Advent 2026

Zechariah's Song

Luke 1:67-79

Advent is traditionally a season to look forward to the coming of Christ. Looking forward to Jesus coming again, in the season where we look forward to celebrating Jesus' first coming.

This devotional is intended to help individuals or families focus day by day on the hope Jesus brings, by using Zechariah's song (Luke 1:67-79). The first two days introduce Zechariah, and the rest of the guide takes a small part of his song each day. The full text of the Bible song is printed at the back of this booklet.

There is a starter question, Bible reading, a thought for the day, and then two questions, with one intended to be accessible to young children. After the study, it would be good to pray.

There is also a newly recorded song to go with this devotional booklet that may help you to memorise the words. Find it on our YouTube channel or website.

YouTube

Website

1st December

Starter question: What things are you longing for this advent season?

This year in our advent season we are focusing on Zechariah's song, sometimes called the Benedictus from the first word in the Latin translation of the song. To set the scene, we'll read about the promise of a baby to Zechariah in Luke 1.

Luke 1:5-25: *5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.*
8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient

to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'
[18] Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.'
[19] The angel said to him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.
[20] And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.'
[21] Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. [22] When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.
[23] When his time of service was completed, he returned home. [24] After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. [25] 'The Lord has done this for me,' she said. 'In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.'

God was acting in a special way in Israel, after centuries of Israel waiting for God to keep his promises. Zechariah and Elizabeth had been longing both for a child of their own and for God to send his rescuer to Israel. The angel Gabriel comes to Zechariah to promise a son born in old age, and that this son will prepare the way for the Lord himself to come.

Question for younger ones: What will the special baby born to Zechariah and Elizabeth do?

Question for older ones: What things that God promises in the Bible do we find hard to believe?

2nd December

Starter question: What does your name mean? Do you know why your parents chose your name?

Luke 1:57-67: *57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. 59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, 60 but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." 61 They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." 62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. 63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 All the neighbours were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. 66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:*

Zechariah now believes, and he obeys the angel's message, calling his son John. Zechariah is then able to speak, and he praises God. The song we are looking at this advent is Zechariah's song of praise. It praises God for the birth of John, and looks forward to the Lord himself coming.

For younger ones: Why does Zechariah write the baby's name?

For older ones: Zechariah's praise makes a big impact on his neighbours. What can we praise God for when we talk with people around us?

3rd December

Starter question: Who or what do you praise in your house?

Luke 1:68b: *"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel"*

Zechariah directs his praise to the Lord, the God of Israel. It is God who has given Zechariah and Elizabeth a baby in their old age. And this is not an unknown God. It is the God of Israel. The God who rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The God who gave them the promised land. The God who is both the mighty Creator no one can compare with and the God of Israel who wants his people to know him.
That is why he is described as the Lord. The Lord is how the personal name of God from the Old Testament is written in the New Testament. The name God reveals to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14-15) gets written down with 4 Hebrew letters. But the Jewish people were concerned to honour the name so when they were reading the Scriptures, and they came to these 4 letters, they said Lord instead. When they translated the Old Testament into Greek, the Greek version had the Greek word for Lord. So Zechariah is not just praising someone important. He is praising the Lord, the real God, who has revealed himself to Israel.

For younger and older ones: What truths do you know about God?

4th December

Starter question: Can you share an example where you were in trouble and someone came and rescued you?

Luke 1:68b: *"because he has come to his people and redeemed them."*

Zechariah praises God because God has come to his people and rescued them. The birth of John is the start of God's rescue plan. There is more to come, God coming in a more remarkable way. But John, born to elderly parents, is a sign of God coming to his people.

And God redeems his people. The word redemption is linked to slavery. A slave could be redeemed, bought freedom, by a family member or friend. But for the Israelites, redemption points back to God rescuing the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. All the power of the plagues, all the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, all the passing through the waters of death that then drowned their enemies, is included in redemption. And if God is coming to redeem his people now, we're expecting a mighty rescue.

Question for younger ones: Why is it good news that God comes to his people? (What would be the problem if God just waited for people to make their way to him?)

Question for older ones: What does the idea of redemption suggest about the human condition and how God rescues us?

