

Our Faithful and Loving God

I would like to start with a story that illustrates an important truth about prayer. I make a distinction between accounts and stories. Stories are fictitious. Accounts are true historical events. This is a story about a shipwrecked survivor who is on an uninhabited island. He had built a crude hut from the ruins of what was left of his sunken boat. He started praying anxiously for God to rescue him from the island. He watched every day for passing ships, hoping that one would stop and rescue him. One day he was totally horrified when he watched his hut go up in smoke. To this man's limited vision, that was the worst possible thing that could have happened to him, and he cursed God. The next day a ship arrived, and the captain said, "We saw your smoke signal."

The story illustrates an important truth that we are going to learn from our study. In fact, we actually see it in scripture again and again. That is, the timing of God's answer to our prayers always has a purpose. He wants us always to be seeking Him and His desire for our life. He always seeks our best. It is an important truth.

ZACHARIAS' MINISTRY IN THE TEMPLE. Our study has two themes. There is a primary theme and a secondary theme. The primary theme is the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, the Christ. The secondary

theme is about a couple who wanted a child. Our passage is Luke 1:5. Luke is the author of this book and the Holy Spirit is also the author. Every book of the Bible has a human author and God the Holy Spirit is also the author. In verse 5 the Holy Spirit begins with some background information. He starts by answering two questions. The first question is, "When did the division of Abijah minister in the temple?" The next question is, "Who was involved?" Verse 5 says,

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. Luke 1:5 (NASB)



"Angel Appearing to Zacharias" (1486-90), Ghirlandaio, Domenico

Immediately, we are told that the time of the events that will be described occurred in the days of Herod, king of Judea. This is Herod the Great. If you were to look at a historical timeline, you would find that Herod the Great reigned from roughly 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.

He reigned for about thirty-three-years. Historians claim he reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. However, I believe he reigned from 37 B.C. to 2 B.C. We are going to discover in our next study that this event occurred at the very end of King Herod's reign, anywhere from 4 B.C. to 2 B.C. For a variety of reasons, I believe that it is 2 B.C.

The next question that Luke answers is: who was involved? We learn in the rest of the verses of a married couple, Zacharias and Elizabeth. Zacharias is from the priestly division of Abijah, making him a descendant of Abijah. This was one of many priestly lines. The bottom line is that both Zacharias and Elizabeth were descendants of Aaron, who was a Levite. Both of them had a priestly lineage. Had Elisabeth been a male, she could have been a priest.

Now 1 Chronicles 23:24 provides more information about Abijah, one of twenty-four divisions within the priesthood. 1 Chronicles tells us that King David reorganized the priests. Initially, Aaron, the first high priest, and his sons had children. After a while there were many priests. In time King David had to reorganize the priests in order to schedule when each priest could minister in the temple and in what capacity. All of them could not have ministered at one time. King David organized the priests into twenty-four divisions. Abijah was the eighth division. Each of the divisions had roughly fifty-six men who would serve at a given time, and they would serve twice during a year. Therefore, if you were a priest, the probability of being able to serve the Lord in the temple was roughly 25 percent during your lifetime. Consider: you are a priest. You are qualified to serve in the temple, but the likelihood of your ever serving in the temple was one out of four. That is not a very good probability. Therefore, if you had an opportunity to serve in the temple, it was an important event. It was a great honor since it was all determined by lot.

ZACHARIAS AND ELIZABETH INTRODUCED. Now before we go on further, let us talk more about this couple. Zacharias' name had a particular meaning. Every name in the Bible had a meaning. Zacharias' name meant "Yahweh remembers." Elizabeth's name meant "His oath." Now, if you think about both of those names, and combine them together, the combined meaning reads "Yahweh remembers His oath." In Psalms 89:34-35 God is speaking and we read:

*My covenant I will not violate,
Nor will I alter the utterance of My lips.
Once I have sworn by My holiness;
I will not lie to David.*

Psalms 89:34-35 (NASB)

Do you realize what God said? "I have sworn . . ." It is going to happen. I do not lie. God is not like us—we lie. Have you ever made an oath or made a commitment, essentially a vow? You promised someone you were going to do something, and did you not follow through? I think many of us are guilty of not following through on some commitment. But when God makes a commitment, He follows through.

