

Main Idea: We learn how to respond to Christ’s first coming by pondering several songs that Luke records in Luke 1-2. Last time we looked at Mary’s song. This week we’ll consider three more songs.

Zechariah’s Song—Luke 1:67-79

- I. Zechariah praises God for what He has done (67-75).
 - A. He has redeemed His people (68).
 - B. He has raised up a horn of salvation for His people (69-75).
- II. Zechariah praises God for what his son will do (76-77).
 - A. He will be called a prophet (76a).
 - B. He will prepare the way for the Lord (76b-77).
- III. Zechariah praises God for what the Messiah will do (78-79).
 - A. He is the Rising Son who will come from heaven (78).
 - B. He will shine on those in darkness (79).
 - C. He will bring peace (79b).

The Heavenly Host’s Song—Luke 2:13-14

- I. They ascribed glory to God.
- II. They announced that peace was available to men.
 - A. This peace had come to earth.
 - B. This peace was linked to God’s grace.

Simeon’s Song—Luke 2:28-35

- I. He praised God for keeping His promise (29).
- II. He announced the truth about the baby (30-32).
 - A. He is God’s salvation.
 - B. He is a light.
- III. He gave a prophecy for Joseph and Mary (33-35).

Application: Some questions to ponder...

1. What do we learn about praising God from Zechariah, the angels, and Simeon?
2. What can I do to make praising the Lord a greater part of my life?
3. What most needs to happen in my life so I can celebrate Christmas properly?

What is the appropriate response when you receive a blessing from God Almighty? The well known hymn captures it...

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Praise Him all creatures here below.

Praise Him above ye heavenly host.

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Granted, praise is not the only appropriate response to God’s blessing—there should be heartfelt thankfulness, a commitment to use that blessing for His honor in daily living, and more. But if we really appreciate the gift, there will be *praise*.

Praise. Just what is praise? The Hebrew word is *hallel* which means “to make noise, specifically, to make noise that ascribes honor and glory to God.” Praise is something you can’t do with your mouth shut. To borrow from the title of a book a few years ago, *Praise: A Matter of Life and Breath*.²

So when you praise the Lord, you are using your mouth to bring attention to Him for who He is and what He has done. And again, the Lord desires and deserves more than the response of our mouths when He blesses us, but certainly nothing less.

You say, “What does this have to do with today’s Christmas message?” Everything! If the appropriate response to a blessing from God is praise, then you would expect that the response to the greatest blessing God ever sent to earth would be praise, right? And that’s exactly what happened. When God sent His only begotten Son into the

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¹ Series developed from a Wednesday evening Bible study done at WBC in December 2004.

² Ronald Allen, published 1980.

world, there were outbursts of spontaneous and joy-filled praise. Not by all, for sure. Not even the majority, for few recognized the gift. But for those who understood, well, you couldn't keep them quiet!

When the Gospel writer, Luke, tells the story of the birth of Jesus, he includes the response of four individuals and groups, four outbursts of praise. In order to learn how to respond rightly to Christmas, we're looking at these four songs in our two week mini-series from Luke 1-2, "*The Songs of Christmas*." Last time we looked at Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55. This week we'll consider three more songs.

Zechariah's Song—Luke 1:67-79

The Song of the Heavenly Host—Luke 2:13-14

Simeon's Song—Luke 2:28-32

I want you to see a word that pops up in each case. Speaking of Zechariah in Luke 1:64, "Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, **praising** God." Speaking of the heavenly host, Luke 2:13 says, "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, **praising** God." And speaking of a man named Simeon, we read in Luke 2:28 says, "Simeon took him in his arms and **praised** God, saying."

That's what should happen, not just for them, but for us, too. If we really grasp the magnitude of this heavenly gift, we will use our lips to make noise, to *praise* the Giver.

I want us to be a people who respond with praise this Christmas, and every day. That's what this message is all about. But praise isn't simply mindless and meaningless noise. There's a content to it. We make meaningful sounds when we praise. We call attention to the specifics of God's character and what He has done.

