

Hold Fast • Luke 1:8-20

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Reading • 1 Cor. 1:4-9

⁴ I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, ⁵ that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, ⁶ even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, ⁷ so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will also confirm you to the end, *that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

B. God Is Faithful

1. As v. 9 says – God IS faithful!
 2. In Philippians 2:10 & 11 we're told the day will come when *every* tongue will declare that Jesus is Lord.
 3. Not a single soul in heaven or on earth will be *exempt* from making that great confession.
 4. Even the demons who've long resisted God, will be made to acknowledge that *despite* their rebellion, Jesus *IS* the Sovereign over All Creation.
 5. You see, God is faithful, & everything He's promised *will* come to pass.
 6. The victory Jesus *secured* at the cross will finally be *realized*, and all creation will break forth in a united declaration that He is Lord.
 7. On that great day, we'll be able to look back over every instance of our lives & realize with absolute clarity that God's will was perfect & that *everything* He promised, every word He spoke regarding us, has come to pass.
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8. There's a great example of the faithfulness of God in Luke 1.

II. TEXT

A. Set the Scene

1. Luke begins his story of Jesus with the birth of His cousin, John

- the Baptist.
2. John's parents were descendants of the Great High Priest Aaron.
 3. Their names were Zacharias & Elizabeth, & though they were righteous, godly people, *they were childless*.
 - a. This might not seem such a tragedy *to us* but to a Jew of *that time*, it was a terrible blow.
 - b. To be a part of the covenant people of God meant to enjoy the promise He made to Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars in the heavens.
 - c. Each & every Jew was understood to be under an obligation to marry & have children.
 - d. It was thought if a couple were barren, it was a sign of *God's judgment*.
 - e. And this is where the teaching of the rabbis ran into a problem with Zacharias & Elizabeth –
 - 1) because everyone knew them to be good, godly folk
 - 2) who deserved God's blessing, not judgment.
 4. Luke tells us in v. 7 that in addition to their being barren, Zacharias & Elizabeth have now aged well past the season of life in which they could have children.
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5. By the time of Jesus, there were far too many priests for them all to serve in the temple at the same time, so they'd been divided into 24 divisions.
 6. Each division served for one week, twice a year.
 7. Zacharias belonged to the division known as Abijah.
 8. It was when it was his division's turn to serve in the temple that something highly unusual happened.

B. Vs. 8-9

⁸ So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

1. There were just short of a thousand priests in each group,
2. Which meant there wasn't enough for them all to do when they *did* serve.
3. So assignments were passed out by lot.
4. Zacharias was picked to burn the incense that was offered along

with both the morning & the evening sacrifices.

5. A priest would take a small shovel of specially prepared incense, along with some live coals from the courtyard altar & enter the holy place before the veil that served as the door to the holy of holies.
6. He'd walk over to the golden altar that was just this side of the veil, place the coals on the altar, then sprinkle the incense on the coals.
7. Besides the high priest, no one was allowed to approach *this close* to the holy of holies – so the priest who was given this assignment was stoked to get it.
8. With so many priests, and their tasks assigned by lot, *MOST* priests *never* had a chance to perform this special duty.
9. So when a priest was selected to perform this service, it was *the greatest day* of his life!
10. But for Zacharias, something *even more dramatic* took place.

C. Vs. 10-13

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.

1. It had become the tradition that after the incense had been offered, the priest was supposed to come out of the holy place and stand before the people who'd gathered to receive a blessing.
2. After having just been *so close* to the presence of God, the priest who offered incense was thought to carry *special favor* he would then bestow on the people.
3. But Zacharias didn't come out of the holy place in the same time frame the other priests who made this service usually did because something was going on in there.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

4. The word “troubled” would be better translated as “terrified.”
5. That's the typical response human beings have when they see an angel.
 - a. They are creatures of great power & immense holiness.
 - b. The frailty of fallen humanity is brought into high relief when

- confronted with the glory of heaven.
- c. And most men & women lose all courage in the face of an angel.
 - d. It's why the first words they always speak are, "Don't be afraid!"
 - e. Look at it here -

13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

- 6. It had been over 400 years & the days of the last prophet, Malachi that any word had come from God.
 - a. Zacharias was overcome with the awareness that *he* was the one chosen to receive this momentous revelation from heaven.
- 7. He had to have been *astonished* that the divine silence would be broken with something so *personal*, something so intimate to he & his wife as their desire for a child.
 - a. As a priest & someone who was tasked with the spiritual health of the nation of Israel,
 - b. He would have expected the long famine of God's Word to be broken with a message to *all* the people.
 - c. A private encounter with an angel who brings him a personal promise had to be a bit confusing.
- 8. Look at the angel's message again in v. 13.

