

# Hope in God's Faithfulness

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Date: 03 December 2023

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning. Our scripture reading this morning will be taken from the book of Luke, beginning at chapter 1, beginning at verses 1 through 25.

That have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us.

It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah, and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

[ 1 : 21 ] Now while he was serving as priest before God, when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. And you shall 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. And 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, and to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

[ 2 : 36 ] And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. And the angel answered him, I am Gabriel.

I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple.

And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days, his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.

Here ends God's word. This morning we're taking a break from our sermon series in the book of Genesis. And we're starting a four-week Christmas sermon series titled The Hope of Christmas.

[ 3 : 59 ] And one of the Sad Realities About Christmas is that, despite the fact that it marks the birth of Jesus and the hope that he brought to our dark and broken world, for many people Christmas is one of the darkest and most hopeless times of the year.

Sadly, many people take their lives or attempt to take their lives just engulfed in hopelessness.

And while the reasons for these expressions of hopelessness in the lives of so many are many, I believe that if we were to fix our eyes on the marvel and the wonder of the Savior's birth, our hearts will be filled with hope during the Christmas season.

And that's the goal of this sermon series. That's the goal over the next four weeks, that we, by the grace of God, will fill our hearts with the hope of Christmas.

We sent out the details of the sermon series. We sent out the details of the sermon series. They were posted in a WhatsApp group and in a shareable format.

[ 5 : 30 ] So I encourage you to use that social media post and share it with friends and family or anybody else you think might benefit from the sermon series.

Over the next four weeks, we're going to be looking at Luke's account of the Savior's birth. And one of the immediate things I should point out to us is that we run the risk of becoming so familiar with this text and the passages that we'll be considering that we can easily hear these sermons in a very passive way and just think to ourselves, well, I know the story and we're not as engaged.

And that's a challenge that we all face. I've said to Alexian that for me, the hardest sermons to preach are Christmas and Easter.

The hardest sermons to preach is that we're not as engaged in a very passive way. Fixed texts around which we can preach. Obviously, there are other texts to the periphery that we may be able to include, but when we look at the central texts, they're fixed.

And we can fall into a trap of just seeing these passages in the very same way every single time. But I'm praying that the Lord will give us all fresh eyes and open hearts as we come to these texts this morning and over the next few weeks.

[ 7 : 12 ] So let me begin by praying that the Lord will do that for us this morning. Father, we thank you for your word this morning, and we pause asking for your help.

God, would you grant us the ability to come to this sermon this morning and the sermons over the next three weeks after today with fresh eyes and open hearts for what you would say to us.

Lord, would you speak to us from the truths of your ancient word. And Lord, we pray that you would use it to transform our hearts and lives and to give us the hope that only comes through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Would you work, Lord, in our hearts in this way, and would you help me as I proclaim your word this morning. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Luke's gospel begins with a commonly overlooked part of the birth of Jesus.

[ 8 : 33 ] If there's a character in the storyline of the birth of Jesus, who would be considered the orphan character, it would be John. And part of the reason that we don't see John in the Christmas story is that Luke is the only gospel writer who connects the birth of John to the birth of Jesus Christ.

And this morning we are considering Gabriel's announcement of the birth of John. And in Gabriel's announcement of the birth of John, we are reminded of a twofold truth that we can so easily forget. A twofold truth that we can so easily forget. And that twofold truth is that God remembers all of our prayers and fulfills all of his prophecies.

I think we can see this twofold truth from this account that was just read in our hearing this morning. God remembers all of our prayers and God fulfills all of his prophecies.

And I really believe that if we remember this twofold truth as we embark upon the Christmas season, as we go through Christmas this year, our hearts will be filled with hope.

[ 10 : 00 ] Our hearts will be filled with the hope of Christmas, the hope that the Lord Jesus Christ has brought into our dark world. And so this morning, I want us to consider Gabriel's announcement of John's birth.

And what we will see in it is that he focuses on two realities, both of which can be a source of despair for God's people.

And they are, number one, a seemingly forgotten prayer, and number two, a seemingly failed prophecy. We got it.

