

Your Prayer Has Been Heard

Luke 1:1-25

Key Verse: 1:13

“But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.”

This past thanksgiving Anna and I hosted a small thanksgiving gathering with my two brothers and their significant others. Like every year, I was commissioned to cook the turkey. I had been doing it for several years, so I was fairly confident that everything would turn out fine. So being a little overconfident and just being busy I didn't put much thought into the preparations this. On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, I had yet to even buy a turkey nor any of the materials we needed to cook it. So we scrambled to the grocery store and got what we could. That night at about 10 PM I realized I have a rock solid frozen turkey that needs to be thawed, brined, and cooked in time for our meal the next day. My problem was that I didn't prepare to prepare my turkey to be cooked. My lack of preparation put me in a bind the night before a big meal.

I think most of us would agree that preparation for anything is important. Like if you want to do well on a test, how you prepare for it is important. If you want to cook a delicious meal, being prepared with all the necessary ingredients beforehand requires looking over a recipe, checking what ingredients you already have, making a list of what you need, and going grocery shopping to pick up what's missing. All that is needed, before you even start cooking.

Well, today, is the first Sunday of December. In the month of December, we start to see Christmas lights go up everywhere. We start hearing Christmas songs on the radio and in the stores we go to. A lot of effort goes into to preparing a holiday spirit. Most retailers do so to get you in the mood to spend as much money as possible in their stores. But what about us as God's children? What are we doing to prepare our hearts to celebrate the birthday of our Savior?

Today's passage allows us the opportunity to start the Christmas season thinking about Zechariah and Elizabeth. We are in the first chapter of Luke's gospel. And this chapter provides for us more details on the events leading up to Jesus' birth than any of the other gospel writers. So Luke's gospel is always a great book to study during Christmas. These 80 verses in chapter one, set the stage for Jesus' birth in chapter 2. Luke is the only gospel to start the story of Jesus' birth with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. So Luke must have considered their

Your Prayer Has Been Heard

story to be one that was overlooked, yet to be a very important part of God's history.

Zechariah and Elizabeth prepared a place for John the Baptist to be born, who would prepare the way for Jesus to come. My prayer through this message is that their story would do for us the same thing it did in Jesus' time, prepare our hearts to receive Jesus this Christmas season. Let's open our up our hearts to this passage and see what we can learn from an old and faithful couple. I pray that we may see God who is always at work, bringing Christ into our lives.

I. Luke's Purpose (1-4)

Let's begin our study of today's passage by looking at the first four verses. These verses serve as the prologue for not only the gospel of Luke, but probably also the book of Acts. Both books that Luke wrote. Luke's careful research was based on three things:

Firstly, from verse one we see that his research builds on many who have undertaken to draw up an account of the things fulfilled by Christ. So Luke is admitting to reference other writings, which surely would have included Matthew and Mark's gospel.

Secondly, from verse two we see that he consulted first hand eyewitnesses and servants of the word. In other words, he consulted primary sources. Many believe that Luke spent much time with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and in this way able to gather many details of these events leading up to Jesus' birth that the other gospel writers may not have known about.

Finally, in verse three we see that he himself carefully investigated everything from the beginning. His purpose was to persuade Theophilus that Christ was true.

The beautiful thing about Luke's gospel is that it is grounded in facts and in history. Luke puts the story of Jesus in the context of the history and events that he was born into. So Jesus' story is not just a mystical or allegorical story. These historical facts of Jesus are important because Jesus' story is the centerpiece of our faith. His birth, death, and resurrection are the verification that God has fulfilled his promises and we are blessed by what Jesus came into this world to accomplish. We are each being pulled into the story of God bringing Jesus into the world. Let's keep this big picture of God and history in mind as we think about Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Your Prayer Has Been Heard

II. Zechariah and Elizabeth: Righteous, Blameless, Childless (5-10)

Let's look at verse 5. It says, **"In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron"**. King Herod was granted kingship by Rome at around 40 B.C. and was made king of Judea among other provinces. So this was a time when God's chosen people were under foreign rule. King Herod is known as being the "greatest builder in Jewish History," but at the same time, his success came as a result of extreme taxation that weighed heavily on the people of Judea. He was also very insecure about his throne, and if you remember, when he heard that Jesus, the "King of the Jews" was born, he ordered all baby boys to be killed.

We also know that when Zechariah and Elizabeth were born that it had been more than 450 years since God spoke to his people through the prophet Malachi. Since that time, no genuine prophetic voice was heard. So generations passed with little to no sign of God. Many of God's people felt abandoned by God. Many felt they were even being punished by God.

What we can see is that historically it was a dark time. Spiritually it was a dark time. But in this context we find Zechariah and Elizabeth, both from priestly lineages.

Let's look more closely at the life and faith of this beautiful elderly couple starting with verse 6 and 7. Let's read them together. **"Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old."**

Luke makes two comments about their lifestyle. First he says they were righteous in the sight of God. And second, he says they were observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

Zachariah's primary job as a priest was to care for the duties of the temple. This responsibility was given to the Levites by God as a special choosing among God's chosen people Israel. The priests served the three major festival of the year. On top of that, all the priests were then divided into 24 divisions, each of which served the temple for one week, twice a year. They were not to own land or have secular jobs or make any money for themselves.

