

Zechariah's Song

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[0 : 00] Now imagine you are asked to watch a short video in which six people, three dressed in white shirts, three dressed in black, are asked to pass basketballs around.

And your job is to keep track of the number of passes made by those in white shirts. But 30 seconds in, someone in a gorilla suit walks in the midst of all those people passing basketballs, faces the camera, thumbs his chest, and then he walks off.

Question, would you see the gorilla? I think almost every one of us would say, oh of course, it's a gorilla. How could anyone miss something so obvious?

About years ago, this experiment was actually performed at Harvard University. And how many people do you think didn't see the gorilla? Anyone?

The answer is 50%. That's half of us. They were so fixated on counting those passes that they missed the gorilla showing up.

[1 : 14] And it turns out that's human nature. The researchers who conducted this experiment decided to do a sequel. This time the viewers were expecting the gorilla to show up.

And it did. But they were so fixated on looking for the gorilla this time, that they didn't see the curtain in the background suddenly changing colour. You see?

That's us. That's human nature. We get fixated on certain things. We get sucked into sad routines. As we live day to day, we get fixated on the routines of trying to put food on the table, of getting to school and tuition on time, of counting the days until the next holiday, of dutifully coming to church every Sunday.

So we can miss it when something big happens. We aren't even aware that we don't know we don't know. And sometimes, we can miss God himself showing up.

Sometimes, we're so fixed in our routines, so rigid in our mindsets, so entrenched in our current habits and lifestyles, that you don't realise that God is actually speaking to you.

[2 : 37] You don't realise that God is wanting to do something uncomfortable in your lives. You don't realise he wants to break you, so that he can remould you. You don't see that he's right there, patiently waiting for you to notice him.

Because you're doing life's equivalent of making basketball passes. It's not that you don't believe in God. It's just that you don't have any expectation at all he will actually show up in your life.

And if you become aware he's actually present and pushing you out of your comfort zone, you have no idea what to do. You're scared, you push back.

And you won't be the first person to do so. Many centuries ago, they lived an ordinary couple, people like you and me, called Elizabeth and Zechariah.

Zechariah was a priest who had served many, many years in the Jewish temple. And they both were getting on in years and were childless. Now, Zechariah was a good and godly man.

[3 : 54] In Luke 1, verse 6, Luke tells us that he was a man of genuine faithfulness, someone trying to walk in God's ways. There's no reason to doubt his sincerity.

But somewhere along the line, he had begun to lose sight of the bigness of God, the nearness of God, the faithfulness of God. His faith was real, but subdued.

He had begun to believe God wouldn't show up, especially when it mattered. And so he simply went about his routines, dutifully performing the sacrifices, running scripture classes, managing the tithes.

He had become much more intimate with the routines than with God. And I suspect Zechariah is far from alone.

Most of us here this morning would consider ourselves Christians, and many of us really do have some faith of some sort. We have our Christian routines.

[5 : 03] We say grace at every meal, show up at church every Sunday, hear about Jesus' birth every Christmas. But God isn't big to us any longer. He's not near to us.

He's not personal to us. He's not really involved in our lives. Zechariah had read in the Old Testament that God would one day show up to come to his people and to rescue his people definitively.

He believed that in his head. But did he really expect anything to happen? Do you expect God to show up? Did he long for it? And you believe.

But do you expect God to actually do something in your life? Do you expect God to show up? Do you expect him to stretch and change you? Do you long for it?

I know I don't always. I believe, and yet I don't always live like I do. And I think it's the same for you too.

[6 : 12] It's simply all too possible to become fixated on our routines and miss God's action in this world. But here's the thing.

God does show up in Zechariah's life. For years, Zechariah had been praying dutifully that God's will be done. And one day, an angel of the Lord appears to him in the temple and tells him his prayer has been heard.

They will have a baby and he will prepare the way for the Lord. That's Luke 1, verse 11 to 17. And Zechariah is so astonished, he doesn't know what to do.

Quite simply, when God shows up, he can't believe it. He can't believe that the Lord is actually going to come and that his own son is going to play a big part in that.

