

What's in a Name?
Promises, Prayers, and Prophecies –
Revealed in the Names

Texts: Luke 1:5-25

Luke 1:76-78 *“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; For you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE HIS WAYS; To give to His people the knowledge of salvation By the forgiveness of their sins, Because of the tender mercy of our God, With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us,”*

Malachi 3:1-4. *“Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts. “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. “He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness. “Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.”*

Isaiah 40:3-5 *“A voice is calling, “Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. “Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. ””*

Malachi 4:5-6 *“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. “He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.””*

Introduction

As we approach this season of our year, our hearts and minds are filled with all sorts of thoughts – most of them good and needful – most designed to ensure that those we love and care about are not forgotten in the busyness of the Christmas season.

For instance – our minds and our schedules are filled with remembering to buy the right gift for the right person, wrap it, and ensure that it arrives at the right place by the right time. Or, perhaps we are busy scheduling parties, get-togethers, planning meals, and deciding who is going to go to whose house this year for Christmas.

And on top of our personal engagements and plans for this season we can't forget the work parties and gift exchanges, the Christmas programs our children have at school, and of course, the special events and activities that take place each year at our church.

By the time you add it all up on the energy and resource meter – Christmas becomes a marathon that we run each year hoping we make it to New Year's without forgetting anyone or dropping any of the major balls we have in the air during this season.

Sadly, for some of us, it is almost a relief when our church doesn't really do much or add much beyond a Christmas eve service to our schedules and calendars during this season, because, in our minds, Christmas is the time for our family to celebrate and because that takes so much time and energy, it is hard to think of adding much more to our plates.

Frankly, for many of us, Christmas is a joyful exhausting chaotic time filled with food, festivities, gifts, and familial celebrations and the reason God gave us January is to recover and recuperate from all of this!

But this is not how it was nor how God intended this time to be when He began to put in motion the events that would eventually result in the season the world has come to celebrate as Christmas.

So, what did God intend for His people to think when He began to put in motion the monumental events that would lead up to the birth of His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ?

Perhaps the best place for us to start is in Luke's gospel, not with the announcement of the birth of Messiah but rather with an earlier announcement made about the birth of another son whose coming had been promised many centuries earlier by a prophet named Malachi who recorded an ancient promise of God that went like this:

Mal 3:1 “Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts.”

Mal 4:5-6 “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.””

For four hundred years God's people had pondered the meaning of those ancient prophecies and promises God had made to them. Who would this messenger be? When would he arrive? Would he truly be Elijah returning from heaven in the same fiery chariot that took him to heaven many centuries earlier? What did all this mean? And though they did not understand all that would be involved in this Elijah figure, they did long for the appearing of the One who would come after him – Christ the Messiah!

As the years went by, their longing grew and by the time Luke records these events, the godly people in Israel who happened to be in Jerusalem would find their way to the temple for either the morning or evening prayer time when a priest entered into the holy place to pour incense on the altar and offer up a prayer to God representing the prayers and hopes of Israel – that Yahweh would send the Messiah to deliver them from their enemies and restore to them the blessings of Messiah's coming kingdom.

By the time Luke introduces us to Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth – Israel has been under bondage for more than 600 years. It has been six centuries since the last Davidic king occupied the throne – the current king reigning

over them wasn't of the Davidic line – he wasn't even a Jew. Herod was a puppet king installed by the real rulers over them, the Romans. Before the Romans, the Ptolemy's from Egypt had ruled over them. Before them, it was Alexander and the Greeks. Prior to him, they had been ruled by the Persians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians.

They had existed under the heavy hand of bondage for many long centuries and now as they gathered daily at the temple for prayer, they longed for God to fulfill His promise to send the *Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,*” says the LORD of hosts.”

Year after year, month after month, week after week, and day after day the faithful gathered at the temple to pray – that somewhere in Israel a virgin would conceive and give birth to the Messiah. And generation after generation, Israel remained barren!

Perhaps that describes some of us this morning – we believe God can and will do what He has promised. We are praying regularly for it. We are faithfully attending to all that God has asked for us – but month after month, year after year has gone by and though we still pray – we don't really think God will actually answer – at least not now. And the proof of this is that like Israel, **we have stopped being surprised** when God doesn't answer and have come to believe that this is the status quo.

And Luke intrudes into our status quo, “ho-hum” Christian routine with a story that is filled with unexpected joy and miraculous intervention all designed to remind us that God hears, sees, remembers, and answers!

But first, the setting of this marvelous tale – a barren couple representing a barren nation; a praying people at a praying time and place; and a reason for great joy, not just momentary gladness.

1. A barren couple and a barren nation (1:5-7)

“In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.”

