

Songs of Christmas

ADVENT READINGS FROM THE GOSPEL OF LUKE



The Gospel of Luke and the Songs of Christmas

Advent Devotional Readings

Advent (from the Latin *Adventus*, meaning coming or arrival) is part of the larger season in the Christian year, an aspect of the church's gathered worship leading up to the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas.

Although not a biblical mandate for the church, Advent has been and remains an important aspect for many churches for most of Christian history. In fact, according to the Christian year, Advent marks the beginning for the people of God in their annual calendar, not January 1. Our lives are not only lived between Christ's first and second comings, they are also marked, formed and shaped by His two comings.

It is a time to remember the birth of Christ (Matt. 1:18-25; Lk. 1:5-2:20; Gal. 4:4), the time at which the promises for the Messiah in the Old Testament were fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ (cf. Gen. 3:15; Isa. 7:14; 9:2-6; Mic. 5:2).

It is a time to ponder the person of Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:1-18; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 3:16).

It is a time to look ahead to the time when Christ will return in great power and glory (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Rom. 1:4) to judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Tim. 4:8; cf. 1 Thess. 4:15).

This Advent Devotional focuses on The Gospel of Luke and the Songs of Christmas. We will highlight four songs "sung" by four key people surrounding the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the God-man, the truth we celebrate at Christmas, yet experience every day throughout the year. These four songs will be the focus of five devotional readings, along with an introduction and a conclusion, making this a seven-part devotional.

1. Introduction: Luke and the Songs of Christmas
2. Week One: Mary's Song, Part 1: The *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55)
3. Week Two: Mary's Song, Part 2: The *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55)
4. Week Three: Zechariah's Song: *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68-79)
5. Week Four: The Angels' Song: *Gloria in Excelsis* (Luke 2:1-20, cf. v. 14)
6. Christmas Day: Simeon's Song: *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32)
7. Conclusion: A New Song: The Song of Eternity (Revelation 5)

Introduction: Luke and the Songs of Christmas

In this Advent Devotional, we focus on the Songs of Christmas as revealed by God and recorded by Luke in the first two chapters of his Gospel. In order to understand the context of these songs, it is important to set Luke's writing in its broader context, so that we can not only understand what Luke *meant*, but also what Luke's writing *means* for us today.

The biblical text must first be understood in its original context, because a text will not mean what it never meant. Additionally, once a text's original meaning is grasped, then it must also be asked what that text means for the people of God today in its application. A text merely understood without being applied comes short of God's intent for his written Word. Additionally, seeking to apply a text without understanding what the text meant will result in both misunderstanding and misapplication. Illustrations abound of both errors. The Word of God certainly is God's redemptive-historical unfolding of his providential plan, which means it is information (what it *meant*), but the Lord also gives it for the intent of knowing and loving him and others, what means one of its purposes is for transformation (what it *means*).

This is especially important to remember as we live in these days prior to Christmas. Many of us engage in this season, and the reading of this Advent Devotional, following the familiar Christmas story. The story has become familiar, but familiarity does not necessarily equate with faithful. We are often more influenced by legend, myth, movies and carols than we are by the real Christmas story. It is important for us to go back to the biblical text, God's written revelation of the historical account of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man. There are many ways to do that, and in this year's devotional we will do that through Luke's Gospel, specifically through God's revealed truth uttered by four individuals through song.

Before we look at the songs in subsequent weeks, it is important to step back to consider Luke's broader themes so that we rightly understand the way these infancy stories fit into Luke's larger whole, and what all of this says about Jesus.

Luke writes of the "things that have been accomplished among us," or "those matters that have been fulfilled" (1:1). Jesus did not come into a historical vacuum. He came into a historical context as part of a larger story planned from eternity past which was "the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4). Jesus' coming was in fulfillment of God's promises. The Old Testament consists of Jesus concealed, while the New Testament is Jesus Christ revealed; the Old Testament is the promise of Jesus, the New Testament is the fulfillment in Jesus. In fact, all the Scriptures are about Jesus (24:25-27), and he fulfilled the whole Old Testament (24:44-47). Luke emphasizes this truth through the four songs sung by four key persons – Mary, Zechariah, the Angels, and Simeon – in Luke 1 and 2, captured best by Mary: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." (Lk. 1:54-55; cf. Matt. 1:22-23; 2:5-6, 15, 17-18, 23).

These truths were "delivered" or "handed down" from those who "were eyewitnesses" (1:2; cf. 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3). These eyewitnesses, those who had been transformed by the person and work of Jesus Christ, were "ministers [servants] of the word" (1:2). These transformed eyewitnesses proclaimed the gospel, the very gospel by which they had been transformed and been made eyewitnesses. These servants of the word, seeking to be faithful to the truth of the story handed down through others, "followed all things closely," or "carefully investigated everything" in order to give "an orderly account" (1:3) of the story of Jesus to Theophilus. The reason is so "that you may have certainty [you may know the certainty] concerning the things you have been taught" (1:4).

What are some of those things they have been taught, those truths Luke highlights and emphasizes in his “orderly account”? First, Luke’s primary purpose in writing this Gospel is to confirm and strengthen the faith of the early Christians and to strengthen them as they live their lives as the people of God who worship the Lord Jesus Christ. This is vitally important for us today. There is significance in both the *meant* and *means* of this text of Scripture.

Second, for Luke, and all the New Testament writers, the faith once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3) focuses on the person and work of Jesus Christ. For Luke, his Gospel centers on Jesus and finds its unity in him. In other words, Luke’s Gospel is made “an orderly account” by finding its unity in Jesus, from the initial announcement in the infancy narrative and the songs surrounding the birth of Jesus (chapters 1 and 2), to his ascension into heaven (chapter 24), he is the center of it all.

Third, added to this unifying center in Jesus, Luke was also clear in Jesus’ coming and mission, which were to seek and to save the lost (19:10). This is evident throughout Luke’s Gospel, which he emphasizes in the birth narrative in the first two chapters. Grounded in the history of Israel, Jesus is referred to as the “Christ,” the “Messiah” which places Jesus in the royal Davidic line. This is clearly articulated in the birth narrative (1:32-33, 68-7, 2:8-14). Being in the Davidic line, he will also usher in salvation, also noted in the birth narrative (1:69, 71, 77; 2:30). But Jesus’s ministry is not limited to the Jews in that although he is the Savior who comes *from* the Jews, he is the Savior *for* the world (cf. Jn. 4:42; 1 Jn. 4:14), including outcasts and Gentiles (2:32), a truth stated by Simeon.

Fourth, the ministry of Jesus, the second person of the Godhead, is surrounded by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead. The Holy Spirit’s heightened ministry focusing on Jesus reflects the work of the Trinitarian God in the economy of salvation, and reflects the inauguration of the new eschatological age ushered in by Jesus (1:15, 35, 67; 2:25-27).

Finally, the birth narrative is bookended by Luke’s focus on the temple. The birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth begin in the temple (1:8ff). This section concludes with Jesus and his family in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. At the conclusion of the Feast, Jesus’ parents departed without him. Upon returning to Jerusalem to look for him, they found him “in the temple” (2:46). All for which the temple stood, revealed and represented, Jesus fulfilled (cf. Jn. 2:19-22).

Over the next four weeks we will study, mediate and ponder these Lucan songs. The first we will look at is Mary’s Song, otherwise known as the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55). Next we will hear the song of Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, also known as the *Benedictus*. As you will recall, Zechariah was stricken mute because he did not believe the angel Gabriel who said that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son. After John’s birth, Zechariah’s tongue was loosed and he immediately praised God (Luke 1:68-79). Then we will celebrate with the angels as they sang to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14), the *Gloria in Excelsis*. After this we will worship with Simeon as he sings of salvation, the appearance of Christ (Luke 2:29-32), known as the *Nunc Dimittis*. We will conclude the series in the New Year when we sing “A New Song: The Song of Eternity” from Revelation 5 (cf. Psalms 96, 98).

