

Benedictus

68 "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people, 69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David,
70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who *have been* since the world began, 71 That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us, 72 To perform the mercy *promised* to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, 73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:
74 To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear,
75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.
76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins,
78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;
79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace." (Lk. 1:68-79)

Zacharias was at least sixty, but perhaps much older. Only Levites had to retire because of age, but the priests could continue on until they were infirm and unable to. He was unusual among the priests. Most priests lived in Jericho or in a section of Jerusalem known as the Opel-quarter. For some reason, Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth chose to live in some small town south of Jerusalem, the hill-country of Judea, a humble unpretentious place.

He was a priest and married to the daughter of the priest, which was supposed to confer double-honour on them and their offspring. And no doubt, the many friends and relatives had long waited for the child of these two, with an almost superstitious awe: a child of a priest and the daughter of a priest will surely be a thorough-bred priest! But the years of their youth had turned into those of middle age and then old age, and no children came. We can speculate what gossip-mill of the elites and priestly families said about why God had judged them unfit to have children, but it was surely there in a culture which prized having children almost above all else. It had been a life of waiting.

There is a chance that Zacharias was a small boy when Pompeii first brought the Roman Eagle to conquer Jerusalem in 63 B.C., and brought Israel under another Gentile kingdom. It was now 600 years since Babylon took the Jews into exile, 500 years since they returned under Persian rule, 300 years since Alexander the Great took over Israel, 200 years since the Maccabean wars, and now at least 60 years of Roman rule. Israel had long waited for a deliverer, but none had come. It had been 400 years since the last prophet, Malachi, had spoken, and now the only sound close to a prophet's voice was the sounds of the pens of scribes making commentaries on the prophets. But there were still so many prophecies to be fulfilled. But now it seemed to be a life of waiting.

He had also waited long for the special privilege of ministering in the Temple. There were many priests, around 20 000 according to Josephus, so around fifty would be on duty each day. To prevent unhappy competitive disputes, the lot was cast to assign to each priest his function. They did this four times. The first was to determine who would offer the morning sacrifice. The second was to determine who was to trim the golden candlestick, and the third was to choose who would make ready the altar of incense within the Holy Place. But the greatest honour fell to the final lot. The most solemn part of the day's service was offering the incense, which symbolised Israel's accepted prayers. Only once in a lifetime could any priest enjoy that privilege. If it happened, a priest was from then on called 'rich'. Zacharias had waited all these decades for that privilege, but in all these decades it had never come to him. It had been a life of waiting.

But what set Zacharias and Elizabeth apart was that their waiting had never become grumbling, their waiting had never become despair or discontent. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. (Lk. 1:6)

This was a couple that allowed the waiting to season them and shape them rather than harden them.

The order of priests that Zacharias was part of, the order of Abijah, was on duty on a certain day. Some put this in the month of June, others in the month of October. But on that day, the high privilege of offering the incense had fallen upon Zacharias. One portion of a life of waiting had finally been fulfilled.

That day he chose two assistants. After the instruments had sounded to signify that the highpoint of the day's worship was to take place, Zacharias and the two would have gone in to the Temple. One would carefully remove what had been on the altar of incense from the previous day, and then walked backwards, still worshipping and leave. The second, would take live coals from the altar of burnt offering, and place them on the very edge of altar of incense, and then also retire backwards and leave.

Now Zacharias stood with the golden censer, alone in the Holy Place, with only the light of the golden seven-armed candelabra burning on his left, the table of shewbread on his right, and ahead of him, in the centre, was the golden altar of incense, placed in front of the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. He waited for the moment, before spreading the incense from his censer upon the altar of incense, and waited till it kindled upon those coals, and went up in a fragrant smoke, symbolic of the prayers of Israel, that were at that moment being offered outside the Temple by the thousands of priests and people.

Then, as Zacharias turned, there he saw on the right side of the altar an angel. It could only have been an angel, one not dressed in priestly garments, one who had not entered with the others. The angel began to tell Zacharias that the second thing he had waited for his whole life was now to be fulfilled: his wife Elizabeth would bare a son, a son to be named Yochanan, John, meaning God is gracious.

But in the next breath, the angel, who turned out to be Gabriel, told Zacharias that his son would herald the end of the third waiting in his life. This child would be filled with Spirit, a Nazarite dedicated wholly to God, one who would be a prophet like Elijah, and would prepare the way for the Messiah. In other words, God's promises to Israel, to deliver her from her enemies and her humiliation and exalt her were about to finally take place, and Zacharias' son would be the prophet to announce Messiah's coming.

In one day, three things Zacharias had been waiting for had now come within reach: the privilege of offering incense, a child for him and Elizabeth, and the Messiah born in his lifetime.

