

Zechariah's Song

Luke 1:5-25; 57-80

Introduction – the long wait...

The last words of the Old Testament in Malachi 4 promise a Messianic hope of a sun of righteousness who would rise with healing in its wings:

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty.

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

At this time the Jewish people were living in the land of Judea with the Jerusalem Temple and priesthood operating. The return from Exile in Babylon was fresh in the memories of the nation. There were three returns led by three significant men:

- Zerubbabel (the descendant of David) with 50,000 people in 538BC (the Temple was rebuilt)
- Ezra with 2000 men and their families in 458BC (the Law was restored)
- Nehemiah with a small group in 444BC (the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt)

Malachi was probably a contemporary of Nehemiah, and probably wrote in around 430 BC. The events of Luke 1 took place some time around 7 to 5 BC. In other words, there were 425 years of silence when God did not give any Scripture to Israel. If we compare this to our history, 425 years ago in 1582:

- Elizabeth I was queen of England
- An 18 year old William Shakespeare paid a £40 bond for his marriage to Anne Hathaway
- It was still 25 years before the first successful English colony in the present-day USA

What amazing changes we have seen in our world in that period of time! For the Jews, the period from 430BC to 5BC was equally momentous. Just look at the timeline of events:

- 330 BC Alexander conquered Persia** – many Jews became Hellenised (adopting the Greek language and Greek culture, clothing and customs)
- 168 BC Antiochus rededicated the Temple to Zeus** – the Greek ruler committed this sacrilege during a period of civil war amongst the Jews
- 152 BC Independence of Judah recognised under Judas the Maccabee** – Judas , whose nickname, Maccabee means "war hammer" finally succeeded in driving out the Greek rulers from Judea
- 63 BC Pompey conquered Jerusalem**
- 44 BC Julius Caesar assassinated** – although this event didn't directly impact Judea it led to a prolonged period of instability followed by civil war in Rome
- 40 BC Herod established as king of Judea** – the Roman senate appointed Herod as a client "king of the Jews". He was still ruling at the time of Luke 1
- 27 BC Augustus became first emperor of Rome** - a period of civil war in Rome finally came to an end with the victory of Octavian, who became Caesar Augustus. This ushered in the *Pax Romana* (Roman peace), a new period of stability across the empire.

It is against this historical background that the events of Luke 1 occurred. The long darkness was about to end. The dawn was about to come. The sun of righteousness was about to rise!

It is interesting to note the lengths that Luke goes to in this passage to take us into the Jewish world. This is particularly unexpected when we understand that Luke moved in the Greek-speaking Gentile world and was writing to the Greek-named Theophilus. Yet he draws Theophilus (and us) into a world of the Jerusalem Temple, populated with priests with exotically named ancestors, burning incense and angels announcing answered prayers. Luke is unashamed in setting the story firmly in its Jewish context. He wants Theophilus (and us) to see the connection back to the Old Testament. He wants us to know that this book is not the first in a pair (Acts

is Luke's sequel to his gospel) but the middle part of a trilogy, of which the Old Testament is the first volume. Luke's story is not new – it is the continuation of the story of the ages, of God's plan of salvation.

1. The priest and the people (1:5-10)

- **Zechariah the priest**

- An upright couple (Zechariah was so upright that he even married within Aaron's line, ensuring that his sons could be priests after him) with a personal tragedy (v7 – they were childless – Zechariah would have no sons to be priests after him). There are a number of Old Testament parallels of barren women who eventually conceived because of God's particular plan for them:

- Sarah was barren but gave birth to Isaac (Genesis 18:11)
- Hannah was barren but gave birth to Samuel (I Samuel 1-2)
- Samson's mother had been barren (Judges 13:2,5)

The mention of a barren wife for the reader familiar with the Old Testament raises the expectation that God is about to intervene.

- Why did God choose Zechariah for this purpose? There is one simple answer to this question: because of His Sovereign plan of grace and mercy!
- Zechariah had his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to burn incense in the Holy Place of the Temple (vv8-9). This was the highest honour available to a priest and due to the numbers of priests at this time (there were 24 divisions, each including around 1000 priest – each division served two 1-week periods yearly as well as serving together during the great Jewish festivals) each priest had only one opportunity to do this in their life. Incense represented the prayers of God's people.
- The faithful worshippers gathered outside (v10) – they were waiting for the priest's blessing that it was customary for him to pronounce upon returning from the Holy Place (Numbers 6:22-26).

- **Contrast with Mary**

Luke includes 10 stories in his opening chapters, and these are deliberately selected and structured to provide a parallel and contrast between Zechariah and Mary (for a detailed structure see *According to Luke* by David Gooding):

<i>Zechariah:</i>	old	priest	from Judea
<i>Mary:</i>	young	virgin	from Galilee (Nazareth – John 1:46)

- **Parallel with the nation**

As a priest, Zechariah represented the entire nation of Israel. Just as Aaron's descendents served as priests to the nation, so the nation was intended to function as a kingdom of priests, representing God to the nations (Exodus 19:6). The parallels between Zechariah's personal tragedy and the condition of Israel are striking:

- A long delayed son (barren Elizabeth) – the long awaited Messiah (barren Israel)
- A covenant that failed because of lack of faith (Zechariah was righteous but faithless)
- Longed for deliverance (from shame / oppression) but lack of belief in supernatural intervention

2. The priest & the angel (1:11-22)

As we read this story we must remind ourselves again that we are not merely reading about a private individual receiving a private message from God. Zechariah the priest represents the nation of Israel, and the message of the angel will be far from "personal"!