To participate in this Advent Devotional, here are a few recommendations for get the most out of your study and mediation.

1. Read Luke 1-2 in a single sitting.
2. Read these chapters a number of times, possibly even from different translations.
3. Take note of each of the songs, the persons who sing them, the part they play in this birth narrative and the truths/themes they reveal.
4. Place these chapters within the larger themes espoused by Luke in his Gospel.

With these biblical songs as your foundation, I encourage you in one additional way this season. For many of us, the traditional hymns and Christmas carols are a special part of the Christmas season. Over the years, many of these hymns and carols have been memorized, at least the first verse of the song.

1. What is it about music that makes it so appealing, so magnetic and memorable?
2. Is singing an enjoyment to you or a burden? Why?
3. As you look at the songs of Scripture, what is their content, about what are they singing?
4. Why does singing play such an instrumental role in our worship of God?
5. What is it about the hymns, carols and choruses of Christmas that are so important, theologically, and significant, spiritually?
6. What are your favorite Christmas hymns and carols and why?
7. Why do Christians love, cherish and memorize those hymns and choruses most focused on Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, and why is singing so important in our worship of the Trinitarian God such that we will engage in it on into eternity?

Week One: Mary's Song: The *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55; cf. 1:26-45, 56), Part 1

At this time of the year, we focus on the conception and birth of a firstborn – two of them: Zechariah and Elizabeth's boy, John, later known as the Baptist, and Joseph and Mary's son, Jesus, the Son of the Most High, the Son of God. In today's devotional, we study and ponder the miraculous conception of Jesus and Mary's response in song to this wonderful act of God's grace. Our devotional will be in two parts: The Historical Context and The Theological and Doxological Response.

The Historical Context

Luke informs the reader this occurred “in the sixth month” when “the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed [pledged to be married] to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David” (1:26-27). Gabriel brings a message from God to Mary. Not only was Mary a virgin who was engaged, she also, importantly, had found favor with God (emphasis mine): “Greetings, O *favored one*, the Lord is with you” (1:28); “you have found *favor* with God” (1:30). It was because the Lord was with her that she was favored. God's favor is not something earned or deserved. It is grounded in his grace and mercy. Mary manifests this truth. In the midst of being troubled by this visit from Gabriel (1:29; cf. 1:12), he comforts her with the words “do not be afraid” (1:30; cf. 1:13). Those with whom God dwells, need not fear. Through God's presence and favor, it was revealed to Mary she would “conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus” and importantly, “you shall call his name Jesus” (1:31).

Mary is informed that Jesus “will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end” (1:32). In other words, Jesus is the promised Messiah. He is the fulfillment of the prophecies given years before by the prophets, words contained in the Old Testament. Jesus would be the fulfillment of all their hopes and dreams. More importantly, Jesus is the fulfillment God's promises to David of having a king on the throne, a kingdom and kingship that will never end (1:32b-33). God's promise *had not* failed. God's promises *will not* fail. The promised one is great and is called Jesus (1:31), Son of the Most High, (1:32), Holy (1:35), Son of God (1:35) and King (1:33).

Though Mary faced an impossible situation, humanly speaking, “how will this be, since I am a virgin?” (1:34), God was the guarantor of his promise, “for nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37). God's work would be accomplished by the Holy Spirit (1:15, 35, 41). In fact, God had already performed another impossible conception six months earlier in the lives of Mary's relatives, Elizabeth and Zechariah, who were old and barren (1:7, 18, 36). Mary heard clearly what Gabriel had said about bearing a son, but she also realized the impossibility of this occurring. If Elizabeth's problem was old age, Mary's was that she was a virgin. But to highlight the human impossibility of fulfilling God's promise and to emphasize God's grace, he fulfills his promise through the miraculous conception of Jesus in Mary's womb. (This is not the *immaculate conception*, which claims Mary was born without sin and remained sinless through her life, and it was for this reason she was prepared to become the mother of Jesus.) How could this happen? Because nothing will be impossible with God (1:37)!

Do you remember when God gave the promise to Abram and Sarai (later to become Abraham and Sarah) that they would have a child who would be blessed and bring a blessing and all the nations would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:1-3; cf. Gen. 17:15-19; 18:9-15; 21:1-7)? They, too, faced an impossible situation – old age. Yet with Sarah at 89 and Abraham at 99, an angel appeared and told them they would conceive and bear a son at the ages of 90 and 100. They, too, doubted, but the angel said, “Nothing is impossible with God” (Gen. 18:14), the same words spoken to Mary. Isaac was the child of the *promise*. Jesus is the child of the *Promise*.

Mary is a model of humble submission to be used for God's honor and glory in the extension of his kingdom, and in the fulfillment of his plan. After hearing this news Mary replies, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (1:38). We often look at this through sentimental eyes, but what Mary learned about this miraculous conception, a divine conception, would raise questions about her chastity. This would bring pain, rejection, being ostracized, and shunned. She would be accused of infidelity. During Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees would recount Jesus' birth and claim this very origin of him. They clearly identified Abraham as their father, over against Jesus, who had been "born of sexual immorality" (Jn. 8:41). It is difficult to know how much of this Mary would have understood at the moment, but, based on Jesus' engagement with the Pharisees, we know she experienced it. Her response reveals her humility, which reflects/manifests one who has experienced God's favor, his grace.

Mary and Elizabeth both experienced God's gracious providential plan in their miraculous conceptions. Upon Mary's news of her miraculous conception, she visits Elizabeth, her relative, who is in her sixth month of pregnancy (1:36), in "the hill country, to a town of Judah" (1:39). When Mary greets Elizabeth, "the baby leaped in her womb" (1:41). This is an initial fulfillment of the promise given to Zechariah about their baby boy, John, who would "be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (1:15). Additionally, Elizabeth "was filled with the Holy Spirit" (1:41). Furthermore, Mary's experience was that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you" (1:35). God the Holy Spirit brought this about. Elizabeth pronounces a blessing on Mary. This blessing is, first and foremost, because of "the fruit of your womb" (1:42): Mary is pregnant with Jesus. The second blessing is pronounced because Mary "believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (1:45). In other words, she believed God would fulfill the promises he spoke to her (1:45), and she humbly trusted the promises of God, evident in her response of "let it be to me according to your word" (1:38). This is sharply contrasted with Zechariah who "did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time" (1:20).

One final and important truth to notice. When John encounters Jesus *in utero* through the voice of Mary, his mother, he "leaped in her [Elizabeth, his mother's] womb" (1:41). Through this, we learn that Jesus is superior to John. Even in the womb, John begins his ministry of pointing to Jesus (1:16-17), of being the forerunner to Jesus, and he does so by worshipping Jesus.

Mary joins the baby John in worship as she praises God through song: "My soul magnifies [glorifies] the Lord" (1:46).

In this first part of Mary's Song, ponder the following questions as you prepare your mind and heart to worship the Lord Jesus Christ this Christmas season:

1. When the Lord is with us, there is nothing to fear. What are your fears? On what issues do you need to hear the words from the Lord, "Do not be afraid?"
2. When it comes to the promises of God, do you know what they are? Do you doubt they will be fulfilled? Even more so, what of God's promises and purposes do you attempt to do in your own strength? Remember, of God's promises and purposes "nothing will be impossible with God."
3. Mary is a model of humble submission. She recognizes she is a servant/slave of the Lord, and she humbly receives the unfolding of God's sovereign and providential plan for her. This is a mark of one who the Lord is with, one on whom his favor rests. Do you have this mark of humility, of God's work, in your life?
4. In addition to humility, Mary also manifests a life of belief and trust in God and his promises. God's favor was on Mary, his grace was upon her, which resulted in a life of humility and belief. The presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life enables one to believe and trust, not only for justification but also for the whole Christian life. Those who have been made righteous by faith live by faith. This is the foundation of blessing. God blesses, to be a blessing, which in turn, is the

means by which one is blessed. What can you learn from Mary? Where do you need to grow in humility? How are you doing when it comes to living a life by faith?

