

Luke 1: 5-23; "Glad Tidings to Zacharias", Sermon # 1 in a Christmas Series– "The Prophecies of Christ's Birth", Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall, on November 27th, 2022, in the Morning Worship Service.

For the next few Sundays including Christmas Day, I want to delve deeply into these first two chapters of Luke to let You see the many preparations made by God for His Son's birth. I want you to see just how many prophecies concerning our Lord, converge at this point in time; because God was, in the giving of His Son, showing His kindness and His love for all mankind. His great love for sinful people everywhere was seen in the Birth of Christ. I want to approach our text from the standpoint of the angel bringing glad tidings to Zacharias. Here in these verses, we find that the message which was supposed to have brought Zacharias joy and gladness actually brought about the opposite effect in him, for a time.

And so, I want to show you now, that God through His appointed angel, would actually be used to be of great help in building Zacharias' faith. I want you to see, that God, with or without an angel, can do the same for you. But let us see now how he did this, with and by an angel, and think of how it applies to our own life. 1st of all – God, through His angel, studied to bring encouragement to these people who had been faithful to Him. 2nd – Even though God, through His angel, studied to bring the best of news to Zacharias, yet he was not believed. And 3rd – God through His angel, thankfully had the authority to bring upon Zacharias a temporary disciplinary judgment which would ultimately help him very much.

1st of all – God, through His angel, studied to bring encouragement to these people who had been faithful to Him. (verses 1-12)

Verse 6 says that both Zacharias and Elizabeth were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. What does this world blameless mean? Well, first of all it means that they delighted in serving God by doing and keeping all His Old Testament commandments; all of the moral commandments, and all of the Divine ceremonial ordinances which they found in the Old Testament Scriptures. Their heart was continually found in meditating upon and doing the things which God commanded, because they loved serving God. By "blameless" it does not mean that either of them were sinless, but it meant that as other people looked at their lives, they couldn't find any reason to blame them for falling short of doing what God would expect them to be doing at any given time.

Let me ask you now, whether it is the same for you? You who live in the New Testament, New Covenant times, are you righteous before God? Do you go about to do and keep God's commandments every day because you are trying to please Him? Are you walking blamelessly before the all-seeing, all-knowing eye of God? He looks at your life, and He knows that your heart and mind are continually towards Him in faith, and in great expectation, that He will do you good. It is not that you are trying to prove anything to God or to men concerning your own righteousness. You know that you fall short of perfection in many ways. You see your own righteousness as filthy rags because of the many ways that you fail to keep His commandments in strict perfection, and from the right motives. But you love God for having given His Son to be your Savior.

God has this same expectation of His saints in both Old Testament and New Testament times; that you would love Him and keep His commandments. He is not expecting you to trust in your own righteousness. He is looking for faith, and hope, and love from you. And so, you are not trusting in your own righteousness; as though that would, in any way, be sufficient to justify you in the sight of the holy God. But rather, it is because you are trusting in God's righteousness alone to justify you, through what Jesus Christ your Lord, your Savior, has done for you, in keeping God's law perfectly, and suffering on the cross for your sins. That is the basis of your being able to walk blamelessly before Him.

Well, none of this redemptive work of Christ's had yet been done in actuality, because Christ had not yet entered the world. And yet, it was their Messiah that Israel was looking for. And so Zacharias and Elizabeth were of that great number who were looking for God to reveal their Promised Messiah to them. Faith is an expectant grace. Faith depends upon God to reveal Himself through verbal or written revelation. He shines His light upon His word in the heart of a person. Faith then, does not look to itself to do what is right, on its own. But it does look to God to provide what is good and needful, in order to do His will; in order to keep His commands.

