

This Is What Christmas Really Means

The Benedictus of Zechariah

Luke 1:67-79

It is so wonderful to hear the choir sing the Christmas message. The tradition of singing at Christmastime is as old as Christmas itself. Did you know that the first Christmas carols are written in the Bible as part of the Christmas story? When Luke sat down to write his gospel, he recorded four of the original songs of Christmas. They are found in Luke chapters 1-2.

These pieces of prophetic poetry have survived for over 2,000 years. They have been placed in many different musical settings and joined to various tunes. Philip Ryken refers to them as *“the last of the Hebrew psalms and the first of the Christian hymns...the gospel is and must be musical...what He has done must be celebrated in song.”*

Today we are going to look at one of these Christmas carols from the Gospel of Luke, the Benedictus of Zechariah, and in it I hope to show you what Christmas really means.

Before read the lyrics of this song and study its message, just like Brett often does for us when we sing from our hymnals, let's go behind the music for a few minutes to get the back-story on our Christmas hymn composer for today. You can find his story in Luke 1:5-25.

Imagine if we lived without any spokesman from God...no Bible, no preaching, only silence from above. Between the Old and New Testaments God's people waited four hundred years to hear a prophet from God. During these “silent years,” some of God's people were holding on to hope, others were stuck in ritual and routine, and still others were not even thinking about God and His promises anymore. There was no son of David on the throne in Jerusalem. Rome ruled the world and cruel King Herod imposed his will on the Jewish people. Immorality was rampant and spiritual life among many Israelites had lost any true vitality. Instead, religion for many was endless rules and empty ritual.

In this world of darkness and despair lived a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. They were godly people, **“both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless,”** (Luke 1:6). This elderly couple had another tragic silence in their life because Elizabeth had not been able to have children.

Zechariah was one of twenty thousand priests in Israel in his day. For just two weeks out of the year his division of Abijah was on duty. While he was in Jerusalem for his Temple responsibilities, he was chosen by lot to be the one to enter the Holy Place and burn incense inside the temple. This was an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and a huge privilege.

A multitude of worshipers were out in the temple courtyard praying as he burned the incense and offered prayers of intercession for the people. They're waiting for

him to come back and pronounce the Aaronic blessing: **“The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face shine upon you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace,”** (Num. 6:24-26).

But Zechariah is delayed. Suddenly the angel Gabriel appears at the right side of the altar of incense. Zechariah was “gripped with fear.” Gabriel’s message was first, **“Do not be afraid.”** And then, **“Your prayer is heard,”** (Luke 1:13). The angel told him that Elizabeth would bear him a son! Verses 14-15 explain what kind of man his son would turn out to be and verses 16-17 describe the message this son would preach. Among the things he would do is to turn people back to the Lord their God and to **“turn the hearts of the fathers to their children,”** (Luke 1:17). All this would be **“to make ready a people prepared for the Lord,”** (1:17).

Zechariah is incredulous at this news and he immediately asks for some sort of sign: **“How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years,”** (Luke 1:18). Gabriel responds saying, **“I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God,”** (Luke 1:19). He was no ordinary angel – appearing centuries before to Daniel and later in this chapter to announce to Mary that she would bear the Messiah.

Zechariah had heard the message but he did not believe it. Now he would have nine months to listen. Gabriel rebukes him saying, **“But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time,”** (Luke 1:20).

Zechariah had asked for a sign and for nine months he had to use sign language to communicate. Someone has wondered what the greater miracle is here – Elizabeth having a baby in her old age or a preacher keeping silent for nine months! He’s going to be a new father and he even can’t tell anyone!

We pick up the story again about nine months later, in verse 57 when their baby boy is born. Zechariah is still unable to speak. Eight days later, the whole town comes out to the circumcision ceremony when they will name the baby. Elizabeth insists that he is to be called John. Zechariah asks for a tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, **“His name is John,”** (Luke 1:63).

