

Zechariah's Song

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'd like us to turn together to the passage that Yuna read for us in Luke chapter 1. Let me read again, verses 67 to 68.

And his father, that's John the Baptist's father, Zachariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied saying, blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.

As we look ahead and get all excited for Christmas, we're doing a very short series called Four Songs for Christmas, where we are looking at four hymns, four short songs found in Luke chapter 1 and 2.

This morning we looked at Mary's song from 1.46 to 55. Tonight we're looking at Zachariah's song, 68 to 79. Next Sunday evening we'll look at the Angel's song in 2.14.

And then in a fortnight's time in the morning we'll look at Simeon's song from 2.29 to 32. These are all short sections set out in poetic form that capture so many of the key truths that lie at the heart of why Jesus came.

[1 : 0 7] And as we said this morning, we can summarize these songs under the following headings. Mary's song teaches us that Jesus is born to cause disruption. Zachariah's song that Jesus is born to bring deliverance.

The Angel's song that Jesus is born to give us delight. And Simeon's song that he's born to transform our departure. And we'll look at all of these in turn.

And as we're thinking about the miracle of Jesus being born, we're going to discover more of what that means as we look at these four songs. So as I said this morning we looked at Mary's song.

Tonight we're looking at Zachariah's song, the fact that Jesus is born to bring deliverance. And as we look at this song together, what I want us to see is that Zachariah's song is going to highlight for us a key truth that lies at the very heart of the Gospel.

This is something that's really important to understand if we're going to understand the Gospel accurately. It's teaching us that in the Gospel we are delivered from something and we are delivered into something.

[2 : 1 2] And again and again tonight we will be mentioning this from to dynamic that we have at the heart of the Gospel. And it's so important for us to understand that because from to is teaching us about what it means to become a Christian and it's guiding us about how we live out our lives as Christians.

So when we think of the Gospel we always want to think from to, from to, out of into. This is something that we really want to make sure that we understand.

And so Zachariah's song helps us to see this more. And as it does that we're going to walk through three headings together and they are three shadows, two images, one decision.

So starting off here with three shadows. As we said this morning all of these songs are coming at a crucial turning point in redemptive history.

Redemptive history is what we mean by the fact that God is working out his salvation across the ages of history. That's what the Bible, the Bible follow, follows and unfolds the narrative of redemptive history.

[3 : 17] And the birth of Jesus is a crucial turning point in that moment. So as we read these songs the Old Testament is coming to a close. The New Testament era is about to begin.

And Zachariah has a key role in that because he's the father of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the last of the Old Testament prophets and he's the one who's announcing that the Messiah, the Son of God, the King is coming.

And so this song comes at a crucial turning point. But we've got to remember that Zachariah is still looking through Old Testament eyes.

He's still in that era. So his hopes, his expectations and the words of his song are all shaped by the language and events of the Old Testament.

And the point we have to remember is one that we say again and again is that the Old Testament functions as a shadow. It's a sign pointing forward to the full reality that's going to come in the new.

[4 : 20] And so Zachariah's song is a brilliant example of it. It's Old Testament language and Old Testament emphasis and themes that are all pointing towards the new, the fact that Jesus is going to come.

And so as we read Zachariah's song together, as we look at it tonight, we need to see it through the framework of that shadow reality that defines the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

And so that's his song in front of us there, 68 verses 68 to 79. I won't read it all again. We read it already, but I'll be picking out several key things that Zachariah mentions.

As I say, all of it is saturated with stuff that's come from the Old Testament. And in particular, he refers to three shadows, three particular shadows from the Old Testament that all reflect this from to dynamic that lies at the heart of the gospel.

And the three shadows I want to highlight are the holy prophets. I want to highlight the covenant.

[5 : 35] That's the third one. My eyes not catching the second one. The covenant, the holy prophets, the covenant and the kingdom. I can't find the word kingdom. My eye is not catching it, but that's the Horace of the house of his servant David.

