**Praise God for the birth of His Son**

Text: Luke 1:67-79

Rev. David Waldron

Scriptures: Exodus 4:27-31; Luke 1:67-79

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 100, 271, 106, 233, 237, 231, 259

**Series:** Occasional (pre-Christmas, installation of elder)

**Theme:** Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, praises God and prophesies primarily about Jesus recognizing that God has visited his people in fulfilment of his promises.

**Proposition:** Praise God for the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ

**Introduction**

I vividly remember the day I became a father for the first time. It was a joyful day - one of those big milestones in life had just happened. I still remember driving home from the hospital with a big smile on my face. Christian fathers here today, did you praise God at the birth of first child?

Praising God is a good and very understandable reaction to the grace of the Lord seen in the birth of a child. This was the response of Zechariah to the birth of his firstborn son John in what is often referred to as the ‘Song of Zechariah’ or by the Latin name ‘Benedictus’ – meaning ‘praise be’.

However, if you are a Christian father who praised God when your first child was born, there are likely some differences between you and Zechariah, for example:

1. Your name is not the same! There are 28 different men called ‘Zechariah’ who are recorded in Scripture. The name means ‘God remembered’. We don’t have any men called Zechariah in this congregation, although it’s a great name to have. ☺
2. Whilst you likely praised God on the birthday of your child, Zechariah’s recorded praise was 8 days after the birth of his son John. He couldn’t do so before this because God had made him unable to speak after he did not at first believe the words of the angel Gabriel who brought news of his wife’s pregnancy.
3. You were likely not as old as Zechariah! Luke records for us that he and his wife Elizabeth were ‘both advanced in years’ (1:7). They had no children before John was conceived, Luke writes that ‘Elizabeth was barren’ (1:7).
4. You did not prophesy as Zechariah did. He was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ in a very special way which enabled him to speak out the inspired words of God which are recorded in holy Scripture.
5. You did not give God praise for somebody else’s child! Notice that although Zechariah refers to his own son John in v76, John is not the main reason for his praise to God, it is Jesus, the son of his wife’s relative Mary, for whom Zechariah primarily gives thanks.

We are going to look now at the ‘Song of Zechariah’ under three headings:

1. God visits his people (v68)
2. God remembers his promises (v68-69)
3. God continues to fulfil his purposes (v76-79)
4. **God visits His people (v68)**

The Bible is a story, a narrative, a historical record, from Creation, through the fall of our first ancestors Adam and Eve, to God’s unfolding plan of conquering Satan, sin and death through the ‘offspring of the woman’ Eve (Gen 3:15). The births of John and Baptist and Jesus Christ fit into this unfolding story of God’s work to redeem his people as Zechariah recognizes in v68: "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people*”.

God is not detached from this world, like the deity Bette Midler sings about in her 1990 cover of the Julie Gold song ‘From a distance’ with the refrain ‘God is watching us from a distance’. Throughout history, God has ‘visited’ His people, for example: When God enabled Sarah to conceive a son to her husband Abraham when they were both in their old age: “*The LORD* ***visited*** *Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised*” (Gen 21:1)

As we heard from our reading in Exodus 4, when the Lord came to rescue His people from their slavery in Egypt we read that: **“***And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had* ***visited*** *the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped*” (Ex 4:31). After God had delivered His people and they were in the wilderness, they worshipped a golden calf and God visited them in judgement, bringing a plague on the people. God explains to Moses “*in the day when I* ***visit****, I will* ***visit*** *their sin upon them*" (Ex 32:34b)

The ongoing disobedience of God’s people and their failure to trust him so that they ‘*did what was right in their own eyes*’ (Judges 21:25) brought covenant curses upon the people, as God had promised (e.g. Deut 28:15-68). These curses included famine in the land, in the days when judges ruled Israel.

However, we read of God’s grace at this time in the book of Ruth: That Naomi “*arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had* ***visited*** *his people and given them food*” (Ruth 1:6).

The word which is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures (the ‘Septuagint) in each of these examples is the same word that is recorded by Luke for Zechariah’s words both in verses 68 and 78: “*because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall* ***visit*** *us from on high*”. It’s the same word used by James in his Holy Spirit inspired definition of pure and undefiled religion which we heard earlier: “*to* ***visit*** *orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world*”. (James 1:27b).