I love what happens next. Zechariah receives his voice back and his heart explodes with worship. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah breaks out in prophetic praise. Listen to his song:

67 Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

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."

I want you to notice first of all an important word in this song. It is used twice. First in verse 68, "**Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited ...**," and then in verse 78, "**Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us.**" It's the word, *visited*. It literally means to look upon in order to help. It is the word you would use when you see someone in a bad situation and then you intervene personally in order to assist them. God saw us in our sin-sick state and He has come to visit us through His Son, Jesus Christ. He saw us fumbling around in the darkness and He has visited us with light.

As Zechariah looks down at his baby boy, he knows that help is on the way. Somehow his son John would help *prepare* the way for the One who *is* the Way. The long wait is now over! The Benedictus of Zechariah is all about God visiting His people, about God coming to earth. This is what Christmas really means: *God has come and visited us in order to save us.*

Nearly every phrase in this Christmas song is filled with biblical references, especially from the Prophets. Ray Pritchard has pointed out five specific facts from this song about the Divine Visitation. I'm going to rephrase them as an outline for us to walk through quickly today.

1. Christmas means God has come to provide salvation.

Zechariah mentions God's saving purpose in four different ways:

- Redemption: **“For He has visited and redeemed His people.”** (68) To “redeem” means to release from bondage through the payment of a price.
- Salvation: **“And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David.”** (69) The horn is a symbol of the strength of an animal, such as a bull (Ps. 132:17; 18:2). Here it points to the fact that salvation required God’s mighty power because our enemy is so strong. But God did it—He raised it up. And Zechariah know this salvation is not found in his son John but in another. Although His name is not mentioned here, it is clear that this salvation is in Jesus Christ. This horn of salvation is from **“the house of His servant David”** (1:69). John was from the tribe of Levi. It was Jesus who was born into the house of David to sit on David’s throne. As the angel told Joseph in Matthew 1:21, **“you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.”**
- Rescue: **“That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us.”** (71) **“Being delivered from the hand of our enemies.”** (74)
- Forgiveness: **“To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins.”** (77)

Zechariah is praising God that He did not visit this planet simply to see how we were doing. He knew how badly we were doing. That’s why He came! We were in trouble and God came to save us. That’s what Christmas really means: God has come to provide salvation.

2. Christmas means God has come to keep His promise.

As a godly Jew, Zechariah can’t get over the fact that God has at long last kept his promises. Zechariah sings three stanzas extolling fulfilled prophecy:

- Promised by the prophets. **“As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets.”** (70) Alfred Edersheim found more than 400 Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament that are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But even apart from these specific prophecies, the whole of the Old Testament points to Christ (in Norval Geldenhuys, Luke [Eerdmans], pp. 93-94).
- Cherished by the fathers. **“To perform the mercy promised to our fathers.”** (72) Jews for centuries had expected God to show His mercy by sending the Messiah.
- Guaranteed by oath to Abraham. **“And to remember His holy covenant, The oath which He swore to our father Abraham.”** (72-73) Two thousand years before Jesus Christ was born, God chose Abraham, from a pagan family living in the city of Ur of the Chaldeans, and promised to make a great nation of him, to give his descendants the land of Canaan, and to bless all the families of the earth through him (Gen. 12:1-3). During Jesus’ ministry, He told the Jews who contended with Him, **“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad,”** (John

8:56). Jesus Christ was the seed of Abraham in whom God's promises were fulfilled.

The point is clear: God is now doing what He promised He would do. The prophets saw it coming. Micah spoke of it, and so did Isaiah and Jeremiah. Abraham looked forward to this day, as did Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David. They all saw it coming; they just didn't know exactly when and how it would happen. Zechariah is telling us something very crucial: God fulfilled His promises when He visited the world in the person of Jesus Christ and nothing will ever be the same again.