5. The ultimate focus is on Jesus and worship of him. Are you living a life of worship? What are the hindrances? This is how one truly celebrates the incarnation of Jesus, the God-man. And this is not a one-time remembrance on Christmas Day, it is a life.

Week Two: Mary's Song: The *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55; cf. 1:26-45, 56), Part 2

Mary's song consists of thanks, for who God is, and praise, worship for what he has done. What God does is personal with Mary, but its implications are absolute and universal.

Mary miraculously bears Jesus, the Christ, the God-man, which means she is *theotokos*, God-bearer. In that sense she plays a unique role in redemptive history. But Mary is also a person like us in need of salvation, God extends his grace to her, that is, she is favored, and in response she models a humble, gracious trust in "God my [and our] Savior" (1:47).

With this historical backdrop and with Mary's humble heart overflowing with praise and thanks to God, she responds in worship (for a comparison, cf. Hannah's song, 1 Sam. 2:1-10).

The Theological and Doxological Response

Mary glorifies the Lord and rejoices in God her Savior (1:46b-47). Mary begins her song with worship: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." "My soul" is that personal praise that comes from deep within a person. It is singing from the heart, the depth of one's being. Mary lifts up the Lord God as she praises his providential work on her behalf (1:38). The reference to "the Lord" addresses God as the sovereign Master and Ruler of the world. This address reveals Mary's approach to God is that of a humble servant.

Mary repeats her praise as her "spirit rejoices in God my Savior." She praises God for who he is and for what he has done to save in/through Christ, her son. Many have misunderstood Mary. The Roman Catholic Church overestimates her and claim she is more than what she actually is. The RCC fosters a Marian piety that can only be called idolatrous.

This leads to the other side of the problem. Protestants, on the other hand, underestimate Mary, in that she does not, for many, even serve as a model and example of a humble servant, dependent on God for his grace and mercy for her salvation. God is, indeed, her Savior.

Mary is truly like us, though she played a unique role in redemptive history. She is a sinner used by God to bear the God-man, Jesus Christ, and who was in need of the saving work of Jesus Christ as all other humanity. Mary acknowledges this by recognizing her humble state, the impossible task before her, which required a sovereign and miraculous work of God, which is also reflective of salvation and her receiving the expression of "favored one" (1:28), and her worshipful and dependent response to God as "my Savior" (1:47). Later Jesus is identified as the Savior, the God-man who came to "save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21): "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11).

When we restrict ourselves to what is clearly taught in the Scriptures, we find in Mary a beautiful woman of character, uniquely blessed of God. She is a model of faith in God, one who believed what the Lord said (1:45), and a model for the church. Mary stands in the Gospels as a mark or sign of the true humanity of Jesus Christ and a model of the Christian devoted to God her Savior (1:47).

The basis of Mary's praise is God and his grace (1:48-50). In his grace, he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. Mary knew her own need for a Savior. She also knew that she, humanly speaking was an insignificant person. Additionally, Mary was aware she had nothing to offer spiritually to God. And yet, God in his grace bestowed on her the great privilege of giving birth to the Savior, both her own personal Savior and the Savior of the world. Because of this blessing from God, all nations will call

Mary blessed (1:48; cf. 1:42). Why? Not because she was perfect like some teach, but rather she was a model of humility, obedience, belief, submission to God. She was truly “poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3).

In our spiritual birth, we must realize we had nothing to offer spiritually speaking, and God, too, has been mindful of the humble state of his servants in his grace.

In this humble state, Mary worships the Mighty One because he has done great things for her. The reference to the Mighty One in the Old Testament alludes to God who fights on behalf of his people to deliver them. God is a warrior who delivers his people through victorious power (Zeph. 3:17). Here God exercised his power to create the child. What God promised and what seemed impossible was possible for God, the Mighty One, for he exercises his power to deliver his people through the birth of a Son, Jesus Christ.

Three of God’s attributes are highlighted: Mighty, as noted above, Holy and Mercy. Mary’s reason for praising God focuses on his being, for he is worthy of our worship for who he is. Because of who God is he acts a certain way. Specifically, Mary focuses on God’s attributes of power, exalted holiness and mercy, descriptions of God’s attributes which are designed to highlight his specific attributes most prominently displayed in this miraculous work in salvation history. All of this places our focus on God, not Mary.

God’s mercy is given to all those who fear him (1:50-53). God’s “mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation” (1:50) is included in both key truths in Mary’s song since it serves as a transitional verse. It draws to a conclusion Mary’s statement about herself, and it serves as an introduction to what is stated about the widespread impact of the birth of Jesus Christ. Additionally, in the last section, God was praised for his attributes. They reflect who he is, and based on who he is he responds in certain ways. So, the transition is from focusing on God’s nature to his works, and he is praised for both.

Being a God-fearer is a requirement to receive God’s mercy. And being a God-fearer is reflective of having received God’s mercy. These twin truths are not in competition with one another but are, rather, reflective of the outworking of the gospel in a person’s life. There is no place for pride.

God the Mighty One has performed mighty deeds leading to salvation and judgment. This is accomplished through his arm – a common metaphor/reference (*an anthropomorphism* – a figure of speech that describes God as having a human form or characteristic) in the Old Testament to the power of God, especially regarding his deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt in the Exodus. Thus, God’s arm becomes an image of the second exodus, deliverance of his people from spiritual death and bondage to sin.

His coming means two things to two groups of people – one to the arrogant and proud, and another to the humble. He has scattered the proud, brought down rulers, and sent the rich away empty. He has lifted up the humble and filled the hungry with good things. The coming of the king to establish his kingdom sets things right according to his norms and standards, not ours or any human king.

The ground of God’s acting for his people is the covenant, which finds its fulfillment in the arrival of the Messiah (1:54-55). Reflective of the king’s kingdom, there is a reversal of what is expected of an earthly king and kingdom. In contrast to the proud and arrogant, the poor and marginalized receive God’s blessings (Lk. 4:18; 6:20-22; 7:22; 14:13, 21).

In God’s mercy, his servant Israel is remembered. God remembers his covenantal promises spoken to Abraham and the fathers. This is now the redemptive historical fulfillment of God’s promises. Jesus’ birth is the redemptive historical fulfillment of God’s promises (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).

Not only does Israel receive God's mercy and blessing, not only are they the recipients of God's covenantal promises, so are "his offspring forever." There is a universality to this fulfillment. All those who are Abraham's offspring will be remembered and extended mercy by God. All those who have faith in Christ "are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:29).

Ponder the following questions as you prepare your mind and heart to worship the Lord Jesus Christ this Christmas season through Mary's song:

1. What do we learn from the life of Mary? How and why does your soul magnify the Lord and your spirit rejoice in God our Savior?
2. As we observe in Mary, how do we live a life of humility, obedience, belief, and submission to God? How do we reflect being "poor in spirit"?
3. Of God's promises, what are you being asked to believe and in what ways are you being asked to trust him at this season of the year and at this time in your life?
4. What is the significance of God's attributes emphasized by Mary – Mighty, Holy and Mercy - as understood and applied in your own life?
5. God is faithful to his name and his promises. Like Mary, worship him!

Week Three: Zechariah's Song: *Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-79; cf. 1:5-25, 57-66, 80)

In Mary's song, we learned that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary (1:26-27) with the message that she would bear a Son whom she was to call Jesus (1:31). In her excitement, Mary went to visit her relative Elizabeth (1:36) to tell her the Good News of her pregnancy with the holy Jesus (1:39-45). Mary's response, the only appropriate response, was to sing praises to God for "the Mighty One has done great things for me" (1:49).