5th December

Starter question: What is the strongest animal you have seen in person?

Luke 1:69a: "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us"

Zechariah uses a biblical picture for God's work (2 Samuel 22:3), that God is raising up a horn of salvation. In Zechariah's day, the bull with its horns was the strongest domestic animal. A bull's horn could drive off a lion or gore a careless human. A horn is therefore something

very strong.

The altar also has horns on its corners (Exodus 27:2). So horns are not only pictures of strength but also of sacrifice. When Zechariah says God is raising up a horn of salvation, that means God is doing something new that will be strong and perhaps sacrificial. And we need a strong salvation because evil is so strong in this world, and even in our own hearts. We need God to bring a strong salvation.

Question for younger ones: Who are some people who are both strong and kind?

Question for older ones: When is it good news for you that God's salvation is strong?



6th December: Sunday worship at Emmanuel



7th December

Starter question: How was King David a strong rescuer?

Luke 1:69b: "...in the house of his servant David."

Zechariah declares that God is raising up a horn of salvation in the house of his servant David. Zechariah is not talking about a building here: house also has the idea of family. David had been God's anointed, chosen, king 1000 years earlier. He is famous for defeating the giant Goliath with his sling. Later in his life, God promised David that God would build David's house (family) and that one of his descendants would rule forever (2 Samuel 7:11b-16).

So, Zechariah knows that God is about to keep his promise to David- that a mighty rescuer is coming who is descended from David. God's kingdom is going to break into the world in a way that will change it forever.

Question for younger ones: Can you retell the story of David and Goliath?

Question for older ones: How is Jesus like King David?

8th December

Starter question: What information does a party invitation contain?

Luke 1:70: *"(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago)"*

When someone is planning a party, they plan the details of place, time, food, activities. And then they send the invitation with that information. When it comes to the special rescue from God, God's plan goes back a long way. He has been telling his people about the rescue plan over many centuries. God said he would bring a rescuer from David's family 1000 years earlier. God reaffirmed that promise many times. For one example you could look at the Christmas reading of Isaiah 9:1-7. The people who brought God's "invitation" and told people God's plan of rescue in advance were the prophets. They are holy prophets- people set aside by God to speak God's words to the people. They are not speaking their own hopes or plans. The prophets spoke God's plan, centuries before Jesus came.

Question for younger ones: Why isn't it easy to wait a long time for something that has been promised?

Question for older ones: How does the promise from long ago help us be more confident in God's plan of rescue?

9th December

Starter question: Do you know any stories where someone is rescued from their enemies? How is the person rescued?

Luke 1:71: *"salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us"*

Zechariah's song describes salvation in terms of rescue from enemies. There are wicked people who hate God's people and have power to harm them. Like David defeating Goliath and the Philistines, God's rescue of his people will include rescue from the power of enemies. For Zechariah, the enemies of God's people would include the Romans. They were pagan colonial oppressors, demanding taxes for Caesar, and brutally crushing resistance.

But Jesus goes on to help us see our real enemies. Our real enemies are not just unjust people in this life, but the forces of darkness. Satan, sin and death are the enemies who hate and destroy human beings. So, the rescue we need must rescue us from their hands. It must take us to a place of safety from evil forces, from the evil inside us, and from the death that destroys us.

Question for younger ones: When do you get scared? How does knowing God is a rescuer help at those times?

Question for older ones: What are some examples of problems or enemies in this world, which have Satan, sin or death behind them? Why is it helpful to remember that these are our real enemies?

10th December

Starter question: When someone does something wrong, what is justice?

Luke 1:72: *"to show mercy to our ancestors"*

Zechariah celebrates that God's rescue will be showing mercy to his people. Justice is giving people what they deserve, which means those who do wrong get punished for their wrong. Mercy is not giving people what they deserve, not punishing those who deserve it. Zechariah, like many of the great pray-ers in the Old Testament, knows that the Israelites do not deserve God's rescue. They have not been loyal to God as they should have been. They have loved other gods. And they have not lived holy, loving lives as God wanted. They have been selfish and greedy and unkind. So, God's rescue is an act of mercy. God is rescuing people who deserve judgement.