The language of David is the language of the kingdom. And so we've got these three shadows set before us here, the prophets, the kingdom and the covenant.

First of all, the prophets. If you read in the Old Testament, you see that they have an incredibly important role in the life of Israel. And the role they had was that they functioned as God's spokesman.

So they spoke, God spoke by the mouth of his prophets. So when you read about a prophet in the Old Testament, you're basically reading about somebody who's functioning as God's spokesperson.

And the message that they proclaimed reflected this from to dynamic. And so they came to the people with a warning of judgment.

[6 : 42] And at the same time, they gave the people a promise of salvation. And whenever you read about the prophets, you want to remember those two words, judgment and salvation, warning and promise.

There's that twofold dynamic. They're warning people to come out of a path that's going to lead to disaster. And they're offering the promise of coming back into a relationship with God, a promise of receiving salvation.

John the Baptist, as the last of the Old Testament prophets, reflected that same dynamic. So when he spoke to the crowds, you read this in Luke chapter three, he warns them about fleeing, warns them about the fact that their behavior is provoking God's wrath.

And he calls them to repentance. Repentance is that turning around, turning back to God. So warning them to turn from disaster and turn back to God.

And so he's just reflecting the pattern that we've seen all the way through the prophets in the Old Testament. The prophets are warning the people that if they continue to turn away from God, they are guaranteed to bring catastrophe.

[7 : 57] And that meant that very often the prophets warning was a hard message for the people. It was difficult for them to hear because it was exposing their sin. But at the same time, the prophets called people back to God, always, always, always offering a hope of salvation.

To give you an example from the Old Testament, from right at the heart of the Old Testament, this is the prophet Ezekiel saying, as I live, declares the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.

Turn back, turn back from your evil ways for why will you die, O house of Israel? You can see right in those verses, it's that from to dynamic. Turn away from wickedness.

Turn away from the path that's going to lead to your death and turn back to the Lord and find salvation. And all of that's pointing us to what Jesus has come to do.

Jesus wants to bring you from spiritual disaster, to deliver you out of that and to bring you into eternal security.

[9 : 03] The second shadow that we have running through this passage is the shadow of the kingdom. And that's brought through to us with the language, the references to David that appears again and again in this passage and indeed throughout the gospels.

Again and again and again you'll find the gospels relating the coming of Jesus to the kingdom of God. And it's something that you see again and again and again. Zachariah here refers to David, the same connection gets made in Luke 2 that Jesus is born in the city of David.

He's at the house, Joseph is at the house and lineage of David, 2.11 again speaks of the city of David. All of that reference back to David is to do with the kingdom.

And that's all because David was the greatest Old Testament kingdom but he functioned as a shadow of the rule and authority that belongs to Jesus.

And so the coming of Jesus marks the inauguration of the kingdom of God. That's what Jesus himself said when he began preaching, he said what? He said the kingdom of God is at hand and so Jesus preached that message and then he proved it by performing miracles that demonstrated his authority.

[10 : 25] And again the kingdom is a matter of from to, out of into. And the reason it's a matter of from to is because ultimately there's only two kingdoms.

There's the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil. And Jesus has come to call us out of one and to bring us into the other.

And that's reinforced by the language of enemies that runs through Zacharias song. From Zacharias perspective, the people of Israel had been crushed and oppressed by enemies again and again and again.

That's how the Old Testament ends. When you get to the end of the Old Testament era, the nation of Israel has fallen apart, Jerusalem has been attacked, the temple has been destroyed and the people have been dragged into exile in Babylon and just just a tiny remnant has returned by the time the Old Testament era closes around 400 BC or 430 odd BC.

And then in the bit between the Old Testament and the New Testament, what we call the inter-testamental period, it was the same thing. Foreign forces were dominating the people.

- [11 : 37] First it was the Babylonian, then it was the Persian, then it was the Greeks. Now by the time we get to the New Testament, it's the Romans. And so people like Zachariah are living in a land that's occupied by a foreign ruler.

