

Zechariah's Song - "God Has Come"

Luke 1:68-79

Where is God when tragedy strikes? On Thursday we learned of another devastating tragedy in one of our nation's schools. Another massacre of innocent children by a crazed murderer - this time in Newtown Connecticut. Where is God when 20 children and 6 teachers are gunned down in an elementary school?

Where is God when 29 year old teacher Kaitlin Roig hid in a classroom bathroom with 14 children aged 6-7 years old?

Her story brought me to tears as I watched her tell her story to Diane Sawyer on an ABC News clip. The third grade teacher thought the children would be killed if they tried to escape outside or down the hall, so she tried to keep fourteen terrified children quiet as they hid in the classroom bathroom. Kaitlin wedged a storage unit in front of the door and didn't come out until the police unlocked the door. Some of the children stood on the toilet so they could all fit in the small bathroom. Thankfully, Kaitlin and her children were safe and are scarred only by the horrors of that day and the knowledge that so many of their friends and teachers were senselessly killed.

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/newtown-teacher-refused-unlock-door-police-fearing-gunmans/story?id=17976299>

If we say that "God was there keeping Kaitlin and her children safe," then where was God when the 20 children in the other classrooms were killed by the shooter Adam Lanza?

Only someone who has experienced this kind of violence can begin to imagine what these grieving parents must be going through. The prayers of the entire country cry out for these grieving parents and the community of Newton. We pray for God's comfort through their unimaginable sorrow.

But Newton was not the only place where sorrow could be found last week.

On Friday, Dec 15, 6 adults and 4 teens were shot in Chicago in a series of separate crimes.

In Philadelphia, 319 homicide deaths so far in 2012. Almost one per day.

<http://www.phillypolice.com/about/crime-statistics/>

In Syria, close to 40,000 have been killed in civil war.

<http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/15/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html>

In Thailand, Indonesia, and dozens of other countries, children are being sold as sex slaves to the highest bidder.

We were reminded of the depth of evil in our world when Adam Lanza opened fire in a small town elementary school. But if we think hard enough, suffering is all around us. It

is in the home of Mary Kelley whose 52 year old son Bill died of a heart attack leaving behind a wife and 2 sons. It is the home of Loraine Fergonna whose son-in-law was just diagnosed with blood cancer.

IS GOD HERE?

Think back with me to the time of the Jewish people under Emperor Ceasar Agustus. There was great disease. Life expectance was 50 for an infant male, 36 for an infant female. Most parents expected that at least on or more of their children would die of a childhood disease. Slavery, robbery and war were all part of the ancient world. It was a world of suffering and sorrow. The Jews lived under Roman authority, and while Rome kept the peace, rebellions were put down mercilessly.

Israel longed for her Messiah. Peace was an idea that eluded the Jewish people. Corruption was rampant. King Herod who sat on the throne in Jerusalem was an imposter - not even Jewish. He enslaved his own nation to build his elaborate monuments to himself.

And into this sad world, a message of hope was given.

That message is exalted in the praise given by an elderly priest whom God used as a part of the Christmas story. The priests name is Zechariah. Some translations name him Zacharias, but it's the same name. He and his wife Elizabeth lived in the hills of Judea, possibly near Hebron. They were childless and prayed for a baby. That prayer was answered late in their lives when the angel Gabriel delivered the news that Elizabeth would give birth to a son who would be the forerunner of the Messiah.

Our passage in Luke 1:68-79 presents Zechariah's praise at the birth of his son, the baby that would grow up to be John the Baptist. His praise represents the hope of all Israel, that the Messiah had finally come, that GOD HAS VISITED HIS PEOPLE. His praise reaches through the centuries to remind us that God has provided an answer to the sorrows and evil that is in this world today. The answer is found in the reality that GOD HAS COME to us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I. Zechariah's Praise - God Has Come!

There are two Parts to Zechariah's Song of Praise. The first Section is contained in Luke 1:69-75. We know that this passage divides into two parts because each of the parts are one sentence in Greek. The first sentence addresses what GOD HAS DONE to secure salvation. The main point of this is found in v. 69 - "*he has raised up a horn of salvation for us.*"

The second section is found in Luke 1:76-79. This section emphasizes Zechariah's prophecy concerning his son John. *"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 him."* (Luke 1:76), This part of the praise is directed toward What God WILL DO in the future through John and most importantly, through Jesus. John's role would be to prepare Israel to hear the message that the Messiah would proclaim.

Both of these sections focus on the word "God has visited us." The word is the Greek word *episkeptomai* and it means "to look at, or to visit." Note the two uses of this word in the two main sections of Zechariah's praise:

1:68 *"He has come **and has redeemed** his people"*

1:78 *"the rising sun **will come to us** from heaven"*

Both sentences use the same Greek word. This connects the two sentences together and presents Zechariah's main point of his praise - GOD HAS COME to VISIT HIS PEOPLE.

This word is used in **Luke 7:16** following the miraculous healing of the grief stricken mother whose only son had died. Jesus raised her son and the people replied with the following response: *"They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. **"God has come to help his people."**"*

The answer to this world's SORROW is that GOD HAS COME
Parents in Newton can be comforted because GOD HAS COME and welcomes children.

Cancer patients can be comforted because GOD HAS COME to give purpose when you've been told that your life will soon come to an end.

Victims of crime can be comforted because GOD HAS COME and promises that one day Justice will rule.

II. The Reason for Zechariah's Praise

Zechariah's praise flowed out of his knowledge of God and his experience of being visited by the angel Gabriel.

