

## The Promises of God

Luke 1:57-80

Isn't Zacharias getting a little ahead of himself? After all, in verse 68, he says God has redeemed His people. But how can that be true? At the time Zacharias spoke these words, the Roman Imperial grip on Judea was as tight as ever. John the Baptist was a newborn – he hadn't had a chance to engage in any of his ministry yet. And of course, the Messiah to Whom John would bear witness isn't born until chapter 2, the passage we'll read next week. So, why does Zacharias act like God's plan had already been completed?

Well, he's not the only prophet who used this sort of language. Many others throughout the Old Testament employ what theologians like to call the "Prophetic Perfect," speaking of things yet to come as though they had already taken place. They do this to indicate the absolute certainty of the things they are predicting. We might put it this way: if God says it, even though it's going to happen sometime in the future, it's as good as done.

Of course, what makes Zacharias' use of the prophetic perfect so striking is that he did not, at the beginning of this chapter, believe in the certainty of such prophecy. No, when the angel Gabriel showed up at the Temple and first told Zacharias that he and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a baby, Zacharias didn't believe him at first. Instead, Zacharias insisted that such a thing was impossible, because he and his wife had simply passed the point where they were biologically able to have children. It is because of such unbelief that Zacharias couldn't talk at all at the beginning of this passage – his ability to speak had been taken away from him because of his lack of faith in God's power to do the impossible.

Well, Zacharias obviously learned the lesson of his enforced quiet time. For when he and Elizabeth had to pick out a name for their miracle baby, he followed Gabriel's instructions to the letter, insisting on naming the baby John. And at that very moment, in that demonstration of obedience to God's commands, his tongue was loosed and he was once again able to speak. And the first thing that this former skeptic says is in the prophetic perfect, asserting that if God says it, it is as good as done. John's birth left no more room for Zacharias to doubt the reliability of God's promises.

So, before we get into the specifics of what Zacharias said, let's first pay attention to the lesson of the prophetic perfect. For maybe during this time of the year, you need a little persuasion that whatever God promises is as good as done. Maybe you're having a hard time making ends meet and you're wondering if God really will give you your daily bread. Maybe in the midst of your pain or chronic illness, you're wondering about God's promise of abundant life. Maybe you're wondering if God can forgive something you've said or done. Maybe your grief over the loss of a loved one during this time when so many others are surrounded by family and friends has made you wonder if God is really there, and if He really cares about you. If that's the case, Zacharias's prophecy has a lot to say to you.

For Zacharias doesn't just use the prophetic perfect to reenforce his certainty about the promises Gabriel had made to him. No, in verses 69 and 70, he also indicates how the imminent coming, first of God's messenger and then of the Messiah Himself, are fulfillments of other prophecies that God had already made to His people over the span of hundreds of years. We saw just a few examples in our responsive reading this morning – how so many prophets foretold the coming of a Son

of David. And in his own prophecy Zacharias rejoices because all their predictions were about to come true.

And that's the amazing truth that we celebrate during this time of year – that God would keep His promise to send us a Messiah. But Zacharias gives us an even greater reason for rejoicing in verse 68, when he says that God hasn't just redeemed His people in Christ – He has visited us. He has become one of us in every way. Just so, we marvel at the fact that God's Messiah would not appear at the head of legions of angels, but instead would allow Himself to be born into poverty and obscurity. Moreover, we are amazed that Jesus would grow up to experience all the same sort of everyday human problems that we face. For He experienced hunger and thirst. He endured grief and loss, rejection and betrayal, even by his closest friends. No, with the coming of Christ, we have no room to wonder whether God keeps His promises. For in Immanuel, God Himself is with us.

And having become a firm believer in God's faithfulness, Zacharias went on to embrace all the specific predictions Gabriel had made about his newborn son John. Far from remaining a skeptic, in verses 76 through 79 Zacharias rejoices in everything both Gabriel and the prophet Malachi said about his son's coming ministry: that John would be God's messenger, a messenger who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord, a messenger who would turn the hearts of fathers and children back toward each other.

And John would indeed go on to do all this. As Luke explains starting in chapter 3, John shined the light of God's truth into the darkness of sin, exposing all the ways in which God's people were failing to love God and failing to love each other. John would preach the need for repentance, the need for people to turn away from sin and self and to turn to God in faith, repentance that is necessary for anyone to enter into a right relationship with God.

And by pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God Who would take away the sin of the world, John would illustrate not only the problem of sin but its solution. Together, he and Jesus would make it clear that we all need much more than a self-help program, much more than a redoubled effort to pursue personal holiness – we need a sacrificial Lamb, a Savior Who would lay down His life in order that our sins might be forgiven.

