

# A Righteous Response to Preposterous Promises

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 13 December 2009

Preacher: Jonathan Smith

[ 0 : 00 ] Coming out of four weeks in Malachi, going to Luke. We're going to see tonight that there's a bit of overlap between Malachi and Luke. He quotes something from Malachi twice tonight, so that's nice and neat. People always ask me what my favourite book of the Bible is.

I always say two, Luke and Acts, because that's volume one, volume two. So technically it's one book, and I love Luke as a writer. He's a really good, thorough writer.

We're going to see tonight why he's such a good writer. And I'm excited about looking at the birth narrative going into Christmas, seeing what Luke has for us.

So make sure you stick around in the following weeks, including the Christmas services, because we're just going to keep playing through Luke's account of Jesus' birth. I was speaking to a guy last night at a party, and just a really good guy, a really good friend, get along with him really well.

And he's a really gifted guy in ministry and doing a lot of good stuff, good dad, good pastor. And I talked to him for hours last night, and for most of the time he was just talking to me on the brink of crying.

[ 1 : 08 ] And he just said, you know, how's it going? Expecting the, yeah, all right kind of response. And he wasn't all right. He'd just endured, he said to me, the most difficult period of his entire life since about the start of the year.

Just constant barrage of suffering one after another. And I just listened to him talk about all this junk that was happening in his life, and feeling really, really sorry for him.

And then when he finally kind of stopped telling me all this stuff that had been going on, I just said, man, I'm really sorry about that. And he said something really interesting. Listen to this.

He said, don't be sorry. I wouldn't trade the last 12 months for anything. God has taught me more in the last 12 months than for the previous 30 odd years.

He said, God has completely broken the back of my pride. And I'm a humble man today because of what I've been going through and still going through.

[ 2 : 14 ] An interesting thing. Interesting take on things. We'll see more about that in a minute. Let's go. Luke chapter 1, verse 1. We'll read the first four verses called the prologue.

It's four verses, one sentence. So he says, Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of events, of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you've been instructed.

We've got a really good resource available to us today called the ESV Study Bible. This is a Bible that Paul Barker contributed to with the Deuteronomy notes. I've got a copy, which I got cheap.

It's part of the perks of being at this church. And it's a really good resource. You need to get your hands on it. And it says this about that prologue. It says, The prologue to Luke's gospel, comprised of a single sentence, ranks among the finest Greek writing of the first century and demonstrates Luke's skill and credentials as a writer.

So the first thing we learn about Luke, by way of introduction, is that he is a very careful, very learned man. He was a physician or a doctor, educated man, very literate, and his handle on the Greek language is very, very good.

[ 3 : 45 ] Superior to most other historians of the time. And he was one of the greatest historians that has ever lived. There's a guy, I couldn't remember his name, an Oxford historian, quite a famous guy who said that he believed Luke to be a historian par excellence, one of the greatest historians of all time.

And his account in Luke and Acts is just really very thorough. You'll notice as you read through Luke, which I hope you do in the coming weeks, that he constantly makes reference to details that just don't seem to matter.

They don't really add anything to the story, but he includes them because he's that thorough, that careful. And so he says that in this intro, that he wanted to put an orderly account together.

That there were many others, this is probably other Christians at the time, not necessarily the other gospel writers, but other Christians who heard the oral tradition about Jesus, the oral teachings, and they wanted it to be remembered for a long time.

So they wrote it down. And these haven't survived to today. In fact, the only accounts that have survived to today are the gospel writings. And that is, as we know, because they were inspired by God.

[ 4 : 58 ] So Luke wrote this one. John wrote another one. Mark wrote another one. Matthew wrote another one. They had different purposes in writing, different audiences, different personalities, but all of it was overseen by God.

All of it was inspired by God. And that's why we have it today. He says, interestingly, that he wants to write about the things that have been fulfilled among us.

That's in verse one. And this is pointing to the fact that Jesus, in his work, in his life, in his death and resurrection, fulfilled much of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah.

Also, that not only did he fulfill the Old Testament, but he accomplished all things in his death and resurrection. So when Jesus died and rose again, or when he died, he said, it is finished, it is accomplished, it has been fulfilled.

