

The Promises of God

Luke 1:57-80

Isn't Zacharias getting a little ahead of himself? After all, in the first several verses of his prophecy, he makes it sound like God had already saved His people from their enemies, from the hand of all who hated them. But how could that be? 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 hadn't even been born – that wouldn't happen until the next chapter. So, why does Zacharias act like God's plan had already been completed?

Well, he's not the only prophet who spoke this way. Many others throughout the Old Testament use 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 prophecy. No, when the angel Gabriel showed up at the Temple and said that Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a baby, Zacharias didn't believe him at first. Instead, he insisted that such a thing was impossible – they 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 was removed because of his lack of faith.

Well, Zacharias obviously got the point of his enforced quiet time. For when he and Elizabeth had to pick out a name for their miracle baby, he insisted on following Gabriel's instructions and naming him John. And at that very moment, in that example 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. Maybe during this time of the year, we 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 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.

For Zacharias doesn't just use the prophetic perfect to underline the truth of God's faithfulness in his message. No, in verses 69 and 70, he indicates how the imminent coming first of God's messenger and then of the Messiah Himself are fulfillments of the prophecies that God gave to His people throughout the centuries. We saw just a few examples in our responsive reading this morning of how

the prophets foretold the coming of a Son of David, and in his own prophecy Zacharias rejoices in how they were all about to come true.

And that's the amazing truth that we celebrate during this time of year – that God would keep His promise not just to send us a Messiah, but as Zacharias says, to visit us, to become one of us in every way. We are amazed that the 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 marvel that He would grow up to experience all the same sort of everyday human problems that we face. 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 embraced all the specific things Gabriel predicted about his newborn son John. Far from remaining a skeptic, in verses 76 through 79 he rejoiced in everything both Gabriel and the prophet Malachi said about his son's coming ministry: that John would be God's messenger, the one coming in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord, the one who would restore the hearts of the fathers and children to each other.

And John would indeed do all this. As Luke explains starting in chapter 3, John would shine the light of 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, which 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 the people needed more than a self-help program, more than a redoubled effort to pursue personal holiness – they would 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." God was 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 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 be able to serve Him without any more fear of misunderstanding or humiliation. He 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.

Is such longing a characteristic of our own lives? It should be, because Jesus didn't come to sacrifice Himself for us so that we could continue 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 Him, the more we will turn away from ourselves and the things of this world. The more we trust Him, 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 the presence of God takes first place in our desires, our personal discouragements and disappointments will fade into the background, as we trust more and more in His sovereign will and His providential care, as we trust Him to direct the flow of our lives and to give us what He knows is best for us each day.

For that is the touchstone, the anchor of Zacharias' his prophecy. Before he gets to 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, he 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 His 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 Messiah extending His righteous justice to the ends of the earth, even to the coastlands where the wicked Philistines lived at the time.

And we can rely on the truth of that prophecy as well, for Christ is indeed coming again, not this time as a Babe in a manger to hang on a cruel cross, but in power and glory, 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 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 will one day get what they want. 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 in 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.