

ZECHARIAH UNFOLDS GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

Luke 1:68-80

(NASB) "And his father Zacharias [Zechariah] was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: ⁶⁸ 'Blessed *be* the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, ⁶⁹ And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant—⁷⁰ As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old—⁷¹ Salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us; ⁷² To show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath which He swore to Abraham our father, ⁷⁴ To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. ⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways, ⁷⁷ to give to His people *the* knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, ⁷⁹ to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'" ⁸⁰ And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel."

INTRODUCTION

On a Sunday afternoon in September of 2011, Hope Phillips, age 38, was enjoying time in a park with her husband and son in Memphis, TN. A car on Riverside Drive suddenly plunged into the waters of Wolf River Harbor in an apparent suicide attempt. But then the driver climbed onto the roof of his sinking car. Phillips said, "His face was like, 'I'm so desperate, please help me,' so all I could do was run into the water." The man was about 25' off the bank. She swam toward him, used a tree branch to pull him toward shore, and her husband helped drag him out of the water. The young man said he was a student at the University of Tennessee. "I'm not worth anything," he kept saying. Phillips told him, "You *are* worth something." When he asked her name, she said, "Hope." He kept repeating, "What's your name?" When it dawned on him he'd been rescued by a woman named "Hope," a smile spread across his face. She knew then he didn't really want to die. The police took him to the Regional Medical Center for help he was ready to receive.

Four weeks from tonight is Christmas Eve. We will soon be hearing or singing the beloved carol, *O Holy Night*. The first verse includes these words: "Long lay the world in sin and error pining, Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope—the weary world rejoices, For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!" Zechariah conveys this same, "thrill of hope," as he unfolds the wonders of God's plan for our rescue and salvation from all that would ruin us. Zechariah's prophecy is a song of praise similar to Mary's in **Luke 1:46-55**. It's called "the *Benedictus*," the Latin word for "blessing" behind our English word "benediction," which is the first word of **vs. 68** in the Latin Vulgate translation that became the standard Bible of the early Church in A.D. 400. The crowd attending John's circumcision & naming were mystified by the miraculous events surrounding John's birth. They asked, "'What then will this child be?' (**1:66**). Few knew what the angel Gabriel revealed to Zechariah nine months earlier, found in **Luke 1:15-17**: "'For he will be great in the sight of the Lord . . . He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.'" Zechariah's song unfolds four aspects of God's plan of salvation that are as true for us individuals as for the nation of Israel.

I. PREPARATION (1:67-76)

All of life is preparation to lead us to Christ. Can you not trace how God has been actively at work throughout your life? Many details needed to come together in the right timing or right way before you awakened to your need of **Jesus** as your personal Savior. There were even more circumstances, countless details to arrange or fall into place, before the stage was set for the coming of the Son of God to Earth. Our Creator knew His Son's perfect sacrifice would be necessary to save us from everlasting ruin, even before

He created our world, as **I Peter 1:18-20** (CSB) discloses: "For you know that you were redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things like silver or gold,¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of an unblemished and spotless lamb.²⁰ He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was revealed in these last times for you." **Romans 5:6** (NASB) adds: "For while we were still helpless [to save ourselves], at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."

The covenant blessings God announced to Abraham, Moses, and David were primarily this-worldly, involving descendants, land, prosperity, and victory over Israel's enemies. Zechariah's song identifies 16 covenant promises for which John's birth signifies the beginning of God's saving program by the Messiah. **Vss. 69-75** make it clear political deliverance from abusive earthly rulers *is included* in God's promises to Israel of the Old Testament era, and to the Church in the New Testament era. Israel's political redemption has been delayed due to much of the nation rejecting **Jesus** as the Messiah God sent them. Rome utterly destroyed Jerusalem and Israel as a nation in 70 A. D., as Jesus predicted in **Luke 13:34-35; 19:41-44**). But Israel's desolation was not due to God's weakness. In **vs. 69**: "And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant," "horn" is a metaphor for power based upon the great strength of horned animals like the ox in the Near East. "Horn of salvation" underscores God's vast power when rescuing His people from all that would destroy us. In **vs.74**, "To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear," the word translated "without fear" appears first in the Greek text. By rescuing us from the power of political, spiritual, and physical "enemies" to ruin us, including sin and death, God's emphatic purpose is to free us from any fears crippling our ability to "serve Him."