And so that's the purpose. One of the purposes for him writing this is to show how that has been fulfilled. He also says there in verse two, that he wants to make an account of the stuff that had been told them by eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

[ 6 : 07 ] So this was written probably about 80, 62. So there are people around who knew Jesus, who'd seen Jesus, who'd been around during that time, eyewitnesses still alive during the time of this writing.

And that's really important because if Luke was making it up, they could have said, no, no, that's not how it happened. Or what are you talking about? Jesus never rose from the dead or whatever.

See how that's important? See why he mentions that? It authenticates his writing as a historical, true document. He's writing to a guy named Theophilus.

That's verse three. This guy is, he refers to him as most excellent Theophilus. So he's probably a wealthy, important man. His name in Greek means God, lover or lover of God.

He's probably a Christian believer who's heard and accepted Christ, but isn't really grounded in his faith. And that's why finally Luke says, as the kind of main purpose for his writing of the whole book, verse four, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you've been instructed.

[ 7 : 12 ] That's why he wrote it. That's why we read Luke, is so that we might know the truth. I know a lot of us can doubt the Bible, can question whether, is this really true?

It's a really old book. Can we really depend on the Bible to tell us the truth? And the answer is yes. In fact, that's the purpose that Luke has in writing it, that Theophilus and that us might know the truth.

Solid, be solidly grounded in the truth. Not that we won't have doubts, not that we won't have those dark nights of the soul, but that we will know in our heart the truth about Jesus Christ, the truth that Hannah's testified to tonight.

And we see that not only in her experience, but in the account, the gospel accounts that we have in front of us. So that's the prologue. That's Luke. That's his purpose. Let's take a look at this first story.

Verse five. We'll go through to seven. He says, So let's pick that apart a bit.

[ 8 : 35 ] We see that it's in the days of King Herod that this is taking place. And that's important. King Herod was really just an amazing guy. He's like a brilliant, maniacal despot.

And just a really brilliant, evil man, which is the worst kind of evil, isn't it? And if you go to Jerusalem today, which I haven't, but I was talking to some people this morning who have been on a Ridley tour.

And just most of what you see architecturally was built by him. He was a brilliant builder and constructor of buildings. He, I think he invented quick dry cement by mixing sand and some ash from Italy and made this, this amazing cement that could be dropped into the ocean.

And it quick dried so that he was able to build harbors and increase his wealth. He was very wealthy King. He had been kind of placed there by the Romans as a puppet King really, so that they could have safe passage for their soldiers.

And it was all kind of under the Roman rule at the moment, as you know, and he'd been placed there as a puppet King. He didn't know really that he was a puppet King because he was so, so full of himself, as we'll see.

[ 9 : 52 ] Matthew chapter two tells us that he was the guy that had all of the boys under two years old killed when he heard that Jesus was being born because he was threatened by Jesus kingship.

And he also had, we're told in other historical documents that he had his wife and children killed because he was totally paranoid that they were going to take power from him.

So anyone who threatened him, he would have them killed. A lot like Saddam Hussein in some ways, like just killing his own family regularly. That was just what he did.

And anyone who came up against him, he would kill them as well. In the temple that he built, which is the temple that we're going to look at today, every stone of the building weighed about the same as a 747 aircraft, and every stone has his initials on it, even to this day you can see.

So he was very, very sure of himself. He didn't lack in self-confidence, this guy Herod, and he was a maniac. So that's him, and that's the kind of times that we're diving into tonight.

[ 11 : 05 ] Very uncertain, very dangerous times for anyone, like Jesus, for instance, to come as king into that kind of milieu. So let's move on.

We're going to look at Zechariah. We see that in this passage, Zechariah is a priest. That's not a really glorious thing. There were 18,000 priests in Israel at this time.

So, you know, a position of some importance, but not unique by any means. His wife is Elizabeth. She's a descendant of Aaron, and both of them, it says, were living blamelessly.

They were righteous before God. And I think what Luke is trying to get at there, he's not saying that they're sinless, because we know that Jesus is the only man, the only human who has ever lived, who is sinless.