We now move back to an earlier time in Luke's Gospel, to the historical record of the birth of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Although Zechariah's song of thanks and praise occurs after Mary's song, Luke's account actually begins with them. Mary sings her song of praise and worship to God (1:46-55) after she is informed of her miraculous conception (1:26-38), and her visit with Elizabeth and Zechariah (1:39-45). Zechariah's song, which is a prophecy, is spoken after John is born and Zechariah's tongue was loosed, his punishment of being unable to speak for disbelieving the promise of God that he and Elizabeth would bear a son was removed (1:20, 63-64).

The Historical Context

Zechariah (which means "Yahweh has remembered again") and Elizabeth (which means "my God is the one by whom I swear" or "my God is fortune") were, like Mary, "righteous before God." They also walked "blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (1:6). Zechariah was a priest, not a high priest, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah, while Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron, the first priest (Ex. 28:1-5). Although they wanted children, they were unable because Elizabeth was barren, and to add to the impossibility of bearing children, both were "advanced in years" (1:6).

All priests served in the temple for two one-week periods each year. In the midst of Zechariah's annual ministry, he was chosen by lot to engage in the greatest ministry of his career, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense (1:9). This special ministry was performed only once in a lifetime. When Zechariah was ministering in the temple burning incense to the Lord, Gabriel appeared to him and brought the message a message from God (1:19). The angel informed him that he and Elizabeth would bear a son, and they were to call him John (1:13). John's ministry was to be that of a forerunner of the Messiah, to prepare the way for the Lord, "to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (1:17).

Due to the apparent impossible circumstances facing this barren and old couple, Zechariah doubted God and his promise (1:18). God disciplined him by striking him mute until the birth of John (1:20). He exited the temple unable to speak. It is important to note the similarities and differences between Zechariah's and Mary's questions. They both ask questions and wonder how the promise given to them by the angel will be fulfilled, since both are humanly impossible. Mary's question was answered and she, in turn, was blessed because she believed what the Lord had said to her would be accomplished. The Lord not only *had to* fulfill his promise, since it was impossible, he *would* fulfill his promise. In contrast, Zechariah doubted so he asked for a sign of confirmation to validate this promise. God did grant a sign, but it was in the form of a rebuke due to his lack of faith, his disbelief. He was not able to speak. He lived for the full length of the pregnancy, nine months, with the promise and the sign, without any full realization of the fulfillment of the promise. Elizabeth knew this was only a work of the grace of God, and uttered "the Lord has done this for me" (1:25).

After nine months, Elizabeth gave birth to a son, and everyone shared their joy. Eight days later they brought the baby boy to be circumcised and to name him. Others wanted to name him after his father, but Elizabeth insisted that he be called John (1:59-60). When they asked Zechariah, he asked for a writing tablet and wrote "His name is John" (1:63).

Immediately he was able to speak and he praised God (1:63). In response he sang a beautiful Spirit-filled song of praise, the *Benedictus*.

In sum, the song praises God for His redemption, salvation, mercy, covenant, all brought about through the coming Davidic ruler, Jesus (1:68-75). It also focuses on the ministry of John (later known as the Baptist). He is the prophet of the Most High who will prepare the way (1:76), and to bring the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins (1:77), which comes through Jesus (1:78-79), the light of the world (Jn. 8:12; cf. Jn. 3:19-21).

The Theological and Doxological Response

God is praised for delivering his people (1:68-75).

God has come and redeemed his people (1:68a). God's coming can refer to a gracious act or to judgment, often both. In this instance, the reference is to God's gracious coming for deliverance of his people, but there is also an implicit statement about his judgement because he frees his people from the *enemies* who will be judged. This coming is linked with the Messiah Jesus' coming. The Messiah's coming means redemption for God's people. It means deliverance from enemies, so that God's people are free to serve the Deliverer. Redemption is release to a Redeemer, and worship of him.

Redemption has Old Testament roots. The divine act of deliverance from Egypt became the type for understanding God's future acts of redemption and salvation for his people. Thus, with the coming of God in the Messiah Jesus, true liberation and redemption occur in both the physical and spiritual realms. Salvation in Christ becomes the anti-type, the fulfillment of the Egyptian experience and rather than Moses leading to the promised land, and who died before entering into it, Jesus brings us safely to the promised land.

God raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David, about which the prophets had spoken, and we were saved from our enemies (1:69-71). In the Old Testament, the term "raised" is used of significant figures – prophet (Dt. 18:15, 180, judge (Jd. 3:9, 15), priest (1 Sam. 2:35), and king (2 Sam. 23:1). In this Messiah, the one who represents God's coming, all of these significant titles and functions converge into one person.

The Messiah is a person of power and strength. The term horn pictures the ox with horns that defeat enemies with the powerful thrust of its protected head (Dt. 33:17). It is also used of God himself (2 Sam. 22:3; Ps. 18:2). This Messiah who will be raised up is from the line and lineage of David and he fulfills the promise spoken by him (2 Sam. 7:14), and confirmed by many other prophets. There is divine unity in the biblical account: "as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" (1:70). The message of the prophets is unified, though spoken by many, because the message of God's promise remains the same throughout all ages, and its unity is guaranteed because he is the divine author. This Messiah, who is strong and fulfilled prophecy, saved and saves us from our enemies.

Salvation produces or displays God's mercy, shown to our fathers, and faithfulness, he has remembered his covenant (1:72-73). God's mercy and his covenant are brought together. Mercy is punishment withheld that is deserved, and grace, the other side of this twin truth, is a gift freely given undeserved. In God's mercy, he acts. He sends the Messiah to save his people, our fathers in the faith. In doing this, he is faithful to the covenant, the original covenant given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), who is our father in the faith (Gal. 3:29). For God "to remember," it does not mean simply to bring to mind. Rather, it refers to God bringing his promise to completion, to fulfillment. In relation to the covenant, notice, importantly, the reference both to Abraham (1:73) and David (1:69). It is important to acknowledge God sends a

Messiah not primarily for us, but for him. He sends a Messiah as a result of faithfulness to his covenant, and secondarily for us.

The reason God did this, the purpose of God's mercy, the forgiveness of sins, to remember his covenant, to rescue from enemies, was the following: *The purpose of salvation ("we were rescued") is that we might serve the Lord (worship) without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days (1:74-75)*. God delivers his people from the hands of their enemies, he saves us, and in saving his people he fulfills the covenant, and he does all of this for his name's sake. In response, when God delivers, redeems and saves for his sake, he does this so his people can serve him fearlessly, without fear. This expression is emphatic. If the enemy keeps people in fear of death and judgement and condemnation, God delivers from fear. This expression "without fear" is emphatic. Freed from these enemies and fears (Heb. 2:14-18), we are saved to serve, to worship, an engagement with God in all of life (cf. Rom. 12:1-2).

God is also praised for what he will do through John and Jesus (1:76-79).

John will be called the prophet of the Most High (1:76-77). Zechariah transitions to address John and Jesus. Most High refers to God. John is God's prophet, whereas Jesus is God's Son. John, though older, is subordinate to Jesus. John's role is twofold.

First, he will prepare the way of the Lord. John is the fulfillment of promises given earlier by Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1). There is continuity between John's and Jesus' ministry, but when Jesus comes, John's particular ministry is over. Jesus holds center stage in redemptive history. All that precedes points toward his coming, and all subsequent to this, points back to his coming. He is the center point of all of redemptive history. The Lord is *κύριος (Kurios)*. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), this term is used of God, translating the *tetragrammaton*, Yahweh. But in the coming of the Lord, God, the Lord is Jesus. This passage teaches about the deity of Christ.