We didn't have slides earlier, so I guess they came. So those are two realities that stand out in Gabriel's announcement of the birth of John.

A seemingly forgotten prayer and a seemingly failed prophecy. And in our remaining time, I want to consider both of these, beginning with the first one, a seemingly forgotten prayer.

[ 11 : 12 ] Luke begins his gospel with the appearance of Gabriel to Zechariah. And we're told in the opening verses of this account that Zechariah was a priest.

And we see how Luke was a historian because he doesn't tell us simply he was a priest. He says he was a priest in the days of Herod the king. He was locating these events in a historical setting. And Zechariah happened to belong to a division of the priests whose duty it was to serve at that particular time.

And I think just taking a moment to talk about the priesthood and how the priesthood was structured would be helpful for us to see how God was at work in what we can easily overlook as just data. But God was at work in this announcement of the birth of John that Luke has recorded in his gospel. So at this time, the priesthood would have numbered about 18,000 priests and they were subdivided into divisions.

[ 12 : 29 ] And each division would serve twice per year, a week at a time. And because there were more than enough priests to do the specific tasks that needed to be done in the temple, they would choose who was going to serve by casting lots.

And casting lots in those days is equivalent to what we may call today flipping a coin to choose randomly who will get to do a particular thing.

And in the tasks that the priests would perform, there was one particular task, which was the honor of a lifetime.

And that was to burn incense before the Lord. That was to take the incense, go into the holy place, and burn it before the Lord, which was a symbol of intercession before the Lord for the people.

And you'd see in this account that as Zechariah was doing this, there were people who were gathered on the outside because this was a most solemn occasion, this burning of the incense, which represented the prayers of intercession on behalf of the people going up to the Lord.

[ 13 : 51 ] This was the highlight of any priests, priestly ministry. It was the honor of a lifetime.

And it was such a precious honor that a priest, if he was selected, he could only be selected once. He couldn't go many times.

And they would remove him so that, well, out of the consideration, so that others who had not had this opportunity may have a better chance of having this opportunity.

The reality is that some priests served all their lives and retired from the priesthood or died, and they never got the opportunity to burn incense. They never got the opportunity to go into the holy place and offer this sweet aroma to the Lord, representing their intercessions on behalf of the people.

And so with that background, let's now consider the selection of Zechariah, beginning in verse 8. We read, Now while he was serving as priest before God, when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by Lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

[ 15 : 16 ] And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. When I think about this picture of this faithful priest, this old priest, Zechariah, offering incense to the Lord, to me, it's a beautiful picture of remaining faithful and steadfast in the Lord's service in the midst of personal prayers yet unanswered and personal desires yet unmet.

That was Zechariah's situation. And I say this because earlier in this account, in verse 7, we're told that Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were childless.

And we're also told that they were advanced in years. And in that day and time, in that culture, if you did not have a child, you were considered either under a curse from God or under some kind of displeasure for something that you had done.

But such was not the case with Zechariah and Elizabeth. And Luke is careful to point this out to us. Look again at what he writes about them in verse 6.

He writes, And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and the statutes of the Lord. Luke was not saying that they were perfect.

[ 16 : 56 ] Zechariah and Elizabeth were not perfect. What he says about them is they were blameless. He's simply saying that they were righteous and they were godly. And there was nothing that could be pointed to in their lives that openly and outwardly was sinful.

They were godly, yet they were childless. And Zechariah is serving. And what we see is that he had actually prayed a prayer.

He prayed a prayer to God for a son. And here he is. He's offering up these incense, praying to God, and yet, he has prayed a prayer that, humanly speaking, will never be answered. As I was reading this account, and this happens to me every time I read this account, my mind goes back to a video that we have at home, and all of our children have watched it, and it is on this account of Gabriel coming to Zechariah when he is in the temple, and Gabriel comes to him and says to Zechariah in this video, your prayer has been answered. And Zechariah says, what prayer? And that always stands out to me because the reality is that when you were young and you prayed for a child and it didn't happen, and now you're old, you've forgotten about that prayer. [ 18 : 31 ] That prayer, you're not thinking about that particular prayer. But that was Zechariah's lot. He was serving, and in this moment, his duty was to offer up the intercessions on behalf of the people to God.

