

Waiting for God

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[0 : 00] And this morning, as indicated in the bulletin, we begin a five-part Christmas message series.! And I'm grateful for what David shared, just to help us to gain perspective about this time of year when many people do untold damage to themselves and their families by how they approach the Christmas season.

And so over the years, what I've sought to do when we are approaching the Christmas season is to help us to keep Christ as center of our celebrations.

And I try to do this in a very intentional way because the sad truth is that even for some Christians, Christ is not central.

And Christmas is becoming more and more about shopping and gifts and parties and food and not primarily about celebrating the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

I know that there are some who take issue with the fact that Christ was not born on December 25th. And that really is not the point of the celebration. It never was from the time it started.

[1 : 25] The point of the celebration was not to celebrate the date of the birth of Christ, but really to celebrate the fact of the birth of Christ. He was born and His birth changed everything.

And for those of us who belong to Christ this morning, I think we need to really consider this fact that there has to be a difference between how we live life as those who belong to Christ compared to those who do not.

And Christmas and how we celebrate Christmas is one of those occasions where that comparison can be made. And so over the next several weeks, we will be turning our attention to God's Word and considering the birth of Christ to help us prepare our hearts to celebrate Christ at the time of Christmas.

So if you have not yet done so, please turn to Luke chapter 1. This morning, we will be considering verses 1 through 25.

It's a message I've entitled, Waiting for God. Luke chapter 1, we begin in verse 1. Luke writes,!

[3 : 09] 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. 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 law 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.

[4 : 44] 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 to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

And Zechariah said to the angel, How should 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.

[5 : 59] 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.

Let's pray together. Father, how blessed we are this morning to be able to gather, to sing, to lift our voices to you in worship and now to sit under the preaching of your word.

[7 : 25] And Father, we pause in this moment to ask for your help because we can do nothing without you. We need you to cause us to hear your word and then to obey your word.

So Lord, would you grant us illumination this morning? Would you grant us hearts that are postured to hear and obey? And Lord, our desire is that you would use this message this morning and in the coming weeks to prepare us to celebrate and commemorate the coming of the Savior.

Father, I ask that you would provide abundant grace for me once again, Lord, as I stand before your people to bring your word. Lord, no one is sufficient for the task of bringing your word to your people so I ask for the help of your Holy Spirit to enable me, Lord, for this lofty task this morning of representing you before these who are assembled here.

So Lord, would you come by your Spirit? Would you help us this morning, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I'm sure that some of you have counted it.

If you have not, I'm sure your children have. But in exactly 32 days, we will be at the end of this year. And one of the realities in our midst is that some of us will end this year postured in the same way that we entered it.

[9 : 07] We entered it in a posture of waiting and in particular waiting for God. some of us who are waiting for God to move in our health situations, our bodies are wracked with sickness and by pain.

And doctors have done all that they are able to do. And so we wait. And some of us are waiting for God in financial situations. We find it difficult to make ends meet.

We are overwhelmed by debt. And the income from our jobs or from our businesses is not sufficient. And so we wait for God to intervene.

And closely connected to that, there are some of us who are unemployed. We're waiting for God to open some door of employment.

In an economy where jobs are hard to find, where bills are mounting and perhaps creditors are calling. Some of us are in work situations where our careers have dead-ended and there's no promise of change, no prospect for change unless God opens a door or makes a way.

[10 : 32] for some of us we face family situations that have us waiting for God. A difficult marriage, perhaps a wayward child.

We've done all that we know to do and it hasn't been enough and we've prayed and we've asked God that He would intervene and so we are waiting for Him to act.

Perhaps you didn't enter this year waiting. You didn't enter this year with any awareness of some outstanding need or some circumstance in which you needed God to intervene. But things changed this year and maybe now you do face a situation where you have to wait for God having prayed.

and the list can go on. There are other situations that I can point to where we have prayed and prayed and we find ourselves so waiting for God to answer those prayers.

But in the passage that we read this morning I think we have two encouraging examples. two faith building examples of waiting for God.

[11 : 57] And here's how I would summarize this encouragement that flows from the passage that we just read to those of us who wait for God. Wait for God because He hears our prayers and fulfills His promises.

I think when we consider this account and we consider the two examples of waiting that we find in this account the encouragement that comes to us this morning some 2,000 years removed from these circumstances is wait for God because He hears our prayers and He fulfills His promises. In our remaining time this morning I'd like us to consider and learn from these two examples of waiting for God in this text so that we can be encouraged whether that waiting is now or in the future.