He's scared. He is out of his comfort zone. And so he pushes back. No way, Lord, he says. And God says, that's not right.

[7 : 23] So he's struck dumb. God decrees that he can't speak until his son is actually born. In other words, he's prevented from one of his main jobs as a priest, to teach.

He can't speak God's good news until God's good news is actually real to him. And so we're left waiting for the next moment when God shows up again.

And that's where we pick up the story this morning. And as we pick up the story, the question in our minds should be, when God shows up, what should we do?

When God shows up, what should we do? You see, as we join the story in verse 57, when God shows up again. Verse 57, when it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. More literally, in the original Greek, the sentence says, when the time was fulfilled for Elizabeth to have her baby. Well, as we said last week, God keeps promises.

[8 : 35] They have that baby. But notice that Luke doesn't actually make a big deal about the birth. For us, naturally, all our focus will be on the baby.

But Luke is more interested in how people react to the birth. Notice in verse 58, he tells us not about the baby, but the neighbours and relatives.

In fact, they get a lot of the airtime. We'll hear about them all throughout. But here in verse 58, they're simply happy. They share in the joy of the parents as you would expect.

God has shown up by giving this couple an unexpected gift of a baby, so they rejoice. But then, after the initial joy over the birth has settled, things begin to get a little touchy.

According to biblical law, Jewish children are to be circumcised on the eighth day. And in this baby's case, he's going to be officially named as well.

[9 : 42] And the whole village seems to want to get in on the action. Verse 59. Just imagine the scene. The auntie says, Eh, I think Zechariah is a nice name, leh.

He looks like a Zechariah to me. Plus, we need to pass down the family name. call him Zechariah. Another uncle says, in our Jewish culture, we always call the son after the grandfather or the father. So, Zechariah Jr., it must be. Clearly, the extended family all have an opinion. And they all agree that customs and traditions must be followed.

The art culture says it's the usual practice for children to be named after grandpa or papa. No ifs or buts. So, the parents, they assume, will follow along and name this boy Zechariah.

You see, this is how they're thinking. This is the normal way of doing things, they say. This is our tradition. Things must be done the proper way.

[10 : 57] And so, they fall in line with how things ought to be in their minds. I mean, that's our default setting, isn't it?

This is how we have always done things, so this is how we must continue to do things. Because it's comfortable, it's soothing, it grants us control.

But it leaves little room for God's purposes to be carried forward. And Elizabeth recognizes this, verse 60.

But his mother spoke up and said, no, he is to be called John. Elizabeth is clear. She knows God's instructions.

The baby is to be called John. How she comes to know this is not clear. Probably Zachariah, although he can't speak, was still able to communicate to her that's what the angel said.

[11 : 57] And she knows. God's word trumps even cherished traditions. God's word must triumph over even community expectations.

God's word must be the final authority to which she submits. in order for God's plans to move forward. The angel said, you are to call him John.

And Elizabeth now says, he is to be called John. Sorry family, sorry village, but God's word comes first.

Not surprisingly, the community doesn't react positively. With a touch of cynicism, verse 61, they say to her, there is no one among your relatives who has that name.

They're still fixated on their customs and traditions. God has shown up in their midst and they can't even see it. And since Elizabeth offers the name because Zechariah can't speak, perhaps they think that Elizabeth is acting without Zechariah's consent.

[13 : 12] Maybe they are thinking, she's just somebody who doesn't know anything or has little respect for our way of doing things. So they turn now to Zechariah, verse 62.

They made signs to his father to find out what he would like to name the child. But his response is even more emphatic, verse 63. He asked for a writing tablet and to everyone's astonishment, he wrote, his name is John.

Zechariah isn't going to make the same mistake twice. God has shown up and he's not going to do it wrong this time. I confirm it, he declares, his name is John.

And with that, it's all settled. You see, when God shows up, what should we do?

Answer, trust God's word completely. Get in line with what he says, even when it's out of step with public opinion.

[14 : 20] That's what Elizabeth and Zechariah have been showing us. After all, his word has been shown to be trustworthy. The baby is born. God has shown up.