In order to learn better how to praise, let's look at these three songs. Due to time constraints, we're just going to survey these three songs. My prayer is that the Lord would use what we're about to see to help us praise Him, and to make our praise meaningful.

Zechariah's Song—Luke 1:67-79

Let's set the stage for this first song. What happened before Zechariah's outburst in praise? Luke tells us about...

⇒Mary's visit with Elizabeth and Mary's Song (39-56) – Apparently, Mary stayed with Elizabeth until her delivery.

⇒Elizabeth gives birth to a son (57-58) – You'll notice the neighbors shared her joy.

⇒The baby is named on day eight (59-63) – And note the part Zechariah had in this. When the angel first told Zechariah he was going to have a son, he wavered in unbelief, and became mute. But now he takes a tablet, and demonstrates his faith by writing, "His name is John (63)." Then immediately...

⇒Zechariah's mouth is opened (64-66). And what does he do with his mouth? He "began to speak, praising God," says verse 64. And what specifically did he say to and about God? Luke tells us in verse 67, "His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied." The prophecy is actually a poetic hymn or song of praise in verses 68-79.

As I mentioned last time, the text doesn't say that Zechariah *sang* these words, nor did Mary, nor did the others we'll consider. But what they each said is by form and structure, poetic. It's like a hymn. So in the least, they spoke this poetic response to the Lord, and perhaps sang it.

There are three movements to this song, identified by the change in pronouns: “He...His...” (68-75), “You...” (76), and “Him...” (77-79). As we’ll see, Zechariah praises God in this song for three accomplishments.

I. Zechariah praises God for what He has done (67-75).

Has done, as in *past* tense. Two things.

A. He has redeemed His people (68). “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.” What redemption does Zechariah have in mind here? Is he thinking about Israel’s past redemption (from Egypt, from Babylon, etc) or the one that is happening in the present that’s connected with the birth of his son? Or maybe it’s all inclusive? It’s hard to tell. But what’s clear is that God has a track record of redeeming, of rescuing His people. And for that He deserves their praise.

B. He has raised up a horn of salvation for His people (69-75). That’s verse 69, “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” The image of a *horn* portrays power and authority and even royalty. So the horn of salvation refers to a person who has the power to bring salvation.

Who is this person? I don’t think Zechariah is talking about his son, John, here. He’ll start talking about his son in verse 76, where he changes pronouns (“And you, my child, will be called a prophet”). His son is a prophet. His son is not the horn of salvation.

So who is this horn of salvation? It’s the person that prompted Mary’s song three months earlier, a song Zechariah undoubtedly heard. It’s the person whose presence caused his own son to leap in the womb of his wife, Elizabeth. It’s the Messiah.

We learn five things about the Messiah from Zechariah’s song.

1. *He is the predicted one (70).* Listen to verses 69-71, “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), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.” Notice that parenthesis, “as He said through his holy prophets.” In centuries past the Lord gave prophecies about the coming Messiah. Isaiah predicted His virgin birth (Isa 7:14). Micah predicted that He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Zechariah predicted that He would be crucified (Zech 12:10). The psalmist predicted He would rise from the dead (Ps 16:11). That’s who this horn, the Messiah, is. He’s the predicted one.

2. *He is the source of mercy (72).* Look at the beginning of verse 72, “...to show mercy to our fathers.” That’s why this horn has come to the world, as a demonstration of God’s amazing mercy, a theme that Mary marveled at in her song.

Mercy. God doesn’t treat us the way we deserve. Last week I told you about the illustration of mercy God sent into my life recently. A little stray dog showed up and ran into our garage. A dirty, smelly stray dog. We already have a dog. We don’t need to let that dog into our lives. He’s not my responsibility. But mercy says he is. And so we let him stay with us, and fed him, and bathed him, and started looking for a good home for him. This past Monday a woman came to our home to see the dog. She had told us, “My granddaughter’s little dog died and she’s heartbroken, and I’ve been praying that God would send another little dog our way for Christmas. I would love to have this dog.” And so the mercy continues!

