

## Sermon 3, The Child of Promise, Pt. 2, Luke 1:5-25

**Proposition:** Though John the Baptist will begin to fulfill God's promises to His people, this answered prayer is concealed — in his parents' hearts and in the wilderness.

- I. Problem: The Unblessed Righteous, vv. 5-7
- II. Prayer
  - A. Symbolized by the Incense Offering, vv. 8-9
  - B. Engaged in by the People, v. 10
  - C. Engaged in by Zachariah, v. 13b
- III. Answer, vv. 13-17
  - A. Zachariah Will Get the Son he'd Prayed for, v. 13
  - B. Joy for Zachariah and Many Others, v. 14
  - C. The Promised Son Described, vv. 15-17
    1. He will be Great in the Lord's Sight
    2. He Will be a Teetotaler
    3. He Will be Filled with the Spirit Before Birth
    4. He Will Turn Back the Sons of Israel to God
    5. He Will Prepare the Lord's Way like Elijah
    6. He Will Turn Back Fathers to their Children
    7. He Will Turn Back the Disobedient to Wisdom
    8. He Will Prepare a People for the Lord
- IV. Doubt, v. 18
- V. Answer, vv. 19-20
  - A. Gabriel's Identity
  - B. Gabriel's Position
  - C. Gabriel's Mission
  - D. Zachariah's Muteness
- VI. Answer Concealed, vv. 21-25, 80
  - A. Zachariah Can't Speak
  - B. Elizabeth Hid Herself

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we began to look at this text together last Sunday morning. We saw some of the salient characteristics of Luke's narrative. In particular, we saw that in recounting the story of a child of promise the evangelist is alluding to the stories of Isaac, Joseph, Samson, and Samuel. We saw that Luke presents in microcosm the issue affecting Israel as the whole, and we saw that he resolves the issue in microcosm within this opening pericope of his book. Today we will look at the same story, but at its double structure of prayer receiving an answer (positive) and doubt receiving an answer too (negative). The story concludes

with the hiding of the pregnancy and the son born from it, for Luke portrays the Baptist according to the model of a prophet. Just as Moses was hidden in his parents' home and Elijah was hidden in the wilderness, so John must be hidden until the day of his appearance to Israel. The point Luke is making is that the child of promise comes in answer to the prayers of God's people, and that to doubt his coming is a sin worthy of punishment. Let's dig in.

**I. Problem: The Unblessed Righteous, vv. 5-7**

As you no doubt recall from last Sunday, the issue that Luke immediately presents to us is the issue of the unblessed righteous. The Psalms state that the man who fears the Lord and walks in His ways will have children. Zachariah feared the Lord and walked in His ways — and he had no children. This problem in microcosm reflects the macrocosmic problem of Israel languishing under the tyranny of Herod the Idumean.

**II. Prayer**

Luke does not tell us directly how this righteous couple responded to their plight, other than to say that they remained faithful. Despite everything, they continued to walk blameless in all the statutes and ordinances of the LORD. But clearly, the evangelist wants us to see that prayer was a huge part of their response.

**A. Symbolized by the Incense Offering, vv. 8-9**

Offering incense is the first thing we see Zachariah doing. But what is the particular significance of this action? Let's ask King David that question.

LORD, I cry unto thee: make haste unto me; give ear unto my voice, when I cry unto thee. Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. (Psa 141:1-2 KJV)

Did you get that? David compares prayer to both kinds of sacrifice. The actual act of prayer he puts in parallel with the burning of incense. The lifting up of the hands — that is, assuming a posture of reverent worship — he puts in parallel with the evening sacrifice on the altar of burnt offering.

So prayer as an internal act of obeisance and worship, the inner, hidden core of the spiritual life, is what the incense altar represented. It stands for the internal side of religion, the heart-felt aspect of it. The bronze altar stands for the external service of worship. Put both together, and you have genuine faith working by love.

And so, the book of Luke opens with Zechariah presenting an incense offering not just because that's what he was doing, but because what he was doing makes a point that Luke wants to make. That point, which is repeated in three ways here, is that God saves in response to the prayers of His people. Zechariah burns incense which represents prayer ascending up to the throne of God.

**B. Engaged in by the People, v. 10**

That incense is not the only kind of prayer in view, though. The whole multitude of the people was out in the temple courtyard, praying. What were they praying for? Luke does not tell us, any

more than he tells us what Zachariah and Elizabeth were praying for. It doesn't take too much to guess, though, that they were praying for the salvation of Israel, for deliverance from Herod and Rome, for the coming of the Kingdom of God. They were praying for the same things that we pray for today — the state of the church and the world, and for God to intervene and set both of those things right.