But I think he's trying to show us that they were, in fact, serving God, living by God's decrees. And the reason that he's pushing that point is because in those days, this is important, in those days, if you were barren, if you couldn't have children, people would view that as a judgment of God.

[ 12 : 15 ] That you must have some kind of sin in your life, and God is judging you for that. That's why you can't have kids. So, I think that's what Luke's trying to say. It's not because of their sin that she can't have children.

Actually, it's part of God's plan, and things are going to happen in God's time. We'll see that before the end. Luke also says that they were old, and the question is how old.

It doesn't say exactly, but the same phrase there that they were getting on in years, that's used of Abraham and Sarah. You remember Abraham and Sarah? In Genesis, they, in the same situation, they couldn't have kids, and it says they're getting on in years.

And then Paul in Romans, if you follow this rabbit, Warren, you'll get there. Paul in Romans talks about Sarah and Abraham, and he says they were as good as dead when they had kids.

So, these people, by implication, are old. Like, really, really old. Old. They would hate the music here. They're old.

[ 13 : 19 ] Really, really old. Zechariah is, as I said, one of 18,000 priests. They divided all the priests into 24 units, about 750 in each.

I think. And, they would go to Jerusalem, to the temple, the big temple, up on the hill. I think it was twice a year for a week, to do temple duty.

And this was a big deal for the priests, to go to the big smoke, the biggest city that they'd ever seen, or ever would see, to the temple of God, and to serve in that temple. And that's where we find ourselves.

So, they're at the temple, or they're in Jerusalem at least. And now we'll get to the temple. Verse 8. Follow with me. Once, when he was serving as priest before God, that's Zechariah, and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord, and offer incense.

So, what's going on here is, the big job for these guys. You go there for a week, and do your thing, but the big job, top job, once in a lifetime opportunity, was to go into the holy place, and put incense on the coals there, and say a few prayers.

[14:35] That was the job. And, and you could only ever do it once in your lifetime. Once you'd done it, that was it. You were considered blessed, and you'd never get the chance again. And the way they determined who would go, out of these 750 guys, was to roll dice.

Proverbs, I think it's 1633, says that, the lot is cast into the lap, or the dice is cast into the lap, but every decision is from the Lord. And that's what happens here.

God determines, that Zechariah gets his shot. So, Zechariah's been turning up, I don't know, 40, 50 years, every time, to go into the temple, to do his thing, the lot's cast, he doesn't get picked.

Again, and again, and again, and again, and again, never gets picked for the top job. And then, what happens? Let's check it out, verse 10, let's keep going.

It says, now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of people was praying outside, this is outside the temple. Then, while Zechariah is in, the holy place, there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

[15:47] When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. So, let's talk about this for a little bit, a little digression.

Let's talk about angels, okay? I think, most of us, have the wrong view of angels. And this is because of media, and cartoons, and just dumb ideas about angels, and worshipping angels, and bad kind of, new age mythology.

But angels, we need to know from the Bible, we can see, that angels are absolutely, 100% real, with us, today. The word angel means messenger, or God's messenger.

And we see from Hebrews chapter 1, I think it is, that says that angels are ministering spirits, sent by God to serve believers. So, every one of us here, who is a believer, has angels ministering to us. That's what the Bible says. Now, we've kind of turned that into a little bit of a mythology, about, you know, your guardian angel, and this and that. We won't get into that, but, all we need to know from the Bible, is that they are ministering spirits, that they minister to believers.

[17:02] Hebrews 13, was our wedding text actually, you remember sweetie? And one of the, you remember better than me, I know, don't give me that look. And it says in there, that we should entertain strangers, for by doing so, some have entertained angels.

So, angels can, appear to us, as any other human does. We may not know that they're angels, that they can be, in that form.

And, we also hear from the Bible, that they rejoice, when someone comes to know Jesus. When Hannah, was here that night, when Megan was here that night, and they gave their lives to Jesus, angels just blew up, and went crazy.

Right? So, that's what angels do. And this particular angel, is, a very important angel. We're going to see in a second, this is, Gabriel the angel.

There's only two angels, named in the Bible, Michael, and Gabriel. And both of those, guys are really, important, angels, in salvation history. I've had, actually, tell you a story.