Psalm 119, verses 5 & 6 in the King James Bible says – “O that my ways were directed to keep Thy statutes!” “Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all Thy commandments.” I am sure that Zacharias and Elizabeth prayed in just this way, that they would be directed by God Himself to keep His statutes of truth and righteousness. But in their particular case, God was going to make this very practical to them. For, in verse 7 it says that they had no child. They had no child because Elizabeth was barren, and she had been so for many years. It also says that she was well advanced in years. They did not really expect that they would ever be able to have a child.

There are probably some among us who can identify with Zacharias and Elizabeth. They think that because their prayers have not been answered for many years, that God would not give them a child, and that He never would give them one. But then one day, He did! And this shows us that our faith, our expectation and our hope ought always to be in God; that what He has promised, He will indeed perform. And yet still there are many questions that come, because we do not know for certain that God will grant some particular thing, like conception in the womb. But still, our faith ought to be able to justify God in that very thing, if that is the case with us, with our wife, or with our husband.

I want you to see that God studied to encourage this couple who had been so faithful to Him. And He does the same thing with you, dear Christian, when you are faithful to Him. God set up just the particular circumstances as to where and when Zacharias would receive the glad tidings that they would have a child. It would be while Zacharias was fulfilling his duties as a priest before God. The “lot” fell to him to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. I have read that there were about 20,000 priests serving the Lord during those days in which Zacharias lived. And in his own division there must have been many men. But out of all these, the lot fell to him in particular!

This should show us the sovereignty of God is in the smallest details of life. As it says in Proverbs 16: 33 – “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” Zacharias' duty was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. Outside, at this very time, the whole multitude of the people was praying at the hour of incense. What were they praying for? They were no doubt praying for their long expected Messiah, that He might come. An angel of the Lord, it says in verse 11, appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

But immediately, the angel tells him – Do not be afraid, Zacharias. For your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. I think that we rightly wonder whether Zacharias was actually asking for a child to be born to he and Elizabeth while he was going about his holy duty of burning incense. Would he not have been praying for the Promised Messiah? Yes, and when he had gotten done asking for His appearance, he could legitimately also pray for a child; that which would take away his and his wife's reproach. For it was considered a great misfortune not to have children in those days.

But possibly we should understand this statement of the angel to mean that his prayer of many years had been heard, and it was even now, at this late date in their lives, going to be answered. I think that we can apply this ourselves and our prayers in this way. We should continue to exercise the faith that God can, at any time, answer our prayers, for the most important things in our life. We should not give up hope in regard to God miraculously giving conception, or in relation to people whom we love being saved. We should always continue to expect that God can, and that He will, if it is according to His purpose and will for us, do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask or

think. But will you not take this truth to heart; that God does study to bring encouragement to those of His own people who are faithfully walking with Him? He loves to occasionally surprise you, dear Christian. He loves to give you good things because He is Your heavenly father.

2nd – Even though God, through His angel, studied to bring the best of news to Zacharias, yet he was not believed.

Verses 13-17 say – “But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.’ “And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.” “For He will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink.” “He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.” “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.” “He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

What greater or more glorious news could Zacharius have been given beyond this! These are amazing statements of God’s intended purpose for his son’s future ministry; to be able to go before the Messiah, and in the spirit and power of Elijah, no less! And his ministry would be blessed to many fathers, that their hearts would be turned to their children, and disobedient people to the wisdom of the righteous, so that a large number of people would be prepared for the ministry of the Lord Jesus to them. Now, you would have thought that Zacharias’ face would have lit up with brilliant joy at these statements. But it wasn’t. Instead, he sadly answers – How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years!

What a pathetic answer! What an unbelieving answer! What a pitiful response, when he has just been given the answer to his prayer of many years! Sometimes even the best and most consistent of godly people cannot respond rightly to the great things that God is going to do for them in the future! They are so used to persevering through long years of disappointed expectations, that when God does desire to answer them favorably, they cannot receive it. In fact they refuse to believe it. It is like they cannot believe that it could possibly happen! Zacharias’ response to these wonderful words of the angel was one of unbelieving uncertainty! How shall I know this?