And his own prayer for a son had not been answered. And we can imagine that again as the years went by for Zechariah and Elizabeth, the dream of having a child just faded, and I think the prayer faded with it as well. And so it's reasonable to think that they were no longer praying. They were no longer expecting to have a child. Time was against them. They were old and advanced in years. They'd given up hope of ever having a child. What makes this account even more profound is when we consider the meanings of the names Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John. Zechariah means God remembers. God remembered Zechariah's prayer for a son that Zechariah had seemingly forgotten. [ 19 : 58 ] And in his providence, God had Zechariah to be named Zechariah. He had his parents to name him Zechariah. God knew everything about Zechariah before the foundation of the world.

God knew that he would be in a situation where he would not be able to have a child, and yet he had his parents to name him Zechariah God remembers. And in that culture, people knew the meanings of names. So when a name was uttered, they knew what it meant. And so every time they said Zechariah, they always said, God remembers. God remembers. God remembers. Elizabeth means God is my oath or I swear by God. It means that God is trustworthy and God is dependable. We can stake our lives on him. We can stake our hearts' desires upon the Lord.

[ 21 : 02 ] And Elizabeth's trustworthy God in this announcement by Gabriel was showing himself to be trustworthy, announcing that she was going to have that long-awaited and desired son. son. And John means God is gracious. God announced to Zechariah that he was going to have a son, the son he'd been praying for. And God said, you are to name him God is gracious. You are to name him John. And let's be reminded this morning, brothers and sisters, that God gives us good gifts. He gives us gifts that we don't deserve. But God is not gracious because he gives us gifts. God is gracious. He is by nature gracious. And his giving us gifts is a part of his gracious nature. And so the angel tells Zechariah that he is going to have a son.

[ 22 : 19 ] And in verse 14, he tells him that this son will bring him gladness and many will rejoice at his birth. All of this is the sovereign dealings of a sovereign God.

God answered for Zechariah and Elizabeth a seemingly forgotten prayer. And that should fill all of our hearts with hope this morning because I would suspect that all of us have some prayer or another that we are waiting for God to answer. No doubt some of us long-standing prayers. Some of us long-standing prayers for healing for ourselves or for a loved one or perhaps for an unbelieving child or spouse or some other family member.

Perhaps for a marriage to be restored or some provision for a need or whatever else. But this account of God remembering a seemingly forgotten prayer, a prayer that humanly speaking seemed to be impossible to be answered should fill our hearts with hope that God does answer seemingly remembered, seemingly forgotten prayers.

[ 23 : 53 ] That God remembers words, that God is one by whom we can swear, that he is one we can stake our lives on, that he is one that is gracious.

We should fill all of our hearts with hope and encouragement this morning. perhaps there's some of us who are like Zechariah and Elizabeth.

You're no longer waiting. You've given up. Time has passed by. Everything points to, from a human point of view, that that prayer cannot be answered.

Once again, we should be encouraged that God remembers. That we can stake our claim on the Lord and that the Lord is gracious.

We'll look at this next week, but I do want to point you to it because I think it helps to make the point about how God is able to remember and he is able to answer those prayers that seemingly have been forgotten and impossible to answer in what Gabriel later says to Mary in verses 36 and 37 when Gabriel was trying to answer Mary's questions and help Mary to see that God is able to do what he had promised her.

[ 25 : 33 ] This is what Gabriel says to Mary in verses 36 and 37. and behold your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren and he then says this for nothing will be impossible with God nothing nothing will be impossible with God we'll consider what Gabriel said to Mary more closely next next week but I want us to hear this this morning nothing is impossible with God even those prayers that we have given upon even those prayers that when we look at our life circumstances everything says it's impossible to be answered all things are possible with