[18:08] Just in case, you don't believe me, maybe you're an engineer, and you don't believe me. I can tell you, some experiences, you may not still believe me, but, I've got a buddy, who, he's, a New Zealand guy, and his parents, are heavily involved, in prayer ministry, and particularly, in kind of dealing with, dark, stuff, dark sin, demonic oppression, and stuff like that.

And, he tells this story, about when he was, at home, sleeping upstairs, in his room, and waking up, actually, he'd never been to sleep, he'd just got into bed, and, in his room, a physical, manifestation, manifestation, of, Satan, demons, right in his face, and, he could never tell me, without crying, but, he just said, it was like, bloody hell, were his words, and he was, completely terrified, and, then he said, very interestingly, as he cried out to God, which is all he could do, his words were, light, light, came into the room, and took, took the bad angels away, that, the angels came, and rescued him, from that moment, of oppression, and I've got, quite a few other stories, of friends, who've been in similar situations, I've been, myself, around my conversion, around 10 years ago, a lot of, experience, with, physical manifestations, of evil, and demons, in my own experience, and I'm, I'm the conservative, reformed, Bible guy, and I totally, totally, believe in angels, and demons today, and this was his experience, he, saw, an angel, that this was his big shot, the best day of his life, suddenly, an angel appears next to him, and he freaks out, it says, he was terrified, fear

overwhelmed him, and this is the common experience, when angels turn up, in the Bible, people get really scared, and the angel says, don't be afraid, don't be afraid, it's alright, God has sent me for this purpose, so he's terrified, he's overwhelmed, he's, losing his mind, and then, verse 13, the angel says to him, don't be afraid, don't be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer, has been heard, your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you, a son, and you will name him, John, you will have joy, and gladness, and many will rejoice, at his birth, for he will be great, in the sight of the Lord, he must never drink wine, or strong drink, even before his birth, he will be filled, by the Holy Spirit, he will turn many, of the people of Israel, to the Lord, their God, with the spirit, of the power of Elijah, he will go before him, to turn the hearts, of parents, to their children, ding, ding, ding, Malachi, remember, and the disobedient, to the wisdom, of the righteous, to make ready, a people prepared, for the Lord, he says, Zechariah, your prayer, has been answered, I think we get a window, into what he was praying about, he got the big job, he goes in, puts the incense down, he starts praying, and I reckon he prayed, about two things, number one, God, please save Israel, please rescue us, from our oppressors, please let us loose, from the Romans, please send the Messiah, to lead us into freedom, and number two, God, please give us a son, please, I know we're really old, but please give us a son, because the angel turns up, and says, your prayer has been heard, Elizabeth will have a son, and the son's name is John, you will name him, John, verse 13, this is John the Baptist, this should be fresh in our minds, from Malachi 3, verse 1, and Malachi 4, I think it's 5 to 6, both quoted here, the prophecy, that before the Messiah would come, before Jesus would come, there would be, a man like Elijah, a prophet, and this angel says, that's going to be John, John the Baptist, John the Baptist, is going to prepare, the way for the Lord, he's going to turn, the hearts of fathers, to their children, and so it's a prophecy fulfilled, it's 400 years, in waiting, between Malachi and now, and now it's fulfilled, it's a big deal, it's a big deal, it says there, that he won't, just by, just to cover the details, it says he'll never drink wine, or strong drink, it's not because, he's going to be more holy, than anyone else, because he's going to be a prophet, we see that Jesus drinks, so it can't be that, John's more holy than Jesus, we don't want to, get into that kind of mistake, it's probably, it doesn't say exactly, why that's going to be, but he's going to live, that kind of ascetic lifestyle, that the prophets, of old lived, so it fits, with his prophetic calling, that he would not, drink in that way, and his job, as I said, his whole job in life, from birth, from, no, before birth, from conception, is going to be, to prepare, the way for the Lord, and he's going to be, full of the Holy Spirit, even before he's born, it's a beautiful thing, let's keep going, verse 18, there's lots to do,