John will, second, give the people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is connected with salvation. Since sin is defiance and rebellion against God, that sin must be forgiven or there will be no salvation. John will proclaim this salvation and forgiveness of sins, but it is Jesus who alone can and will provide it. This is why when John first encountered Jesus while *in utero*, he leaped (1:41). This also explains why when John saw Jesus later in life he exclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29, 36)! And understanding his role in redemptive history as the one who points to Jesus and once he arrives, his role is over and he rightly acknowledges, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30).

Jesus is sent as a result of God's mercy (1:78-79). It is because of God's tender mercy he acts for his people. The "sunrise" will visit us from "on high," from heaven. God initiatives. Here it states he will "visit us," a repetition from what is stated earlier about God's having "visited and redeemed his people" (1:68). The sunrise dispels the darkness (cf. Isa. 60:1-3), and spiritually it gives the light of life and removes death and the shadow of death (Jn. 1:4-5; 8:12). Jesus comes to shine on those living in darkness. The result of his coming is that he guides us into peace.

Here are some questions as we ponder over and pray through the truths expressed in Zechariah's song:

1. What were the apparent impossibilities that Zechariah and Elizabeth faced?
2. Even though something may be impossible, humanly speaking, it does not necessarily make that thing impossible. Why? What was Elizabeth's response? What was Mary told (1:37)?
3. Why was Zechariah disciplined, what form did this discipline take, and for how long? In what ways and in what areas are you doubting God?

4. God's blessings naturally lead to praise. Do you regularly praise God for His goodness and His gifts? Why or why not?
5. What are the themes of Zechariah's song (1:68-79)? What is said about God, about John, about Jesus? What are the significant truths in this story that are need to hear and apply in your life, especially during this season?

Week Four: The Angels' Song: *Gloria in Excelsis* (Luke 2:13-14; cf. 2:1-12, 15-20)

Mary became pregnant with Jesus (1:31), the God-man, through the power of the Most High, the miraculous conception (1:35). After receiving this news and acknowledging her trust and dependency on the Lord, she visited Elizabeth, her relative (1:39-40), who was in her sixth month of pregnancy (1:36). After arriving and greeting one another, Elizabeth notes John leaped for joy in her womb at the voice of Mary, in reality in the presence of the Messiah, Jesus (1:41-45). Mary responded in song, known as the *Magnificat* (1:46-55).

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months (1:56) at which time Elizabeth and Zechariah gave birth to John (1:57-66). In spite of requests from their family, Elizabeth insisted on naming him John. When they asked Zechariah, he agreed in writing that his name would be John (1:59-63). Immediately after writing John, "his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. . . . Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied (1:64, 67). Zechariah's blessing of God, his prophecy is his song, the *Benedictus* (1:68-79).

Mary sang her song after the announcement of her miraculous conception (1:46-55). Zechariah sang his song after the birth of John, their son (1:68-79). Six months later it was time for Mary to give birth.

The Historical Context

Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the whole Roman Empire (2:1). This decree calls for the registration of provincial citizens for the purpose of assessing taxes. All those who lived under Rome's authority were required to register. The decree was issued by the Roman leader, Octavian, Caesar Augustus, the great nephew of Julius Caesar. He came to power as the Roman dictator in 27 BC, and reigned until his death in 14 AD.

Luke portrays Augustus as the unknowing agent of God, whose decree leads to the fulfillment of the promise made by God long ago, that a special ruler would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:1-2). This occurred while Quirinius was governor of Syria (2:2). Luke places Jesus' birth in history, in the context of world history. It is not just part of history, it is about to make history because all people be affected. Even though the exact date of the census is not known, the fact of the birth is certain!

This meant Joseph had to return to his ancestral home to register, and Mary, his betrothed, accompanied him (2:3-5). They traveled to Bethlehem, the town of David, because Joseph was from the house and line of David. Luke makes the connection to Old Testament promises, which fulfill prophecy. On the human level, all of this seemed to be senseless and useless, nothing but a bother to a man with a pregnant woman who was not even yet his wife. And yet, they were all engaged in the process of fulfilling prophecy that had been spoken by God 500-750 years earlier.

At the right time, in the fullness of time, while in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to Jesus and he was wrapped in cloths and placed in a manger because there was no room in all of Bethlehem (2:6-7). Once again – this is not a mistake. It took place at just the right time: "When the time had fully come" (Gal. 4:4). God is behind the timing of events, and the time is always perfect. These humble beginnings are also part of God's plan for it becomes the sign by which the shepherds will recognize the Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

After Jesus' birth, an angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds to inform them of this good news (2:8-9). Not only did Jesus have a humble beginning, but his birth was announced first to humble and lowly shepherds (cf. 1:38, 52; 4:16-18), whose testimony was oftentimes not accepted in the court of law as credible. This means that if this was a fabrication, the birth would have been announced to credible

witnesses. Instead, in the providence of God, and because it is a valid historical account (Lk. 1:3), it is recorded as historical fact: the angel appeared to the shepherds. The context in which the angel appeared was that “the glory of the Lord shone around them” (2:9), which illumined the darkness of the night sky, a reference to the Shekinah glory (Ex. 16:10).

The Theological and Doxological Response

The announcement of Christ’s birth was given by an angel: “And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger’” (2:10-12). The shepherds were frightened. The angel calms their fears. The angel’s appearance is not for judgment, but for bringing good news. He communicates the wonderful event of Jesus’ (“Christ the Lord”) birth, which is good news and results in great joy for all people (2:10). The sign is that they will find a baby wrapped in cloths lying in a manger (2:11).

The angel’s message contains six major truths regarding the birth of Jesus. First, the announcement is “good news.” The term for good news is gospel. The gospel is something God has done in sending his Son to be the Savior. Second, this birth which is good news causes “great joy.” The greatest joy in the world is that the Lord Jesus Christ became a man, the God-man. God delights to send his Son to be the Savior of the world” (Jn. 4:42; 1 Jn. 4:14). This also informs us of what ought to bring us true joy. Third, this fact has a bearing on “all the people.” This good news of the gospel is not only for the shepherds, but this is good news of great joy for all people. The gospel, the coming of Jesus is for all people, the hope and peace for the world. Fourth, the reason the message is good news and is cause for great joy is because “this day” the birth of “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” has occurred. Fifth, the birth of Christ the Lord is in the line of David, a Davidic king (2 Sam. 7:8-16; 1 Chron. 17:11-14), and the fulfillment of a prophecy, as he will be born “in the city of David.” Finally, the truth of all the angel communicated with them will be authenticated with a sign – a babe lying in a manger.

After the angel pronounced the birth of “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:11), joining the angel was a “multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying” (2:13) (known as Gloria in Excelsis): ““Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased” (2:14)!

You will notice there are three-word pairs: glory-peace, heaven (highest)-earth; God-men. The KJV translates this verse as follows: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” Note the three-part division: (1) *Glory* to God in the highest, (2) and on earth *peace*, (3) *good will* toward men. Rather, it seems that the two-part division as reflected in the ESV (and NASB, NIV, NLT) is more accurate: (1) Glory to God in the highest, (2) and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.”

This verse, the angels’ song, did not address the “good will” to be manifested on earth by human beings toward one another (KJV). Although that is not bad or wrong, the text does not teach that it is a horizontal reference. It does not refer to the “good will” as the disposition required of human beings to be recipients of the peace, “peace among men of good will,” as if we earn God’s peace by being good natured, neither does it refer to the “good will” or esteem that some people might enjoy among others. Rather, good will was to be understood of God’s “good pleasure” given to those whom God has favored with his grace (cf. Mary in 1:28, 30). This becomes a common phrase, albeit a technical phrase in first century Judaism, for God’s people, his elect, those on whom God has poured out his favor. God is the one who offers and grants peace, and those who are the recipients receive God’s peace through his grace.