Luke 1:6 gives us some more information. In the next couple of verses, we are going to be given some very personal information. Verse 6 says,

*They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.
Luke 1:6 (NASB)*

Now I would suspect that some of us might object to this information being shared, but I also think that a lot of people would not mind this particular information being shared. We are told they were righteous, walking blamelessly. But what does that mean? Does that mean that these people were holy or sinless? That is a key question. Is that what that means? No. Notice how the rest of the verse goes:

... in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

It means they were obedient to the Mosaic laws. They kept the rituals and the ordinances. You would expect that of a priest. They were faithful to the Lord. They kept the commandments and the requirements of the Lord.

ELIZABETH IS BARREN. Verse 7 reveals some personal information that we might not want people to know.

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years. Luke 1:7 (NASB)

This is sensitive. We are told they have no children because she was barren. Notice, he was not the one who was barren. Often we talk about a man being barren or sterile. She was the one who was sterile. She was the one who could not have

children. In the Jewish culture, this was a tragedy. It is a tragedy in our culture too. In those days, they looked down on a woman in this condition. In 1 Samuel 1 we are told about a woman named Hannah. She was married to a man who had two wives. The other wife provoked Hannah bitterly to irritate her because Hannah was barren. This would have been very difficult for Elizabeth. There are women in our own culture who struggle greatly because they cannot have children. We can understand the emotion. We sympathize with Elizabeth. Verse 7 says that they had no child because of Elizabeth's condition.

ZACHARIAS AND ELIZABETH ARE OLD. We are told they are advanced in years. I would imagine that Zacharias and Elizabeth prayed from the early days of their marriage, "Please let us have a child." What an embarrassment for the couple that they had never had any children. Kent Hughes writes in his commentary on Luke,

The text says that the two were "well along in years" (v. 7). Nature's planned obsolescence had taken its course, and there was no hope. They had never heard of Hippocrates, but he had put it perfectly: "A man, when his growth is over, is dry and cold." The fountains of maternity were dry, the spotted, worn hands of this righteous couple would never hold a child of their own.¹

The picture Scripture paints is that they were old and past the years of being able to have children. Most of us would say it is over, it is not possible. I would imagine that is exactly the conclusion they had come to as well. God had passed them by. All their years of praying and pleading with God were like the man on the island pleading and begging, and hoping to be rescued. This couple had hoped and hoped, but for them it was not going to happen. They were past the age of bearing children.

ZACHARIAS WAS SERVING IN THE TEMPLE. Verse 8 says,

Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division . . .

Luke 1:8 (NASB)

All of a sudden verse 8 tells us that Zacharias was serving according to his division. This is like a miracle all by itself if you think about the probabilities. There was a one out of four probability that he would even be serving. When I say one out of four probability that he would be serving in the temple, it is during a lifetime—not during a year. It has been estimated that the number of priests at this time was anywhere from 8,000 to 20,000 men. If only 104 priests from a division had a chance to serve in a year, think about the probabilities of being picked. A priest was only eligible to serve from age thirty until he was fifty. So verse 8 is a stunning statement all by itself, that he was performing his priestly duties.

Verse 9 adds that . . .

. . . according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

Luke 1:9 (NASB)

Zacharias was chosen by a random lot.² It was not by seniority. It was by, as we would think today, like a throw of the dice. But verse 9 tells us that he had entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense.

The Mishnah tells us that incense was burned twice a day³ in the temple, in the morning and then in the evening. We believe, based upon this text, it was probably in the evening because there is a large crowd outside.

Verse 10 says,

And the whole multitude of the people . . . Luke 1:10a (NASB)

The meaning of the Greek has the idea of a very large crowd. A very large crowd is more likely in the evening than in the morning. And . . .

