means the life-saving medicine given to you on your deathbed. It means a defeat turned on its head into triumph. Salvation is always “from” something. In this case, “from our enemies.” Who are our enemies?

The Devil. He is the accuser who drags our stinking corpses into God’s court and lists before him all our errors with glee; he is the one who sets before us the things that we want and tells us, “If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours” (Luke 4:7).

The world is our enemy. All mankind, blinded to the light of the Gospel and preferring to hide in the darkness of their sins; they cannot fathom the truth of grace, but see in it only that it seeks to grab ahold of them and pull them out of the darkness into the light. This terrifies them, and so they hate it. And as Jesus says, “you will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (Matt. 10:22).

Our own flesh is our enemy. We are sinful beings, and “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12). The sin which is an innate quality of our beings manifests itself, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matt. 15:19), and “the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (Gal. 5:19-21). Do any of these remind you of anyone? Don’t look around. Look inward. Perhaps you think, none of these apply directly to me. I’m not a murderer. I’ve never had an orgy. I’m not a thief or liar or idolater. But are you ever jealous? Do you create unnecessary strife and rivalry between your fellow Christians? Have you ever said anything that puts a black mark on someone’s name in the eyes of someone else? Do you decide what you want and damned be what anyone else wants? Before you start to think that your flesh is not your own enemy, that your soul is not blackened by sin, recall the general words of Paul: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Recall that even that mighty saint could recognize in himself, not just that he was sinful in some ambiguous ethereal sense, but that he committed specific sins, that his body was always trying to sin, always turning his back on God and saying, “I don’t care what God has to say about it; I want *this!*” He wrote: “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:15, 18-19).

As Christians, we don't stop sinning. If we were to claim that this were possible, then we would have to damn Paul and Peter and John and the other apostles, Moses, Abraham, Jacob, and all the patriarchs and prophets. No, what makes Christians different is not that we don't sin: it's that we wrestle with that sin. As we confess in "The Meaning of Baptism" from Luther's *Small Catechism*: "Such baptizing with water means that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts; and that a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever."<sup>2</sup> Notice, "daily," this occurs. "Daily," by "contrition and repentance," we remember our baptism where we were saved, and we arise to new life.

## II. We Sing for Remembrance

This was the job of John the Baptist, as his father Zechariah sang, referring the third time to "salvation": "you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, / to give knowledge of salvation to his people / in the forgiveness of their sins." This is what John did: "he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). That's what baptism accomplishes – and it's once for all – and by confession and absolution, by contrition and repentance, we remember the salvation given in that baptism.

All our salvation, which is found in miniature in confession and absolution, in fact, depends on remembrance. Martin Luther again writes: "Confession consists of

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<sup>2</sup> *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism* (Mankato: ELS, 2001), 22.

two parts: one, that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the pastor or confessor as from God himself, and in no way doubt, but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.”<sup>3</sup> Following this in Luther’s instruction come two questions:

*What sins should we confess?*

Before God we should acknowledge ourselves guilty of all sins, even of those which we do not know about, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer. But before the pastor or confessor we should acknowledge those sins only which we know and feel in our hearts.

*Which are these?*

Here consider your own situation according to the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, employer, employee; whether you have been disobedient, dishonest, lazy; whether you have injured anyone by word or deed; whether you have stolen, neglected, wasted anything, or done any harm.<sup>4</sup>

This is serious. Our own sinfulness *must* be called to remembrance first. If we refuse to acknowledge our sins, whether evils committed or good deeds omitted, then we are to be considered “impenitent.” As our Catechism’s Explanation teaches: “When it is clearly evident that a sinner is impenitent, Christians must exclude him from their fellowship,” an act known as “Excommunication.”<sup>5</sup> Think of it this way: salvation means forgiveness, and there can be no forgiveness where there is no sin acknowledged. So if one does not acknowledge his sin, that person cannot be saved.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 194.

That is why John was to go “to give knowledge of salvation to [God’s] people / *in the forgiveness of their sins.*” After the sins are called to remembrance, then a second thing is remembered: the promises of God, as Zechariah sings:

as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
that we should be saved from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us;  
to show the mercy promised to our fathers  
and to remember his holy covenant,  
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us  
that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear,  
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And the work of his son was to preach forgiveness of sins, which is grounded in “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.”