In all of God's actions, there is preparation and there is fulfillment. We could ask ourselves, "How thoroughly do we prepare for God to carry out His will in our life?" A man named Ed Watt visited a local department store with his wife. They purchased a piece of luggage and a cooler. Ed then browsed in the shoe department waiting for his wife to finish the rest of her shopping. A shoe clerk asked if he could be of assistance. "No, thank you," Ed replied. "I'm just waiting for my wife." A man behind him immediately spoke up, "I'm waiting for a wife, too, but I never thought to bring lunch and an overnight bag."

II. PRIVACY (Knowledge) (1:76-79)

Vs. 77: "to give to His people *the* knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins." "Privacy" is "knowledge of a generally private matter." It's the noun form of the adjective "privy." In the early 1300s, knowledge of ice cream was a privy of royalty. Marco Polo gave royal chefs of Europe the mysterious recipe for ice cream he discovered during his travels in Asia. It brought such delight to the monarchs they sought to keep ice cream a secret only royalty would be fit to enjoy. Aren't you glad the recipe for ice cream is no longer a royal secret? The Greek term "salvation" can mean "deliverance or preservation," whether it be deliverance of a person or a nation, physical preservation of health, or spiritual deliverance from sin's penalty and power to restore us to God. The Apostle Paul explained in **Romans 16:25-26** (NASB) that many specifics of God's plan of salvation remained a "mystery," were generally known only to God, until the Son of God came to Earth to disclose fuller knowledge of and to accomplish the full details of God's plan of salvation: "Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past,²⁶ but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, *leading* to obedience of faith."

From our perspective as New Testament Christians, **Isaiah 53** may be the most Christological of any passage of the Hebrew Scriptures. Let's read **vss. 5-10** (GWT): "He was wounded for our rebellious acts. He was crushed for our sins. He was punished so that we could have peace, and we received healing from His wounds.⁶ We have all strayed like sheep. Each one of us has turned to go his own way, and the LORD has laid all our sins on Him.⁷ He was abused and punished, but He didn't open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. He was like a sheep that is silent when its wool is cut off. He didn't open His

mouth. ⁸ He was arrested, taken away, and judged. Who would have thought that He would be removed from the world? He was killed because of My people's rebellion. ⁹ He was placed in a tomb with the wicked. He was put there with the rich when He died, although He had done nothing violent and had never spoken a lie. ¹⁰ Yet, it was the LORD's will to crush Him with suffering. When the LORD has made His life a sacrifice for our wrongdoings, He will see His descendants for many days. The will of the LORD will succeed through Him." We as believers can vividly see the suffering and sacrifice of our Savior in Isaiah's prophecy 700 years before **Jesus'** birth, but few understood them until **Jesus** came to unlock their meaning.

A daughter of a Jewish rabbi tells this story: "My father taught me to read the Bible in Hebrew when a young child. We began at Genesis. When we came to Isaiah he skipped the 53rd chapter. I asked him why. He said it was not necessary for Jews to read that chapter. I became more curious. I asked him who it was for, and he said Christians. I asked him what the Christian Bible was doing in our Bible. He became very angry and told me to keep quiet. He said again it was not necessary to read it. I wondered why God would put unnecessary things in the Bible. I copied the 53rd chapter on paper and carried it in my stocking for two years until I came to America—the free country. I looked at it at night and every chance I could without being seen. I took better care of that paper than people do of money. Through reading this wonderful chapter I was led to accept Christ as my Savior. I was walking in New York one day and heard a lady reading this chapter. She explained how it referred to **Jesus** and the wonderful things He accomplished for us. I accepted Christ as my Savior. He satisfied me completely!"

III. PARDON (Forgiveness) (1:76-79)

⁷⁶ "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways, ⁷⁷ to give to His people *the* knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us." Zechariah prophesied his son John's message, and the Lord's, would be salvation by merciful "forgiveness," by grace, and not by trying to pile up enough merits to earn God's favor. The Greek word here for "forgiveness" means much more than to "release another from obligation to repay or appease us for an offense against us," as when **Jesus** declared in **Matthew 6:14**, "[I]f you forgive people their wrongdoing, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well." **Vs. 77** uses a Greek word that truly means "pardon" in a judicial sense: "letting go all record of an offense so that it's as if it had never been committed." In **Matthew 18:21-35** (NLT), **Jesus** spoke of a "king" who "released" and "forgave" a man of a debt equivalent to "millions of dollars" that was impossible for him to repay. In other words, this man would never need to apply for more mercy to escape the consequences of his outrageous debt. Grace had wiped it off his account.