But it was a little too much. Before he knew it, he was doubting the angel's word. "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." (Lk. 1:18), he asked. This was different to when Mary spoke to Gabriel and asked, "How shall this be?" Mary didn't understand the method, but Zacharias doubted God's means. Gabriel responded by saying that in discipline for his unbelief, Zacharias would now be mute until the day these things would take place.

Outside the people were worried, because there were rabbinic traditions about priests seeing signs or visitations in the holy place, or even dying while serving God. When he came out, and could not speak, but could only gesture and sign with his hands, and they understood that he had seen something.

With that remarkable day over, he returned home, and his wife soon conceived, and chose to

seclude herself for five months. In the sixth month, Mary came to visit, and the babe John leaped in the womb when he heard her voice.

Finally the time came for Elizabeth to deliver. The great many neighbours and relatives rejoiced in this Sarah-like birth in old age. But Zacharias was still mute. Eight days later, according to the Law of Moses, the child was to be circumcised, and everyone expected them to name their firstborn son after the father, Zacharias. Elizabeth wanted the name John. They called for Zacharias, and made signs to him to ask what the child should be called, which perhaps shows that he had been struck deaf as well. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John". At that moment, his muteness was lifted, and he began praising God to the wonder, and ongoing discussion of those in the hill country of Judea.

When Zacharias's tongue was loosed, he gave this song, the song that has been called "Benedictus", for the first word "Blessed".

It's a song about God's work. It is about promises that become reality. It's about what God said He would do, and what He has done. A song about waiting that turns into having, faith that turns into sight.

70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who *have been* since the world began,

72 To perform the mercy *promised* to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, 73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:

There is only one God in all the world's claimed religions that makes statements about the future, and God's people wait and watch until the promised future moves into the present, and then becomes recorded history. False gods, made-up gods cannot write the future in advance. They cannot be specific about events and works that will take place. But there is nothing like the promises of God made for your future, then moving into your present to make you rejoice in the reality of God. If you have looked for the promises of God during a time of waiting, and then seen it move into your present, until you could relate it to others as an historical event in your life, then you have tasted the works of God.

The opening line, like Mary's magnificat is the tone for the whole song: "Blessed *is* the Lord God of Israel,

Praised, loved, enjoyed, be the Lord God of Israel. Praised be a God real enough, active enough, living enough to turning waiting into watching, promises into present experience, hope into here and now. Zacharias' poem is about the performance of God's promises, the purposes of God's promises, and the procedure of God's promises. What He said He would do, why He said He would do it, and how he said He would do it.

I. Praise God For the Performance of His Promises

For He has visited and redeemed His people, 69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David,

Zacharias says the first thing that God has done, just as He said He would, is He has visited His people. The word *visited* in the original means to make an appearance in order to help. God has not just passively watched His people from afar. God has actually intervened. He has come among His people. The ancient prophecy was, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. (Isa. 7:14)"

God among us. God walking in a crowd. God sitting next to people at weddings. This is what it

means that God sent His Son, that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. Visitation. Many years later, Jesus would weep over Jerusalem and say, "You did not know the time of your visitation."

To this day, we mark the fact that God visited us with our calendar. The 2020th year of our Lord.

But this visitation is more than God being among His people. The second part of verse 68 tells you another part of the performance of God's promises.

This is happening to redeem His people. *Redeem* means to buy back, to buy out so as to set free. God promised and is now performing the release of His people from bondage. What kind of bondage? Zacharias in this song sees two kinds: bondage to sin, and bondage to enemies. The two are connected, though they are not always simultaneous. He sings that God has come to pay the price to set His people free from slavery to themselves, and slavery to others.

Like the second Moses setting Israel free from slavery, like a second Boaz buying a poor bride out of poverty, like a second Hosea, buying his unfaithful wife Gomer from the slave-block, so God has come to redeem His people.

Perfect freedom is not being bound to your sin, or bound to the world, or a slave to man-pleasing, or a slave to possessions.

The third thing that Zacharias says God promised He would do and is now performing is to raise up a horn of salvation in the house of His servant David. A horn, in ancient Israel, symbolised strength. The horns of a strong ox could gore someone coming close. So Zacharias says, finally, Israel has a judge stronger than Samson, a King stronger even than David, a leader greater than Joshua, though sharing his name, a deliverer. Someone who will have inner moral strength, and outward courage. He will defeat Israel's greatest threat: sin and death. Ultimately, he will defeat lesser threats: nations and peoples that hate them.

I think everyone who is redeemed wishes for a King: a leader strong enough to conquer what would conquer us.

God promised visitation, God promised redemption, and God promised deliverance. But now Zacharias is going to sing about why God promised these things.

II. Praise God For the Purpose of His Promises

71 That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us, 72 To perform the mercy *promised* to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, 73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham: 74 To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, 75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

In reverse order, or in a kind of mirror of the three things God promised, Zacharias now gives the three purposes of those promises.