[ 23 : 25 ] Zechariah said to the angel, how will I know, that this is so, for I am an old man, and my wife, is getting on in years, isn't that a polite way, of saying she's old, how will I know, that this is so, for I am an old man, like so many men, in the Bible, Zechariah, screws it up, at the most important moment, doesn't he, he should have just shut up, but he didn't, how will I know, this is so, he has doubts, he's really old, she's barren, they've kind of dealt, with this by now, I wonder how many of us, find ourselves in this situation, not necessarily, with Gabriel, speaking promises to us, but promises from the Bible, just trying to think about, how this works itself out, for us today, how do we do, what Zechariah did, it's good to identify ourselves, with other people's sin, and I reckon we do it like this, see if this is right,

I reckon we hear, promises in the Bible, that Jesus Christ, his death, was powerful enough, to save us, from every sin, we've ever committed, we hear that promise, and yet at times, particularly after, we've just sinned, in that particular way, we completely doubt, that that's the case, or that that's possible, is that just me, it's me, and two other people, alright, still worth talking about, the Bible says, that Jesus Christ's blood, we sung about it, about four times tonight, his blood, is sufficient, to save you, from every sin, past, present, and future, that there is nothing, that can separate us, from the love of Christ, Christ, but how hard, is it to believe that, on those, dark nights of the soul, after the, thousandth time, that you've committed, that sin, but it's not okay, to doubt, that the blood of Jesus, is sufficient, for us, for our salvation, it's not okay, and it's not okay, for Zechariah, to doubt either, verse 19, the angel replied,

I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence, of God, and I've been sent, to speak to you, and to bring you, this good news, but now, because you did not, believe my words, which will be fulfilled, in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day, these things occur, he says, I'm Gabriel, I've come to give you, good news, it's good news, in two ways, number one, John the Baptist, is coming, that means, the Messiah is coming, that means, salvation is coming, that's good news, for

him, and for all of us here, and secondly, you're going to have a son, you've been praying for it, up until about, five seconds ago, you're praying for it, and now, I've said that you're, going to get it, and you're doubting, and so he strikes him mute, I just want to head off, at the pass, maybe a danger here, that we might think, oh man, does this mean, the next time I doubt,

God's going to blow me up, or something, I don't think that's the point, we're going to get to the point sooner, it's a really important point, that's not the point, let me say this, this is going to be a major point, coming back to the story, that I told you at the start, I believe, and I was trying to figure out, why it is that he made him mute, and I thought, is it just a gift to his wife, that she'll spend her whole pregnancy, with a mute husband, that could, it's possible, I reckon there's a deeper thing, let's just chat about this, I reckon, that the reason, Zachariah struck mute, in this point, this time, is because God is disciplining him, to make him more, holy, more godly, less proud, less dependent on himself, that God disciplines, the ones he loves,

Hebrews chapter 12 says, God disciplines, the ones he loves, I tell you what, the greatest act of, unlove, that God could show to you, would be to leave you alone, in your sin, and the greatest way, that God can love us, and bring about, sanctification, and holiness in our life, is to discipline us, read Hebrews 12 tonight, it's an amazing piece, God disciplines, the ones he loves, it's not pleasant, but it's for our good, got some quotes for you, the Baptists are going to love this, one of my heroes is Spurgeon, Charles Spurgeon, let me just read you, three quotes, this is dangerous, because as soon as I read quotes, you guys are going to tune out, I don't want you to do it, it's really important, really important, Spurgeon went through, a lot of depression, just a lot of bad stuff, sickness, and he said this, it would be a very sharp, and trying experience to me, to think that I have an affliction, which God never sent me, that the bitter cup, was never filled by his hand, that my trials, were never measured out by him, nor sent to me, by his arrangement of their weight, and quantity, that is not something, that's very popular today, in Christian circles, to think that way about God, that he would measure out, every affliction, and send it our way for our good, read you some more, stay with me, he says,