- **Zechariah's fearfulness (v12)**

- Fear is a normal response to the unexpected and to the divine. The angel's words, "Do not be afraid", are the usual response, heard time and again in the Gospels from angels and from the Lord Himself. This is an amazing truth, that when a person is humble before the Lord they have no need to fear Him. If we do not need to fear the divine, then what do we have to fear?

- **The angel's message (vv13-17) [which prayer is answered? Surely prayer for son]**

- *The answer to prayer* (v13) – A question arises here as to what prayer has been answered. Is it simply Zechariah's prayers for a son or more broadly the prayers of the faithful in Israel for their deliverance to come? Although both are probably intended, the immediate reference is to Zechariah's prayers. This is startling, as every indicator would suggest that Zechariah had stopped

praying for a son (or at least had stopped believing that it could happen) long ago. Here is an amazing example of God's plan being fulfilled in God's time. God hears the prayers of His people, but He will answer in the right time and in the right way according to His good and pleasing will. Often this is not the same as our expectation. Zechariah's example reminds us again of the faithfulness of God.

- *John's name and mission* (vv14-17) – The promise is given that Zechariah will have a son, and he is told to name him John, which means “Yahweh has been gracious”. Then the angel speaks of John's special mission – he will go before the Lord (cf. Isaiah 40:3) in the spirit of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and so on. The central message of John would be repentance (the verb turning is key). There is a direct reference here to Malachi 4:5-6. The connection would undoubtedly have been clear to a priest steeped in the Old Testament scriptures – the silence was about to be broke. The forerunner to the Messiah, the one described by Malachi as the prophet Elijah returned, was about to be born!
- **Zechariah's faithlessness (v18)** – *instinctive disbelief from heart, not reasoned*
 - In contrast to the mission of John, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children (v17) we now see a childless father whose heart also needs to be turned!
 - Zechariah's question was a question of doubt. It is possible to ask a question of God with faith – genuinely seeking an answer. Mary (Luke 1:34) is a wonderful example of this. But Zechariah's question was like Sarah's (Genesis 18:12), not Mary's. He simply didn't believe it was possible. He had given up hope! He could have learned from Old Testament examples (Genesis 18:14: nothing is “too hard for the LORD”), but faithlessness had gripped him.
 - We see in Zechariah an instinctive disbelief that stemmed from the heart, not from reason. He didn't stop to think it through and come to a conclusion that the angel's words were improbable, he simply expressed his gut reaction. He simply does not have the faith to accept that the angel's words can come true. As always, Zechariah reminds us that it is faithlessness, not fear, that will act as a barrier to God's work in us. Zechariah received no rebuke for his fear – only comfort – but his faithfulness must be addressed.
 - Zechariah's response illustrates the reason why John must come. He must prepare people for the Lord (v17). Zechariah was not ready for the Messiah, and if faith could not be found in the priest representing the people before the Lord, then where could it be found?
- **The angel's response (v19-20)**
 - Only now does the angel reveal who he is. He gives his name and speaks of the special mission he has been given to bring this good news to Zechariah. The name Gabriel was hugely significant, and Zechariah would have known it. The name appears only once before in the Scriptures – in Daniel 8&9. It was Gabriel who gave Daniel the promise of God's anointed one who would come. The connection to the promised Messiah is direct. The reappearance of Gabriel is evidence that God is about to act to fulfill the Old Testament promises.
- **Zechariah's silence (v20-22)**
 - Zechariah was struck dumb, and presumably also deaf (since in v62 other people had to signal to him to make themselves understood). This silence was:
 - *A judgement* – it would be a nonsense for Zechariah to leave the Temple and pronounce blessing upon the people from a position of faithlessness! The priest's silence is a judgement on faithless Israel and an indicator of the failure of the Old Covenant.
 - *A sign* – it was a sign to Zechariah and to the people. Perhaps there is a parallel here between Zechariah's nine-month silence and God's 425 year silence. The people saw the sign and realised that God was at work (v22).
 - *An opportunity* – through the period of silence Zechariah's faith could be restored. So often, God leads His people through life's wildernesses to bring them to a place of greater faith in Him. Often it is in the painful times that we grow the most.

3. Zechariah's pregnant silence (1:23-25, 57-66)

- What do you do when you're a priest and you can't speak? All that Zechariah can do is reflect and turn to God. As God's people, when we find ourselves in the place of pain, feeling that we are unable to speak or sing God's praise we have two choices. We can either try to run away from God. Not only will

we find it impossible to escape His presence, but we will never find answers to our questions. Or we can cry out to God in inexpressible groans of the heart, waiting for Him.