And the first example is a waiting couple a waiting couple a waiting couple in the persons of Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth.

Look at how Luke describes them in verses 5-7. We're told in verse 5 that Zechariah was a priest and that his wife Elizabeth was descended from Aaron who was the first high priest of Israel.

[13:33] She even had the same name that Aaron's wife had. Elizabeth. Elizabeth was Aaron's wife in the Hebrew language and it translated into Elizabeth into the Greek language.

Note in particular how in verse 6 Luke takes the time to tell us their standing before God. He describes for us their standing before God and what he says about them is they were both righteous before God walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

And then immediately in the very next verse in verse 7 Luke contrasts their righteous standing before God with their heartbreaking situation in life. They were childless.

Elizabeth was unable to have children and in addition to that at this point she and Zechariah were well advanced in years and humanly speaking there was no hope for them to have a child.

It would have been difficult when Elizabeth was young and now she is old and so is Zechariah. And so Luke places these two realities side by side.

[14:57] They're standing before God and their situation in life. And I think it's under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Luke tells us about their righteous standing before God and their heartbreaking situation in life to make the point that their childlessness had nothing to do with sinfulness.

It was not due to some judgment from God against them. And this is an important point for Luke to make because in that day especially childlessness was considered to be a curse.

It was considered to be a sign of divine judgment and divine displeasure. And we see this from Elizabeth's own assessment. Look at her assessment in verse 25.

After conceiving she says thus has the Lord done for me in the days when he looked upon me to take away my reproach among people.

The NIV says it more plainly. The NIV says the Lord has done this for me she said. In these days he has shown his favor and has taken away my disgrace among people.

[16:16] That was how she viewed her circumstances and I think it's fair to say it was not in a vacuum. She didn't just view that in a vacuum.

She viewed it because that was the outlook among the people. That was the general consensus of her situation in that particular day.

But again Luke is careful to say to us and to remind us that this was not the case with Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were blameless, not sinless, not perfect, but they were blameless, meaning that they were faithfully obeying and keeping the commandments of the Lord.

Not perfectly, but faithfully. And for us this morning, I think there's an obvious lesson that we need to be reminded of, that less than ideal circumstances and unanswered prayers in our lives are not in and of themselves any indicator that God is displeased with us or God is judging us.

And this is especially true when we are walking in the light and we are seeking to faithfully please the Lord. And obviously the opposite is true.

[17:37] Having what we desire and having life to be as we would want it to be is no indicator in and of itself that God is pleased with us. One of the mysteries of the Christian life is why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?

And some of those reasons we would never know on this side of eternity and we have to relegate them into the category of mystery. We don't know. We don't know why at times the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer.

But it is a reality. We see it in scripture and we see it in life. So let us this morning not misread our circumstances to try to determine God's pleasure or displeasure.

We see in verses 8-10 that Zechariah had a unique opportunity. He was chosen by Lot to burn incense in the holy place.

And this is something that many priests lived and died and didn't get an opportunity to do. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity and it really was only afforded once to a priest.
[18:49] When he had this opportunity he was no longer eligible for it. And having been chosen by Lot means that it was done randomly.

It was kind of like putting names in a bag and pulling one out or throwing some kind of chance instrument to determine who the person is going to be chosen.
But what we see as we read this account is that though Zechariah humanly speaking was chosen by Lot ultimately from a divine perspective he was chosen by God.
God had a plan for this man at that time in that nation. God had a message for Zechariah and that message would both answer his long-standing prayer for a child and would also fulfill God's long-standing promise to send a prophet who would prepare the way for Messiah.
And so Gabriel appears to Zechariah and tells him his prayer has been heard and that Elizabeth is going to bear a son by the name of John.

[20:03] Notice what Gabriel tells Zechariah in verse 13. Your prayer has been heard. Now I think it's reasonable to conclude that Zechariah probably was not praying that prayer right then.

I mean he expresses incredible doubt. He says how shall I know this? I'm an old man and my wife is advanced in years.

That doesn't sound like someone who is going to be praying a prayer asking the Lord to give him a child and more specifically a son at that particular time.

So I think the best understanding of what the angel is saying about this prayer is that this is a prayer that Zechariah had long ago prayed. Had prayed when he was younger when Elizabeth was younger though she was not conceiving praying that God would grant them a child and in particular a son.

And so Gabriel comes to him and Gabriel says Zechariah that prayer that you prayed that long-standing prayer that you've waited on and perhaps are no longer even considering in this moment as being possible.