Do you see what our salvation is based on? God “remember[s] his holy covenant, / the oath that he swore.” That’s right in the middle of this song: everything in Zechariah’s song grows out of that concrete fact of God’s covenant, which is his oath, which is his promise, which is the Gospel.

Think about covenants for a moment. With Abraham God made a covenant, telling him, “‘Bring me a heifer..., a female goat..., a ram..., a turtledove, and a young pigeon.’ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other.... When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram” (Gen. 15:9-10, 17-18). With the nation of Israel enslaved in Egypt God made a covenant, telling them to “take a lamb...without blemish, a male a year



old...and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight. Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses" (Ex. 12:3-7). He reaffirmed that covenant with the freed nation of Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai: "And [Moses] sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he threw against the altar.... And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words'" (Ex. 24:5-8).

Do you notice the common theme running through the covenants: blood sacrifice. Death and blood must accompany the oath that God swore. And we see, foreshadowed now by Zechariah's song and by the work of his son preparing the way, that the "covenantal sacrifice God made with Abraham, celebrated in the Passover, poured on the people by Moses...is now offered in a cup of the Lord's blood."<sup>6</sup> It is by the blood of God himself that the deliverance and salvation he promised comes into being. Notice that this occurs because *God* remembers his covenant. It then means something to us when *we* remember it.

We remember it by looking back through God's promises: through the Old Testament where he foretold the coming of the Messiah, the Redeemer, the Savior; and through the New Testament, where we see what that Savior accomplished by his blood,

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<sup>6</sup> Just, *op. cit.*, 99.

shed on the cross, the blood put on the doorposts of our hearts so that the angel of death might pass us over and we be “delivered from the hand of our enemies.” Therefore we sing for remembrance; and we are able to remember, because God has remembered us. Go back to the theme of names once again. Zechariah’s name is Hebrew: זְכַרְיָהּ – which means, “*Yahweh has remembered.*” This prophet, filled with the Holy Spirit so that he might instruct us with song, has certainly lived up to his name. The Lord God has remembered his promise to us, and that promise meant that “he has visited and redeemed his people / and has raised up a horn of salvation for us / in the house of his servant David.” Because he remembered that promise and accomplished that salvation, we are able to “serve him without fear, / in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”

This bit, see, is the only thing that *continues* after all the points of history. God is a god of history, who worked through the events of mankind to bring about the salvation of mankind. Now we march forward empowered by the salvation won by those events (specifically by the events of Jesus’ death on the cross and subsequent resurrection), and, led by the same Holy Spirit that caused Zechariah to sing his hymn, we “serve him without fear, / in holiness and righteousness before him.” See where we are? “Before him.” This is the same phrase spoken by the angel Gabriel, when he introduced himself to Zechariah: “I stand *in the presence of God*” (Luke 1:19). Because of what is accomplished, we share a place with the angels.

The song ends: “because of the tender mercy of our God...the sunrise shall visit us from on high,” and notice again the *visitation*. This sunrise is the light of grace, as

Malachi prophesied: “But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings” (4:2). This is the accomplishing of our salvation, which was made public to all by the rising of the Son of God on Easter morning, bringing healing to all who were dead in sin. He rose “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, / to guide our feet into the way of peace.” This is what God accomplishes through his Son, by winning salvation: “God’s goal is to bring peace to his creation and to guide his people to peace.”<sup>7</sup>

Peace is ours because of the light of the sun of righteousness, which is salvation, which was won by the one named “Yahweh is salvation,” Jesus, given to us when we come to know him. That is the purpose and goal of Zechariah’s song: it is a teaching song. It’s goal is the same as that “of all preaching, liturgy, catechesis, and pastoral care,” i.e., “to bring God’s people into deeper communion with Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

Let everything you see, hear, and do here in this church building, every word you sing, every message preached to you be united in purpose with John (whose name even means “the Lord has been gracious,” the message he would have us remember!), and let Zechariah’s song become ours, so that we sing, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,” for all these many reasons, which all boil down to one thing: our salvation!

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Just, *op. cit.*, 100.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* xv.