### **C. Engaged in by Zachariah, v. 13b**

And, of course, Gabriel's statement that "your prayer has been heard" tells us that Zachariah and Elizabeth had been praying too. Their prayers focused on their desire for a son — but the text gives us license to think that they wanted a son not just for themselves, but for the sake of Israel's deliverance. How does Luke describe Simeon in the next chapter? "This man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25). Well then, if Simeon is righteous and devout, and being righteous and devoted means that you are looking for the consolation of Israel, it's not too much of a stretch to suggest that the worshippers in the temple court and Zachariah himself, both on the job and off it, are praying for Israel's consolation as well.

Does that give you any comfort in prayer and any encouragement to pray? It should. When did God act to redeem His people? When they were praying for it. The priest inside, the people outside, are alike asking God to save His people through the son of promise.

When you lament the state of our culture, the ruin of our nation, and the agony of watching the Devil overrun so many things once devoted to Christ, do you take that immediately to prayer? You should. The birth of John the Baptist did not come apart from devout and long-lasting prayer.

### **III. Answer, vv. 13-17**

But the answer to that prayer did come, and the answer is recorded here.

#### **A. Zachariah Will Get the Son he'd Prayed for, v. 13**

The first answer, of course, is that Zachariah will get the son he's prayed for. God heard, and He responded by sending the Messiah's forerunner. As we'll see in a moment, that was John's role.

#### **B. Joy for Zachariah and Many Others, v. 14**

The coming of this son brings joy for Zachariah, for Mary, and for many others. This theme of joy recurs throughout Luke-Acts, for indeed, there is no more fitting response to the good news that God has acted to save us.

So — I just asked if you pray for God to deliver. Do you have joy in what He has already done to deliver us? You should; indeed, if you truly understand what the Lord has done, you will have joy.

#### **C. The Promised Son Described, vv. 15-17**

When you see the eight things that Gabriel promises about John the Baptist, you will see why Zachariah and Elizabeth and many others — including us here today — had such good reason to rejoice at his birth. He is indeed to be a wondrous child, a true son of promise whose coming marks a major step forward in the fulfillment of God's promises.

### **1. He will be Great in the Lord's Sight**

Among those born of women there is no one greater than John the Baptist. That's not my verdict; that's the testimony of Jesus Christ. John is the greatest man of the old covenant era. Gabriel's statement that he will be great in the sight of Yahweh is the literal truth. Even if the world disregards him, thinks of him as a crank, a lunatic who lives in the desert and eats grasshoppers, God sees not as man sees. The LORD looks on the heart, and what He sees in John is true greatness. John is great, not like Alexander the Great (who was great in battle) or Peter the Great (who was great at nation-building), but great because of all he does to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

### **2. He Will be a Teetotaler**

John is also going to be a teetotaler. He will not drink wine, beer, or any other form of alcohol. Is John a Nazarite? He abstains from alcohol, but we are told nothing about the hair. He is, then, seemingly only half a Nazarite. That is, he is not exactly doing what the OT Nazirite did. Instead, he is like the OT Nazirite in the important respect of total abstinence from alcoholic beverages.

### **3. He Will be Filled with the Spirit Before Birth**

Why is that? Because he is filled with the Holy Spirit of God. The effect of the Spirit can be rather close to some of the effects of alcohol. Those who are full of Him don't need wine and beer to get a buzz and feel good. They have the Holy Spirit, and so they have everything they need for a high. In fact, they have way more than that. The Holy Spirit doesn't give a merely temporary high. He is permanent, stable, eternal, and untiring. John is already filled with the Spirit, even as a tiny embryo.

Thus, to those who say "clump of cells" we say "No, human person." We know he's a human person because he can be filled with the Spirit of God! The Spirit does not come upon clumps of cells; He interacts personally with us because He is personal.

To be filled with the Spirit is contrasted with being filled with alcohol also in Eph. 5. John is, like so many of the prophets of the past, filled with the Spirit of God so that he can speak the words of God and lead the people of God.

### **4. He Will Turn Back the Sons of Israel to God**

In fact, that's what the next phrase tells us. The Spirit will clothe John for the specific task of bringing Israelites back to the Lord their God. The angel refers to Yahweh, the name of God, in a phrase that appears hundreds of times in the OT. John's mission is to take Israelites who have wandered away from full commitment and to bring them back.