A man in a small southern town with a very rough beard tried everything he could think of to soften his whiskers and ease his shaving distress. After 20 years of shaving himself every morning, he'd had enough. He told his wife he intended to let the local barber shave him each day. He went to the town's barber shop, which was owned by the pastor of the Baptist Church. The regular barber was not at work that day. But his wife, Grace, said she could take care of his needs. Grace shaved him, sprayed him with lilac water, and said, "That will be \$20." The man thought this price a bit high, but he paid the bill and went to work. The next morning, he looked in the mirror. His face seemed as smooth as when he'd left the barber shop the day before. "Not bad," he thought. "At least I don't need to get shaved every day." Next morning, his face remained smooth. Two weeks later, he still couldn't find any trace of whiskers on his face. He returned to the barber shop. "I thought \$20 was high for a shave", he told Grace, "but I've never been shaved like this before. It's been two weeks and my whiskers still haven't started growing back. Help me to understand what's happened to me." She replied, "You've been shaved by Grace, so once shaved, always shaved."

IV. PEACE (1:76-79)

Vs. 78-79: "Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, ⁷⁹ to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death." God's final prophecies in Israel's

history were announced through Malachi 450 years before Jesus' birth. **Malachi 4:5-6** (NKJV) proclaims, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse." Gabriel echoed these words to Zechariah when announcing John's birth (**Luke 1:13-17**). Some think "the Sunrise from on high" echoes **Malachi 4:2**: "But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings." The coming of the "Son of the Most High," "Jesus" (whose name means, "the LORD [YAHWEH] is salvation") (**Luke 1:31-32**), was the dawn of a new day in human history brought about by "the tender mercy of our God"! As "the Sunrise from on high," **Jesus** came, "to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death"; on those in a condition of extreme danger, fear, and hopelessness; pining away with no relief in sight. **Jesus** also came, "To guide our feet into the way of peace." Those just pictured as sitting down in despair are now described as on their feet, moving forward again in life after experiencing the "peace" of reconciliation with God and the assurance of having their sins forgiven.

Luke closes his description of John by these words of **vs. 80**: "And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel." "The deserts" ("wilderness," NIV) refers to the desolate, uninhabited, and barren regions east of Jerusalem, near the Dead Sea. God saw to it that this budding "prophet of the Most High" would be raised in a spiritual boot camp, first by his parents and later with John's cooperation. "Strong in spirit" ("spiritually strong," HCSB) should be understood as John yielded every aspect of his development—mental, moral, spiritual, and physical—to the control of the "Holy Spirit" who "filled" him from conception (**Luke 1:15**).

CONCLUSION

Charlene Cothran is a woman upon whom "the Sunrise from on high" shone "upon," as one "who [sat] in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide [her] feet into the way of peace." Charlene is publisher of *Venus Magazine*, which she founded in 1995 to benefit lesbians of African descent. In 2007, she announced on the magazine's web site she has become a Christian and has rejected the lesbian lifestyle she had been living and promoting as an activist. Cothran says that as a magazine publisher she has had the opportunity to address thousands of people publicly, influencing homosexuals to come out of the closet to seek acceptance. She has now come out of the closet as an activist to promote the Christian lifestyle. She says, "The spirit of God spoke directly into my soul and said you will choose this day who you will serve and if you make the wrong choice, I will allow you to drift so far away from me that you will never hear my voice again. I gave God my heart and soul in the parking lot of the mall, right there in my car. A river of tears flowed as Jesus washed me and forgave me and redeemed me for His work."

Charlene Cothran is committed to continue her work in the homosexual community, but she has changed her mission. She says, "I intend be just as 'out' about my transformation as I was about my lesbian life. I have given every gift I have back to God, including VENUS Magazine. The target audience will remain the same but . . . our new mission is to encourage, educate and assist those in the [homosexual] life who want change but can't find a way out." Cothran has gone on to form The Evidence Ministry, Inc., an evangelical mission encouraging gays to renounce homosexuality. If you were seeking evidence about whether people are unchangeably born as homosexuals or whether **Jesus Christ** can be counted upon to save people out of this lifestyle and transform them into His image, would *Venus Magazine* be a reliable source for the truth? Yes! Why? Because Charlene Cothran has "carefully investigated" the truth about **Jesus**, as Luke intended (**1:1-4**), and has experienced the Preparation, Privity, Pardon, and Peace **Jesus** offers to all who embrace Him as Savior and Lord!