[ 29 : 28 ] I'm afraid, that all the grace, that I've got, of my comfortable, and easy times, and happy hours, might almost lie on a penny, but the good, that I've received, from my sorrows, and pains, and griefs, is altogether incalculable, affliction, is the best bit of furniture, in my house, it is the best book, in a minister's library, one more, this is good, he's great with language, he says, I dare say, the greatest, earthly blessing, that God can give, any of us, is health, with the exception, of sickness, if some men, that I know, could only be, favoured, with a month, of rheumatism, it would be, by God's grace, to mellow them, marvelously, that's what, my buddy, was saying last night, that God, works great things, in us, through our afflictions, and here's the link, you read ahead, to the end of a chapter, this chapter,

Elizabeth, Elizabeth has, the baby, Zechariah's, tongue is loosed, and the first thing, he does, is not shake his fist, at God, he praises God, with a beautiful song, he praises God, God has removed, that pride, he has removed, that obstacle, between him, and worship, I guess, what I want to say, is, our afflictions, are really, God's grace, to us, that's what the Bible says, you've got to come to terms, with it, I know it's not easy, that's what the Bible says, and here, we can see clearly, that it's grace, to Zechariah, I reckon it's grace, in two ways, first of all, because God, disciplines the ones, he loves, if you're being disciplined, God loves you, it's evidence, God leaves people alone, who don't, who don't love him, number two, this is really important too, this rebuke, from the angel, sounds pretty harsh, but it carries a promise, did you catch it, right at the end, he says, you'll become mute, unable to speak, until when, until, the day, these things occur, it's a promise, he's going to have a son, the Messiah, is going to come, all of his prayers, are going to be answered, it's going to happen, after that time of affliction, nine months, of not being able to speak, but it's going to come, it's a promise, all right, let's just do the last couple of verses, real quick, and I'll pray, let's read through to the end, verse 21, meanwhile, this is while, this is while Zechariah, still in the temple, offering his incense, and whatnot, the people were waiting, for Zechariah, and wondered, at the delay, in the sanctuary, so they're all outside, kneeling down, on the marble, praying, and pretending, to look really, holy and pious, but really, they're in a lot of pain, and he's in there, a long time, so they're wondering, what's going on, when he finally came out, he could not speak, to them, and they realized, that he'd seen a vision, in the sanctuary, he kept motioning, to them, and remained unable, to speak, when his time of service, was ended, he went to his home, after those days, his wife Elizabeth, conceived, and for five months, she remained in seclusion, we don't know

why, she just did, by herself for five months, and she said, this is what the Lord, has done for me, when he looked, favorably on me, and took away, the disgrace, I've endured, among my people, it was a disgrace, not to be able, to have kids, but God heard her prayer, and she was honored, by God in that, and the baby, that was born, would be John the Baptist, John the baptizer, he would prepare, the way, for Jesus Christ, to come, I want you to come, every week, from here on in, because you're going to see, how this plays out, Luke follows it, very carefully, very meticulously, how God works, to bring Jesus, into the world, to save Hannah, to save me, to save you, from your sins, it's an exciting story, let's pray for us, particularly, if I could pray for you, and for me, that we would see, God's hand, in our afflictions, as his loving way, of bringing us, to holiness, let's pray, Father, thank you for, Luke, the physician, the historian, the careful, author of this book, thank you Lord, that you inspired, everything he wrote, that it's not just, the account of a man, in the first century, but it is, the very word of God, to us, we thank you, that his purpose, in writing, is so that we might, know, the truth, Lord, please, help us, to know the truth, to know it well, to stand, on the rock, and to be secure, in the knowledge, that what we read, in the gospels, is historical fact, theological truth, Lord, we also pray, thinking about, your hand, in disciplining us, I pray that we would, really see you, as a father, that children, often don't want, to be disciplined, and often don't, understand the discipline, that they receive, but that we would, see you, as a father, who disciplines, the ones he loves, Lord, let it not be said, of us, in the second week, of chemo, that we threw away, our faith, or that we shook, our fist at you, let it be said, that we delighted, to know that, you were working, good out of our situation, that we would know, in our heart, right in our heart, Romans 8, verse 28, that you work, all things together, for good, for those who love you, and are called, according to your purpose, Lord, help us to believe, these promises, promises, please keep us, secure in your love, and truth, in our time, of need and adversity, we do pray it all, for Jesus sake, our great God, and King, Amen.