They feel oppressed and crushed by their enemies. They are desperate for their deliverance. And it's very likely that when Zachariah was thinking about all of these things, he would have been hoping that the Messiah was going to bring military deliverance for the Jewish people from their enemies so they'd have their country again.

That's what many people thought at that time. So when he speaks about enemies, he probably means Romans. But like all the Old Testament prophecies, God is actually thinking about something much, much bigger.

And as we were saying when we were introducing the language of Psalm 18, all that language of enemies and conflict and opposition in the Old Testament is pointing us to the bigger and more serious enemy, the enemy of sin and death.

And the whole gospel arises from the fact that sin has left us as slaves and as captives in the kingdom of darkness. That's why the world is broken. That's why there is so much evil in the world.

- [12 : 49] That's why so many things go wrong. That's why there is so much suffering. That's why you only need to turn on the news for 10 seconds to see that the world has gone wrong. We are under the grip of darkness.

The gospel is a message of deliverance. And that deliverance is not from the Romans like Zachariah and others thought. It's deliverance from sin and death. And it's the same thing.

It's from to. Jesus has come to bring us out of the grip of sin and death and bring us into the eternal life that he is giving to every citizen of his kingdom.

And it's telling you that Jesus wants to deliver you from slavery to sin and bring you into spiritual freedom in his kingdom. This emphasis of the kingdom is again from to out of into.

And then the third shadow that we have here is the shadow of the covenant. Now that concept of covenant is massively important in the Bible. It's really the thread that runs through the whole Bible.

- [13 : 53] And Zachariah talks about it here, he talks about Abraham. He's pointing us right back to the very beginning of the Bible, to the promise that God gave to Abraham.

And the theology that the Bible reveals is really covenant theology. When we say Old Testament, New Testament, what we mean is Old Covenant, New Covenant. That word covenant runs through the whole of scripture.

It's so important. And one of the most important figures is Abraham. And God comes to him and says, Behold, my covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

No longer shall your name be called Abraham, but your name shall be called Abraham. For I've made you a father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful. I will make you into nations and kings shall come from you.

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your soul journeys, the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession and I will be their God.

- [14 : 59] Now covenant theology is, well, I think it's the coolest thing ever. It's so fascinating. It's incredible to see how everything fits together across the pages of scripture.

Covenant theology is the subject that takes you so deep into the riches of the gospel. But at its heart, it's very simple. You might be thinking Thomas, I don't even know what you're talking about when you say that word covenant at the heart of it is just so beautifully simple.

The biblical concept of covenant is all about the fact that God wants to be your God. And he wants you to be his people.

And that's the phrase that comes up again and again and again. I will be your God and you will be my people. That's the relationship, the covenant relationship that is central to the gospel.

Sin has broken it, but Jesus has come to restore it. And again, it's all about from to our relationship with God has been ruined by sin.

[16 : 06] We've been left alienated from him. We're guilty before him. We've wandered off in our own direction. We've rejected our Creator. We've said to God, we don't need you. We don't want you and half of us don't even believe in you.

So we are given, we are guilty of covenant unfaithfulness. But the absolutely incredible thing about God is that he never gives up.

He never gives up on you. His covenant faithfulness and his steadfast love endure forever.

And in the gospel, God is calling us out of that alienation and brokenness and back into a relationship with him. Everything in the Bible is about restoring that relationship.

The Old Testament points towards it. Everything in the New Testament is what makes it possible. And that's why I read from Jeremiah 31 at the very start of the service, because that this is a key version of the Old Testament.

[17 : 07] It's pointing forward to what God is wanting to do in the new. The days are coming to clear us the Lord. When I'll make a new covenant, the New Testament is coming with the house of Israel, with the house of Judah, not like the covenant I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with them. Make with the house of Israel after those days declares the Lord. I'll put my law within them. I'll write it on their hearts. And there's the phrase right there.

I will be their God. And they shall be my people. And one of the many amazing things about covenant theology is that it's all rooted in the unrelenting, unstoppable covenant love of God.