First, verse 71 explains why God is raising up a horn of salvation in the house of David: **to be saved** from our enemies and out of the hand of those who hate us. Israel has been hated by the Dragon and his seed from its beginning. Only Messiah can ultimately save Israel from the raging of the heathen. The prophets predict in vivid detail the deliverance of Israel by Messiah in Ezekiel 38 and 39, in Zechariah 12, 13, and 14, and in Revelation 19. Only the Prince of Peace can finally bring peace.

For how many years had Zacharias passed Roman soldiers on the way up to the Temple. For how many years had they suffered the indignity of Roman coins with the image of Caesar, the Roman eagle in Jerusalem among a people who were to have no graven images.

But before He saves them from their enemies, He will need to save them from themselves. That's the second purpose of His promises, which corresponds to the second promise: to redeem His people. God's purpose was to **save His people from their sins**.

To perform the **mercy promised** to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, 73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:

God promised that He would have mercy on Israel. Why did Israel need mercy? Because like you and me, they had rebelled against God. They had rejected their Creator. But God promised mercy.

Zechariah 13:1 "In that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness. (Zech. 13:1)

24 "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. 25 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezek. 36:24-26)

God promised Abraham that Israel would be a blessing to all nations. It has been by giving the world the Messiah and the Bible. But there is still more promised, when Israel comes to salvation. Paul tells us Now if their fall *is* riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! (Rom. 11:12)

15 For if their being cast away *is* the reconciling of the world, what *will* their acceptance *be* but life from the dead? (Rom. 11:15)

23 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: "In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard *that God is with you.*" (Zech. 8:23)

If you are saved from sin and saved from your enemies, what do you get to do? The third purpose, which corresponds to why God visited His people:

74 To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, 75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

Salvation from enemies and salvation from sin sets you free to serve.

Here are four qualifiers of a life of service: without fear, in holiness, in righteousness, before Him, all the days of our lives.

If you are a true believer, you long to serve God. You want to serve Him without fear of persecution, or reprisals, or danger. You want to serve Him in purity without a guilty conscience. You want to serve openly, before Him to Him. And you want it to be perpetual, till the end of your life.

So when God says, I will use my strong Son to deliver you from Satan and those that hate you. I will redeem you from your sin and its guilt and its pain. I will visit you to be able to happily serve me all the days of your life without fear, without guilt, this is joy.

Praise God for His performed promises. Praise God for His purposes in the promises.

III. Praise God For How He Will Perform His Promises

76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,

77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins,

78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; 79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace."

Here are two people that will bring these promises of visitation, redemption and deliverance to pass. First, the child. John, will be the first Prophet since Malachi. He will be the forerunner, the one who goes ahead the face of the Lord Messiah. He will do two things. He will prepare Messiah's ways, and he will give knowledge of salvation.

John would raise messianic expectations. He would turn people's hearts again towards hoping in God, remembering the Word. He would shake up a dry and dull people, a people now apathetic. John would also give knowledge of salvation. He would preach the Gospel: that sins would be forgiven, through God's mercy. Unless people were ready to receive the King by repenting and believing, they could not receive the kingdom.

But now comes the high point of the song. God's mercy would send the Dayspring from on high. This literally means the Dawn from on High. After the long night of slavery to sin, and oppression, Messiah is like the Dawn. This Dawn has finally visited us.

This is the same word Paul uses

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, (Tit. 2:11)

Titus 3:4 But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, (Tit. 3:4)

Messiah is going to do two things. He will **give light** to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death. This is nothing less than salvation. He will open the eyes of those blinded by sin, who cannot see God. He will show Himself to be the light of the world, bringing them back to God by Himself.

He will **guide our feet** in the way of peace. After he has saved us, He will disciple us. He will lead us, teach us to serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before His face all the days of our lives.

Zacharias looks at his son John, and in that little baby he sees a lot. He sees God was not making empty statements when He promised from Abraham onwards that He would come to His people, set them free and deliver them. Why? to save them: from themselves, from their enemies, so that they could serve Him all their days. His son is the first part of that plan: the forerunner who would fallow up the ground, and coming after him would be the long expected Messiah: the Light who gives Light, and the Shepherd who guides. The future had now become present. And now we read it as past.

We find ourselves now between the two comings of Jesus. We, too long for His second visitation. We long for complete redemption, the redemption of our bodies. We long for the Son of David to sit on His throne and rule the world. We, too must wait for the day we will be saved from a world that hates Christianity. We must wait to be delivered from our own sin completely. We must wait for the day when we will serve Him in perfect joy forever and ever. But just as John and Jesus accomplished the purpose of His first coming, so it will be with the second.

But just as that future moved into their present and became their past, so the promises of His return, when He will defeat Israel's enemies and ours, when He will glorify us with new bodies, when He will wipe away every tear will surely come to pass.