That’s just a small reflection of how the Lord works. He sees the dirty, smelly sinner, and *could* say, “I don’t need that in my life. It’s not my responsibility for the mess he’s in.” But mercy says he is. The Lord sent the horn of salvation into the world *to show mercy to our fathers*, sings Zechariah.

3. *He is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (72b-73).* That's verses 72b-73, "and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham." Two thousand years before Zechariah's day, the Lord made a promise, a *covenant* with Abraham, in essence, to bless Abraham, and to bless the world through Abraham's descendants. That's who this child Mary is carrying is, the fulfillment of this Abrahamic covenant.

4. *He is the One who will rescue us (74).* Verse 74—"to rescue us from the hand of our enemies." This horn, this Messiah child, has come to rescue us, says Zechariah.

5. *He is the One who will enable us to serve (74b-75).* "...and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." You'll notice that God's purpose in saving is service. He rescues us so we can serve Him in holiness and righteousness.

So there's the first movement, we might say the first *verse*, of Zechariah's song. Zechariah begins by praising God for what He has done in redeeming and raising up a horn for His people.

II. Zechariah praises God for what his son will do (76-77).

The pronoun shifts to "you" in verse 76. "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..." Remember, verse 67 says that the Holy Spirit has filled Zechariah, and now He enables Zechariah to make two predictions about his son.

A. He will be called a prophet (76a). "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High." And of course, that's what they said about John the Baptist.

Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 11:7-9, "As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: 'What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.'"

Zechariah made a second prediction about his son...

B. He will prepare the way for the Lord (76b-77). "...for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins..."

And of course, that's what John did. He prepared the way for the Lord. How? By doing two things that his father predicted in this song.

1. *He will give them the knowledge of salvation.*

2. *He will tell them about God's forgiveness.*

And that's what John did. He tilled the soil about the subjects of salvation and forgiveness. "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" John would later say in John 1:29. I can't save your soul, but He can. I can't take care of your biggest problem, but He can. Which is why John would also say, "He must become greater; I must become less (John 3:30)."

Jesus Himself said of John in Matthew 11:10-11, "This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

That brings us to the third movement in Zechariah's song. After praising God for what He has done, and for what He will use his son to do...

III. Zechariah praises God for what the Messiah will do (78-79).

That's verses 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." With that outburst of praise Zechariah reveals three things about the One for which his son was preparing the world.

A. He is the Rising Sun who will come from heaven (78). That's another messianic title from the Old Testament. The rising sun. The sunrise (ESV, NASB). The dayspring (KJV). Numbers 24:17 says, "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." And Malachi 4:2, "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall."

And what will this Rising Sun do? Zechariah tells us...

B. He will shine on those in darkness (79). "...to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death..." It's a frightening thing to be in the dark, and not know how to get out. He will shine on those in darkness, on those living in the dark shadow of death. And...

C. He will bring peace (79b). "...to guide our feet into the path of peace." Shalom. That's where He will take those He rescues from darkness, to life as the Creator intended, to wholeness of life, to *shalom*.

That's what Messiah will do, says Zechariah in his song. And as history unfolded, He did. The Rising Sun was born. He shined upon those living in darkness, who in fact, rejected His light, and crucified Him. But through His crucifixion and subsequent resurrection, He brought *shalom* to the world, specifically to whoever would repent and receive Him as their Savior and Lord.

Have you? Have you received the Rising Sun and the shalom that He alone can give?

So ends Zechariah's song. Verse 80 concludes, "And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel."

But the praise wasn't over. We find the next song in 2:13-14. It's the song of the Heavenly Host.

You remember them, don't you? Every child who has ever participated in a Christmas program remembers the Heavenly Host, the children with the white robes and sparkling halos.

Luke tells us in 2:1, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree." Verse 4 says, "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem." Verse 5, "He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him, and was expecting a child."