Jesus wants to take you from being an outcast and bring you into his family, his kingdom, where you are loved forever by him as his child.

So in all these shadows, the shadow of the prophets or the kingdom of the covenant, we look at the same balance of from to and they're all pointing us towards what Jesus has come to accomplish.

[18 : 16] Jesus wants to deliver you from blindly walking towards disaster. And instead he's calling you to return to him and be saved. Jesus wants to deliver you from slavery and oppression and cruelty from sin.

And he wants to bring you into the freedom and security of his kingdom. And Jesus wants to bring you from the curse of a broken covenant and back into a beautiful relationship with God, where forever and ever and ever he is your God and you are his people.

We can summarize it like this because I feel like I'm just throwing lots of information at you. So let me just summarize it like this. Jesus wants to take us from to, from spiritual disaster into eternal security, from slavery to sin into freedom, from being an outcast alienated from God into his family, where we are loved and cherished forever.

And the key thing I want you to recognize as you look at that is that so many people get this the wrong way around.

Because people think that if you become a Christian and follow Jesus, you're giving up your security and it's probably going to be a disaster.

[19 : 40] Socially, economically, whatever. People think that by becoming a Christian, you're giving up your freedom and you're going to be a slave to all sorts of do's and don'ts and restrictions and boring things.

And people think that actually you might risk losing the love of your friends or the respect of your colleagues and you might actually become an outcast. That's what people think and it's totally, totally, totally wrong.

It's not true. Jesus wants to bring you into eternal security. Jesus wants to give you amazing freedom where you can be everything that God created you to be and Jesus wants you to know the incredible love of God now and forever and ever.

In other words, Jesus does not want to bring you out of something good and bring you into something rubbish. He wants to bring you out of something awful and bring you into something amazing.

And that's reinforced by two images that Zechariah uses in his song. Let me read it again.

[21 : 02] Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he's visited and redeemed his people. He's raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you child will be called the prophet of the most high. You'll go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people and the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God whereby the sunrise shall visit us from high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet in the way of peace.

The two images I want us to look at are this one where Jesus is described as a horn of salvation and this one where Jesus is described as a sunrise.

Both of these reflect the from to deliverance that Jesus brings and both of them teach us some beautiful things. First of all the horn of salvation that image is an image of strength and power.

And so the idea is that you think of a bull or an ox with horns. It's strong. It's powerful. And the phrase itself is used in the Old Testament to describe God. We actually sang it in Psalm 18.

[22 : 30] That's why we sang from that Psalm. It describes God as a rock, refuge or shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. Now here David when he wrote this Psalm was thinking in the context of being delivered from his enemies.

And so it's very much the idea of a deliverance from situation. God is rescuing him and protecting him from a dangerous situation and this is an image of the power and strength of God through which that deliverance came.

And so Zechariah is echoing that imagery and it's just it's very obvious what he's trying to do. He's emphasizing that Jesus has come as a mighty powerful warrior and he's come to rescue us and to save us from the power of sin and death.

In other words that imagery, horn of salvation is telling you that Jesus has come to fight. Now when we say that that Jesus has come to fight, it's important to think about that because it's very easy to get it wrong.

All of this is the language of battle and confrontation. When we speak about deliverance from, we're talking about being rescued from a desperately serious situation. But there's a danger that we misunderstand that because it's very easy to think that if Jesus is coming as a horn of salvation, if he is coming to fight, if he's coming to engage in confrontation, we can often think that Jesus has come to fight against you.

[24 : 00] And we can think that in lots of ways. We think that Jesus has come to restrict you, to scold you, to stifle you, to embarrass you, to inconvenience you, to rebuke you, to criticize you.

And because of that, people look at Jesus and think that he's a threat. People see Jesus, people see becoming a Christian as a threat to your freedom, a threat to your intellectual credibility, a threat to your independence, maybe even a threat to your happiness.

And sometimes, sometimes, sometimes the church has made it look like that. When Christians are harsh and cruel and judgmental and smug, it's a betrayal of what the Gospel is actually about because that's not the Gospel.