God I think it's important for me to say what I'm not saying this morning I am not saying that God will answer all of our seemingly forgotten prayers I'm not saying that because he will not if God answered every single prayer we prayed we'll have heaven on earth brothers and sisters we will have heaven realized but the reality is if we live in a world that is broken that is fallen and we live in a world awaiting the promise of a new world that the Lord Jesus Christ will usher in when he returns and it is only then that all will be as it should be it is only then that all things will be perfect but on this side all will not be as we want it to be all of our prayers will not be answered and here's another thing all of our prayers don't need to be answered they don't need to be answered what need to be answered

God will certainly answer but all of our prayers do not need to be answered and we are dealing with the God who is sovereign in all of his ways sovereign in all of his dealings and he does all things in accordance with the counsel of his will and so he determined that even though Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed this prayer for a child when they were young a sovereign God determined I'm going to answer that when you're old we don't get to choose our roles we don't get to choose the parts that we play in the drama of life a sovereign God chooses that for us as we see he chose for Zechariah and for Elizabeth now what we see in this passage is that intertwined with God answering a seemingly forgotten prayer God fulfilled a seemingly failed prophecy he he he was answering this seemingly forgotten prayer that Zechariah had prayed but he was also answering and fulfilling a seemingly failed prophecy prophecy and this is my second and final point Gabriel announced to Zechariah that God was going to bless him and Elizabeth with a son but what was clear is that John was not going to be an ordinary child in fact what is very clear when you look at what Gabriel said is that John was not just going to be Zechariah's son John was going to be God's prophet and so

Zechariah would not have the privilege of naming John that was the privilege of fathers Zechariah wouldn't have that privilege Gabriel said his name will be John you are to name him John that God is gracious look again at what Gabriel said about John starting in verse 15 it says he will be great before the Lord and 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

[ 30 : 56 ] Lord a people prepared so John was Zechariah and Elizabeth's son and to them God was saying I'm gracious but John was also God's prophet to the nation and to them he was saying I'm gracious John was a gift of grace both to this elderly couple and to this wayward nation and we see that John is no ordinary child because first in a culture where alcohol was consumed as a part of the culture John was commanded to drink no alcohol John was going to be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb and John was going to have a specific ministry to the nation of Israel to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers as I was considering

John's life it struck me how there are people who really believe that they make much of free will and our ability to choose to do this and to choose to do that with our lives and they say things like oh God will never violate a person's will and all that but you look at John John had no say in the matter you can't drink alcohol you can be filled with the Holy Spirit from your mother's womb and you are going to be a prophet to the nation of Israel and you are going to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and children to their fathers and John would minister for a very short period of time just a matter of months just a matter of months and after that he's put in prison and that's basically the end of

John's life that's what a sovereign God does and here's the reality he doesn't just do that with John he does that with all of us and it matters not that we understand how he does that there is a sovereign God who is working out all of his purpose in all of our lives now in order to appreciate how this announcement of John's birth was the fulfillment of a seemingly failed prophecy we need to consider the last two verses of the book of Malachi which is the last book in the Old Testament it's Malachi chapter 4 verses 4 to 6 here's what those two verses say behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of comes and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers lest

I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction these are the last words of God to the children of Israel recorded as the Old Testament came to a close last words of God to them now between that prophecy that Malachi utters on behalf of God and this announcement that Gabriel is giving to Zechariah 400 years elapsed this is called the 400 year period of silence where God said nothing else to the nation of Israel it is almost as if the conversation paused it's kind of like listening to something you hit the pause button and then when Gabriel speaks the pause button is released and God begins to speak again and so this announcement of

John's birth by Gabriel connects back to this prophecy that we have in Malachi chapter 4 God promised to send Elijah the prophet to the children of Israel before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes what is that great and awesome day that's the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ the time when whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved the time when salvation would be full and free and people can come and drink from the wells of salvation the great and awesome day of the Lord this is about God's reconciling work turning the hearts of fathers to their children and children to their fathers and so for 400 years!

