

Uncle Zechariah's Song • Luke 1:67-80

Luke, the physician turned historian, set out to write the biography of Jesus Christ. Yet, in the first chapter of that biography he hardly mentions Jesus. Instead he talks at great length about Jesus' far less well-known cousin, John.

Luke reminds me of the famous and prolific American writer James Michener. Michener wrote many very long novels with very short titles like *Poland*, *Texas*, *Centennial* and *Hawaii*. They all begin with more background information than most of us could ever want to know. His books start thousands, even millions, of years before the main stories begin. He wrote page after page after page of setting and context for his epic sagas. I have talked to would-be readers who started but never finished a Michener novel.

Maybe that's the way you feel about the first chapter of Luke. It's Jesus' biography and he hasn't even been born yet after 67 verses. Well, wait until chapter 2 because this is the context, preparation and setting for Jesus' arrival, and it's all about Zechariah and his newborn son John.

Zechariah, a good and godly man, lived 2000 years ago in the hill country of Judea in an area that today is part of the nation of Israel. He followed in the vocation of his father. He married a godly woman. He lived a relatively ordinary life, except that they had a continuing heartache—they hoped for children that did not come. Advanced in years he was finishing out his career as a priest when a series of unusual things happened to him.

He was unexpectedly called upon for the first and only time in his entire priestly career to offer incense to God in the temple. When he did the angel Gabriel appeared to him and gave to him a prophecy that Elizabeth would become pregnant and God would give them a son.

Zechariah went home and Elizabeth became pregnant. Their son John was born. Zechariah had more excitement in one year than in the rest of his life combined.

Zechariah's greatest days were his older days.

Virtually nothing is known about the rest of his life. It wasn't until he was an old man that he made his greatest contribution.

That somewhat contradicts the way most of us think. We assume that the best days of life are always the earlier days. We think that life's peak comes early and old is bad. We rarely imagine that a person's greatest work will be done after age 65.

Not so for Zechariah. All of life was anticipation and preparation for what God would do and he didn't know until it happened. He is somewhat like Moses who spent 40 years of his life preparing in the royal courts of Egypt. He spent another difficult 40 years preparing in the desert of Midian. It was not until Moses was 80 years old that God called him to lead the ancient nation of Israel out of Egyptian slavery and toward the Promised Land. He was an old man when he confronted Pharaoh, when he received the Ten Commandments and when he wrote the early books of the Old Testament.

In all of this there is a subtle but significant principle for us. It is that we should live all of life as if every day is the most significant and important. But

we must also live as if it is preparation for our greatest days of all. The challenge is that we never know which it is. God's greatest days for us may be our oldest days. Everything else in life may be preparation for significance we would never anticipate. Therefore, live life with a combination of immediacy and anticipation. With God the best days are often ahead.

Zechariah's greatest days included a special song of praise to God. Filled with the Holy Spirit he was inspired to sing words that God thought good enough and important enough to be recorded in the New Testament biography of Jesus. Zechariah's song started with praise to God. "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people."

Zechariah was a wise man when it came to his theology of worship for he knew that wor-

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ship should always begin with God. It should always center in him, always start out with praise and adoration for who God is and what God has done.

That is something that we also should do. The mark of success when we walk out of a church service is when we can say, "I experienced God."

Old Zechariah got it right—"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel!" But Zechariah keeps singing with words of praise for God's promises—actually for promises that have been fulfilled, especially the promise of a Messiah.

Woven throughout most of the Old Testament music and sermons, letters, books and prophecy are promises and expectations that God would send his special representative. He is sometimes called "Messiah". That means "anointed one" in English and "Christ" in Greek. He is promised to be the Redeemer, King, Leader, Friend, Savior and a whole list of titles. One of the references for the Messiah is "horn" which refers to his great strength (just like the strength of a rhinoceros or moose or mountain goat is represented by horns).

Godly Jews had waited for generations for this leader-from-God to come. Now old Zechariah's relative by marriage, Mary, was pregnant with the promised Messiah. All of this is why the old man sings, "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago)."

Zechariah sings on, next singing praise for past preservation. He knew God would keep his promise for a Messiah because God kept so many other promises preserving his people in the past. He praised God for "salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies." God had faithfully preserved the people of Israel against enemies. God had kept his promises. What he said to Abraham 2000 years earlier he had done for two millennia. God had repeatedly rescued his people.

This is a good praise for us to offer, too. Have you ever praised God that you have lived as long as you have and survived all that you have survived? Have you ever praised God for protect-

ing our nation and our world? Have you ever praised God for the way he has preserved his church against all the things that could have gone wrong?

I was sitting in the aisle seat of a flight to Phoenix. As we landed I was looking out the window and saw the man in the window seat cross himself as soon as the wheels touched the ground. My first response was to smile. I thought, "That's not bad. This guy is grateful to God for getting him back on earth again." What I had seen as routine he turned into praise.