Question for younger ones: How do you feel when someone shows you mercy (does not punish you for something you did wrong)?

Question for older ones: How does remembering that God's rescue of us is him showing mercy affect how we feel about God?

11th December

Starter question: How do you remind yourself to do what you have promised to do?

Luke 1:72b: "and to remember his holy covenant"

Zechariah describes God as remembering his holy covenant. Now Zechariah does not think that God had forgotten his covenant

agreement. It is not that God had lost the covenant document down the back of the sofa cushion, and then suddenly found it.
But Zechariah sees that God is now doing what he had promised long before to do. He celebrates that God is a God who never forgets his promises. God is like an elephant: he never forgets. Zechariah celebrates that God remembers his covenant agreement with his people.

Question for younger ones: How can you help yourself remember that God remembers his promises today?

Question for older ones: Which promise of God will you remember today, knowing that God never forgets his promises?

12th December

Starter question: What is Abraham famous for?

Luke 1:73-74b: *"the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies"*

When Zechariah mentions God's holy covenant in v72, we might have thought he was referring to the great covenant with Moses at Mount Sinai. But Zechariah is thinking of an earlier and more fundamental covenant: God's covenant with Abraham.
In Genesis 12 and 14, God promises Abraham a people, land, and blessing, including protection from enemies. In Genesis 15, God binds himself in a covenant to give Abraham offspring and land. In Genesis 17, this covenant is confirmed on Abraham's side with circumcision as a sign of the covenant. And finally in Genesis 22, God swears by himself that he will bring these blessings to Abraham.

Before the covenant of the Law of Moses, there is the covenant with Abraham where God promises to bless Abraham and his descendant(s). What Abraham and his descendants must do is trust God's promises (Genesis 15:6). Zechariah appeals to that foundational promise, trusting that God will keep his promise.

Question for younger ones: What is the right response to someone reliable making a promise to us?

Question for older ones: Why is it helpful to remember that God's promises to Abraham are earlier than the Law Covenant at Mount Sinai?

13th December: Sunday worship at Emmanuel

14th December

Starter question: What would you most like to do if you could choose to do whatever you liked for the day?

Luke 1:74b: "and to enable us to serve him without fear"

Zechariah knows that God's rescue is coming. His own child, John, is preparing the way for God himself to come. God will rescue is from our enemies. From Satan and sin and death.
But what is God saving us for? What is the good way we should use our freedom? Zechariah sees that what is best for human beings, our true purpose, is to serve God. Not because God is needy and we must help him. But because we were made to rule the world under God, serving him by ruling the world with love and creativity and wisdom. Sin is rebelling against God, trying to rule without God, and it has

made life in this world hard.
But the rescue God is bringing will so connect us to God's love and goodness and power that we can serve him again. Instead of fear- fear of missing out on good things, fear of people around us hurting us- we can serve God without fear. And that will be the best way to live.

Question for younger ones: What makes it hard for you to do the right thing?

Question for older ones: What things make us afraid to serve God?



15th December

Starter question: What sort of behaviours help us to live in happy community with others?

Luke 1:75: *"in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."*

God's rescue will set us free from our enemies to live with God and be like God. Zechariah is rejoicing in that. God will enable us to serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. We'll live before God, in his presence. And we'll live like God, in holiness and righteousness.
We sometimes think of holiness as a negative thing- not being able to have fun. But Jesus shows us true holiness. He is truly good, truly living with his heavenly Father as his priority. And actually, we know that living without holiness and righteousness is not good for us. Going against God's good ways does not really satisfy us. Doing wrong things and hurting others leaves us feeling guilty and ashamed. So, it is good news that God's rescue in Jesus will set us free to live in holiness in the presence of God.

Question for younger ones: Who is someone you know who shows holiness in their life?

Question for older ones: What truths can we speak to ourselves if living without God seems better than living serving God?

16th December

Starter question: How do we hear God's message to us today?

Luke 1:76a: *"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;"*

Zechariah now turns to his baby boy, John. Parents generally think their babies are wonderful and hope they will do good things with their life. But Zechariah has more than just a vague hope. The angel who told him he was going to have a baby as an old man also told him that the baby would serve God.