To ‘visit’ here is not merely to pay a social call and have a cup of coffee. (Not that being conversational and sharing a drink are not good things, but they do not constitute Scriptural ‘visiting’ in and of themselves). The word ‘visit’ literally means toregard, give attention to, look at, to examine closely, inspect.

It has two parts, the first is three letters in Greek (epi) which intensifies the second part (skopeo) from which we get our English word ‘scope’. **Just as** a telescope is used to closely examine the moon, planets, stars and galaxies and a microscope is used to give attention to very small objects, **So likewise,** to ‘visit’ here is to examine closely with the aim of being involved in the lives of others so as to assist in meeting their needs.

Interestingly, the word which is translated ‘overseer’ in the qualifications of elders in both 1 Tim 3:2 and Tit 1:7 is closely related to the word ‘visit’. One of the key aspects of the call of an elder is to visit those over whom they are called by God to ‘*exercise oversight’*, ‘*not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock’* (1 Pet 5:3). Elders are to model the character of Christ, the character of God. They are called be involved in the lives of those in the congregation, visiting with a view to modelling the truth and grace of our Saviour as we seek to be used by the Lord as instruments in His hands as He meets the spiritual needs of His people.

Zechariah knew that God had not been merely ‘watching us from a distance’, but that He had visited His people in the past and now He had visited them again. He had come and met the needs of His people through the conceptions of both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Now, with his tongue supernaturally loosed by God, Zechariah praises the Lord "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has* ***visited*** *and redeemed his people*”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God’s people, praise the Lord because He has visited this world in the birth of His Son Jesus. Praise God because of his care, concern, blessings and judgments. He is involved with us, not detached, uninterested, or unable to act. Read the Bible and you will see clearly that God remembers His promise to conquer Satan, sin and death through the ‘offspring of the woman’ Eve (Gen 3:15).

Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **God remembers His promises (v68-75)**

I need to be especially careful with my car keys, my cell phone, and other essential items. Why? Because I readily forget where I’ve left them if they are not in their usual put-down place. I keep a diary so that I don’t forget important dates like birthdays, anniversaries and meetings. Perhaps you like me, can be forgetful at times. Our minds are both limited by our creatureliness and by the effects of the fall.

You might think that God is somehow like us in our forgetfulness when you first read Zechariah’s words in v72 about God having ‘*remembered his holy covenant’.* Does our all-knowing God forget things? No. Never. Interesting that in Scripture we never read that He forgets our sins, but rather He chooses not to remember them. He says "*I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins*” (Isa 43:25). Not remembering is not the same as being forgetful.

So what does it mean when the Scriptures record in many places that God remembers? e.g. **“***God* ***remembered*** *Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided*” (Gen 8:1); **“***God heard their groaning, and God* ***remembered*** *his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob*” (Ex 2:24); **“***He has* ***remembered*** *his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel*” (Ps 98:3). Whenever Scripture recording that ‘God remembered’ it most certainly does not mean that He had forgotten something, rather it is an indication that God has moved to act on behalf of His people.

Most of Zechariah’s ‘song’ focusses on the significance of what God had done in visiting His people by enabling His Son to become a human being. Zechariah praises God because He had “*raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David*” (v69). We sometimes use the expression ‘strong as an ox’. Oxen are one of a number of types of mammals with horns.

In Scripture, a horn is a symbol of strength e.g. **“***For you are the glory of their strength; by your favour our* ***horn*** *is exalted*” (Ps 89:17); “*There I will make a* ***horn*** *to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed*” (Ps 132:17)

Zechariah praises God for the upcoming birth of Jesus Christ because He has provided the strong leader, a powerful king in the line of David, as He had promised to do: **“***When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men*” (2 Sam 7:12-14)

Down through history God made promises through the mouths of his holy prophets, acting on what He had said. From the time of the Exodus onwards, God had repeatedly brought His people victory over their enemies, despite their weakness in the face of seemingly unconquerable foes. Think, for example, of the city of Jericho which fell to the Israelites.