[21:18] God has heard that prayer and God will answer. God didn't just hear the prayer when Gabriel came to tell him God heard that prayer.

The only issue was the timing of God's answer to that prayer. Brothers and sisters what we see in this example of this couple Zechariah and Elizabeth is a wonderful example of what faithful waiting on God, waiting for God to answer prayer looks like.

First of all what we see is they continue to serve the Lord, especially Zechariah. There Zechariah was still serving God as a priest in the temple even though in his mind this important prayer for a child had not been answered.

And as far as he was concerned based on Elizabeth's advanced age would not be answered. But he continued to serve God. He continued to serve God faithfully even though others probably wondered and speculated about the reason for his and Elizabeth's childlessness.

So what can we learn from this faithful man, from his example? First of all we can learn that we don't serve God because he answers our prayers or he gives us the desires of our hearts.

[22:52] We serve God because he is God. We serve God whether he gives us those things or not. If God gives us nothing, he is worthy of our service, he is worthy of our worship.

But some people including some Christians have the attitude of Job's wife and how they view God and how they relate to God. Job's wife said to Job, God is not hearing your prayers.

He has allowed these circumstances to come against you. Curse God and die. Last Sunday, Pastor Wayne Brooks shared with us and made the point that one of the most important aspects of the Christian life is learning how to walk through trials.

And he's right. It's one of the most important aspects of the Christian life. Practically speaking, learning how to walk through trials because in this life we will have trials.
we need to learn how to walk through them and this morning I want to add another to that another important aspect of the Christian life is learning how to wait for God to answer long standing prayers see either one could trip us up the trials that are lingering and seeming to never go away and prayers that are important enough for us to lift up to God and to pray to God and when they aren't answered they can trip us up as well if we don't understand how we are to wait for God an important lesson that we can learn from this example of Zechariah and Elizabeth is that delay is not denial sometimes God says yes to our prayers yes right away immediately sometimes he says no

outrightly and it's a no answer the door is closed and then there's sometimes when God says yes but not yet but the reality is when we pray prayers we really don't want to hear no for an answer and we really even don't want to hear yes but not yet because sometimes we can't even distinguish between no and yes but not yet not right now we prefer to hear yes right now

[25 : 26] I'm going to do that but here's what can help us what can help us is that the more we grow in our conviction that God is perfect and wise in all of his ways that he withholds no good gift from his children no good gift from those who walk uprightly before him it is easier to entrust our prayers to such a God and to wait for him to do what he deems best when he deems best and how he deems best so when our convictions grow in that God and we believe that God and we are reminding ourselves that we are praying to that God and waiting for that God not saying that the waiting becomes easier but we are able to wait faithfully and we are able to trust God to do what is best when he deems it best and how he deems it best

I feel constrained this morning to make a point that should be obvious and that is that it would be a misapplication for us to conclude from this passage that all of our unanswered prayers will eventually be answered as we would want them to be as in the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth that is not the point of the passage and that is certainly not the point that I am seeking to make in this message I do not believe that that is what God is seeking to communicate to us but I do believe he is trying to hold out to us a faithful example of a waiting couple to encourage our hearts and to remind us that he does answer prayers and he even answers those prayers that seem like they may never be answered and as we study these things we learn the ways of God we learn that God is doing something bigger and something more than we can see that meets our eyes in the situation God had something very unique and very special for this couple so I want to ask you this morning as we consider this example of this waiting couple for those of us who are waiting for God this morning to answer prayers I want to ask you are you faithfully waiting?

are you faithfully serving God patiently trusting Him to do what is best? are you like Zechariah going about the work that God had ordained for you to do and just trusting God leaving that to Him to do as He pleases?

but if you are may this example of Zechariah and Elizabeth continue encourage you to continue to do so but I imagine that for many of us this morning who are waiting for God discouragement may have set in and disengagement may have taken place and perhaps even though we may be continuing the outward practices and going about the things that we would normally do things like church attendance we are not faithfully serving the Lord we are not actively trusting His goodness and waiting for Him to answer our prayers when and how He deems best and that's you this morning again my prayer is that this example of this waiting couple would encourage your heart that God is worthy of waiting for