The child. The one Zechariah just sang about. "And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in clothes and placed him in a manger (7)."

You know the story. And you know about the shepherds in verse 8, "out in the fields nearby." And the angel that appeared, and the glory of the Lord that shone around them (9). And the announcement in verse 11, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

Then came the next song. The Heavenly Host erupted in praise in verses 13-14, "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'"

The Song of the Heavenly Host—Luke 2:13-14

The song happened *suddenly*, says Luke, when a *great company of the heavenly host appeared*. How many makes up a great company? Hundreds? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands? Luke uses the Greek term *plethos*, so there was a *plethora* of heavenly host.

And what kind of beings are these that comprise the *Heavenly Host*? Verse 15 calls them “angels,” but apparently they’re a distinct group of angels from the one mentioned in verse 9, where we’re told specifically that the “heavenly host” appeared “with the angel.” We know from other texts that all angels are not the same. In terms of evil beings, Paul talks about “rulers” and “authorities” that are “in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12).” An angel is simply “a supernatural messenger.”

And so on the night of Jesus birth, not only the first angel, but this additional group of angels known as “the heavenly host” appeared to the shepherds. The Greek word for “host” is *stratia*, which can mean “army” (a *stratiotes* is a “soldier”) or “unit.” Here it refers to a special unit or rank of supernatural beings.

Luke says these innumerable heavenly creatures were “praising God” and “saying.” In essence, they called attention to two basic themes in their song...

I. They ascribed glory to God.

Verse 14—“Glory to God in the highest.” *Glory. Doxa.* Honor, glory, praise, greatness. The host ascribes all that to the One who deserves it all.

Glory to God. And they conclude this glory belongs to Him particularly as they ponder what is happening before their very eyes. God just humbled Himself and sent His own Son into the world to become a lowly human being.

Glory to God in the highest. In the highest heaven, says the NRSV. Again, the contrast is striking. What place does God hold? He’s exalted in the highest heaven. Where is His Son? Laying in a cattle trough.

Glory! Glory to God! Glory to God in the highest! But there’s another theme in the song of the host.

II. They announced that peace was available to men.

“And on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” The world is looking for peace, with bloodshed and violence rampant. I want you to notice two things about peace. The heavenly host makes it clear that...

A. This peace had come to earth. “*On earth* peace to men.” God has done something so that men at war with God, with each other, and with themselves, could have *peace*. He sent this peace to them on earth, and He sent it wrapped up in a person, the person we know as Jesus the Christ. And notice secondly...

B. This peace was linked to God’s grace. “Peace to men *on whom his favor rests*.” You don’t earn peace. It’s linked to the favor of Almighty God. That means you don’t merit it, or achieve it by your efforts. It’s a gift that must be received. Again, it’s wrapped up in a person you must receive. “For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph 2:8-9).”

With that, the powerful yet song ended. Verse 15 says the angels left the shepherds and went into heaven. The shepherds, of course, headed directly into Bethlehem, “to see this thing that has happened.” And they found Mary, Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger (16).

Eight days later, the baby was named “Jesus,” according to verse 21. And on that day Joseph and Mary circumcised the baby boy, and also went to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill their purification responsibilities according to God’s law.

It was there in the temple court that they met a very ordinary, and a very extraordinary man named Simeon, who provided Luke’s fourth Christmas song.

Simeon’s Song—Luke 2:28-32

Simeon was a righteous man who was waiting for Israel’s consolation to come (25). The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah (26). And so he watched and waited. Until the day he saw this young peasant couple walk into the temple courts carrying their newborn son.

According to verse 28, Simeon went up to the couple and took the baby in his arms and praised God. He, in essence, said three things.

I. He praised God for keeping His promise (29).

Notice verse 29, “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.” Lord, You made me a promise, and today You have fulfilled it. And because You have, I can now leave this world in peace. Remember the heavenly host’s announcement? “On earth *peace* to men on whom his favor rests.” You have shown me peace, and I praise You!

