

EXTRAORDINARY PROMISES

As Luke continues his Gospel record, he picks up the story from the last promise of the Old Testament and presents an account of the first promise of the New Testament. Give thanks to God that He always answers prayer, keeps His promises, amazes and assists His people, by His perfect providence!

1- GOD ALWAYS ANSWERS PRAYER *in His perfect time.* Luke 1:5 continues his narrative that in the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments. But they had no child and both were advanced in years. Herod had refurbished the glory of the temple, but as a monument to his greatness, not God's. The people were oppressed, rebelled, repressed, and now they were under the heel of Rome. It had been 400 years since the Israelites had heard from God, through the prophet Malachi.

Many people had all but forgotten about God, but not Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were our kind of people, careful to trust and obey in spite of what was considered personal tragedy in their day. No doubt they prayed earnestly about this, yet continued faithfully serving the Lord in spite of their disappointment. JC Ryle notes, "*prayers are not necessarily rejected because the answer is long delayed.*" God always answers prayer: either yes, no, wait, or with a better way. And so Luke 1:5-17 unfolds.

2- GOD ARRANGES HIS PERFECT PLAN *for His own purposes.* For a thousand years, the priests had followed a rotational service. Zechariah was chosen by lot for the great honor of serving at the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. RK Hughes notes this was a task many priests would never know, even once in a lifetime. The whole multitude of the people were praying outside, as Zechariah entered the Most Holy Place to burn incense, which in Scripture is connected to the prayers of the saints. Their prayer was for the redemption of Israel and the coming of the Christ. But something happened.

An angel appeared to Zechariah, and he was afraid. Hughes says the angel spoke and prophecy from God occurred for the first time in 400 years. The angel Gabriel said incredible words: "*do not be afraid, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you will call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great before the Lord.*" Zechariah's head must have been spinning. God was answering prayer about the birth of a son!

3- GOD ALWAYS KEEPS HIS PROMISES *in His perfect way.* The imagery in Zechariah's mind about a son and rejoicing would have been breathtaking. But Gabriel was still talking: "*he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.*" Zechariah's mind races to the words of Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6.

God had promised the very things the angel spoke. Now it was to be fulfilled in the miraculous birth to a childless priest and wife who walked in God's ways. What a poignant grace of God to bless them, as He had done for Abraham (Genesis 15), Jacob (Genesis 30), Hannah (1Samuel 1). RC Sproul observes, "*Zechariah and Elizabeth will bear a special child who will fulfill a special task for the Lord, that of leading the return of the children of Israel to the faith of their fathers, and the prophet who would announce the Messiah who would fulfill all of God's promises.*" Give thanks to Him!

4- GOD ACCOMPLISHES PERFECT PROMISES *in His perfect time.* In Exodus 34, the Lord passed by Moses and proclaimed, "*the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means pardon the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children.*" Moses worshiped and confessed, we are a stiffnecked people, pardon our iniquity and sin. And God said, "*behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or any nation, and all people shall see the work of the Lord, for it is an awesome thing that I will do for you.*"

The people paid a heavy price for the sins of their fathers. The consequences of disobedience led to the oppression and trouble the nation endured, even as Zechariah worshiped in the temple. Only God's transforming grace could break the cycle of sin, so that fathers would not pursue sinful disobedience that ruins the lives of children, and so children would not be resentful of their lot in life due to disobedience, and repeat their fathers' sins. Only the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit could change all this.

JC Ryle notes, "*It is not for us to prescribe either the time or the way in which our requests are to be answered. He who knows best the time for people to be born, knows also the time for them to be born again. Whatever we seek for our sons and daughters, let us first seek that they have a place in the covenant and a name in the book of life.*" How can you make a difference for the next generation? RD Phillips observes, "*Our mandate to work in the garden of child's life is meant to gain access to his heart, and thus direct him to Christ. Our mandate is to protect that heart from seeking to satisfy its own sinful cravings. This work is done only by the power of the Holy Spirit.*" Pray, and work, for the children! □