In sum, the angels’ message consists of two major truths. First, God is glorified for who he is and for what he has done. The heavens rejoice and praise God for the outworking of God’s salvation, the

unfolding of redemptive history culminating in the birth (and life, death, ascension and return) of Jesus, the Savior, Christ the Lord. Second, peace is extended to those upon whom God's favor, his grace, rests. The people to whom God draws near through Jesus will experience the life and peace God bestows, which has vertical implications such that we are now at peace with God (Rom. 5:1), and also horizontal implications, in that we are now at peace with one another (Eph. 2:14-17). This is good news of great joy for all people.

Worship was the response to this announcement of good news. After the angels departed, the shepherds went to Bethlehem and found Mary, Joseph and the baby (2:16), just as they had been told (2:20). They responded obediently to the message given by God through the angels. Immediately they began to tell others about this good news. They spread the word (proclaimed) about the arrival of the Savior who is Christ the Lord. People were amazed at what they heard (2:17-18). Mary treasured these things and pondered them in her heart. She worshipped God privately and in the quiet of her heart (2:19; cf. Ps. 95:6-7). The shepherds returned to their fields glorifying and praised God. They worshipped corporately, publicly and boldly (2:20; cf. Ps. 95:1-2).

Here are some questions as we ponder over and pray through the truths expressed in the angels' song:

1. What is the historical context in which this all occurs? What lessons can we learn about our own historical context and God's sovereign control over it?
2. To whom did the angel (singular) appear and what is the significance?
3. Why were the shepherds afraid? What calmed their fears? What fears are you experiencing this season?
4. What was the message given to the shepherds by the angel? What is the significance? What promises of God do you need to be reminded of this season?
5. When the angels (plural) appeared they sang a song. What did they sing? What do you learn about our condition and need, and God's offer of grace, mercy and peace, and our message and hope for all people?
6. What do you notice about all those associated with the birth of Jesus? How will the remembrance of the birth of Jesus Christ affect you this season, and will your response be that of worship?

May we receive the good news with great joy and worship, and may we share that good news with all people! O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

Christmas Day: Simeon's Song: *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:25-32; cf. 2:21-24, 33-40)

Eight days after Jesus was born, he was circumcised (2:21), according to the law (Gen. 17:11-12), and given the name Jesus (2:21), just as the angel Gabriel had said (1:31). Jesus was circumcised to identify with Israel; He was/is our representative, and is the one who is preeminently a son, the chosen One (Lk. 9:35). [Jesus undergoes baptism for the same reason].

Joseph and Mary were pious, law-abiding Jews (2:22-24, 39). After the time of Mary's purification (40 days after birth, Lev. 12:2-4, 6), they traveled from Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem to present their firstborn, Jesus, to the Lord (2:22; cf. Ex. 13:2; Num. 18:15-16) and His service (1 Sam. 1-2), and to offer a sacrifice in accordance with the Law of the Lord (2:24; cf. Lev. 12:8). The Law stated that one was to offer a lamb as a burnt offering and a turtledove as a sin offering. If one was poor and could not afford a lamb, then either two turtledoves or two pigeons would be sacrificed. Joseph and Mary's offering was that of the poor which identified with those Christ came to save (1:52; 4:18-19; 6:20).

The Historical Context

The focus of this fourth and final song is Simeon, a righteous and devout man, who was waiting for the consolation of Israel. When he saw the baby Jesus, his wait was over. He took him in his arms and praised God. Simeon's praise and prophecy are known as the *Nunc Dimittis*.

In obedience to the law, Joseph and Mary had their baby boy circumcised on the eighth day, and named him Jesus. They do what all Jewish parents would have done who had given birth to a Jewish son. In the Old Testament, the law stated that any son of Abraham should be circumcised on the eighth day (Gen. 17:11-12; Lk. 1:59). In the baby's circumcision he was identifying with his people as their representative leader or as a representative human. But the main emphasis of this text of Scripture is on the naming of this baby boy – Jesus – not his circumcision. The name means save or salvation, which aligns closely with how he was referred to in 2:11: "Savior, Christ the Lord." Jesus is his name, Christ is his title, and Savior is his purpose.

After the prescribed time of purification, according to the law, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem to present their firstborn to the Lord and to dedicate him to the Lord's service (Lk. 2:22-23). The law stated that the mother of a male child was unclean for 7 days and then had to be confined for 33 days before traveling to the temple to offer a sacrifice. The presentation of the firstborn to the Lord (Ex. 13:2, 12, 15) and the dedication of the firstborn to the Lord's service (1 Sam. 1-2) were both commanded in Scripture.

The sacrifice they offered for their purification was that of the poor. One of the birds was for the burnt offering and the other for the sin offering (2:24). In Leviticus 12:2-4, 6 a lamb and turtle dove are to be offered unless you cannot afford it. Then it was to be either two turtle doves or two pigeons. The offerings emphasize different aspects in the process of communion with God. The sin offering emphasizes punishment or retribution for sin borne by the animal instead of the worshipper. The burnt offering emphasizes complete, whole consecration to God, which includes utter destruction of sin and uncleanness – the animal sacrifice is completely consumed. Even here we look forward to Christ as the final offering to which all the animal sacrifices find their fulfillment. As Mary and Joseph make the offering of the poor, they identify with those their son, Jesus, came to save (1:52; 4:18-19; 6:20).

While Joseph and Mary were in the temple with Jesus, they were met by an old man named Simeon who said great things about Jesus (2:25-35). We will say more about Simeon below, as we focus on his "song." There was also an old prophetess named Anna who continually worshipped in the temple. She too gave thanks to God for Jesus and tied Jesus in with the redemption of Jerusalem (2:36-38). Anna was

married but lost her husband at a young age and never remarried. She was a pious woman. Although she did not live on the temple grounds, there would have been a place for her to stay, and she was there daily, fasting and praying. We are told that she worshipped night and day. Anna's activity pictures a person whose life is totally focused, consumed on serving God (as the burnt offering, totally consecrated, consumed).

Anna, too, encountered Jesus while in the temple. She gave thanks to God for this child-Redeemer, and also spoke to the crowd about Israel's redemption through this child – he would redeem those enslaved to sin (2:38). The focus is on the Redeemer and the new age ushered in with his birth. Anna reveals that before the Messiah came, one could be decent and live a good life. But it is an unfulfilled life, which reflects a life absent true, real, lasting and abiding life. That is why John's words are so apt: "He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him" (1 Jn. 4:9).

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the law, they returned home to Nazareth (2:39).

The infancy events began in the temple with Zechariah (1:5ff) and ended in the temple with Jesus (2:41-51). After all the events of Jesus birth, "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (2:19). After an early fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy regarding the blessing and pain brought about in Jesus, while he tarried in the temple that caused his parents concern when they could not find him, Mary "his mother treasured up all these things in her heart" (2:51). Jesus' public life begins in the temple and it ends by him replacing the temple or becoming the true ultimate temple that the earthly temple foreshadowed. Humankind, both male (Simeon) and female (Anna), praise God for Jesus.

A Word About Simeon

Simeon was in Jerusalem waiting for God's appointed consolation (2:25). Israel's consolation referred to the hope of deliverance for the people. In the Old Testament various agents brought God's consolation, but a primary agent who was anticipated was the Servant of God. This desire for consolation or deliverance characterizes the believer or God-fearer in Luke (6:23-24; 17:22-37; 21:25-36)

He was clearly a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led man. What was revealed about Simeon was his spiritual condition, not his vocation or his age. He is righteous and devout, an exemplary saint. The text states "the Holy Spirit was upon him" (2:25). Verses 25-27 reveal his character is a result of the Holy Spirit, his life was guided by the Holy Spirit. He had received a special work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ (2:26). He was anxiously waiting. Simeon received a promise that God would not let him die without seeing the Messiah, the Lord's Christ. The Lord's Christ, the Messiah in verse 26 is linked with the consolation of Israel in verse 25. It was for this that he waited. But he trusted that God's word was sure and it would be fulfilled so he did not wait hopelessly. Rather he waited hopefully.