The Gospel is not about Jesus coming to rant at you for everything that you've done wrong. It's not Jesus coming with a message saying, you've got to sort yourself out and get your act together.

And it's not a message that is trying to brutally expose all your feelings and then kick you while you're down and tell you all the things that you've done wrong. And that's because Jesus has not come to fight against you.

[25 : 07] Jesus has come to fight for you. And his whole mission is about rescuing you out of danger, freeing you from slavery and pulling you off the path to hell so that you never, ever need to go in that direction again.

And that's why the imagery of the Horn of Salvation is so rich and so powerful. And we need it if our understanding of Jesus is going to be accurate. When we think of Jesus, sometimes we think of Jesus maybe first and foremost as gentle.

And that is absolutely right because Jesus is the most gentle, most compassionate person who has ever lived. But he is not soft and he's not weak and he is not feeble.

Jesus is magnificently strong. Jesus is majestically powerful. Jesus is unbreakably tough.

He is a horn of salvation and he is using all of that strength to fight for you, to rescue you, to save you, to defend you, to deliver you from all the destructive power of sin.

[26 : 21] And that's why if you're a Christian or if you become a Christian, you need to know that you are weak. You absolutely need to know that you are weak. So often we think that we are strong, that we can manage on our own and we can't.

You need to know that you are weak, but you never, ever need to feel afraid.

You do not need to feel afraid because Jesus has come to fight for you. And Zachariah knew that, he spoke of that.

He says that God has raised up a horn of salvation for us. For us, the people of God foreshadowed in the Old Testament, in the people of Israel, but in the new, extended and invited to all who come to put their faith in Jesus.

So horn of salvation is a beautiful image for us to think about. But the other image that Zachariah uses is the image of a sunrise.

[27 : 28] That's an image of light, of clarity and of a new beginning. And it actually echoes the Old Testament again. Zachariah in this song quotes from Malachi, he quotes Malachi verse one of Malachi 3 1 when he speaks about the messenger preparing the way before the coming of the Lord.

That's John the Baptist is going to fulfill that prophecy. He's the one, the forerunner, preparing the way. But Malachi 4 2 speaks of the coming Messiah in the language of sunrise.

For you who fear my name, the Son of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. And we actually sang that phrase in Hark the Herald in Jerusalem. Whenever you hear that, that, that, that, and Carol, sometimes people think that it's supposed to say Son of righteousness.

It's not, it's meant to say son, S-U-N because it's quoting from Malachi chapter 2. It's all using this image of a sunrise to describe the coming of Jesus.

And that is such a beautiful thing to think about. And it's speaking so powerfully about what we are delivered into. So the Horn of Salvation is what we are rescued out of the sunrise is what we are brought into.

[28 : 40] And as Zachariah describes this, he speaks of it bringing light to those who are in darkness. You can see there at the line at the bottom there, light to those who sit in darkness.

That idea of light is something that comes up again and again and again in the Bible. It speaks of knowledge. It speaks of learning and growing to give knowledge of salvation to his people.

You see that there in verse 77, it's the same emphasis that's been made. Without Jesus we're in darkness. We're lost, we're blind, we're disorientated.

He's come to bring light. He's come to show us where we are, to show us what we need, to show us where to go. And as that light shines on us, our sin is exposed and his mercy is revealed.

And that's why salvation is always just a matter of turning to him. Again, turning from sin, turning to Jesus. Our eyes are opened and we discover the truth as it's revealed in him.

[29 : 44] But not only that, the image of sunrise is speaking of our feet being guided in the way of peace. And that's so, so important for us to remember. The Gospel delivers us from sin and death and it brings us into a new path.

It brings us into the light and joy and beauty of God's kingdom. In other words, Jesus doesn't just say, well, I'm going to save you, but then you have to get on with it yourself.

He takes us and leads us and guides us as we follow him. He gives our lives new direction, new purpose and new meaning.