[ 36 : 29 ] they were literally looking for Elijah to return and so as far as they were concerned this 100 year period of time this is not actually happening but what we see is in Gabriel's prophecy in Luke chapter 1 it is not a literal return of Elijah instead what Gabriel says is that John would go before God in the spirit and the power of Elijah to make ready a people for the Lord so we have the better understanding of what Malachi 4 4 through 6 means that it's not Elijah literally coming but it's Elijah coming through John the Baptist in a spiritual kind of sense and Jesus confirms this in his ministry all the gospel writers record this this is what

Matthew's account says in Matthew 17 10 to 13 and the disciples asked him then why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first he answered Elijah does come and he restores all things but I tell you that Elijah has already come and they did not recognize him but did to him whatever they pleased so also the son of man will certainly suffer at their hands verse 13 then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist so based on this prophecy of Malachi coming for 400 years the prophetic promise was unfulfilled and had seemingly failed but there's an even earlier prophecy about

John the Baptist than this one that we have recorded in Malachi there's an earlier one in the book of Isaiah the prophet Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 40 verses 3 to 5 a voice cries in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord make straight in the desert a highway for our God every valley will be lifted up every mountain will be made low the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken the gospel writers Matthew Mark and Luke confirm that John the Baptist was that voice crying in the wilderness that Isaiah prophesied about and we'll see that in the third sermon in this series when we come to look at Zechariah's prophecy at the birth of John the Baptist now this prophecy by Isaiah was 700 years before Gabriel appeared to Zechariah about John so for 700 years this prophecy was out there that there's going to be this voice in the wilderness proclaiming prepare the way of the Lord and doing amazing things to prepare for this one who's called the Lord who's going to be coming 700 years no fulfillment the prophecy seems

seems to have failed so not only does God show himself faithful to Zechariah and Elizabeth by answering a seemingly forgotten prayer God also showed himself faithful to the nation of Israel by fulfilling a seemingly forgotten failed prophecy by sending them the prophet

John on the liturgical church calendar today marks the first day of Advent and Advent is the season that begins four Sundays before Christmas and it simply means coming that's what Advent means it means coming and in Advent what happens is we do two things we look back we reflect on the promise of Christ's coming we reflect on the scriptures that prophesied that Jesus Christ would come into the world and we anticipate with those who waited we anticipate we think about what was it like to wait for the coming of Jesus and Advent also is about looking forward it is about anticipating Christ's second coming his return to the world and renewing those promises in our hearts as well and we are waiting for his return in the same way that some waited for his initial coming into the world and here's what we see we see that God was faithful to fulfill the promise of Christ coming into the world the earliest indication of that promise that we can see goes back to Genesis 3:15 where

[42:28] God promised that the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent and the faithful people of God as they lived in this sinful and broken world would be looking forward to the fulfillment of that prophecy of the seed of the woman crushing the head of the serpent and that promise was renewed in different ways throughout redemption history and people waited for that and here we are now we're waiting for Christ's return and we've been waiting 2,000 years and it's easy to think very much like the unfulfilled prophecy for 700 years of John the Baptist that maybe that's not going to happen it's easy to grow weary in waiting and wondering will it be fulfilled brothers and sisters this fulfillment of the birth of John the Baptist as a part of God's big plan of redemption to bring the Savior because John came to prepare the

Savior's way it should remind us that he who fulfilled the promise of his son's first coming will fulfill the promise of his son's last coming his second coming when he comes in glory brothers and sisters everything ultimately points to that day everything ultimately points to Christ's return everything points in that direction and on that day when Christ returns he will reward the righteous he will punish the wicked and he will usher in a new heaven and a new earth and I pray that as we reflect on this account of Gabriel's announcement that our hearts will be filled with faith to trust in this God who is faithful trust in this God who is faithful to remember seemingly forgotten prayers to fulfill seemingly failed prophecies he will do it and I pray for all of us to remember this because if we remember this truth no matter how dark it gets no matter how broken the world becomes we will continue to hope in God who is faithful next Sunday the Lord willing we're going to consider Gabriel's announcement of Mary's virgin conception and how that calls us to hope in God's power let's pray Father would you help us all to fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus Christ help us to look to you the one who is faithful the one who remembers our prayers even the ones we forget and the one who fulfills all of his prophecies even when to us they seem as if they have failed and in so doing Lord would you fill our hearts with hope that when he comes from you we ask this in Jesus name amen let's stand for a closing song so