Your Prayer Has Been Heard

Practically speaking, the life of priest was not glamorous. Many of the responsibilities went unnoticed. It involved mundane activities like cleaning the temple and keeping the lamp burning. It was a life set apart for the practical services for the temple and worship. And we can see that Zechariah was faithfully serving his duty even in his old age.

But this commitment goes beyond just a sense of duty. When Luke says Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly, it shows that they were both faithful to God from their hearts. Only a very few people in the Bible are called blameless. The Bible refers to Noah and Job as being blameless (Gen 6:9, Job 1:8). King David refers to himself as being blameless in a song towards the end of his life (2 Samuel 22:24). So Zechariah and Elizabeth were a very special couple. They believed in God and depended on his faithfulness. And in their love for and devotion to God they lived their life the way God wanted them to live. They were people who made God's commandments a way of life, living in such a way so as not to give anyone an occasion to hold anything against them. In this way they could be found righteous and blameless before God.

Luke also tells us that they were childless. If we put ourselves in their place for a moment, we can understand how difficult it would have been to be a priestly family and not have children. People of those times believed bareness to be a punishment from God. So in spite of their deep faith, tremendous service and commitment to God, there was something they really wanted, but they did not receive it. This childlessness actually caused them to feel disgraced as Elizabeth reveals in verse 25. This problem could only be solved by a divine intervention from God and it appeared as if He was not answering.

We can understand Zechariah and Elizabeth's disgrace. When people are faithfully serving God, we have this tendency to feel like if God loves me he'd give me what I'm asking for. Especially for something like a child right? The prayer for a child is not something unreasonable for a married couple, yet when God doesn't answer this prayer it is difficult to understand why.

We all reach out to God for his divine intervention for the things we are troubled by that are not unreasonable. Whether it's financial hardship, or chronic illness, or a prayer for a spouse, or a broken relationships, or wandering children. We feel deep disappointment, especially when it seems like God is not there for us

Your Prayer Has Been Heard

when we need him. We are tempted to despair and lose the joy and meaning in our life of faith.

In the face of these things, what can we learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth? We see that they stayed the course. They lived a Godly life in a way that pleases Him. And they remained faithful to what God called them to do. This one line in the Bible tells us so much who this couple was. The way they chose to live their lives came from a deep faith and trust in God and who He was. They had faith that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Heb 11:6). May God give all of us such a deep faith that trusts God in the daily grind of the life of faith.

III. Your Prayer Has Been Heard (8-13)

Look at verses 8-10. That time of the year came when Zechariah's division was on duty for the week and he was chosen by lot to go into the temple of the Lord to burn incense. So what that meant was that Zechariah was to enter the Holy Place of the temple, which was just outside the Most Holy Place. His service was to pray intercessory prayers for God's people. And while he did so, assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Look at verse 11, **"Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense."** This startled Zechariah and he became gripped with fear. But what did this angel say to Zechariah? Let's read verse 13 together, our key verse. **"But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.'"**

First we see that the angel came to bring good news. He says, **"do not be afraid."** Then the angel called Zechariah by name. Through these words we can see that even though we are sinners, God wants to draw near to us. He wants to come into our lives, he wants to answer our prayers, and he wants to give us good news. God works in a very personal way like this. He knows us by name, and he knows the longing of our hearts.

Then the angel says to Zechariah, "your prayer has been heard." So it's clear that Zechariah has been praying. Praying for what? Well, we don't know for sure. But the Angels next statement gives us a clue. He says, **"your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son."** So when Zechariah was supposed to be praying intercessory

Your Prayer Has Been Heard

prayers for the people of God, it looks like he snuck in a personal prayer topic. It is pretty obvious that Zechariah and his wife were praying for a son.

But most likely Zechariah prayed for even more. As a priest I'm sure he cried out to God that He would reveal himself to them in those dark times. As a person of God's chosen people Israel, I'm sure he prayed to God for the long awaited Messiah. And in a big way, God shows up and answers all of those prayers at once through a child. God would send the forerunner of the Messiah through Zechariah.

The angel's words, "**Your prayer has been heard.**" show us that God is listening and he does answer our prayers. We don't always get what we want when we pray, but we can be sure that God hears. God wants to answer our prayers and when he does it is part of His bigger plan to bring Christ into the world. As the God of history, he is faithfully working out his redemptive plan in and through us even, through the problems of our lives.

The reality is that God cannot just say yes to everyone's prayer request. It actually wouldn't work out very well if he did. In the movie Bruce Almighty, the main character, Bruce Nolan is given God's power. One of the things he does is turn on his computer overwhelmed by millions of prayer requests that he needs to answer. So in frustration he automatically replies yes to every prayer request that came in. Then he says, "There you go, now everybody's happy." This of course caused utter chaos in the world.