Well, Zacharias, when an angel appears to you, telling you not to be afraid for he brings glad tidings, it ought to be enough for you. The angel’s response to him was to declare his mission to him from God. “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.” What is truly amazing about the angel Gabriel’s declaration to Zacharias is, that he tells him what his reaction to John’s birth will be, when he first sees him. He will have joy and gladness, verse 14, and many will rejoice at his birth. And Zacharias still cannot rejoice. I want to apply this to all of us here.

When you receive a promise in the word of God, will you not learn to rejoice in it, that it shall have its fulfillment in God’s time, for you, and for each and every one of God’s people who are trusting in Him, and hoping in Him, that He will come and do great things? God has promised that for all whom He saves, when He begins a good work in them, that He will complete it, until the Day of Christ. Why will you doubt this? Why will you look at the promise and question the ability or the faithfulness of God, to complete the work that He has started. It is as if you think that it all depends upon you and your perseverance, when it is really God who upholds you in the strength of your faith, through Christ, and He gives you grace to persevere.

You may not believe this great truth, and so you doubt whether you will hold out to the end. Dear believer, rest upon the promises of God as certain to you personally. Never doubt His power to save, or His power to keep, or His promised strength to complete the great salvation that He has begun in you. Listen to how the apostle Paul words this in two places in the book of 1st Thessalonians. Chapter 3, verses 11-13. “Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ direct our way to you.” “And may the Lord make you (or cause you) increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as well do to you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our

God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.” And 1st Thessalonians 5: 23 – “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” “He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.”

Let us also be willing to believe in the great promises of the Bible concerning what God will do for Christ’s Church in the latter times of this Church age. These promises belong to all of God’s dear people in every generation, even though we do not live to see it – the victory of Christ’s kingdom over all the kingdoms of this world trying to prevent it. Christ shall have dominion as the hymnwriter says. These are the best of tidings to those who are working hard at fulfilling the great commission. Even as Christ died and rose again, even so, if it at some point in the future it looks like utter defeat for His Church, yet God will fulfill His promise. Let us believe it, for God is well able to bring it to pass. Nothing shall be impossible for God, and so labor on, dear saint.

3rd – God through His angel, thankfully had the authority to bring upon Zacharias a temporary disciplinary judgment which would ultimately help him very much.

Verses 19-23 say – “And the angel answered and said to him, ‘I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.’ “But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.” “And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple.” “But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless.” “So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house.”

Now, I hope that you can see, that one of these reasons that these things fell out the way that they did was because God wanted to deal with Zacharias’ faith, to strengthen it. This angel Gabriel said that he stood in the presence of God, and that he was sent to speak to Zacharias these great things, bringing him glad tidings. But Zacharias did not believe his words, which would be fulfilled in their own time. Notice how great a sin unbelief is, in relation to the promises and the prophecies of God! For all true believers it will lead to some sort of temporary disciplinary action being given to them so that they will learn to trust Him more. God is wise, and He knows what to bring.

Faith is a grace which is designed by God to grow. But if we ourselves hinder our own faith; if we are people of little faith, or fall into an unbelieving state, then God will not be able to do much with us or by us unless and until He corrects us. This is because without faith, it is impossible to please Him. And he who comes to God must believe that God is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Zacharias was told that he would be mute and not able to speak until the day of John’s birth, because he did not believe God’s words which would be fulfilled in their own time.

Are you not glad that every time that you fall into unbelief that God doesn’t make you mute, or do something dramatic every time you doubt His promises, or His good will towards you continually in Christ? John lingered long in the temple because of this, and when he finally came out, and he couldn’t speak to them, they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple. He beckoned to them and remained speechless. It was because God loved Zacharias that he did this to him. Let us believe the words of Hebrews chapter 12, verse 5 and following – “My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves, He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.” Let us remember this, and rejoice that God is always faithful to His promises. Let us rejoice to be His children, whom He is teaching to more and more trust in Him and obey Him.