

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

⁶⁸Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has visited us and prepared redemption for his people.
⁶⁹He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰just as he said long ago through the mouth of his holy prophets.
⁷¹He raised up salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us,
⁷²in order to show mercy to our fathers by remembering his holy covenant,
⁷³the oath which he swore to Abraham our father,
⁷⁴to grant deliverance to us from the hand of our enemies,
so that we are able to serve him without fear,
⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,
because you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸because of God's tender mercies,
by which the Rising Sun from on high will visit us,
⁷⁹to shine on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace. (EHV)

Theme: Blessed be the Lord God.

1. He Remembered his Holy Covenant.
2. He gives us the knowledge of Salvation.

“Let my prayer rise before you as incense...” We just sang that song earlier as part of our liturgy. It is a reference to a priest lighting the incense on the altar of incense in the Holy Place in the temple. The picture is simple but striking—as smoke rises up towards the heavens so our prayers rise up to God, who hears and answers us. This incense was lit twice a day—once during the morning sacrifice and once in the evening.

And on one particular day, it was Zechariah's turn to light the incense—and it was a big day for him! This was a rare privilege for any priest in Israel. I'll spare you the details, but because of the number of priests in Israel, this was a once or twice in a lifetime opportunity for Zechariah.

But things didn't go exactly as planned. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah while he was in the Holy Place. The angel told him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, were going to have a son, even though she was unable to have children and they were both well along in years.

So Zechariah expressed doubt, **How can I be sure of this, because I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years?** Sure, Mary said something similar when Gabriel appeared to her, but her words came from amazement and wonder not doubt like Zechariah's. And so, because he doubted, he was made unable to talk until everything had been fulfilled. It was a big day for Zechariah, but not in the way that he had anticipated, instead he saw an angel who promised him that he would have a son.

And not just any Son, but the forerunner of the Messiah. Gabriel told him, **He will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to prepare a people who are ready for the Lord.** To prepare a

people who are ready for the Lord. It is with these words that Zechariah knew that his Son would be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that Pastor Gartner preached on this past Sunday, **In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord. In the wasteland make a level highway for our God.** Malachi in our first lesson today uses similar language, **Look! I am sending my messenger! He will prepare the way before me.**

Fast forward over nine months later. Elizabeth did give birth to a son, and eight days later, when it came time to circumcise and name the child everyone gathered together at their house for a celebration. They expected the boy to be named Zechariah, after his Father, as was custom, but Elizabeth, and Zechariah by writing on a tablet, said his name is John. And at that moment Zechariah was able to talk again!

Put yourself in Zechariah's place for a little bit. He doubted and was severely punished for it. But doesn't it seem a little unfair? I'm certainly glad that the Lord doesn't punish me so severely whenever I doubt his Word—and let's be honest, we all doubt his Word from time to time. Plus, what Gabriel told Zechariah was impossible—we doubt God in far less impossible to keep promises! And if we were shut-up by the Lord for over nine months, when we were finally able to talk again, we'd probably have some choice words for the Lord—certainly we'd complain to anyone who would listen to us! But Zechariah doesn't complain at all. Perhaps it's because he had over nine months to think about and then marvel at the fulfillment of Gabriel's words when his son was born!

His song is filled with words of praise for the Lord; the opening line of this song is, **Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel.** Under inspiration of the Holy Spirit Zechariah prophesied and praised the name of the Lord!

And what we see here is what you'd expect from a priest and a prophet—many of the words that he sung are quote or references to Old Testament passages. This Song is a doctrinally-rich text, filled with many beautiful and comforting words concerning our Savior, Jesus. And it's perhaps best to walk through the text, and comment on a few of the highlights along the way.

In verse 68, Zechariah tells us why the Lord is blessed, **because he has visited us and prepared redemption for his people.** We remember that one of Jesus' names is Immanuel, which means God with us. In Jesus God is with us since in Jesus God came and dwelled among us. He came to accomplish our redemption. To redeem means to purchase or buy back. This was accomplished by Christ shedding his holy precious blood on the cross, paying for our sins and purchasing us from sin and eternal damnation.

In the next verse Zechariah says, **he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.** Salvation is another big word which refers to God's act of saving his people—again accomplished by the work of Jesus. And Jesus, although he is God, was born of the Virgin Mary, a descendent of David!

In verse 70 Zechariah mentions that this fulfills what God had said long ago through the prophets. Perhaps this is a good place to note that all of these were going to take place in the future—Jesus had yet to be born and he had yet to redeem us and accomplish our salvation. And yet Zechariah is speaking in the past tense here—as if all this had already taken place! That is because with God fulfilling his promise to send a Savior, our salvation is all but complete!

Not only does this fulfill the words of the prophets, but it also keeps the covenant, or one-sided agreement, which God made with Abraham that all nations on earth would be blessed through him because the Savior of the world would come from his line. Some 2000 years after making this promise to Abraham, God finally kept it!

The fulfillment of this prophecy brings about deliverance from our enemies—not our earthly enemies, from which we may still suffer, but deliverance from our spiritual enemies of sin, death, and the power of the devil. Although we still struggle against them, in heaven we will be

free from sin, as we live eternally because of Christ who died in our place and rose from the dead as he crushed Satan's head!

As a result we are able to serve God without fear, because by Christ we are pure and holy in his sight. No longer are we poor miserable sinners deserving of death and damnation, but Christ has paid for our sins and he has given us his perfection. When God sees us, he sees the work of his Son, and his holiness and righteousness, or perfection that he has given to us. As a result, we are declared not guilty!

In verse 76 Zechariah finally mentions his son, John. But even when he does so, the focus is not on John himself, but on Christ. As John the Baptist would say about himself and Jesus some 30 years later, **He must increase, but I must decrease.**

John's job was to prepare the hearts and minds of the people for the coming of the Lord, which he did by preaching repentance and by baptizing for the forgiveness of their sins. And when Jesus started his ministry, John gave the people the knowledge of salvation by pointing to Jesus as, **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**

Jesus is the Rising Sun who shines the light of his gospel in a world full of the darkness of sin and the shadow of death. Through him and through him alone we have peace—the sure and certain comfort of forgiveness through Christ and an eternal life to come!

The Song of Zechariah is not the most well-known of the three songs of Advent that we are looking at this season. Out of all the different resources we currently have there are only two options to sing the Song of Zechariah, while we have four options of the Song of Mary, and seven for the Song of Simeon! And that's really too bad. Because, as we've seen, it's a doctrinally-rich song, full of the comfort of the gospel in the work of Christ! And you think about Zachariah, a man who doubted the angel of God when he announced God's blessing to him, and how he is just like us. We too, because of our many doubts, need that same gospel comfort in the salvation of Christ, which has freely and fully given us to us in his redemption. And when we hear this song, we can't but help marvel and the grace of the Lord and sing: "Blessed be the Lord God!" Amen.