It's really a silly and ridiculous movie, and I don't mean to make light of unanswered prayer. But I pray that we can all have the faith and assurance to know that God hears us. The angel's words to Zechariah are for us too. "**Your prayer has been heard.**" They encourage us to lift our eyes to heaven and see what God is doing. They encourage us to pray for the desires of our heart, but while doing so, seeking what is right for us in God's sight. It encourages us not to be fatalistic and not to give in to despair, but to continue in prayer trusting that God is control of history, and so he is in control of my life. And He will answer, in His way, in His time, in a way that brings out the best in us, and in a way that He can work to bring Christ into the world. In this way let's continue to pray for the things we need his divine intervention for.

Your Prayer Has Been Heard

IV. To make ready a people prepared for the Lord (14-25)

The angel continues in verses 14-17 with more details about how God was answering their prayers. These verses show us that this newborn baby will be a joy and a delight, not just for Zechariah and Elizabeth, but for all God's people. He would be great in God's sight. He would be very specially filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb. And he would be set apart to live an ascetic life. And his main work is beautiful and is found in verses 16 and 17. Let's read those together. **"He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."** God used this elderly couple to bring John into the world to reveal His divine power and authority. Their child was clearly an act of God. This miraculous birth of John would prepare the miraculous birth of Jesus. Their child would bring back the people of Israel to the Lord their God. He would turn the hearts of the parent to their children, and make ready a people prepared for the Lord. John was the answer to Zechariah's prayer in a much bigger way than he could have ever imagined. I wondered why God didn't just send Jesus right away. Why send John first? Because God understands the importance of preparation. He wanted his people to be ready to receive his son. He went to great lengths to send Jesus into the world at the right time and in the right way so that people would receive him well. Praise God who works in this way.

ur passage ends with Zechariah requesting a sign to confirm these things to be true. So the angel says to him in verse 19 and 20, **"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."**

When Zechariah responds with unbelief, God wants him to believe him at his words. Gabriel came to him with an answer to prayer that was almost too good to be true. So God gives him 9 months of muteness (and probably deafness as verse 62 indicates) to really ponder and contemplate these things. God wants to help Zechariah to believe His promises. God didn't give up on him, or move on to someone else. He instead gave him an opportunity to grow. If you think about this

Your Prayer Has Been Heard

punishment, Zechariah could not speak or listen to anyone except God. It was really a divinely perfect opportunity for him to grow in his relationship with God.

In contrast, Elizabeth acknowledges God and rejoices that her disgrace is taken away. And what she does is she puts herself in seclusion for 5 months. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth could enjoy a time of deep meditation, prayer, and Bible study to fully understand and see what God would be doing through them that they would believe God at his words.

Through much prayer and reflection while preparing this message I realized that it is tempting in difficult times to only see a figurative Herod on the throne when we look at our times. It is tempting to be fixated on the literal or figurative childlessness problem we have when God doesn't seem to be giving us what we have been asking for. What we are encouraged to do through this passage is to see past our struggles to see what God is doing to bring Christ into the World.

Working with High School students, every year there is at one least Senior student who faces great disappointment in their life through their college application process. It really becomes a test of faith when a very bright and promising student doesn't get into the school they thought for sure God would get them into. But those times have also been times of learning and growing into an even greater and deeper view of God and who He is. For those students that experience this disappointment, when they struggle with it by faith, they can see that God has a much bigger, and actually an even better, plan for their lives.

For God is bigger than Herod, He is bigger than our childlessness, He is bigger than our marriage, He is bigger than our college choice. And what God wants to do is to include us in His history. He wants to use the hearts and lives of faithful and prayerful people, like Zechariah and Elizabeth to carry out his grand and huge world redemptive plan and purpose to bring Christ into the world still today.

This sounds so big, maybe too big to be practical. But how does this passage help us prepare our hearts to receive Jesus this Christmas? Right now there are exactly 3 weeks before Christmas day. If we don't prepare our hearts then what you might end up with a rock solid frozen turkey of a heart the night before Christmas, missing out on the opportunity to experience Christ's birth fully this year. God gave us the best gift we could ever ask for through the baby Jesus. And yes, there are many unanswered prayers among us. Yes there are many signs of depravity, brokenness, and darkness all around us. It can feel so dark sometimes. But my prayer is that we can be encouraged by knowing that God is always at work. God's will and His way are so unimaginably big. He is so powerful and he

Your Prayer Has Been Heard

shows up and delivers in ways we can never imagine. So this Christmas season, would you allow God to include you in His history, in his plan? He is using whatever you are going through and whatever you are praying for as preparation to bring Christ into your life and into the lives of the people around you.

May God bless all of us to be faithful and sincere in our prayer life, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, knowing that God is listening. May God bless us all to be faithful in the daily grind of the life of faith, even in the face of hardship and struggle. In this way, may we see the miraculous work of God around us and stand in awe of Him who is working out his plans to bring Christ into the world. Let's all start preparing our hearts today to have a very Merry Christmas full of the baby Jesus.