So Christmas means God has come to save us, God has come to fulfill His promises and third:

3. Christmas means God has come to transform us.

In verses 74 and 75 Zechariah speaks of the total transformation Jesus will make in the lives of those who follow him. Salvation leads to sanctification which always leads to service:

- Sanctification. **"In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life."** (v. 75) Jesus has come to save us from sin and to sanctify us to live in holiness and righteousness.
- Serving. **"To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear."** I love how salvation leads us to live lives of serving. He saved you so that you might fulfill the highest calling in the universe – serving God without fear forever! We are saved to serve. How will you serve God in the new year?

God gives us grace so that we can live for His glory. God has come to save, to keep His promises, to enable us to live holy lives and fourth:

4. Christmas means God has come to prepare a people for Himself.

Now Zechariah considers the significance of the infant son he holds in his arms. In verses 76 and 77 he sings joyfully to John and utters three specific predictions about his future:

- He will be a prophet of God. **"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest."** (v. 76a)
- He will prepare the way of the Lord. **"For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways."** (v. 76b)
- He will preach forgiveness. **"To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins."**

This is exactly what John the Baptist did. His whole mission was to make the nation ready for the coming of Messiah. He was a prophet, a preparer and a preacher of salvation. John began his ministry by going out to the desert region around the Jordan River and preaching repentance. He baptized people as they confessed their sin and so he helped prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

When John saw Jesus, he cried out, **“Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”** (John 1:29)

Did you notice that there are only two verses in this entire song that have to do with Zechariah’s own son John? The rest of this chorus has to do with the Lord Jesus, the Savior. John’s life would be all about putting Jesus first and pointing people away from himself so that they would see the Savior. We would do well to mimic his life mission as found in John 3:30: **“He must increase, but I must decrease.”** John was focused on being second, not first. He prepared people for Jesus’ first coming. We have the privilege of helping people get ready to meet the Lord at His Second Coming. We do that not by pointing to ourselves, but to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christmas means God has come bringing salvation, keeping His promises, transforming our lives, preparing us to be His people and lastly:

5. Christmas means God has come bringing spiritual blessings.

In one final burst of praise Zechariah speaks of three great blessings when God visits us:

- Light to those who are in darkness. **“Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us.”** (78)
Jesus is the Dayspring, the sunrise from on high. Jesus coming to earth is the beginning of a new day. It means the end of the dark night. Above all, it speaks of hope to the hurting.
- Pardon to those condemned to death. **“To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.”** (79) Humanity sits in the darkness of sin, waiting for death to devour us. Jesus came to die for us so that we, the condemned might be pardoned, set free from sin and death.
- Guidance to those who have lost their way. **“To guide our feet into the way of peace.”** (78)

During the Christmas season of 1879, an agnostic reporter in Boston saw three little girls standing in front of a store window full of toys. One of them was blind. Coming closer, he heard the other two trying to describe the playthings to their friend. He said he had never thought of how difficult it would be to explain what something looks like to someone who has never been able to see. That incident became the basis for a newspaper story.

Two weeks later this same agnostic attended a meeting conducted by the famous evangelist, D. L. Moody. His purpose was to catch Moody in some inconsistency. But he was greatly surprised to hear Moody use his own newspaper account of the three girls to illustrate a spiritual truth. Moody said, “Just as the blind girl couldn’t visualize the toys, so a lost person can’t see Christ in all His glory.” He said that God must open the eyes of those without Christ so that the person will acknowledge his sin and trust the Savior in humble faith. That night God opened that newsman’s eyes. He saw his own need and discovered

for himself what Christmas really means. (From, "Our Daily Bread," Winter, 1980-1981.)

The familiar words of Phillips Brooks say it so beautifully:

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.

God has visited earth in the person of Jesus Christ. Now that same Divine Visitor comes and knocks at the door of your heart. Will you open the door and let Him in? Ask Him to shine into your heart to guide you into the way of peace. Repent of your sins and trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior. The visitor from heaven is here at last! Will you, like Zechariah, drop everything and welcome Him into your world? If today you trust in Jesus Christ to save you from sin you will experience what Christmas really means.