

# Zechariah's Song

Joy is a word that appears in many of our songs, sayings and stories at Christmas. Today's study is wrapped in joy as an elderly couple experience incredible joy at the birth of a son



**Michael Olmsted**

and the whole world is told the incomparable good news that God's promised Messiah is about to appear.

Luke introduces the old priest Zechariah ministering at the Temple, when, in the isolation of the holy place, the angel Gabriel appears to announce that Elizabeth will bear a son (Luke 1:5-25). Zechariah questions the angel, pointing out that this does not seem realistic, and the angel says Zechariah will not speak again until the birth is accomplished. For nine months, Zechariah cannot say a word about this miracle from God, but when the boy is born the old priest sings a beautiful and powerful hymn about God's ultimate gift of salvation.

The Jewish custom is to circumcise a boy eight days after birth and give his official name. When that time arrived, with family and probably the whole village gathered, Elizabeth surprises everyone with the announcement that the baby will be called John instead of Zechariah, a departure from custom. At that point the tongue of Zechariah was set free to confirm his wife's decision and to sing the joyful truths that had been forming in the old priest's heart and mind for months. "John" is the shorter form for "Jehohanan," meaning "Jehovah's gift" or "God is gracious." Zechariah's song has two stanzas. The first, verses 67-75, praises God for the soon-to-be-seen Messiah. The second stanza, verses 76-79, speaks of this newborn John as the prophet Israel believed would announce Messiah.

Through generations of suffering and oppression, Israel had longed for God's promised Messiah. Zechariah, like his contemporaries, believed the Messiah would be a political leader much like King David, who would free Israel from Gentile oppression

and restore their independence. Zechariah's words are based on the ancient prophets and flavored by his world view: "He has brought salvation from our enemies and from the power of all those who hate us.... He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and remembered his holy covenant"...all this "so that we could serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes" (vv. 71-75).

The words are true, but the contemporary interpretation is flawed because this Messiah will change not only Israel but the whole world. Why is Messiah coming? ...."so that we could serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes" (v. 75). Do not view Zechariah as misguided for he is struggling to see the enormity of God's promise through human eyes. We have the advantage of looking back at the full story and yet we often see God and his promises through a lens of our limited desires and understanding. Zechariah begins his song enraptured by the truth that God's long-promised Messiah is about to appear!

Even though Luke is a non-Jewish writer presenting Christ as God's gift to all the world, he connects with the Old Testament imagery of light overcoming the darkness and the oppressed being set free. Like Mary's song, Zechariah's song takes its name "Benedictus" (blessed) from the first word of its early Latin translation. Jewish prayers often began with "blessed" as does this hymn to the Creator God who is also the Savior God, fulfilling his promise. Jewish tradition saw prophecy as ending with Malachi (400-plus years), which means that John's birth signals something wonderful is about to happen, something reminiscent of God speaking directly to his people as in ancient times. This is not an uncommon notion for Christians who long for those "better" days of church long ago. Although Zechariah understands the past, he is looking forward to a new day.

Zechariah's song presents several

## Formations

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Scripture: Luke 1:57-58, 67-79

significant ideas: (1) God is in the process of delivering his people from bondage (v. 68); (2) the Savior from David's lineage is about to appear (v. 69); (3) God's deliverance will empower his people to serve him without fear (v. 74); (4) John will be the prophet who calls the people to prepare for God's salvation (v. 76); (5) all of this will become reality, not because of human planning or activity, but because of God's compassion (v. 78); and (6) this coming "light" will guide us to the path of peace (v. 79).

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is warm and wonderful: two people of deep faith, both the age of grandparents facing parenthood, both respected as examples of living for God in spite of their infertility, which their culture saw as God's disfavor.

Life is not predictable, which often causes us to struggle with our questions instead of trusting God. The Jews saw the long years since Malachi as a time of darkness, but God was at work getting ready to send his Son into the world. When John the baptizer appeared, the Jews were almost as surprised as Zechariah when God's angel appeared to him in the Temple. When John began calling his own people to repentance, they were longing for God's punishment to fall on the rest of the world. Instead, the voice of the prophet called the chosen people to look within themselves and face their need for a new understanding of God. Zechariah said, "(John) will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins... because of our God's deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us" (v. 78). Advent is a call to celebration, a call to sing the chorus of God's abundant grace, a call to share God's love with all the world. Sing!

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*Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.*