- In the meantime, Elizabeth takes centre-stage in the story. Zechariah is not seen, and Luke refers to "Elizabeth's child", not "son" until John is born:
 - *Elizabeth and her Lord* (v24-25) – praise for what God has done for her
 - *Elizabeth and Mary* (v39-45) – praise for what God has done for Mary
 - *Elizabeth and her neighbours* (v57-61) – faithful insistence on God's will
- Zechariah's faith restored through trial (v62-64) – here we see Zechariah's nine-month pregnant silence giving birth to faithful obedience. He simply insists on the name the angel had given him. God's response is to open his mouth once more and the result was glory to God!

4. Zechariah's prophetic praise (1:67-80)

The first recorded words of Zechariah after his speech was restored are a beautiful song of praise to God. How we may pray that our lips could be released to praise Him as we ought. There are two parts to Zechariah's songs, and they **bridge the Old to New Testaments**, just as the two generations of Zechariah's family will – Zechariah the priest and John the forerunner of the Christ. Both parts have a distinctive focus. These words are described as prophecy (revealed by the Spirit of God), but are also born out of Zechariah's reflection in His silence (this same pattern is often seen in the Psalms, where in the midst of David's personal emotions and responses to His situation the Spirit brought forth prophetic words about the Messiah – see Psalm 22 for a profound example).

a) *Addressed to God (vv68-75) – past tense, national focus*

Zechariah's first words are not about his own newborn son, John, but about the Messiah. He is not primarily taken up with personal circumstances but with the gospel! Zechariah's words are full of Old Testament references:

- v68 – Redemption for God's people refers to Exodus 15:13 (the song of Moses) and Psalm 106:10.
- v69 – The Horn of salvation (or "mighty Saviour") from David's house refers to Psalm 132:17 and Ezekiel 29:21. Here we see the fulfillment of God's covenant with David (II Samuel 7).
- vv72-73 – Here Zechariah refers to God's covenant with Abraham – the founding promises of the nation of Israel (Genesis 17). God will remember his promises.
- vv74-75 – The reference to serving God without fear is from Exodus 7:16.

The central focus of this part of the song is **God's mercy to fathers** (v72) including Abraham, Moses and David **shown through his rescue of Israel**.

b) *Addressed to John (vv76-79) – future tense, spiritual focus*

Zechariah now addresses John for two verses, but then shifts again to the Messiah. He will not lose sight of the big picture in the detail of his own circumstances!

- v76 – John will be the Prophet of Most High. This contrasts with Jesus, who is the Son of Most High (1:32). John's part in God's plan will be great, but he is not the central figure!
- vv76-77 – John will prepare the way of the Lord (Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3).
- v77 – Here the spiritual nature of God's fulfillment of prophecy is clear. The Messiah will not simply be a national deliverer for Israel, but he will bring forgiveness for sins! What the Old Covenant was powerless to do, Christ will finally accomplish through His death.
- v78 – The Messiah is called the "Rising Sun". This is another reference back to Malachi 4 (v2). The Sun of Righteousness will arise with healing in His wings.
- v79 – The reference to people in darkness is from Isaiah 9:2, and probably is an indication of the Messiah's mission beyond Israel alone to all nations.
- v79 – The Messiah will guide us in the "path of peace". This is the beautiful Old Testament concept of Shalom. The meaning is more than simply the absence of strife. Shalom is wholeness – complete health and fulfilment.

The central focus of this part of the song is the **tender mercy of our God resulting in forgiveness of sins** (vv77-78).

Through Zechariah's song we discover that the social revolution envisaged by Mary (v46-55) depends on a spiritual revolution. It is interesting that the references to Malachi 4 in this chapter speak of the forerunner like Elijah and the Sun of Righteousness rising with healing for the faithful, but not of the judgement of evildoers. Those parts of Malachi 4 still need to be fulfilled. Although Zechariah could not have seen it, we understand that there had to be two comings of the Messiah. The first as a servant to deal with sin, but the second as a conquering King to bring judgement and to destroy God's enemies. Both are necessary for God's Kingdom to be finally revealed. One has happened (Zechariah stood in the last minutes of darkness before the dawn), but the second is still to come!

Conclusion

- **Recapturing wonder** – Perhaps we can see ourselves among the wondering onlookers (v21 & v65-66 – see also 2:18, 47). We come with wonder, reading Luke 1 afresh with wonder and in the context of Old Testament. That is surely the attitude Luke wants us to have as he builds the story. He intends the reader to wonder and ponder who John will be (v66) and who Jesus is. He wants to draw us into the story so that we can see ourselves as part of God's big plan.
- **Restoring faith** – we need to learn instinctive faith while waiting for Messiah even in times of silence from God or from us (when praise seems impossible). Our faith is not measured by how we serve or sing when all is well, but by how we react when the unexpected happens. We too face the struggles of seemingly unanswered prayer, physical weakness and illness, but we too await a glorious dawn, when Malachi's vision will finally be fulfilled.
- **Refocusing hope** – the gospel (God's mercy shown in Messiah) was Zechariah's hope and it is also ours. Christmas is another opportunity to remember the One for whom Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, wondering crowds and even John the Baptist were only the supporting cast.