[29 : 42] He is worthy of trusting in because He hears and He answers prayers even long standing prayers that seem like they'll never be answered now God ordained that Zechariah and Elizabeth would be the parents of a special child a child who would be filled with the Holy Spirit from Elizabeth's womb a child who would be the one to prepare the way for the coming Messiah for the Savior of the world but they would not have known this they would not have known that God had planned to answer the prayer they prayed but He had some other things in mind that He was at the same time going to fulfill a promise to the nation of Israel and since this was a special child they were

God's specially ordained parents for this child to be this miracle child He was not of virgin birth like Jesus was but nonetheless the circumstances were such God allowed the circumstances to be such that all would know that this was nothing short of the Lord's doing this child was a miracle and so what we see God doing is He simultaneously answered Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayer and fulfilled His promise that He would send the prophet to prepare the way of Messiah so God had this bigger plan for Zechariah and Elizabeth and one I'm sure that they did not factor in to their prayers and so there was this divine delay in God answering their prayer because of this bigger plan and this brings me to the second example of waiting awaiting people awaiting people the truth is that Zechariah and Elizabeth represented on a personal level the situation in Israel on a national level 400 years had passed by since God had spoken to the nation of Israel 400 years had gone by since He had spoken to them through the mouth of one of His prophets and that prophet was the prophet Malachi one of the last things He did was He promised them that He was going to send Elijah He was going to send the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes and here are

the exact words that God spoke to the nation of Israel through the prophet Malachi behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord 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 those who heard that prophecy those who heard that God made this promise that He was going to send Elijah and later we see in this account that we read that it was one in the spirit of Elijah one in the power of Elijah they read this they heard this prophecy that this prophet was going to come and he was going to prepare the way for the Lord before that great and awesome day comes when Messiah would come and they died and never saw the fulfillment many who later read this prophecy or heard this prophecy read to them who were not living at the time of Malachi they also died and didn't see its fulfillment and how easy would it have been for successive generations to wonder about this prophecy to wonder about this promise will God do this after all these generations had passed away and it is nothing short of a miracle that what we find in the passage that we just read is that some 400 years later not only are there faithful priests like Zechariah who are serving but there are faithful people who are still worshiping God and they are still worshiping this God who had not fulfilled his promise to them after 400 years and yet they were faithfully waiting look at what it says in Luke chapter 1 verse 10 it says and the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense the whole multitude of the people promise waiting to be fulfilled many died not seeing fulfillment and yet there's a whole multitude of the people praying outside at the hour of incense and this was their daily practice in the evening the priest would offer up incense to God as worship on behalf of the people and despite the fact that this promise to send the prophet to prepare Messiah's way had not yet been fulfilled the people continued to gather and they continued to pray and they continued to worship God and really they continued to wait and so in addition to Gabriel's message as an answered prayer for Zechariah and Elizabeth Zechariah also heard what the angel said as a fulfillment of God's promise to him and his people he heard with two sets of heirs he heard that yes this prayer that my wife and I have prayed that is beyond humanly taking place now God is answering that prayer and then he also heard that this promise that God had made to the nation that he would send the prophet who would go before Messiah that that promise was now being fulfilled look at what it says in verse 15 concerning

John the Baptist it says that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb and no doubt this was pointing to the unique work that he would do as the forerunner of Jesus as the one who pointed to Jesus and for this work he would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb and look at the specific ministry that he is given in verses 16 and 17 it says he will turn in verse 16 he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God and in verse 17 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 a people to make ready for the Lord a people prepared we see immediately that verse 17 echoes in particular the prophecy of Malachi now 400 years

[37 : 44] God was fulfilling his word this announcement of John's birth was and still is a reminder that God fulfills promises when we think of the birth of Christ it is so easy to overlook the birth of John and interestingly Luke is the only one who gives us these particular details of the announcement of John's birth and later on he will give us the details of John's birth but Luke serves us very well by reminding us of the close connection between Jesus and John the same angel announced their birth six months apart John the Baptist was the sign that Messiah was on his way he was the forerunner of

Messiah and so as God was announcing the fulfillment of this promise to send John to send the forerunner before the Messiah what he was also doing was he was announcing his fulfillment of his greatest promise his greatest promise that he was going to send the Lord that he was going to send the Savior of the world he was going to send the one who would be the substitute for sinners and who would reconcile sinners back to God he was announcing that he would fulfill this even greater promise this more important promise than the promise of sending the forerunner of the Messiah he would send the Messiah himself and friends in so doing God was reminding them that he was going to fulfill an even longer standing promise we read in