He knew that God was at work in his life. Zechariah was a godly man with a heavy heart. He and Elizabeth had NO CHILDREN. Luke 1:7. At the RIGHT TIME, God intervened in Zechariah's life.

The timing of this intervention is given in Luke 1:8. *"Zechariah's division was on duty"* His "division" was the priestly line of Abijah from which Zechariah traced his lineage and priestly vintage.

Once in a lifetime, his "family" would be chosen from this priestly line to serve in the

Holy Place for ONE WEEK. The members of the family would be divided up for the days of that week. Each day, one of the FAMILY MEMBERS would be chosen by lot for the most honored of all tasks - lighting and tending the Golden Lampstand.

This lampstand represented God's presence with Israel. It was a reminder of the Light of the World. We know what this lampstand looked like! The very lampstand that Zechariah tended that day was taken to Rome when Titus destroyed the Temple in 70 AD. When Titus returned to Rome, he built a GREAT ARCH to commemorate his victories. Inscribed in the arch are the trophies of his victories in Judea, including a replica of the LAMPSTAND. The arch and the engraved lampstand still can be viewed in Rome today, 2,000 years later!

On this day, Zechariah was the one chosen! Edersheim writes, *"His course—that of Abia—was on **duty for the week**, and the 'house of his fathers' for **that special day**. More than that, the **lot had fallen on Zacharias** for the most honourable service in the daily ministry—that of burning the incense on the golden altar within the Holy Place. **For the first time in his life, and for the last, would this service [be given to] him.**"* Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple, Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ.* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), 157-58.

Gabriel appeared with an important message. The story is told in Luke 1:11-20. Gabriel reveals that God answered Zechariah's prayer for a son (1:13).

His son would bring many people of Israel back to the Lord (1:14).

His son would make the people ready for the coming Messiah (1:15)

Zechariah had plenty of time to think about what God was doing. Gabriel declares that because Zechariah did not believe the message, he would be unable to speak until after the baby was born (Luke 1:21-25.) This prophecy was fulfilled and Zechariah immediately became mute. God gave Zechariah a nine month "time out" to contemplate the impact of what he was about to do.

There is an interesting fact concerning Zechariah's inability to speak when he emerged from inside the Holy Place that day. As the priest chosen to light the Golden Lampstand, Zechariah was also to pronounce the benediction on the people. The benediction was from **Numbers 6:24-26** *"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."*

When Zechariah came out of the Temple, the people were waiting for him to pronounce the benediction, but **he couldn't speak! Luke 1:21-22** *"Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak."*

This made Zechariah's visit from Gabriel even more significant.

During this "once in a lifetime" experience, God spoke to Zechariah at the RIGHT PLACE and at the RIGHT TIME.

So, Zechariah knows that God was working in his life. That is why he is able to testify that GOD HAS COME.

If we know that God is at work in our lives, we can also testify of GOD'S POWER. We can tell people that we know that GOD IS NEAR because we have experienced his nearness.

Secondly, Zechariah knew that GOD HAS COME because he knew the Bible and related his experiences through the lens of Scripture.

His Praise is filled with quotations and allusions from the OT. He quotes at least 16 references from the OT.

Most direct quotations are in the second section dealing prophetically with the ministry of JOHN as the FORERUNNER of the MESSIAH. Here are just a few of those quotations: Luke 1:76 *"You will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him"* FROM... **Isaiah 40:3** *"A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.'" And also from Malachi 3:1* *"'See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,'" says the LORD Almighty."*

Luke 1:78–79 *"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."* This quotation of Zechariah comes from two passages. **Isaiah 9:2** *"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."* and **Isaiah 58:8** *"Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard."*

Zechariah was filled with praise because he knew God's Word and could relate his current experiences to the prophecies contained in the Old Testament. Without his knowledge of God's Word, his experience with Gabriel might have been misinterpreted. More likely we can say that God was able to perform this wonderful miracle in Zechariah's life because he DID KNOW God's word. God knew that Zechariah would be able to understand the spiritual meaning of this miracle and give God glory.

His 2000 year old song of praise reminds us that God Has Come!
JESUS entered this world to bring LIGHT into the darkness
JESUS brings light to all who trust in Him
Those who follow Jesus have new life
Those who follow Jesus have hope
Those who follow Jesus are filled with kindness as a result of the Fruit of the Spirit
Families who follow Jesus have PEACE
Communities who follow Jesus are better places to live

What has gone wrong with America?
Why so much violence?
It's because we think that we can have PEACE without MORALS!
It's because we think that we don't need God!
We are a nation without a moral compass.

The same ABC report cited above gave some of Kaitlin's words to her children huddled in the bathroom afraid that any moment would be their last. *"I thought we were all going to die," she said through tears. "I told the kids I love them and I was so happy they were my students... I said anyone who believed in the power of the prayer, we need to pray and those who don't believe in prayer" think happy thoughts.*

How sad that Kaitlin Roig felt restraint in telling her children to pray. Her restraint may have been her own lack of personal faith, or it may have been in light of the hyper sensitivity that is forced down our throats every day by a handful of godless athiests who insist on robbing our nation of our heritage, our faith and our values. “

With all praise to Kaitlin and the other teachers who showed great courage, there is a lesson here for us to learn. At times of great tragedy, we need more than happy thoughts! We need a savior!

The good news is that God has come! Jesus came into the world to save us from our sins. John the Baptist announced his birth.
He came, lived and died for us.
We rejected him.
But his life is given for all who will trust him and await his return.
One day he will rule and reign on earth, and those who trust him will rule with him.
As an added blessing, He will also give you peace and comfort through the trials of this life.