. . . were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

Luke 1:10b (NASB)

2. Yoma 2:1-5. Mishnah.

3. Ibid.

1. R. Kent Hughes. Luke. Preaching The Word. Crossway Books. 1998. p. 21.

Now why are they praying? Because any time a priest went into the temple to offer incense on the altar, it was a risky business. If a priest did not do it quite right, he might die. God would take his life. When the priest entered the holy place, he would pass the golden candlestick, and the table of shewbread. He would then go to the altar of incense, and there he would put incense on the altar. He would not go into the Holy of Holies. He entered to offer incense on the altar of incense, and then he would come back out. People would be standing outside, between the altar on which sacrifices were made and the tabernacle itself. They would be praying the whole time he was inside for his safety. What a picture! People caring for their priest. This is really a wonderful picture to think about.

But the Mishnah also said that if a priest had an opportunity to serve incense, he could only do it one time in his entire life. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Serving in the temple was a coveted opportunity. So Zacharias had the opportunity about which he had probably long dreamed and hoped. You can just imagine what was going on inside his heart: thrill, excitement, and yet at the same time fear, because he was going inside the holy place to offer incense on the altar—mixed feelings bubbling up all together. What a tremendous opportunity for this saint of God, this righteous man. Notice what verse 6 says. They were righteous, and they were walking blamelessly before the Lord.

Now flashback for a moment. Remember that they have no children. Some of us might think, “They had no children as punishment because they did something wrong.” But they were blameless. They were righteous. They had not done anything wrong at all; yet they had no children. So here was a righteous, blameless man and he walked into the holy place to offer incense on the altar.

Now verses 11-12 say,

And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. Luke 1:11-12 (NASB)

The Greek word that is translated here as “troubled” is *ter-raso* in the Greek, and it means “shaken.” It has the idea that

this man was just shaken. He saw the angel, and then we are told “and fear gripped him.” He was already a jumble of emotions. This is the first time he was doing this. He walked in to offer incense on the altar, saw the angel and fear gripped him. We can understand his emotion. This is really incredible. You ask, “Why did the angel appear?” Verse 13 answers the question.

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.” Luke 1:13 (NASB)

Why did the angel appear? The angel appeared to give Zacharias a great announcement. The angel appeared to tell him that his prayer was going to be answered. We might wonder, “How long had it been?” We do not know, but it had been a long time. I believe the Lord waited for Zacharias to have the opportunity to serve in the temple, to offer incense. On this occasion God sent an angel. God timed it so that when Zacharias walked into the holy place to offer incense, an angel appeared to give him an announcement—to prayer requests that were probably prayed decades ago. It is unbelievable to think about what God did.

What did the angel tell him? In the past we had to wait for a baby to be born to learn the sex. But this angel told Zacharias the child was going to be a son and he was to name him John. Great information! Now just imagine what was probably going on in Zacharias’ mind at this point.

Verse 14. The angel continued speaking,

You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. Luke 1:14 (NASB)

I could not help thinking that the angel was announcing that he was going to have joy and gladness. Have you ever wondered if God wants you to have joy? Have you ever wondered if God wants you to be happy, to be glad? Do you think God wants you to be joyful and glad? If you are not sure, then read Galatians 5:22. There you will find that the fruit of the Spirit is love, peace, and ... what? Joy! Did you

know that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, and peace? The Gospels tell us that Jesus rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit. One of the fruits of the Spirit is joy. God wants you to be joyful! God wants you to be glad! God is not out to make your life miserable. God wants you to be joyful. He works to bring us to that point. Oftentimes we are not joyful. One of the reasons is because we are not dealing with sin properly in our life. So we grieve the Spirit and are in conflict with God. The joy and the peace that we long for is not there. It is not there because we are not in a right relationship with our God.

I was thrilled that this angel announced to Zacharias, “And you will have joy and gladness.” Do you not think Zacharias and Elizabeth were going to be happy? The answer is obvious. This was something they have wanted and now God was going to grant them their request. It was all part of God’s plan.