His word is true. We may not be able to trust everything we read on the internet. We can't trust everything that is said by the politicians.

Statistics can be manipulated. Photos can be fake. Magazines can be airbrushed. But we can trust God's word completely.

Zechariah, after all, would have been familiar with Psalm 119. And now he can agree with the psalmist that God's word is true.

It's fixed in the heavens. It can't be corrupted. And it brings goodness to all who listen. And so that's what we hang to above all.

[15 : 21] Traditions and customs and community norms all have their place. They can be good things. One generation's council should not be thrown away by the next generation.

But one generation's council can also sometimes devolve into legalism. Because things are done in a certain way and work for a certain time, it's assumed that it will work for all times and then it becomes a fixed rule and tradition.

But what we need to do instead, as Christians did during the time of the Reformation, is to be constantly reforming according to God's word.

If that requires changing our default settings, then we must do it. We need to first and foremost heed God's word rather than the surrounding community around us.

And when we get in line with God's word, we get in line with God's plans. We endure, we don't miss him when he shows up. Again, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't seek wise counsel from others, but it does mean that we know who has priority.

[16 : 43] But that's not all. But the good news is, when God shows up, what else can we do? We gratefully accept his mercy.

You see, Zechariah has something that many of us wish for, a vision from God. But he blew it. God showed up through his angel, and what did he do?

He questioned God. So there was discipline. There are consequences. His mouth is closed. But clearly in those months of silence, when he wasn't able to teach, Zechariah was listening to God again.

Later on, when we listen to his actual song, we'll notice that it's full of scripture references. He's clearly been meditating on the Old Testament.

He has been shaken out of his comfort zone, out of his routines, and he was diligently seeking God again. And God is gracious.

[17 : 51] His discipline is not forever. Zechariah writes, in line with God's will, his name is John. And straight away, verse 64, his mouth was opened, and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.

The one who disbelieves now believes. There's been a great reversal. There's a second chance. There is mercy. And actually, that's reflected in the naming of this baby.

John means something like God's gracious and merciful gift, or God shows favor. That's who God is.

We should never, of course, take for granted God's holiness, even for a second. Remember, he struck Zechariah dumb. But that too is a kind of holy mercy, for it wakes Zechariah up to the reality that God is showing up in his life, and drives him back to God's transforming word.

God is both holy and merciful. But this is the person whose word we trust. So no wonder Zechariah praises God the moment his tongue is loosened.

[19 : 19] For when God shows up, what else can we do? We invite others into God's community. Look at verse 65. All throughout the hill country, sorry, all the neighbours were filled with awe.

And throughout the hill country of Judea, people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, what then is this child going to be?

for the Lord's hand was with him. As Zechariah speaks, resuming his priestly duty to teach God's word, the people listening realise that John is no mere baby.

They hear he's a sign that a divine purpose and power is at work, that he has a special destiny. And in verse 66, the NIV says that everyone who heard this word wondered about it.

But more literally, it says that those who heard it stored it up in their hearts, as the ESV puts it. They laid it up in their hearts.

[20 : 29] They pondered upon it. When we listen to God's word taught, you see, and get in line with him, we begin to get impacted at the heart level.

the Lord is at work. Brothers and sisters, this is my constant prayer for you, that we all would listen to God's word.

Let that impact our hearts and get in line with him. That's why I labour Sunday after Sunday to ensure that you hear directly from the Bible, so that our hearts may be transformed.

the question is, are you yourself willing to get on board? But what exactly did Zachariah say?

Well, finally, we come to Zachariah's song, as it's popularly known. For nine months, he's kept it in, but it now all comes pouring out. What exactly is he singing about?

[21 : 36] Well, we think surely he would be singing about John. After all, isn't that how God has shown up in their lives? He's given them a baby in their old age. That's the natural subject of praise.

But notice, John doesn't headline the song. It's not what the Holy Spirit directs him to say. The song's actually not about John at all.

And even when John gets a mention at the end, he's only the supporting actor. So what does he sing about? Well, listen.

Verse 68. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. Zachariah's singing about how God has shown up.