And that's why John's name is so important – it means "Yahweh is gracious." For God was indeed gracious to send John to confront the people with their sin so that they might repent and turn back to God. God was gracious to allow John to bear witness to Jesus so that all those who listened to John's preaching might turn to Christ and be saved.

And if we would build our faith in God, we would do well to remember not only God's faithfulness to keep His promises to us, but also God's grace in pouring out His blessings on us. After all, we've seen the cross. We know the extent to which God has gone to save us and to make us His own. So, even in the midst of our worst problems, even when we face loneliness or grief or pain, how can we doubt that God is with us? How can we doubt that God cares for us?

But let's go a bit further, for Zacharias' prophecy and John's fulfillment of that prophecy in his preaching ministry challenge us in what is perhaps a deeper way. For isn't it true that so many of our disappointments and discouragements spring, in one way or another, from unfulfilled expectations?

Deep down, don't we all think we deserve to live pain-free, happy, fulfilled lives? In fact, isn't that how we usually understand Jesus' promise to give us abundant life?

If that's the case, we need to take another look at verses 74 and 75. For the reason that Zacharias rejoices in the coming of the Messiah, the reason he's so overjoyed that God would keep His promises and be gracious to us, the reason he's so excited about God's people being delivered from the hand of their enemies is not so they can all be happy, but so they can all be holy. He looks forward to the time when God's people will be free, not to please themselves, but to please God. His greatest desire is that God's people would be able to serve the Lord without any more fear of misunderstanding or humiliation. Zacharias longs for deliverance from foreign rulers so that the people of God might be able to pursue righteousness, living according to God's law of love for Him and for His people.

Do we share such a longing? We should, because Jesus didn't come to keep His promises and pour out His grace on us so that we could go on living for ourselves. No, as a good husband longs for his wife's exclusive devotion, so Jesus gave Himself up for the Church so that we could in turn give ourselves completely to Him, living for His glory, and demonstrating His love by loving others in the same sort of self-sacrificial way that He has loved us.

This is why repentance and faith always go hand-in-hand – for the more we turn to Jesus, the more we believe in His promises and rely on His grace, the more we will turn away from ourselves and the things of this world. The more we trust Jesus, the more we should long for His will to be done in our lives, as well as in the world around us. And to the extent that our relationship with God takes first place in our desires, our personal discouragements and disappointments will in fact fade into the background, as we trust more and more in the Lord's sovereign will and His providential care, as we trust Jesus to direct the flow of our lives and to give us what He knows is best for us each day.

And God's sovereignty turns out to be the touchstone, the anchor of Zacharias' prophecy. For before he gets to any of the particulars of God's faithfulness, or of God's forgiveness, or of God's righteousness, before he focuses on any of the ways in which God's grace makes an impact on our individual lives, Zacharias celebrates God's might and majesty, God's power to redeem His people.

Look at how he describes the coming Messiah starting in verse 69. He calls Jesus a horn of salvation, an image which communicates Jesus' power to save. In verse 71, he says that Jesus will save us from all our enemies, from the hands of those who hate us. And in this way Zacharias is echoing the words of the Old Testament prophets we read responsively this morning, the prophets who expected the Messiah to smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips to slay the wicked, burning up all the arrogant and evildoers like so much chaff. The prophets looked forward to the day when their mighty, sovereign Messiah would extend His divine jurisdiction to the ends of the earth, even to the coastlands where the wicked Philistines lived at the time.

And as we trust in God's faithful promises, and as we rely on God's amazing grace, and as we seek to live out more of the righteousness of Christ in our own lives, we can look forward to Jesus' second coming for the same reason. For He will come, not this time as a Babe in a manger but in power and glory, not this time to die on a cruel cross, but to be surrounded by legions of avenging angels.

But if His coming will be the best news of all for those who trust in His faithfulness and forgiveness, if His coming will fulfill the fondest wish of those who bow the knee to His righteous rule in

our lives, it will not be such good news for those who hate Him and His people, for those who continue to reject God's law of love, for those who continue to live only for themselves. For the sad truth is that those who continue to push God away, those who don't want to have anything to do with God, well, one day they'll get what they want. But those who reject the only source of light and life and love will eventually have to do without all those things forever.

But Zacharias doesn't focus on the bad news, and in this season of the year, neither should we. Instead, let us turn aside from our unrealistic expectations, trusting in God's faithfulness to keep His promises. Let us rejoice that God has provided a Savior who loves us enough to die so that we might be forgiven. And let us respond to His grace with righteous living, loving God and loving one another, living for His glory and for the good of our neighbors. In this way, we won't need to fear His coming but can rejoice for the same reason that Zacharias did – that in the birth of Jesus Christ, God has visited and redeemed His people. So let us rejoice. Let all the world rejoice that the Lord has come.