Moved by the Holy Spirit, he went into the temple courts and there he met face to face Jesus, the consolation of Israel (2:27). Once again we see Simeon being guided and led by the Holy Spirit. By the Holy Spirit's prompting, Simeon went to the temple and while there his wait was terminated as he met Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus. Can you imagine his elation and excitement – his wait was now over, but more importantly God's promise, which always comes true, had been fulfilled.

Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God (2:28). I can imagine that Simeon was overcome with gratitude to the point of tears. As he grabbed the baby Jesus, we can see tears streaming down his face, his knees growing weak, almost to the point of needing to sit down. The praise then completes the

excitement, the joy he feels over the fulfillment of God's promise. This leads him to sing a song of praise to God for the fulfillment of the prophecy, and to utter a prophecy about the future ministry of Jesus

The Theological and Doxological Response

Now that he had seen Him, his life could end in peace (2:29), because he had seen the Lord's salvation (2:30), which is to be for all people (2:31). Simeon also prophesied that Jesus would cause the rising and falling of man in Israel and Mary's soul would be pierced (2:33-35). In the midst of this worship Simeon "sings," the fourth and final songs Luke records of the infancy narratives.

The song emphasizes that Jesus' birth is the fulfillment of God's promises to redeem his people, and through the song he utters a prophecy of the future ministry of Jesus.

God is praised for the fulfillment of his promise (2:29-32). God is addressed as the sovereign Lord who is faithful to his promises (2:29). God is the Lord, Master over everything. He determines the beginning and the end. What he has ordained will occur. What he has spoken, will come to pass. Here Simeon praises the sovereign Lord who was – and remains – faithful to his promises, and in his kind mercy he allowed Simeon to live to see and experience the consolation of Israel, in the Lord's Christ, Jesus.

Simeon, God's servant, can now depart in peace (2:29). In the Greek text, "Now" stands at the beginning of this sentence and is there for emphasis. In the coming of Jesus, "now is the time – the time of the consolation of Israel. (It brings to mind Paul's urgent and timely exhortation, where the same word is used: "Behold, *now* is the favorable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2, emphasis mine).) Simeon is God's servant. He refers to himself as "your servant," much like Mary referred to herself (1:38), and is a fitting contrast to the description of God as the sovereign one. Simeon is like the watcher who can now leave his assigned post because the anticipated event has come. Now the watcher is ready to die and he can depart in peace because he has seen and held the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6; Jn. 16:33), sent from the God of Peace (Phil. 4:9; Rom. 16:20) and experienced the peace of God (Phil. 4:7) because he was at peace with God (Rom. 5:1).

The reason Simeon can now depart is because he has seen the Lord's salvation, a light, prepared in the sight of all people: revelation to the Gentiles and glory to Israel (2:30-32). In the coming of Jesus, salvation come. This is why it was essential for Simeon to experience it. Then and only then can he depart, not under a burden, but in peace. Although Simeon was a righteous and devout man, he was not prepared to depart in peace until he met Christ. Only then he was ready. This salvation was not outside of history, given to a few special people. It was done within of history in the sight of all people. God intends to extend to all the salvation that comes in Jesus. The light is Jesus himself and he comes to shine in the darkness (1:79). The effect of this light will be revelation will to the Gentiles – the Word, and glory to Israel, the Shekinah glory. God is acting for his people. This explains how he will be the consolation or deliverer.

Jesus' future ministry is described (2:34-35): "And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.'

Jesus' ministry will cause pain for his mother, Mary. The reference is to the pain that Jesus' ministry causes Mary, as Jesus creates his own family of disciples and his own priorities, and his suffering because of it. This is seen early in Jesus' ministry. After a trip to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Passover, they returned home, and assumed the boy Jesus was with them. After traveling a day, they realized he was not with them. They returned to Jerusalem looking for him, and continued to search for him three days before they found him – in the temple. Upon being questioned by Mary, he replied, "Why were you

looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house" (2:49). Although this was reflective of Simeon's prophecy, his parents did not understand what he meant by this (2:50).

Jesus will cause the rising and falling of many people. People will either be drawn to Jesus or stumble over him. Those who reject him are headed for a fall, while those who receive him in faith are headed for a rising, a blessing. The sign will be that of resistance, contention and rejection of Jesus and his ministry. Simeon addresses how people will respond to Jesus. He will be resisted and rejected. For those who resist, Jesus will not be a hope of promise fulfilled, but a figure who is to be opposed. Although Jesus is God's hope, not all will respond positively to him. The reality of this experience will "pierce through your own "[Mary's] soul."

The purpose of Jesus' ministry will reveal where hearts really are before God. Jesus will expose those who do not believe. How humans respond to God's promise is made evident by how they respond to Jesus, as that will reveal their thoughts (cf. Heb. 4:12). And that response results in eternal spiritual death or eternal blessedness with the Lord.

Mary pondered and treasured all of these truths in her heart. Simeon states that "thoughts from many hearts may be revealed" in responses to Jesus. With this in mind, ponder these questions, treasure these truths in your hearts, and worship him.

1. How did Joseph and Mary respond to the Law?
2. What kind of a man was Simeon? How is he described?
3. Why does Simeon praise God? What is the significance of what Simeon says about the Lord's Christ?
4. What kind of a woman was Anna? How is she described? What does she say about Jesus?
5. If you were to die today, could you sing with Simeon, "now dismiss your servant in peace?" Have you encountered the Prince of Peace, so you can experience the peace of God, the One who brings salvation?

May God's favor be upon you and may you receive His peace during this Christmas season!

Conclusion: A New Song: The Song of Eternity (Revelation 5)

Introduction

The text of Scripture serves as a fitting conclusion to our Advent series on The Songs of Christmas: Mary's Song (*Magnificat*), Zechariah's Song (*Benedictus*), the Angels' Song (*Gloria in Excelsis*), and Simeon's Song (*Nunc Dimittis*). Each of them praised God for His goodness, His faithfulness to His covenant, His grace, His salvation, Jesus Christ.

As the songs recorded in Luke's infancy narrative in chapters 1 and 2 focus on the birth of Jesus, this song focuses on the death and resurrection and exalted status of Jesus, and he is praised for redemption purchased. This was the purpose of Jesus' birth!

With the New Year, many commit themselves to do "new" things by making a list of resolutions. The Bible is also filled with new things. One of them is "a new song," the focus of our final advent devotional. Not only is Revelation 4-5 a fitting conclusion to this series, it is an appropriate way to begin the New Year, learning to sing a new song which focuses on redemption. As Isaac Watts wrote and we sing,

Come, ye that love the Lord,
And let your joys be known;
Join in a song with sweet accord,
While ye surround the throne.

Let those refuse to sing,
Who never knew our God;
But children of the heavenly King,
May speak their joys abroad.

Overview

John has just completed writing letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2-3). Chapters 4 and 5 constitute one vision, worship on the throne room of heaven. Chapter 4 sets the stage for the drama of chapter 5. Chapter 4 describes John's initial vision of what he sees in heaven's throne room, while chapter 5 describes the unfolding drama of what is happening in the throne room.

John first of all sees a door standing open in heaven, and there was a voice that beckoned him to "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place" (4:1). While John was in the Spirit, he saw before him a throne with an occupant (4:2). The occupant was God Himself and the throne signified His supreme, absolute authority over everything - the transcendence, majesty, and sovereignty of Almighty God (4:1-6a). He was surrounded by twenty-four thrones upon which twenty-four elders were seated. This refers to (The elders are an exalted angelic order who serve and adore God as the heavenly counterpart to the 24 priestly and 24 Levitical orders [cf. 1 Chron. 24:4; 25:9-13].)