Verses 15 and 16 gives us more information,

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. Luke 1:15-16 (NASB)

Did you notice what the first part of verse 15 said? It said, “be great in the sight of the Lord.” As I was thinking about this passage, I was reminded once again that there are some who are great in the sight of the Lord, and some are not. Think about it. The angel said that “he will be great in the sight of the Lord.” The implication is that there are some who are great in the sight of the Lord, and then there are some who are not. There may be some who are of varying degrees of greatness. But John the Baptist is going to truly be great because he is the forerunner of the Messiah.

This should remind us that God does care about how we serve Him. Have you ever wanted to be really special to God? I remember years ago I used to tell the Lord that I wanted to be His friend, just as Abraham was God’s friend. Did you know that Daniel was precious in the sight of the Lord? There are some saints who have a special place in God’s heart because of the relationship that they have with Him. John

the Baptist was such a man.

John the Baptist did not drink wine or liquor. The Old Testament says the priests also were told that they could not drink liquor or wine. Also, Zacharias was told that his son would “. . . be filled with the Holy Spirit yet while in his mother’s womb.” John the Baptist was going to be Spirit-filled from the womb.

Verse 17:

It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him . . . Luke 1:17a (NASB)

The “Him” is referring to the Messiah.

. . . 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. Luke 1:17b (NASB)

There are five things that the angel said were going to be true of John the Baptist. The first is found in Malachi 4:5. This is a prophecy and also a promise from the Lord. It says,

Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. Malachi 4:5 (NASB)

This is a prophecy that Elijah will return before the day of the Lord. Verse 6 adds,

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. Malachi 4:6 (NASB)

So the angel quotes Malachi 4:6 and also adds some information to it. There are five key things here that the angel says will be true about John the Baptist. The first thing is that he will be the forerunner of the Messiah, the forerunner of Jesus Christ. The second thing is that he will come in the spirit and the power of Elijah. Now it is important to notice that he is not Elijah. Some people might get confused with this

statement, thinking that John the Baptist was really Elijah. I do not believe he was Elijah, and the reason why is because he came in the spirit and the power of Elijah. He was to be like Elijah; he was not Elijah. In fact, Jesus makes that clear when He is asked by the disciples, “Who is John the Baptist?” Jesus made a statement to the effect that he was Elijah if you want to accept it, but in fact Elijah was yet to come. That is consistent here with Luke. Luke said that he comes in the spirit of Elijah. So he will be like Elijah—referring to Malachi 4:5-6.

Then notice what it says in verse 17.

... TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN

If you were to go back to Malachi, it also says,

... hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers . . . Malachi 4:6 (NASB)

In our day and age, I think that is an important statement. I thought it was interesting that the prophecy does not say it will turn the mothers to the children, and the children to the mothers. That is not what the prophet Malachi said. It says “the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers.” I believe the reason the Holy Spirit tells us that is there is a natural affinity between moms and children. Sometimes the relationship between dads and children is not as close. The Prophet Malachi and the angel in Luke 1 is saying that God will transform our hearts.

Maybe there is a father or perhaps some children reading this and your relationships are not exactly what they should be. Maybe a father has an issue with your son or your daughter. Maybe you are not loving them as you should. Perhaps someone is reading this and your parents are seniors. Do you have an issue with a parent? We do not always love our parents as we should. Maybe you have an issue with your father. Is it not interesting that the message is that the fathers will come back to the children, and the children back to the fathers?

Then verse 17 says, “and the disobedient to the attitude of

the righteous.” A better translation would be that the disobedient will be motivated to have the wisdom of the righteous, and then to prepare a people for the Lord.