II. He announced the truth about the baby (30-32).

That’s verses 30-32, “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” We learn two important things about this baby from Simeon.

A. He is God’s salvation. “My eyes have seen *your salvation*.” It’s a salvation that You have prepared in the sight of all people. God didn’t do this work hidden in a corner. Read the Old Testament and you’ll see that for century after century He was working, preparing the gift of salvation for the world.

Friends, don’t miss the implications. What is our greatest need? It is for God’s salvation. We need to be saved from our sins, and that’s why God sent this little baby into the world, so He would grow up, living a perfect life, and then one day die and conquer death to provide salvation for every sinner who would repent and believe in Him.

We learn something else about this baby from Simeon. Not only is He God’s salvation, but secondly...

B. He is a light. “A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Don’t miss that? This little baby is a Jewish baby, but to whom did He come to give light? Simeon says...

1. *He is for the Gentiles.* And...

2. *He is for the Israelites.* “For revelation to the Gentiles *and* for glory to your people Israel.” That’s why we must not hoard this message we’re celebrating. It’s for the whole world, and it’s our mission to take the message of the Christ to the whole world.

Simeon’s song actually ends at this point, but he’s not done talking. As Joseph and Mary marvel at what Simeon just said about the baby, Simeon has something very person to say to the couple. A prophecy.

III. He gave a prophecy for Joseph and Mary (33-35).

Listen to verses 34-35, “Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: ‘This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.’”

Simeon tells the that this child *is destined*. He’s on earth for a divine purpose. What will He do? He will *cause the falling and rising of many in Israel*. There is no neutral ground with Jesus. He came to be a stumbling block for some, for most in fact. And for others He came to lift them up. He came to be spoken against, says Simeon, and to reveal the hearts of many.

Jesus came to reveal hearts, and a revealed, depraved heart not a pleasant sight. When He reveals your heart to you, with all the sinfulness and self-centeredness you’ve been trying to hide and justify, you either have to cry out to Him to change your heart, *or* get rid of Him. Those were the options in Simeon’s day, and those are the only two options in our day.

And Simeon concludes with a final prophetic word for Mary. “And a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” And it did. As only a mother can do, Mary felt the rejection of her beloved Son. When her other children refused to believe in Him, she felt it. When the local people in Nazareth tried to throw Him off a cliff, she felt it. When the religious authorities said He was a fraud, she felt it. When the Romans put nails through his hands and feet, she felt it. And when the soldier pierced His side, she felt it. Not in any redemptive sense, for He alone is the Redeemer. But the sword of grief pierced her side, too. Just like Simeon said.

Application: Some questions to ponder...

As we finish, let me give you some questions to think about and discuss with your family members and friends over lunch.

1. *What do we learn about praising God from Zechariah, the angels, and Simeon?* We learn that it’s the fitting and appropriate first response to a blessing from God, that when God gives a blessing, He deserves our praise for it. What else do we learn from these songs? Talk about it together.

2. *What can I do to make praising the Lord a greater part of my life?* Praise isn’t natural, not for busy and preoccupied people. We need to slow down and carve out time to engage in praising God with our lips. What specifically can we do to make it happen? Talk about it.

3. *What most needs to happen in my life so I can celebrate Christmas properly?* We’ve just seen four songs. They’re all different, because they’re coming from the lips of different creatures, three human beings and a host of angels. You are different from the person next to you. What most needs to happen in *your* life today so you can celebrate Christmas properly?

For some, it’s as simple as you need to stop resisting the Christ who came and receive Him as your Savior and Lord. For others, it’s time to get rid of some clutter, so the Savior you have professed has His rightful place in your life. For others, it’s the need to go deeper, to really get to know Him better, by reading and studying His Word every day, and by making His church priority. For others, it’s getting out and sharing Him with others who don’t know Him. That’s what will make the celebration of Christmas meaningful. Let’s be doers of His Word and not just hearers.