After college our son Brian moved from Minnesota to Southern California. As he was driving there through winter weather, pulling a trailer over the Rockies, this father thought of a million dangers and things that could go terribly wrong. I thought about everything from loose lug nuts on the wheels to drive-by shooters on the highway. When he called to say he had safely arrived, Charleen and I thanked God for preserving our son.

That's what Zechariah was doing when he sang. He was praising God for preservation. He gives a reminder to all of us: don't just praise God for what's gone right but also praise God for what didn't go wrong!

Wise old Zechariah next sings about the purpose of preservation. Does God save us from our problems, enemies, risks and dangers for a reason? Is it preservation for preservation sake? Of course not! God preserved Israel and God preserves us for a very specific purpose: "to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." In other words, God lets us live so that we can serve him, and so that we can serve him without fear and with holiness all our lives.

Imagine yourself as an employer with an at-risk employee. You are more than generous, doing everything you can to help him succeed. When he was seriously ill you kept him on the payroll for six months and helped pay his medical bills. When the creditors came after him you hired a lawyer to help him out. When his wife threatened divorce you arranged for a marriage counselor. When his job was eliminated you paid for him to be retrained.

Why did you do all this good stuff? You did it so that he would work for you as a good and

honorable employee.

That's what Zechariah sang from his voice of experience. When God preserves us, it is "to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."

The fifth "verse" of Uncle Zechariah's song was personal, practical and theological. Picture this elderly uncle of Jesus stooping over the crib of his newborn son John. He is singing to God, but his song includes his baby boy. Zechariah remembers the words from the last page of the Old Testament, that God would send an Elijah-type prophet who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. This new prophet would get people thinking, call people to repentance, give them teaching, spiritually warm up the crowd so that they would be ready to hear and receive the Messiah. Every devout Jew of this generation was praying for the Messiah to come and expecting that a special new prophet would prepare the way.

What is so personal is that old Zechariah's son John was to grow up and become that prophet before the Messiah. Zechariah sings to his baby, "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for himÉ."

Just a side comment: it is still common for someone like John to prepare people for Jesus. Many of you are God-appointed preparers. You make friends with people. You are kind. You are loving. You invite people to church. You pray for them in their needs. You lovingly confront what is wrong in their lives. You marvelously prepare people for Jesus Christ. And, because of your preparation, those who were not Christians come to Jesus and become Christians. You are just like John.

His voice still strong for an old man, Zechariah comes to the last lines of his inspired hymn. It is what is technically called a "through-composed hymn", that is, each part builds on the previous part. It is all connected. You can't sing just part of it without ripping away much of the meaning.

The finale to this hymn describes the outcome of God's faithfulness and our response. It is a description of what God desires in our lives:

God wants every person not only to be saved by him from sin and death but to know it!

... to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

There is enough magnificent description in Luke 1:77-79 to study for a month. It is enough for a hymn of its own, maybe a whole book of hymns. But let's just look at four key words of outcome.

The first of these is salvation. God wants everyone to have the knowledge of salvation. That is, God wants every person not only to be saved by him from sin and death but to know it!

Sometimes when people are asked if they will go to heaven when they die, they answer, "I hope so. I want to." God wants better than that. He wants us to be certain. He wants us to know for sure that we have received his salvation.

The second outcome is forgiveness. The way to certain knowledge of salvation is through forgiveness of sins. It is a terrible thing to live and die with sins still staining our souls. God wants to forgive all of our sins and offers to do

so when we confess them to God and accept his forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Forgiveness assures salvation.

The third outcome is mercy. God treats us with tender mercy. He is not harsh. He is not out to get us. He never desires for us to get what we deserve. God is always on our side.

Guidance is the fourth outcome. Out of God's mercy comes God's light like the sunrise. When we are lost in darkness and the shadows of death, God shines brightly from heaven and gives us guidance so that our feet will be directed in paths of peace.

It is a beautiful and wonderful picture of what God gives to those who are his and who praise him. Zechariah sings:

(God gives) his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of

our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Jesus' Uncle Zechariah finishes his song to his son and disappears from the pages of Jesus' biography and of the Bible. We never hear from him or about him again.

But Luke the historian adds one last line to the first chapter of Jesus' biography: "And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel." It is an interesting commentary on the childhood and youth of the baby who grew up to be described by Jesus as the greatest man who has ever lived. He is not described as physically strong. He was not famous as an athlete. He was not known for his keen intellect or good grades in school. He was not exceptional because of his social skills and popularity. He "grew and became strong in spirit." What a striking declaration of priorities. No doubt about what the Bible considers to be most important. What a grand description of any child, any adult, any person. What a goal for us all—that we grow spiritually.

These last words of Zechariah were words of praise to God and words about living for God. They make me wonder what we would like our last words to be. How would we like to end life?

There is a simple principle for anything we desire—it is to begin with where we want to end up. If a person wants to build a house, become the president or write a book, decide what you want to do and then work backward from there to reach the desired goal.

Applying that principle to all of life, how would you like life to end? Would you like your last words to be, "I made a lot of money" or "I

drove a nice car"? Probably not! As Christians, our desire should be to end life with a great satisfaction that we served God well, saying with old Zechariah, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel."

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