



ZECHARIAH'S SONG

As part of this year's Advent celebrations, we're thinking about the first ever Christmas songs, recorded for us in Luke's Gospel. Today we're going to look at Zechariah's song, otherwise known as the *Benedictus* ('Blessed be' in Latin). What kind of song is this? Let's take a look ...

Luke 1:57-80

What is the theme of Zechariah's song? It's freedom – one of the most important concepts in the 21st century world. E.g. we'll talk about freedom of choice, of speech, of expression, of religion, of political persuasion. Over the years Hollywood has jumped on the bandwagon, too. Here are a few movie titles you may just recognise:

- *Selma* (the Martin Luther King biopic).
- *Mandela* (as in Nelson Mandela).
- *Lincoln* (as in Abraham Lincoln).
- *Belle* (as in Dido Elizabeth Belle).

Now I'm not trying to minimise the importance of such examples of freedom – after all, many of them, like the abolition of slavery and the work of the Civil Rights Movement, were a result of the impact of Evangelical Christian belief. But biblical freedom goes further: it also includes an inner freedom, something that has eternal ramifications.

Because you can be physically free, but not spiritually so.

What then does Zechariah's song have to tell us about total freedom? Well, think about ol' Zechariah's situation. He'd been visited by the Archangel Gabriel, promised a son, told that this son will be the messenger of the Messiah, and when he starts to question it, he's rendered speechless! And then his son is born, and on the day of the boy's circumcision, Zechariah gets his voice back. And he sings a song of freedom: *baruch ha'adonai eloheh yisra'el* ("Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel ...").

But this is about more than being able to talk again. Zechariah is saying something far more significant – not about his own son so much, as this other baby to come. He uses 4 words to get his point across:

1) Salvation. The word 'salvation' is used 3 times here (vs69, 71, 77). In Greek it's *soterias*, but it's the Hebrew *yeshua* that really counts. *Yeshua* is used throughout the OT, but most notably of God when He parts the Reed Sea and saves the Israelites from Pharaoh (e.g. Exodus 15).

What's interesting is that God also promised to 'become' our salvation, our *yeshua* (e.g. Psalm 118:13-14). Why is that interesting? Because *yeshua* is the origin of a certain Hebrew name, *Y'shua* – the Hebrew form of 'Jesus.' Hence the words of the angel to Joseph (Matthew 1:21). I.e. in Jesus, God literally 'became' our salvation!

And what do we need saving from? We'll come to that ...

2) Redemption (vs68). In Hebrew this would be the word *ge'ullah*. What does *ge'ullah* or 'redemption' mean? Well, back in OT times, if you found yourself in financial difficulty you could sell yourself into slavery in order to survive. But if you were lucky a relative could buy you out or 'redeem' you – a *ga'el* or 'kinsman redeemer.'

Now there are quite a few places in the OT where God refers to Himself as Israel's redeemer, and promises to free them from slavery (e.g. Isaiah 54:8). But for God to fit the bill, He'd have to be a blood relative: He'd have to become one of us. So when did God become a member of the human family? Answer: when Jesus was born!

And how did He redeem us? Again, we'll come to that!

3) Deliverance (vs74: the NIV translates it as 'rescue'). Again, it's the original Hebrew version of this song that really counts – and in Hebrew the word for 'deliverance' is *natza*, 'to snatch away', as in taking something from the hand of another. E.g. when God 'delivered' Israel, He effectively 'snatched' them from the hand of Pharaoh.

Now it may be that Jesus had this in mind when He said, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28). I.e. Jesus has the power to 'snatch' us from the hand of the Devil and say, "Their *Mine*, now." And the good news is: the Devil can never 'snatch' us back!

So when did Jesus do this? Yep, we'll come to that too!

4) Forgiveness. This word, used in vs77, is probably the most significant of all. The Greek word for forgiveness, *aphesis*, literally means 'to carry away.' But the Hebrew word *s'lychah* has an even deeper meaning. What does *s'lychah* mean? 'Release', as from a debt.

Now when God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt, He had to forgive them for all the practices they'd adopted while they were there (Leviticus 18:3) - because only God can forgive sins committed against God, right? Absolutely. So if that's the case, how could this child who was about to appear on the pages of history be in a position to forgive sins? It would mean He would have to be ...

God Himself. And that's who Jesus is (Luke 5:20-21).

But why the need to forgive us? Let's put it all together ...

What Would You Sing?

In Zechariah's song there are 4 'words of freedom', and each one raises a question that needs to be answered:

- **Salvation.** What do we need 'saving' from? Answer: Satan, sin, and a selfish human nature.
- **Redemption.** How has Jesus 'redeemed' us? Answer: by giving up His life, in place of our own.
- **Deliverance.** When did Jesus 'deliver' us? Answer: when His hands and feet were nailed to a cross.
- **Forgiveness.** Why do we need to be 'forgiven'? Answer: we've all messed up, but He still loves us.

Jesus came to set us free from everything that binds us – everything that can hold us captive. And then He rose from the dead, not just to say "I've won", but "*We* have."

So what do we do with this? We all have areas in our lives where we can find ourselves 'enslaved' in some way. So what's enslaving *you*? Or someone close to you? Is it bitterness; anger; envy; unforgiveness; pride; addictions; habits; guilt; worry; fear; regret; low self-worth?

In a minute, I'm going to ask you to come forward with those paper-chains you made earlier; place those chains at the foot of the manger; and ask Jesus to set you free.