John the Baptist was the forerunner. He prepared the people for Jesus Christ, the Messiah, to come. There is another message here, and that is that the Messiah was near. Since John the Baptist was the forerunner of the Messiah, that meant the Messiah was going to arrive during the life time of John the Baptist. The Messiah was not going to arrive after John the Baptist or before John the Baptist, because John the Baptist was the forerunner. This was further proof that Jesus was the Messiah, because the Messiah was only going to come during the lifetime of the forerunner, and the forerunner was John the Baptist. Can you just imagine what was going through Zacharias’ mind? He knew the Old Testament scriptures. He knew the prophecy of Malachi. Now he knew what child was going to be born to him and his wife. Talk about joy! This was an incredible piece of information. He must have been in exaltation over what was going to happen. But, no! That did not happen at first. The next verse explains,

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.” Luke 1:18 (NASB)

Zacharias’ response was unbelief. “I do not believe this. This cannot be, because we are just too old. It just cannot happen. God just waited too long.” An immediate response on our part is, “He forgot who God was!” Yes, he sure did forget because he has his mind on himself. He has a worldly perspective. He just could not understand that with God, nothing is impossible! So he responded in unbelief. Despite his unbelief, God is going to answer his prayer anyway. They are still going to have the child, but Zacharias is going to be disciplined because of his unbelief. Do you know what that tells me? Unbelief is sin. When we doubt God, we sin. Unbelief is a sin. Mark that somewhere in your Bible. Unbelief is a sin. Any time you have trouble believing God, just stop and confess it as sin, because it is a sin. If you do not believe God can do something in your life, it is a sin. It is a sin because

you have doubted the power of God.

Verse 19 now reveals the name of the angel speaking to Zacharias.

The angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel . . . Luke 1:19a (NASB)

Whoa! All of a sudden the angel says, “I am Gabriel.” And what is very interesting in the Greek is that the “I” is the “emphatic I.” The word *ego*. What the angel said was, “I, I am Gabriel!” The emphatic point was that “I am Gabriel!” “I am Gabriel, no one else, I am Gabriel!” Gabriel appears two other times in the pages of scripture. The other times are in Daniel 8, and Daniel 9. I believe Zacharias knew there was an angel named Gabriel in Scripture. Therefore, Gabriel gave Zacharias his credentials, and says,

. . . 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. Luke 1:19b-20 (NASB)

Why were they going to be fulfilled? Because God has a plan to execute, and it is going to happen even though Zacharias sinned.

ZACHARIAS LEAVES THE TEMPLE. Verse 21 explains what happened to Zacharias after he went outside the temple.

The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple . . . Luke 1:21-22a (NASB)

He saw more than a vision; he saw an angel!

. . . and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute. When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home. 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.” Luke 1:22b-25 (NASB)

Note the part about taking away Elizabeth’s disgrace. It was disgraceful among the Jews not to be able to have children. There are several lessons here for us. Let me walk through them.

CONCLUSION. The lessons are that John the Baptist was the forerunner of the Messiah. The main message of our passage is to introduce to us John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah. The promised one of Malachi 4:5-6 is the Messiah who is coming. In our next study, we will learn that Mary is given the second announcement about the coming of the birth of the Messiah. Note that John the Baptist is another proof that Jesus is the promised Messiah from ages long ago. Micah 5:2 prophesies about the one “whose goings are from long ago, from the days of eternity.” That is about Jesus.

Some more lessons for us. First, God keeps His promises. He kept his promise in the prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6. The second one is that we should trust our God, even when our prayers appear to go unanswered. Yes, God does say no to us, but I think there are many prayer requests that are just time delayed. He delays them for a reason, to accomplish a greater good—maybe even to give us a greater blessing.

The next point is that God may delay granting our prayer request for a greater plan. That is exactly what happened to Zacharias and Elizabeth. Romans 8:28 is a great reminder that God works all things together for good. He delayed giving them their prayer request to coincide with His plan for a forerunner before the Messiah. He maximized their joy and blessing. So when your prayer is not immediately answered, just stop and remember that perhaps God is delaying your prayer request to give you even greater joy down the road. In summary, our God is a faithful and loving God who fulfilled His prophecies about the coming forerunner and future Messiah. This study is the beginning of what we call the Christmas account, or the birth of Jesus.