And that's why Christianity is a matter of from to. We're saved from death. We're brought into new life, a new humanity, a new community, a new kingdom of love.

That's why Zachariah can speak about being saved there so that we might serve, delivered to serve, saved in order to serve.

[30 : 43] And that's really, that's precisely the pattern of discipleship. We are saved from our sin and we are brought onto a new path where we can serve and honor Jesus.

And that's what makes being a Christian so brilliant because it means that you have security for eternity and you've got purpose for the week ahead. And it's all reminding us that that's in the Gospel, you're not just saved from something rubbish, you're also delivered into something amazing.

You're brought into an amazing adventure as we follow Jesus together. And in many ways that's where the imagery of sunrise is so beautiful because a sunrise is just lovely.

And it's all reminding us that Jesus is just lovely. To know Him is to know the warmth and brightness and beauty of a new day, of a fresh start, of hope and life and peace.

So as we think about this from two balance that runs through the Gospel, we see three shadows. We see two images. And last of all, we need to think about one decision.

[32 : 04] But there's actually two aspects to this because when we think about from two, we're thinking all about what Jesus has taken us from and what He's bringing us into.

But the truth is before that from two that we experience, there was another even bigger from two.

Because as we think about the coming of Jesus, we need to think about where He came from and we need to think about where He went to.

He came from heaven, from all the beauty and security and glory of heaven.

He came from His Father's arms. His Father's side were from all eternity. They had enjoyed perfect love and togetherness.

[33 : 12] That's where He came from. And He went to the cross. He went to the cross in all of its pain and horror and suffering.

And as we look at Christmas, we think about Jesus being laid in a manger that was just a stop off on a journey to a far, barwarsh destination.

He came from heaven. He came to the cross. And faced with that prospect, Jesus made a decision.

He made a decision to go. And that's why He came. He was ready and willing to humble Himself, to become one of us, to go all the way to the point of death, even death on a cross, all so that you and I can be delivered.

And as we stop and think about where He came from and where He went to, and as we think about that decision, that willingness on the Son of God to do that for you, then that's probably the most profound and astonishing theological truth that you can ever think about.

[34 : 39] Jesus made that decision. And He made it so that you can be saved. And what that means is that for anyone here who's not left, who's not yet a Christian, all of it leaves you with a decision as well.

Because all the shadows in the Old Testament, all the beautiful imagery that we see fulfilled in Jesus, all the great covenant promises of God revealed in Scripture, all the ways in which that great thread of redemptive history unfolds over the pages of Scripture and across the ages of history, all the astonishing theological truth of the Son of God leaving heaven, being conceived in Mary's womb, born, lain in a manger, growing up, beginning His ministry, healing those who are in desperate need and yet rejected by those who claim to be religious leaders, condemned, beaten, crucified, buried.

God did all of that. He did it all. On the third day, Jesus rose again. He's now at the right hand of the Father, reigning over all.

God did all of that. He did everything. He did everything to take you from sin and bring you into His kingdom.

The only thing that sits on your lap is one decision.

[36 : 30] A decision to follow Him, to trust Him. And I don't know if I've been able to make myself clear enough tonight or not, but all that Jesus wants you to leave behind is rubbish stuff.

And all that Jesus wants to bring you into is amazing stuff. And that's what makes the gospel so amazing, and I just want all of you tonight to think so hard about that decision.

And that's really one of the beautiful things about the Lord's Supper, is that it's an opportunity to publicly say, I've made that decision, and following Jesus. And as we sit and share the Lord's Supper together, that's what we're saying.

We're saying, I have made that decision. And in a moment we're going to sing, but I want to just say that if there is anybody who has never sat at the Lord's table before, but who knows that you love Jesus, and you want to publicly say, I love Jesus, and I want to make that decision, and I want to follow Him, and I want to serve Him, then just move into the middle and publicly declare that you love Jesus.

And we'll go on together following Him, because as we sit at the Lord's table, we are united by the fact that He has taken us from sin, and He has brought us into His amazing family.

[37 : 57] Amen. That's great.