So, Zechariah declares what he has heard: John is going to join in God's plan by being someone who speaks for God. A prophet is someone who hears from God and then speaks that message to the people. There has not been a prophet in Israel for hundreds of years. But John will be God's messenger, a signpost pointing to God himself.

Question for younger ones: How can we help other people hear God's message today?

Question for older ones: What things hold us back from speaking God's message to people around us?

17th December

Starter Question: How do you prepare your house for special visitors?

Luke 1:76b: *"for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him"*

John will be the one who prepares the way for the Lord God himself to come. In Isaiah 40:3, we find his role prophesied:

A voice of one calling:
'In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God"

John is not the rescuer; he's not God turning up to defeat our enemies. But he is the one who goes before and prepares the way. He gets the people of God ready for God's arrival. Where the people have forgotten God and have let sin rule, John reminds them of God's promise to come and the need to have sin dealt with. His birth comes before Jesus' birth, and his ministry starts before Jesus' ministry, because his role is to prepare the way for Jesus. John rejoices in that role of pointing to Jesus and shows us our role: Jesus must become greater, I must become less. (John 3:30)

Question for younger ones: How do you feel about the idea that God wants to come and live with us?

Question for older ones: What wrong ideas and wrong behaviours would we clear out of our lives if we thought Jesus was going to physically come and visit us today?

18th December

Starter question: Since Jesus lived 2000 years ago, how can people today know about him?

Luke 1:77a: *"to give his people the knowledge of salvation"*

John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus by giving people knowledge about the way to be saved. Human beings can't figure it out themselves. Cut off from the wisdom and goodness of God, we are stuck. Stuck in a broken and sinful world. Stuck without solid knowledge about how to put things right. But God knows how to save us. And God wants us to know how to be saved. So, John is coming in advance, to tell people God's plan of salvation. John prepares people to know that Jesus is God come to save us.

For us now, looking back, we can still read John the Baptist's words as God's truth for us. We can still read Zechariah's prophesy as God's truth, and we can read on through the gospels to know Jesus and how he saves us. The knowledge of salvation is a precious gift to us from God. He wants us to know how to be put right with him. He gives us the knowledge of salvation in the Bible (containing the words of the prophets and apostles).

Question for younger ones: What does the Bible tell us about how we can be saved?

Question for older ones: What other sources of knowledge of salvation are we tempted to look to, rather than the Bible?

19th December

Starter question: If you broke something that belongs to your friend, what would you do to try put it right?

Luke 1:77b: *"through the forgiveness of their sins"*

God's salvation plan is to provide forgiveness for our sins. His plan is not first self-improvement- keep these rules better and then you will be allowed into the rescue ship. His plan is not first making us pay for our sins- when you have suffered enough, then you can be allowed into God's presence.

God's rescue plan is "through the forgiveness of their sins". Jesus comes to provide forgiveness of our sins. As God, Jesus is the one we have sinned against. As human, he is able to take the just consequences of human sin. As God and man, Jesus takes our sin on himself in our place. By transferring sin and the punishment for sin to himself, God is able to both forgive us our sins and punish every sin. He is perfectly just and the one who shows mercy. And so, salvation is about receiving this forgiveness of sins. We are connected to God because he provides forgiveness- and then transformed by God to live with and for him. Without forgiveness, there is no salvation. With forgiveness, we have friendship with God and transformation to be like God.

Question for younger ones: How is forgiveness different to earning God's approval?

Question for older ones: Why is salvation by forgiveness of sins hard to accept? Why is it still good news?

20th December: Sunday worship at Emmanuel

21st December

Starter question: What sort of animals do we feel tender kindness for?

Luke 1:78a: *"because of the tender mercy of our God"*

Sometimes people think of Jesus as loving, but God the Father as harsh. But Zechariah knows that the whole salvation plan exists because God is a tender and kind God. He sees the people he has made. He sees us. He sees that we have offensively rebelled against him. He sees that we are horribly unkind to others, destructive to the environment, and damaging to ourselves.
But he still loves us and wants what is good for us. He is tender towards human beings. His tender mercy is like the gentleness that nurses a sick young kitten back to health. Our hope as humans all rests on God's character- he is a God who can see people who have acted disgustingly and still have tender mercy towards us- wanting to rescue us and cure us. The salvation plan flows from the loving heart of God, and when we fall back into sin, he continues to have a heart of tender mercy. The Christmas story is a display of God's tender kindness to people who don't deserve it.

