

The Reason for Praise

⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn^[a] of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
⁷¹ salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

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We are in that post Christmas doldrums. There was so much hype and excitement leading up to Christmas—constant Christmas music in the store, the radio and in the home; Arlidazzle; Christmas lights; special menus; inviting family. Yes, we complained about having to shop for Christmas presents, but it was still fun. Now it is post-Christmas. Some folks don’t turn on their lights at night. The presents are all opened. The special food is eaten. Family and guests have gone home. Soon you will have to return to your daily grind whether it is work or school. It is a chore, even sad, to start taking down all the decorations. What a contrast. So much hype leading up to Christmas and now we there is a let down.

We got it all backwards. Instead of all the hype and music excitement leading up to Christmas, it should be dull and boring, even sad. The excitement and music and special food and hype should come on Christmas day and afterwards. At least, that is the way it should be. Today we return to Luke chapter 1 to the Song of Zechariah. In this text we find an old man who was excited to praise God. And he gives us every reason to be more excited that Christmas has come than in waiting for Christmas to come. We can because it means the Messiah has come to accomplish his special mission.

I. The reason to praise is the Messiah has come.

Let’s go back to the song of Zechariah. Zechariah was a pious, God-fearing man, but as you and I know, even God-fearing people are not immune to doubt. When Gabriel announced to him that he and his elderly wife were going to give birth to a son and that this son was the forerunner to the Messiah, he greeted such joyous news with skepticism. He and his wife Elizabeth could not have children especially now in their old age. He basically called God a liar. Well, the angel gave him proof he should trust God. He struck him mute until the day the baby is born.

It is easy for you and me to look down on Zechariah and scold him for doubting God. But then someone should scold us, too. We are like Zechariah. We are also God-fearing people. But how many times have we refused to take God at his Word? I think of all the time I wasted and the anxiety I caused myself when I worried about this or about that when God clearly tells me not to worry. Or when God tells me that the best is yet to come, but I cling to this world as the best I will ever have. I forget that heaven is my home and it is better than any of us can imagine. But God was patient with Zechariah, and this same God is patient with us.

So the baby was born and on the 8th day, the day of circumcision, it was time to name him. Family and friends wanted to name him after Zechariah. But Elizabeth insisted he should be named John, and so did Zechariah, though he had to write it out on paper because he was still mute. Once John received his name, Zechariah could speak again. If you could speak again after nine months of silence, what would you say? What would be the most important thing on your mind that you want to share first? When Zechariah could speak again, his first words were a song of praise to God. **Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.** He praises God because the birth of John means the Messiah is soon to come.

And note how Zechariah speaks of his coming in the past tense, ... **he has come.** Jesus’ birth was another three months away. So much must happen to him in the upcoming years: the murderous plot of Herod; the relentless temptations by the devil; the murder plots by his enemies; the cross; death. But Zechariah is so sure the Messiah will come and will do exactly what he came to do that he speaks in the past tense as though it has happened already.

That is what faith does. It trusts God so much it treats every promise as being if it happened already. The road to heaven before us is paved with God’s promises. Some promises we have seen fulfilled like Jesus born of the virgin in Bethlehem. Others we will see later, and still others not until we open our eyes in heaven. But we can regard every word, every promise, as true, so true that we can regard them as already fulfilled.

The first words out of Zechariah’s mouth were words of praise because John’s birth meant that the Messiah is near. And his coming gives us every reason to praise God as we consider what his coming means to us.

II. *We praise God for the Messiah's mission.*

⁶⁸ **“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn^[a] of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**

Every team and school has a mascot. For Sibley East it is the Wolvine. In Minnesota we have the Vikings and Timberwolves. I still root for the Detroit Lions. You have the Chicago Bears. Mascots are suppose to express a sense of strength. The birth of the Messiah means God is raising up a horn of salvation. This horn is a symbol of power like a mascot painted on the field or displayed on the uniform. It is a horn of salvation. The Messiah has come and he will save people.

Zechariah understood that. That is why he sang, ... **salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.”** The Israelites had a long history of enemies: Egyptians, Edomites, Moabites, Arameans, Babylonians and Assyrians, and in his day the Romans. The skeptic would look at these words and say they are hogwash. God didn't crush the Romans when Jesus was born. And look at Israel today. How many nations are rooting for the downfall of Israel?

But those are not the enemies Zechariah is referring to here. If God meant them, he would have raised up another king David, gave him a superior army, and marched him out to war to crush these enemies. No. The Messiah was someone special. He was not only David's son, he was also David's Lord. This Messiah is no mere mortal. He is God himself in the flesh. What kind of enemy needs crushing if it meant that God himself must do it? We are talking about sin which has made us God's enemies, about death which is the curse of sin, and the devil who hates God and us. The devil has many allies to attack God and his Church. I just read a story of how 22 Catholic missionaries were murdered in 2021 and over 500 over the past ten years. But such persecuting enemies are only the tools the devil uses. That is why Jesus came. He came to free us, not from earthly enemies, but from the enemy behind the enemies, from sin, death and the devil.

Zechariah describes how he did this. He came to redeem or ransom his people. If you turned in a coupon, the store technically buys it back from you. A kidnapped person is ransomed where money is exchanged for their life. Jesus came to ransom us back. You heard earlier in our epistle reading. ... **and through him to reconcile all things to himself (whether things on earth or in heaven) by making peace through the blood of his cross.** God didn't establish peace with the devil. He is still at war with him. He established peace between the sinner and God, and he did this through the blood of his cross. The Romans may have built it, but it was his cross because he took our damning sins as his own and spilled his blood to pay for them.

Zechariah wasn't singing about freedom from enemy nations or economic ruin. He is talking about a true, lasting freedom, freedom from the guilt of our sin, from the fear of death because of the resurrection, and freedom from the tyranny of the devil. Think about it. We are free no matter what. Joseph in the Old Testament was sold into slavery and later imprisoned in the dungeons of Pharaoh, yet he was a free man because of Christ. Paul sent back a runaway slave to his master, and though he was still a slave, he was a free man because of Christ. You could be stuck in a rut or a dead end job or no job at all, maybe you are not living your dream and feel trapped, or you can't avoid aging or disease or illness, but you are all free in Christ.

And we are also free to serve God without fear. ... **and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.** We don't care how the world defines marriage; we will follow God's blueprint for marriage even if means mockery. We will continue to live Christian lives, being honest when everyone else tells us that nice guys finish last, serving and submitting to others even if they don't deserve it, basically living God-pleasing, Christian lives. We want to because of the freedom he gives us in Christ. Even if they threaten us, we are free to serve him in holiness and righteousness.

It is not as much fun to take down the Christmas decorations as it was to put them up. It seems the excitement of Christmas is over. Don't let it be. You can still take down the tree, the lights, everything, and still have every reason to praise God more than before. The Messiah came and he completed his message of salvation. Let the post-Christmas excitement and praise make all the pre-Christmas hype seem boring and nothing. Amen.