### **5. He Will Prepare the Lord's Way like Elijah**

This will be how he prepares the way of the LORD. We read this sentence knowing that the rest of the Gospel frequently refers to Jesus as Lord and automatically assume that the angel is saying here that John will prepare Jesus' way. That's true enough, of course, but that's not exactly what Zachariah would have understood. Grammatically, the referent of "Him" in the phrase "go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah" is to Yahweh, the LORD mentioned in the previous sentence. John is going to go before Yahweh, and he will do so in Elijah's spirit and power. He is the successor to Elijah; he is another Elisha. He will stand up against false worship and evil

rulers, and he will boldly declare that Yahweh is Lord. That message will convert many wandering Israelites and bring them back to the true service of God. The final three clauses here describe different groups John will reclaim through his prophetic ministry, and the upshot of that ministry.

### **6. He Will Turn Back Fathers to their Children**

The first group within Israel that he will turn back is fathers. Dads, we have an absolutely key role in the kingdom of God. There's a reason that Gabriel mentions dads as one of John's major ministry targets. It's not just that he was talking to a dad, though that was part of it. He was talking to a dad because Zachariah would be the most influential person in the training of John the Baptist. You better believe that he was taking notes at this point and ready to train his son according to the list of tasks that Gabriel set forth.

The specific problem the Baptist was set to address was alienation between fathers and their children. I read a few years ago that for good or ill, mothers know the process of giving new life from the inside, while fathers know it from the outside. You will never have that intimate, organic, natural connection with your kids that your wife does. Dads, many of us relate to our children through our wives. Adults in the room, how often do you call your mom vs. how often you call your dad? I haven't asked any of you, but I'd be willing to bet that almost everyone here talks to their mom more than to their dad. That relationship is just naturally more intimate. Your dad didn't carry you in his body for 9 months. If he played with you on the floor, taught you how to shoot hoops and ice skate, and read to you, he still probably spent significantly less time with you than your mom did.

And the hazard of that natural reality is disaffection and alienation — on the part of the dads! Kids always love their dads. They want the biggest piece of you that you can give them. And dads, we often don't value that at the time. Most of us would rather spend an hour fixing the car or working out at the gym than we would reading to our little girls. I'm not saying that you should read to your little girls and let the car die. But I want us to be made a little uncomfortable by John's mission here. He was going to fathers and saying, "Turn your heart toward your children." That means "Turn your heart away from all your other pleasures and commitments and responsibilities of adulthood long enough to become as a little child. Love your offspring; forge a powerful connection of love with them, a connection that is strong enough to teach them the truth about their heavenly Father."

Let me put it clearly. The sexual confusion of our present day flows directly out of fathers' physical absence, emotional absence, or both.

For a whole bunch of LGBT people, the very notion of a heavenly Father is absurd because of how poorly their earthly fathers treated them and how egregiously their earthly fathers failed to love them.

That's just one aspect of the problem, of course. We are wired to hide from God as Father. In our world today, we understand that the Pentecostals focus on the Holy Spirit, while we Presbyterians focus on the Word — but where is the denomination that focuses on the Father? In fact, there is no question but that the Father is the most neglected person of the Trinity. Yes,

we relate to the Father through the Son and through the Spirit, and when the Christian life is functioning properly, the Son and Spirit do not distract us from the Father but rather bring us to Him. But I'm equally sure that if I were to go around and ask you "Jesus says He is the Way; what is He the way to?" no more than two or three people in this room would say "He is the way to the Father." That's what the verse says, of course — "No one comes to the Father but by me." As Aquinas put it, the Father "is the ultimate Person to whom we return." The whole Christian life is about access to the Father. Is that how you think of it? That's how John was to teach it. He was to restore the relationship between fathers and their children as one huge aspect of his mission to prepare a people ready for the appearance of the Lord.

Fathers, John the Baptist isn't coming around anytime soon. I can't book him to come preach a revival next week, otherwise I would. But this means that you and I need to turn our hearts toward our children. The more profound and loving the connection that you forge with your children, the more prepared they are, in earthly terms, to be the Lord's people. Next time you have the choice between going to Harbor Freight and having a pillow fight with your kids, choose the pillow fight.

#### **7. He Will Turn Back the Disobedient to Wisdom**

The first group John's ministry targets is fathers. The second is the disobedient. His mission is to turn them from disobedience to the wisdom that the righteous (i.e., obedient) have. He will talk to those who do not obey God and bring them to the place of repentance or turning that will allow them to imitate the wise, who righteously obey God's commands.

The previous task related specifically to the authority of fathers. This second one, I think, is worthy of imitation on the part of all in authority. If you have students, employees, children, or citizens under your authority, you should use your authority in such a way as to turn the disobedient toward the wisdom of the just. That means, of course, that you need to be righteous and wise yourself. You then need to approach the disobedient with the goal of helping them be wise too.