- When God begins to act, He acts at the right time, at the right place, and with the right people – who love, obey, and who serve God.
- Luke introduces us to an elderly couple well past the age of childbearing. He wants us to know they are both of the priestly lineage, they were both righteous before the Lord, and though they were not sinless, they had lived blamelessly with regard to the statutes and commandments of the Torah of God. And yet – they were barren.
- Barrenness is difficult under any circumstance – but for an OT priest and his wife, it was especially hard given the social implications that were commonly believed in Israel – barrenness was seen as a sign that God was displeased with something in the life of either the husband or wife.
- Luke establishes their righteous standing before the Lord and their blamelessness in the sight of the Law to get you to think deeply about why this couple is barren. Clearly the reason is not due to some defect in their character or some disobedience in their behavior.
- So why are they barren? Luke’s answer is to point you to a much greater barrenness – the barrenness of Israel in relationship to the Son whose birth the nation longed and prayed to receive.
- Further, Luke wants you to think of another couple in the OT who like Zechariah and Elizabeth were also barren – Abraham and Sarah!
- Something monumental is about to happen – the long-awaited Son is finally about to arrive – but before He comes, there must be another miraculous birth – that of the forerunner God promised to send. And that son was about to be born to this faithful, elderly couple.

2. A praying people at a praying time and place (1:8-10)

“Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen

by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.”

- Zechariah was performing his priestly service before God and according to the custom of the priesthood of his day.
- Every day, a large number of priests had to officiate at the central place of worship in Israel – the temple.
- In order to facilitate this in an orderly fashion, the tribe of Levi was organized into 24 divisions with approximately 1000 priests in every division. Zechariah was in the division of Abijah.
- Twice a year, priests from these divisions would come to officiate and attend to all the different aspects of Temple worship.
- One of those duties was to prepare the sacred altar of incense in the Holy Place for a selected, consecrated priest to pour approximately a gallon of the sacred incense on the coals – as the sweet smelling smoke rose from the altar, it represented the corporate prayers of all Israel. To these prayers, the officiating priest would add his prayer and then he would exit and bless the people with the blessing Aaron had proclaimed over the nation: *“The LORD bless you, and keep you; The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.”* (Numbers 6:24–26)
- To be chosen for this duty was a huge honor for a priest – so great that it could only happen once in his lifetime. Many priests spent their entire lives serving at their allotted time and were never chosen for this exalted honor.
- There was an appointed time in the morning and again at about 4 in the afternoon – and generally, during the afternoon/evening prayer time the godly Israelites who were praying for the Hope of Israel to appear would gather outside to pray.
- So Zechariah was at the place of prayer, chosen to offer the appointed prayer, and gathered with the godly Israelites who were praying!
- ***Luke wants us to pick up this prayer theme as central to the nation-shaking events that are about to unfold in this chapter.***

3. A great joy and not just momentary gladness (1:13-14)

“But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.”

- Zechariah is given great reason to rejoice – his prayer has been heard! The idea behind the word “heard” is not just that God received the prayer but rather that God is about to answer his prayer!
- No doubt for many years this faithful couple had been praying that God would hear and answer their prayers for a child.
- In an even greater way, Zechariah (and Elizabeth) had been praying for God to give their barren nation the son He had promised!
- And now, in a most unexpected and unanticipated way, God breaks into Zechariah’s life with wonderful news – your prayers are answered! The sons (plural) are on their way!
- Zechariah, you and Elizabeth will have great personal joy when your son is born! But your private joy will be accompanied by an even greater joy – the joy of many at the birth of your son – because of who your son is going to be before the Lord and what he is destined to do for the Lord!
- Your son will be great in the sight of the Lord – in fact, the greatest human who ever lived outside of Jesus himself! Why? Because of his appointed role – he is to announce the coming of the greater Son – God’s Son! And when this Son arrives, many more will rejoice.
- Zechariah, this is why you and Elizabeth will rejoice when John is born and so will many more!
- There is “great joy” coming – not just momentary gladness that you will have a son. But a much greater joy – the joy described by the Old Testament prophets that would come to the entire nation when Messiah comes! That great joy is what Gabriel was talking about!

These three observations all lead to one massive conclusion – God is on the move in very big and monumental ways! So, let’s jump into the story in Luke 1:5-25 and let’s let Luke unfold the impact of his story through the names of the four main characters we are about to meet *as they teach us that with God who hears and acts, nothing is impossible!*

I. Zechariah – God Remembers! (1:13, 18)

The name Zechariah means “God remembers” – and in choosing Zechariah to be the father of the Messianic forerunner, God was announcing to the entire nation that He remembers his word!

A. God Remembers (1:13)

“But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.”

- Zechariah – God has heard your prayers and He has remembered His promises to Abraham and to David!
- Not only has He heard and remembered – the time He has appointed to answer those prayers and fulfill His promises has finally come and it will start with God answering a much smaller prayer – your personal prayer that Elizabeth would have a son!
- You and she will have a son and when he is born, you are to name him the name God has appointed for him – John.
- This is a stunning answer on many levels – Zechariah and Elizabeth are well past the age when bearing children was possible.
- Without a doubt, they had prayed fervently during the years when childbirth was a realistic possibility – but as time and age came upon them, their prayers for a child of their own had become just a sorrowful memory of what might have been.
- While Zechariah may still have prayed for a son, it was relegated into the same category that he placed his greater prayer for God’s Son to come – someday God would answer but not in my lifetime!
- God sent Gabriel to interrupt such perfunctory, perfectly regulated praying with a wonderful announcement – Zechariah, God has heard and is answering your prayers – all of them!!!
- God remembers His promises and His people – then and now!