Zechariah both recalls these past victories and looks forward to the greater victory over Satan, sin and death to be won in the future by the baby as yet in Mary’s womb when he says: ‘*that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us*” (v71). Humanly, Zechariah may have been thinking of the occupying foreign forces of Rome, but prophetically, He speaks of Christ’s victory over Satan, sin and death.

Zechariah speaks also of the covenant which God swore to Abraham when his faith hac been proven at Mount Moriah when called by God to sacrifice his only son Isaac. "*By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of hisenemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice*." (Gen 22:16). Zechariah knows that God has remembered this holy covenant with Abraham and has acted by sending His own Son to be born as a man.

Brother and sisters in the Lord, let us, like Zechariah, praise God because He has remembered His promises to Abraham, to the Israelites, to King David. He has acted to fulfil His good purposes, which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **God continues to fulfil his purposes (v76-79)**

To understand the story of the Bible, we need to grasp the great purposes of God which He faithfully works to fulfil. A key goal is to ‘redeem his people’ (v68) to deliver them from captivity.

Historically God this this at the time of the Exodus from Egypt – a key event which pointed forward to the deliverance of His people from slavery to sin through the work of Christ. What was the reason that God gave to Moses to tell Pharaoh that He should release the people? We find the answer in Ex 7:16 where God says: "*Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness*". Zechariah recognizes the same goal in God sending His Son, The Great Deliverer, The Redeemer: (v74) “*That we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness all our days*”

God’s goal is to save a people for Himself. To purchase the freedom of people like you and me who would then be so filled with thankfulness that we would willingly offer ourselves up in humble service to the One who has set us free. How was God continuing to fulfil his purposes at the time when Zechariah said these words? By raising up a prophet who would prepare the way for the Redeemer. John the Baptist, Zechariah’s own son, would be the forerunner of Christ in fulfilment of the prophesy in Isaiah 40:3 “*A voice cries"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God*”.

God would fulfil His great purpose of delivering His people from their bondage to sin and death by sending His own Son – John 3:16 "*For God so loved the world,that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*”. God loves His people so much.

Brother and sisters, God loves you so much. It is because of his ‘tender mercy’ that Jesus was born. The word ‘tender’ here comes from a word in Greek which means bowels, or gut. The same word is used of Christ’s mercy when he was on this earth for example in Matt 9:36 we read that **“***When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*”. This word speaks of His deep-seated compassion of great concern and care for others. We could say ‘His stomach turns’ out of loving compassion for us.

It is for this reason that the ‘sunrise’ would visit from on high. Sunrise or dawn – sometimes translated ‘Dayspring’, here indicates a Messiah. One who would bring light to those in darkness. In fulfilment of the prophet Malachi’s words: “*But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.” (Mal 4:2a)*

Zechariah is praising God for the Messiah, as yet to be born, when He first said the words of the Benedictus. He is praising God for Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. He is praising God who has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:13). He is praising God who continues to fulfil his purposes.

How about you today? Are you also praising God for the birth of Jesus Christ? Are you also able to praise God for his continuing purposes which are unfolding in your own life, knowing that He works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes? Christian, have you grasped the reason why you have been redeemed? To willingly serve Christ without fear in holiness and righteousness? Not out of guilt or shame, fundamentally not out of duty or obligation, but out of love? How are you serving Christ in His church? in His Kingdom?

If you are seeking to serve Him, but do not love Him, do not believe in Him, then your service will do you no good. You remain in bondage with the fearful prospect of these chilling words on the day of judgement: **‘***I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness*.' (Matt 7:23)

Perhaps you are someone who realizes deep down that the child whose birth we remember at Christmas time, Jesus Christ, is not a cause of great praise in your life, because you have never yielded your heart to Him. You are not a person who praises God for someone else’s child – the Son of God.

Let me encourage you to do so today. To come to Christ, the Redeemer, the victorious seed of the woman, great king David’s greater son, the merciful, compassionate Saviour. Come to Christ this Christmas time, so that you can join with Zechariah and all of us who know the Lord and sing: *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed me”*

Even for those of us who may have recently become a father, there are many differences between each one of us and Zechariah, but as brothers and sisters in the Lord we can all praise God together and say: *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed* ***us****”.*

AMEN.