Genesis 3 15 at the fall of man in the garden here's what we read the Lord saying to Satan in Genesis 3 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman between your offspring and her offspring he shall bruise your head and you will bruise his heel Genesis 3 15 is God's seed form

promise that he would bring about the redemption of sinners and the defeat of Satan through the death of Jesus Christ Satan would bruise the heel of Christ but Christ would crush the head of the serpent and this is the larger promise that we are seeing as Gabriel announces the coming of John he is announcing that that age old promise that there is going to be the seed of the woman who is going to crush the head of the serpent

God is saying I'm going to fulfill that promise as well so Gabriel's announcement of John's birth pointed of the Messiah and brothers and sisters the waiting people of Israel who continue to wait for God to fulfill his promises are an example for all of us who wait for the Lord to fulfill his promises and to answer our prayers despite the passage of time they waited and trusted and likewise we are reminded that God will fulfill every promise in his word no matter what it looks like in terms of the possibility that maybe they're not going to be fulfilled and it's difficult to think about these promises yet to be fulfilled and not consider this critical promise almost 2,000 years old now where the Lord tells us that he is going to return and there are those who scoff and say it will not happen but in the same way God kept his word to send the Messiah as Savior he will keep his word to send him as judge as the judge of the world and we should be reminded that this is a God who keeps promises so let us not allow what the circumstances look like to determine whether he's going to do it or not from the looks of things in those days many years had passed and it didn't look like these promises would be fulfilled but God fulfilled them and therefore we should be encouraged that he will fulfill all of his promises I want to conclude by sharing some closing thoughts about the meanings of the names of Zechariah and John because even in those names

[43 : 02] God was caring for Zechariah caring for his people encouraging them to wait for him in his divine providence God caused the man who represented his family and who represented his nation at that moment in salvation history in his providence God caused that man to be named Zechariah and what does Zechariah mean it means God remembers God remembers and I think for us we we we tend not to be as aware of and concerned with the importance of names but in the Hebrew culture they certainly were very much aware of the importance of names and so

Zechariah's name was a prophetic message from God to Zechariah and to Israel as they waited for the promises that seemingly were not going to be fulfilled that God remembers God remembers he represented his family he represented his nation in the face of unanswered prayers and an unfulfilled promise and his name was an encouraging reminder that God remembers he remembers the promises he remembers!

the nation of Israel and this morning I believe that it is God's care for us encouraging us to wait for our prayers to be answered and wait for his promises to be fulfilled because he remembers he remembers the prayers we've prayed he remembers the promises he has made and just as Zechariah's name teaches us about God so does John's name God could have left the naming of John up to Zechariah and Elizabeth he could have made John to be what he wanted him to be and allowed the name to just be something on the side and indifferent about it but no God determined that his name would be John it was important enough that he would have this name meaning John what does John mean John means God is gracious God is gracious you see this is the one who would be coming to Israel to a rebellious nation a nation who turned their backs on God a nation who deserved to be judged a nation who deserved to be cut off and God sends the prophet and he gives them a name that says to Israel though you deserve judgment though you deserve wrath I'm gracious I'm gracious the last word that Israel heard from God out of the mouth of his prophet Malachi was destruction it's the last word that's recorded in the last book of the Old Testament in the English Standard Version I think in the King James it might be cursed it's the last word they heard from God and when God sends the prophet he puts on him the name John and he reminds them that God is gracious but brothers and sisters it's not only a reminder to Israel and to Zechariah and Elizabeth that God is gracious it is a reminder to us this morning that God is gracious reminded of what the psalmist says in psalm 103 that God does not deal with us according to what our sins deserve but he deals with us in accordance with his steadfast love and his mercy he gave the nation of Israel grace and he gives us grace the gospel writer

[47 : 48] John not John the Baptist but John puts it this way in John chapter 1 verses 14 through 16 and the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we and we have seen his glory glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth John meaning John the Baptist bore!

witness of him and cried out this was he of whom I said he who comes after me ranks before me because he was before me and then John the gospel writer concludes in verse 16 and from his

fullness we've all received grace upon grace brothers and sisters God remembers and God is gracious and therefore we can we can trust him he remembers he isn't forgotten we can trust him he is gracious he will not deal with us according to what our sins deserve and so we can trust him to answer our prayers we can trust him to fulfill his promises he's a faithful God and he is worthy of our trust and so as we approach the celebration of Christmas let us remember these truths that God communicates to us through the examples of waiting that we find in this introductory text to the Christmas story this waiting couple in the persons of Elizabeth and Zechariah and this waiting people the nation of Israel let's pray together