B. Zechariah Doesn’t (1:18)

“Zacharias said to the angel, “How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.””

- Gabriel, how is this possible? We are so advanced in age that such a thing is humanly impossible! Zechariah forgot that God had done this exact thing in Gen 17 with Abraham and Sarah when they were much older than he and Elizabeth!
- And so, he demands a sign. This is not an act of weak faith, it is an act of unbelief that God would actually do the thing for which he had been praying for so long! But God is gracious!

II. **John – God is Gracious! (1:14-17)**

“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 he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb. “And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. “It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

- In spite of Zechariah’s unbelief, God exhibits unbelievable graciousness to him. But Zechariah is not the only unbeliever nor even the greatest unbeliever – the nation was marked by unbelief!
- And in the face of this unbelieving priest and His unbelieving people, God determines to show His great mercy and grace!
- And so He sends Zechariah and Elizabeth a son named John!
- John means “God is gracious.”

A. His Character

- He will be great in the sight of the Lord – evidenced by the Lord’s assessment of John’s life (Luke 7:28).
- He will be filled and controlled by the Spirit even in the womb – evidenced when Mary arrived (1:41-42)

B. His Identity

- He will be the promised forerunner (Mal 3:1)
- He will have the spirit and power of Elijah (Mal 4:5-6)

C. His Ministry

- He will make ready a people prepared to receive the Lord
- By calling them to repentance
- By calling them to restored relationships
- He will announce the One who will remove the curse

As you can imagine, Zechariah is overcome with confusion and fear! He had come into the holy place alone and now, standing at the right side of the altar was a person – an angelic being!

III. Gabriel – God is Strong! (1:18-20)

“Zacharias said to the angel, ‘How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.’ The angel answered and said to him, ‘I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ‘And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.’”

- This was no ordinary day in Zechariah’s priestly career – but even on this amazing day, he never expected to see, much less talk to an angel like Gabriel.
- Understandably, Zechariah is taken back and stunned by what he is seeing and hearing!
- He and Elizabeth are going to have a son at their age – that was news enough. But to hear who their son would be in the redemptive plan of God was more than he could comprehend.

A. The Request for Proof

“Zacharias said to the angel, ‘How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.’”

- How can this be? First, how can this happen physically? And second, how in the world could our son be the forerunner of Messiah?
- I NEED PROOF before I go and tell people what I have seen and heard! I need a sign that the good news you are giving me will actually happen the way you say it will happen.

B. The Response Presented

” The angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

- The angel reveals His identity – I am Gabriel and I stand in the presence of God!
- Gabriel means “God is Strong!”
- The last time Gabriel appeared in Scripture was 500 years earlier when he appeared to Daniel with an astonishing prophecy – consisting of wonderful news for God’s people!
- Zechariah, for 500 years I have been entrusted with this good news – and the God I serve is strong and mighty to do it!

C. The Reason Given

““And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.””

- Zechariah failed to believe God’s message and so he became the sign – he would not be able to speak or hear until God’s Word came true.
- Zechariah became the sign of a nation that would, like him, struggle to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was their long-awaited messianic champion.
- Like him, they would be deaf and mute with regard to the message of God’s redemption.
- But – God would eventually be gracious to them as a nation just as He was with Zechariah on the day John was born.
- One day in the future, the entire nation will have ears to hear and a mouth to praise Jesus at the time of His second coming!

IV. Elizabeth – God is Favorable! (1:24-25)

“After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, “This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men.””

A. Her Blessing (1:24)

“After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months,

B. Her Confession

saying, “This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men!”

- The name “Elizabeth” means either “*God is my fortune*” or “*God is the one by whom I swear*” – either way, her name implies ***her trust in what God has sworn or promised!***
- Luke is silent about how Zechariah communicated the news he had received – and there is a tasteful silence about the natural process by which this aged couple conceived. All we are told is that they returned home and shortly after, Elizabeth became pregnant.
- What Luke does tell us is her response to this amazing course of events – unlike her husband’s lack of belief, she is convinced that God has done this out of His underserved favor over them and as a result her disgrace is now gone! He has vindicated her in the eyes of her community!

Conclusion: So, what are we to make of this amazing story?

Four important Spiritual Reminders:

1. God Remembers Our Praying – even when it appears He has forgotten or the time for the answer is long past due.

- God remembers us; we must remember Him in our daily lives!

2. God is merciful and gracious – He is constantly displaying His mercy and His grace even when it appears He has forgotten or failed to give us the thing for which we have been praying!

- We must rest in His merciful provision and gracious providence and we must display this by continuing to pray confidently and fervently.

3. God is Strong and Mighty – what is impossible in our strength is unfailingly possible for Him.

- What God has promised, He has the power to fulfill and He will!

4. God is Favorable toward Us!

- Not only does God have the power to do the impossible, He uses that power for our good! He is favorable to us!
- Like Elizabeth, we can expect good and gracious things from our mighty God if we are faithful to His word and are willing to rest and wait patiently for His plan!