In the center around the throne were four living creatures, an exalted order of angelic beings, who lead the heavenly hosts in worship and adoration of God (4:6b-8a). The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders are both an exalted order of angelic beings, while the four living creatures lead the praise and worship, the twenty-four elders follow their lead: praise the "Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (4:8b). Praise and worship of God is unceasing, and is based on his attributes: holiness, omnipotence, and eternal existence (4:8b-9). The living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to God, who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever. Day and night, they never stop saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

To a persecuted church and an exiled John, these truths would have been a great source of encouragement and strength. As the four living creatures praise and worship God, it leads the 24 elders to fall down before God and worship him also (4:10). The twenty-four elders praise God directly for his creation (4:10-11). They say, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

John sees a scroll in the hand of the One who is seated on the throne, but no one was found worthy to open it or to look inside it. Overwhelmed with grief, John wept (5:1-4). The scroll contained writing on both sides (5:1), which speaks of fullness, completeness, plenitude. This scroll contains the fullness of all of God’s purposes in judgment and blessing. It contains the full account of what God in his sovereign will has determined as the destiny of the world, which rests in God’s hands. No one was found worthy to open the scroll. John wept, not because of ignorance, he did not know what God’s plans were, but rather because of an apparent frustration of God’s purposes. One of the elders comforted John. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David has triumphed. He is worthy to open the scroll (5:5). So God’s plans are not thwarted, but actually fulfilled by the Lion, the Root. When John looked at the One described as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, he actually saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne (5:6-7). The slain Lamb is the One who took the scroll from the One who sits on the throne, God the Father.

Worship was not confined only to God as the Creator, but also included the Lamb who alone was considered worthy to open the scroll (5:5). No one other than the Lamb was worthy to disclose the plan of Almighty God. As John looked at the victorious, triumphant Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David (5:5), to surprise he saw a Lamb standing in the center of the throne, which looked as though it had been slain (5:6). Ultimate victory comes through sacrifice, the death of a Lamb who lives again. There is no greater display of universal adoration and worship as when the Lamb took the scroll from the One sitting on the throne (5:7).

Various countries have images that reflect might, strength and power. One would think the proper symbol for Christianity would be the Lion, certainly not a helpless, slain lamb. But the Lamb is the ultimate source of strength, power and hope, for the slain Lamb still lives. He is the ultimate outworking of God’s plan – overcoming death and sin through death itself and resurrection. God’s plan required the death of the God-man. It is appropriate that the One who is the outworking of God’s plan should disclose God’s plan (cf. Jn. 1:18; Heb. 1:2).

The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb (5:8) and they sang a new song (cf. Ps. 96, 98) praising the Lamb for His redemption (5:9-10). Then innumerable angels joined in the heavenly chorus and sang of the worthiness of the Lamb (5:12). Finally, the climax is reached when all creation sings to the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb (5:13). This magnificent scene of worship is brought to a close by the four living creatures, who began the singing (4:8), as they cry, “‘Amen,’ and the elders fell down and worshiped (5:14).” The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb and sang a new song, a song focused on the Lamb’s redemption. God was praised and worshipped in 4:11 for creation. Here the Lamb is praised and worshipped for redemption.

The Redemption Song: The Person, Ground, Extent, and Purpose of Redemption

The Person of Redemption, The Redeemer – The Lamb is the only one worthy to take and open the scroll: “And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals (Rev. 5:9). They sang a “new song.” This was not the song of creation, but the new song of redemption. The idea of a new song grows out of the Psalms. In 98:1 we read (sing!), “Sing to the Lord a new song,

for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.” In other words, every new act of mercy calls forth a new song of gratitude and praise. The song to the Lamb is a new song because the covenant established through his death is a new covenant.

It is interesting to note that the statement, “You are worthy” is the cry with which the Emperor’s arrival was celebrated. Any new Caesar or King would be addressed, “You are worthy.” But it is extremely important for us to remember that ultimately no king, Caesar, emperor, president or any other created being is worthy to disclose the plan of God and to fulfill it – only the Lamb of God. He alone is the one who is worthy to take the scroll from the hand of God and disclose and enact its contents. The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders were joined by innumerable angels in singing about the worthiness of the Lamb. They sang, “Worthy is the lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise” (5:12). The first four are attributes of the Lamb while the last three are related to our response to him. As one says of praise, it is “the inevitable climax of it all . . . the one gift that we who have nothing to give to him who possesses all.”

The Ground of Redemption – The Lamb is worthy because of his death: “because you were slain” (Rev. 5:9). Jesus, the Lamb of God, is worthy simply because of who he is. His worthiness is grounded in his essential being. He is, in fact, very God. Yet his worthiness is not solely attributed to who he is, but also what he did. In this text, the Lamb is worthy precisely because he was slain. His worthiness is attributed to his great act of redemption. As the great church Father Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, “Without ceasing to be what he always was [God], he became what he was not [man].” And I like to add, so that we might become what we could not (children of God).

As was stated earlier, God’s plan is worked out through the sacrifice of a Lamb, the God-man. As Jesus said during his earthly ministry, the Son of Man “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45). Paul reminds believers they were “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:20). In this verse, “with (at the cost of) your blood” denotes the pure price paid for the purchasing, the redemption. We were redeemed at the cost of Christ’s death. He alone is worthy, and his death is the ground of redemption.

The Extent of Redemption – Through the death of the Lamb, people from every tribe, language, people, and nation were ransomed/purchased: “you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev. 5:9). Redemption is not universal in the sense that everyone will be redeemed. But it is universal in the sense that it will include people from all kinds and classes of people. Those who are redeemed, those who comprise the church, recognize no national, political, cultural, or racial boundaries. There is no elitism base on anything, only humility because the Lambs is the only One worthy.

This gives meaning to the texts that speak of God’s desire for all to be saved such as 1 Timothy 2:4 or 2 Peter 3:9. Some suggest that God’s plan is fulfilled and all will ultimately be saved. Others, suggest God’s plan is thwarted due to the free will of man. This text teaches that God’s plan is fulfilled in the redemption, the salvation of all people, not without exception (universalism), but rather all without distinction. This means there will be people from every tribe, language, people and nation who are redeemed.

The Purpose of Redemption – The Lamb purchased these people for God. They were made to be a kingdom and priests to serve God: “you ransomed people for God . . . you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God” (Rev. 5:9, 10). As a kingdom they shall reign and as priests they serve. The purpose of redemption is to serve God, it is for God, not for us. This is the consistent witness of Scripture – saved to serve. Worship is an engagement with God in all of life. All we do, whatever it is, is for him, to serve him. This is the purpose of redemption.

Conclusion

As we thank God for creation (4:11) and for the Lamb's redemption (5:9), we join with all creation in their song of praise, thanksgiving and worship of God and the Lamb: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!" (Revelation 5:13). Added to this throng of worshippers, the four living creatures said "Amen" and the elders fell down and worshipped (5:14).

Ponder and Pray

Ponder and pray, prepare and pray, and pray as we begin a new year. Here are a few questions to aid you.

1. Why would this scene have been so important to a group of Christians who were facing severe persecution? What is the significance for us today as we face turmoil and tribulation?
2. How is the One who is sitting on the throne described? How is the Lamb described?
3. What are the reasons that God and the Lamb are praised? (Look at what is said in the songs.)
4. Notice that the four living creatures sang a new song. Every new act of God's mercy calls forth new songs. What are the new songs you should be singing? What are the new songs that you will sing this New Year?
5. The heavenly scene depicted in Rev. 4-5 is what heaven is all about: worship of God and the Lamb. If you were to go to be "with the Lord" today, would you be ready? Would the unceasing worship be reflective of your present life, or would it be foreign? Would it be boring or would it be your very life?
6. Make worship an uninterrupted reality in your life this year!