#### **8. He Will Prepare a People for the Lord**

The upshot of John's ministry is to prepare a people for the Lord. As Luke will show us, thanks to John's ministry, both in Judea and in Ephesus there were people who were ready to obey God. They were well-prepared for the Lord. They saw Jesus or heard the apostles and immediately joined the Christian cause. That's because John's ministry, brief as it was, had prepared them to see and to love Jesus Christ.

I would encourage you to make that your goal with your children, and, as much as possible, with all those under your care. You and I can't convert anyone, but we should strive to make ready for the Lord a people prepared to see Him and believe in Him.

#### **IV. Doubt, v. 18**

Well, this is a glowing description of what John will be like. No wonder Zachariah doubted whether it could possibly be true. He and Elizabeth had prayed — but had they prayed for a son who would turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just and make ready a people prepared for

the Lord? There is prayer for a son, and then there is prayer for a son who will be the greatest among all those born of women.

Not only does Gabriel identify this doubt as sinful; I think we can identify it as sinful too. Zachariah is not thinking in terms of “With God, nothing shall be impossible.” He is thinking in terms of “That’s not very plausible.”

Zachariah is filtering the angel’s message through what he knows about how the world works, and then saying “Your angelic word is not enough. I’m going to need a more impressive warrant before I can believe this kind of stuff.” That’s what “how shall I know this?” means. Knowledge is true, justified belief. Zachariah pushes back and says “Even if this is true, and I believe it, I don’t think I am warranted in believing it on the word of some random angel who shows up and interrupts my once-in-a-lifetime ministry event.”

#### **V. Answer, vv. 19-20**

Gabriel’s answer centers on this theme of warrant. His basic point, of course, is that his bare word is all the warrant Zachariah could possibly need to produce true, justified belief.

##### **A. Gabriel’s Identity**

The first reason to trust Gabriel’s word is his identity. He is one of only two named angels in the Bible. That’s a pretty select club, when you think about how many men and even how many false gods are named in this book. The fact that Gabriel is willing to attach his name to this prophecy is a first mark of its truthfulness. By the way, the name Gabriel is the Hebrew *gibbor El*, meaning something like “Great Warrior of God.” I wouldn’t speak too aggressively to him.

##### **B. Gabriel’s Position**

Then, Gabriel announces his position. He stands in the presence of God. Again, this is not small potatoes. Far from it. The angel is saying, “Ten minutes ago I was in the Almighty’s throne room, and now I’m here talking with you. You want to talk about status; fine, I’ll talk about status with you. You were complaining about being interrupted while doing your special incense that you will do once in your life? I wear armor and have stood in God’s presence as a guard-messenger for thousands of years.”

##### **C. Gabriel’s Mission**

The angel also repeats his mission. “I was sent to speak with you and bring you these glad tidings. The news I bring is glad news. You were supposed to be rejoicing, and instead, you were doubting.”

Zachariah questioned the angel on the basis of worldly categories; the angel clapped back and rebuked him stiffly for his faithlessness and joylessness.

When God gives you news of joy, how about you believe it and rejoice in it? That’s clearly the standard against which the angel is measuring Zachariah’s response.

##### **D. Zachariah’s Muteness**

And so, he disciplines Zechariah’s unbelief with a consequence of muteness. The many who will rejoice at John’s birth won’t get to rejoice at his conception. The angel reiterates that his words will be fulfilled in their proper time, and then, presumably, he vanishes.

## **VI. Answer Concealed, vv. 21-25, 80**

In other words, the answer to Zachariah's prayer, Elizabeth's prayer, the people's prayer, is going to be hidden.

### **A. Zachariah Can't Speak**

The dad can't speak. Zachariah can't describe the vision. He is unable to communicate what was told to him, except in writing — certainly an extremely cumbersome way to get a message to a group that large.

### **B. Elizabeth Hid Herself**

And Elizabeth hid herself. She was not about to tell the world about her pregnancy. So the dad can't speak and the mom won't see anyone. They hole up in their home in the hill country and enjoy six months of unbridled privacy.

What's Luke's point? Well, he makes it a lot clearer in v. 80: "So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel." Elijah went and hid in the desert. Moses went and hid in the desert for forty years. Like other great prophets, this one is concealed. He is hidden. He does not come before the public eye too soon. As we noted, God will act to deliver His people — but always in His own time frame. Even if He has prepared the deliverer, He does not necessarily trumpet his existence far and near. The prayers of God's people are answered, but the answer is hidden.

Are you willing to live with that? We too cry out for deliverance. "How long, O Lord?" is still a living prayer on the lips of the saints in this room. Yet know that God's Messiah lives. He is not in the deserts, but in the throne room of God, waiting until the Father finishes conquering all His and our enemies. In the meantime, fathers, turn your hearts to your children. Prepare them for the coming of the Lord, for He will come, and all His saints with Him. Amen.