To Zachariah, God has not just shown up in his personal life by bringing about a baby. instead, he's showing up for his people, ready to carry out his rescue plan for the entire world.

[22 : 46] You see, if John is born, and if John's destiny is to point people to Jesus, that means Jesus is coming.

That's the logic. God is about to show up personally in Jesus to redeem them. In verse 78, Zachariah paints a beautiful picture of what that means.

It's like a wonderful sunrise, he says, coming down from heaven, bringing light into darkness, making his face shine upon us.

That's why he's praising God. God is showing up in Jesus to draw people back to himself. That's what Christmas is all about. You see, I wonder what's been going through your mind when I've been talking about God showing up.

Perhaps you were thinking, oh yeah, yeah, yeah, God showed up when I got that bonus from the company I don't even like working for. Oh yeah, yeah, God showed up when he gave me that brand new relationship.

[23 : 58] God showed up because my exam results were good. And yes, that can be true. We can thank God for those things. We're not saying that we shouldn't.

But, could we become so fixated on those things that we forget the biggest way God has shown up is by personally coming himself through Jesus?

could we forget that God has come to save us from our biggest problem? And that problem isn't our lack of finances or our lack of friendships, but our lack of giving glory to God.

That's what sin is. And it's our biggest problem. It's why Israel, Zechariah's people, have suffered so much.

In their history, they've enjoyed earthly blessings, but they failed to worship God again and again. And as a result, they forfeited their relationship with God.

[25 : 07] They could no longer enjoy the presence and the friendship of the most kind, most loving person in the universe. And Israel is simply reflecting what we are all like.

God is not to have been to have the biggest problem. And he rejoices that after 400 years of silence, God has now shown up to provide the solution.

Verse 69, He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. Zechariah isn't saying that God has decided to make Christmas instruments.

No, in the Old Testament, the horn was a symbol of strength. It was the weapon of the ox. And so it became a symbol for those who fight, whether against God or for God.

So for instance, in Psalm 75, verse 9 to 10, it should be on the screen, we hear the psalmist using the imagery of horns in this way. As for me, I will declare this forever, I will sing praise to the God of Jacob, who says, I will cut off the horns of all the wicked, but the horns of the righteous will be lifted up.

[26 : 32] And so the psalmist is associating the horn with mighty warriors. And now Zechariah says, there's a mighty warrior coming, God himself.

Psalm 18, verse 2 makes that clear. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer. My God is my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

And Zechariah is now saying, look, this mighty warrior, God himself, has come in person as King David's greatest son. to us.

And my boy, John, is going to point to this guy. And he will be mighty to save. Now, at first glance, it looks like he will be mighty to save Israel from his earthly enemies.

Verses 70 and 71. As he said, through his holy prophets of long ago, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

[27 : 42] But just look a little closer at the rest of the song. This salvation, verse 77, involves forgiveness of sin. This salvation, verse 79, involves turning people away from death.

This salvation, verse 75, involves making people holy and righteous for all time. See, Zechariah is clear. the ultimate problem isn't Rome, although that's a problem.

The ultimate problem isn't no children, although that's a real problem. The problem ultimately is spiritual adultery. People breaking their covenant promises to God to relate to him faithfully.

That's why death exists. That's why broken hearts exist. That's why enjoyment of God doesn't exist. But God himself shows up in Jesus to fix this broken relationship.

That's the bigger salvation Zechariah has in mind. And in doing so, God's remaining faithful to his own covenant promises made long ago to Abraham.

[29 : 00] That's what verses 72 to 73 are all about. Long ago, thousands of years before Zechariah, God chose one man, Abraham.

And he promised Abraham that from him, he would have as many children as the stars light up the sky, and that through his seed, the world will be made right again.

God is rejoicing. And in highlighting this, Zechariah is not just providing a history lesson, he's rejoicing. He's saying, wow, God is still keeping his marriage vows thousands of years after to those who betrayed him.

what kind of love is this? How can it be that thousands of years ago, when he made those promises, he was already planning to redeem you and me?
And his salvation is a costly rescue. That's the definition of redemption. redemption. There's a price to pay.