Question for younger ones: How does knowing God's heart of tender mercy help us to pray when we have done things wrong?

Question for older ones: What tempts us to think of God as harsh? How can we get the tender mercy of God to soak into us and drive out the fear that God is harsh?

22nd December

Starter question: Have you ever watched the sun rise in the morning? What changes as the sun rises?

Luke 1:78b: *"by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven"*

Zechariah describes the coming salvation of God, prompted by his tender mercy, as like the rising sun. God's presence and salvation will be like light that drives away the darkness, and warmth that drives away the cold. The rising sun comes from heaven- it's God's gift not our human achievement.
Zechariah is quoting from the last prophet in the Old Testament (and possibly the last prophet before John the Baptist) Malachi. "*But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves." Malachi 4:2* The sun from heaven brings healing, and those who trust God's salvation dance with joy like happy calves. By a happy coincidence, in the English language sun- the star our earth orbits- and son- a male child- sounds the same. So, we can say that the Son from heaven, Jesus, shines out healing and righteousness. This is the Christmas good news.

Question for younger ones: How does Jesus bring happiness to human beings?

Question for older ones: What are some of the ways Jesus goodness is like light and warmth from the sun?

23rd December

Starter question: When do we need a torch?

Luke 1:79a: *"to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death"*

Jesus has been described as like the sun from heaven. The fact that is good news suggests that we human beings live in a dark world. Not just the darkness of winter in the UK. But a spiritually dark world. A world where God is often pushed out, and evil spiritual forces reign. A world where the effects of sin damage everything. A world where death takes every person.
We sometimes try to avoid the darkness, to pretend that everything is OK. But the darkness is around us and even inside us. So, it is good news that Jesus is the sun who shines the goodness of God into a dark world. He does not come only for those who are cheerful and whose life is bright. He comes to shine on those living in darkness, and in the shadow of death. Let's soak in that light.

Question for younger ones: What is something sad or hard that you want to ask Jesus to help shine his light into?

Question for older ones: Where do you particularly see the darkness in the world at the moment? How can we pray for Jesus to be the light for those in that darkness?

24th December

Starter question: When you visit a new place, what do you use to guide you?

Luke 1:79b: *"to guide our feet into the path of peace."*

Zechariah finished his song with people still on a journey. People are still travelling on a path, a way. But the rising sun from heaven, Jesus,

shines his light and guides people. This does not mean there is an audible voice from heaven telling us physically which way to turn, or which course to study, or job to take.
Zechariah is telling us that Jesus will guide our paths into the path of peace. He will lead us in the right way, walking alongside him. We will have peace with God through Jesus. No more wondering if God cares about us. Through Jesus, we have forgiveness and a loving relationship with God the Father. And then we will walk the path of peace through this dark world. We walk the way Jesus teaches, so we can be peacemakers and kind, gentle and humble.
The path of peace is a path made by Jesus, and we then get to walk on it, enjoying friendship with God and shining the blessing of Jesus into the world. We'll walk this path of peace until the day when Jesus comes back and the whole world is filled with the peace and righteousness of God.

Question for younger ones: How can you walk the path of peace over the Christmas period?

Question for older ones: What truth from Zechariah's song is most relevant to you for the Christmas period this year?

25th December

Happy Christmas!

Everyone is welcome to join Emmanuel Church Northstowe at Northstowe Secondary College for a short service at 10:30am.

Zechariah's Song
Luke 1:67-79

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
69 He has raised up a horn[c] of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
72 to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."

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Emmanuel
CHURCH
NORTHSTOWE

Emmanuel Church Northstowe meets every Sunday, 10:30am at Northstowe Secondary College. For more information visit the links below, e-mail: contact@emmanuelchurchnorthstowe.org or come along one Sunday morning.

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