[30 : 16] There's a great expense. Somebody has to bear the cost. A while ago now, I was driving on the roads in KL. And you know what KL is like, busy roads, and once you miss a turning, it's very hard to get back on track.

So I missed a turning, and then I had a slight moment of panic. And so I didn't see this car next to me, and I ended up scratching it. So the driver got out angrily, and she said those magic words. You need to pay for this. There's been damage done. Someone has to pay. And someone has to pay for our sin.

Damage has been done. Someone has to bear the cost. That's what redemption is. Costly rescue. And the amazing thing is, it's the injured party himself who bears the cost.

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. Someone has to pay, and God showed up, offered himself in Jesus Christ, and paid the price.

[31 : 36] He did so because he knew we could never pay up. Do you see how God showing up is not just about helping us to be nicer people? God showing up isn't just about making our lives just a bit better.

God didn't show up like a parent at a school football game, cheering his children on. I believe in you. You can do it. You can earn your place on the team.

No, that's not how he showed up. Instead, God showed up like a good Samaritan, saying, you've damaged not just a car, not just a building, but everything that you've come into contact with.

But no worries, I'll absorb the cost. That's what Zacharias sings about. He sings about the mighty warrior who at the same time shows this kind of tender mercy to us.

We see that in verse 78. Because of the tender mercy of our God, this rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness.

[32 : 54] That tender mercy is a kind of emotion that many of us Malaysians felt this week when we considered that poor fireman, Muhammad Adib. A God wrenching kind of compassion.

But while we were helpless to save Adib, God is not helpless to save us. That's why Zacharias sings. That's why he prophesies, verse 67.

Did you notice that's how Luke describes what he's doing? His song is a prophecy. Prophecy, contrary to popular opinion, is not just random revelation from nowhere.

It's the proclamation of God's word to God's people. All throughout, Zacharias' song is grounded in the promises of scripture.

It's for encouragement and praise. And that too will be the job of Zacharias' son, John the Baptist. As verse 76 says, he will be a prophet of the Lord Most High because his main job is to point people to Jesus.

[34 : 06] True prophecy is Jesus-centred prophecy. And why does God show up in Jesus? What's the ultimate purpose of God showing up?

Yes, it's so that people know salvation. Verse 77 tells us that. But there's more. Just look at verses 74 to 75 with me.

To rescue us from the hand of our enemies and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Well, that's ultimately why we are safe, so that we can serve him. If God is a mighty horn of salvation for spiritual adulterers who betrayed him, well, what a privilege it is for us to serve such a God.

He's not a harsh master, so there is nothing to fear. And what he asks for, he enables. He empowers.

[35 : 14] He's not asking for the impossible. Instead, he's waking us up like Zachariah to the reality that has shown up in our lives. If only we stop being so fixated on our routines and reorient our focus on him.

this morning, I don't know how your year has been, but perhaps you've been sleepwalking spiritually through 2018.

God has been speaking to you through the Bible, but you haven't been listening. You've just been going through the routines, used to the same old way of doing things, such that you haven't

changed your default settings in response to God's nudging.

You've been ignoring God's word. Perhaps you've been enjoying God's little blessings, but you've missed the biggest way in which God himself has shown up in your lives.

You've forgotten Jesus himself. So this Christmas, here's your chance. Here's an opportunity to make Jesus a big deal in your life again, perhaps for the very first time.

[36 : 32] here's an opportunity to make him Lord. That means handing over control of your life to him. That means getting in line with the Bible and taking it seriously.

And here's a chance to make 2019 the year of fearlessly serving him. A year where you take risks in following him. A year where you allow him to grow you in holiness and righteousness, even when it can hurt.

starting today. The rising sun has come from heaven to shine on you and to bring you back to the right path.

Let's gratefully accept his mercy and let's make sure that this Christmas time you don't miss Christ, our God who has shown up.

I'm just going to give us a few seconds now just to think about what we've heard and then I'm going to lead us in prayer.

[37 : 38] hear? Okay. Thank you. Thank you.