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard. . .

- 9. What prayer was the angel referring to?
 - a. Was Zacharias *praying at the moment* he offered the incense?
 - b. Or was this a prayer he'd prayed in days gone by, but had *now given up on* because he & Beth were too old to have children?
- 10. Based on Zacharias' *response* to the angel's words, we can safely conclude that he and Elizabeth had spent years praying for a child but as none came & now they are too old, they'd given up.
 - a. The prayer was an *old one*. And while they'd given up on it, God hadn't.
 - b. The angel came to tell him their prayer had been heard & would *now* be fulfilled.
- 11. They would have a son and were to name him "John."
- 12. The angel has more to say about this special child . . .

D. Vs. 14-20

14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 He will also 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 prepared for the Lord."

1. Last Wednesday evening we took a look at all the angel said regarding the life and future ministry of John.
2. The main thing was that he was to be the *forerunner* of the long-awaited Messiah.
3. It's Zacharias' reaction to the angel's message that I want to focus on -

18 And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

4. What's not brought across in the translation is the underlying tone of *doubt* in Zacharias' words.
5. Really, he says to the angel – "Yeah? Prove it! Your word isn't enough. Give me something I can lay my hands on and know for sure what you say is true."
6. The angel's response is rather humorous -

19 And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings."

7. In effect the angel says, "Listen pal – I'm Gabriel! I'm not just some run of the mill angel. I stand in God's glorious presence & am His agent to carry only the most important messages. I've been sent to give you incredible news and your response is way out of line!"
8. Now, I realize you might think I'm reading a lot into the text here, but really, that's the tone of Gabriel's response to Zacharias' doubt.
9. The proof is in what comes next. Gabriel says -

20 But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until

the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."

10. Gabriel's response proves Zacharias had lost faith.
 - a. Not his faith *in God* – but his *hope* in having a son.
 - b. He'd come to the place where he wouldn't let himself believe any longer that God would bless him in that way.
11. For this lack of faith, Gabriel tells Zacharias he will remain mute until John's birth.

E. The Lesson

1. If an angel appeared to you & said you were going to have a son & that he would play a special role in the plan of God, would you respond like this?
2. I'm going to guess most of us would say, "No way!"
3. If an angel appeared in all its glory & said *just about anything* consistent with God's nature & Word, we'd likely give a hearty – "Alrighty then!"
4. Zacharias' response to Gabriel's message teaches us an important lesson; one some of us need to hear.
5. That lesson is this – Never give up hope in God's answer of your prayer.
 - a. Never stop trusting in Him to bring forth His blessing.
 - b. Hold fast to the Lord, prevail in prayer –
 - 1) No matter how long the wait
 - 2) No matter how many the obstacles
 - 3) No matter how fierce the opposition
 - 4) No matter how discouraging the evidence
 - 5) No matter how contrary the emotions
 - 6) No matter how impossible the situation.

6. Jump on down to v. 37 –

37 "For with God nothing will be impossible."

- a. Gabriel had now gone to Nazareth to visit Elizabeth's cousin, Mary.
- b. While Elizabeth was old & way past the age of child-bearing,
- c. Mary was young & unmarried. She was a chaste virgin.
- d. The chances of *her* getting pregnant were *even more impossible* than Elizabeth's,
- e. Because while Elizabeth was at least married & had a normal

- physical relationship with her husband,
- f. Mary would **NEVER** have such contact until her wedding night.
 - g. So when Gabriel told her she would conceive the Messiah, in simple faith she asked how?
 - h. Gabriel told her the Holy Spirit would be the agent of conception.
 - i. He ended his message with these words –

37 “For with God nothing will be impossible.”

- 7. For years, Zacharias & Elizabeth had *ached* for children.
 - a. They’d prayed. They’d pleaded. They’d poured out their hearts to God.
 - b. After the first few years of their marriage, they realized getting pregnant was more than just difficult – they were barren.
 - c. As more years passed, each of them childless, they became more troubled and the prayers more urgent.
 - d. Then came that fateful season when they realized the number of years left to them to have a child were running out.
 - e. As the change of life began for Elizabeth, their hope faltered, and when menopause was complete, it failed altogether.
 - f. To their way of thinking, if they’d not been able to have children when the years were *with* them, it was doubly certain there would be no child now that the years were *against* them.
 - g. So the prayers had stopped. And when Gabriel mentioned them to Zacharias, he’d all but forgotten them.
- 8. Look again at how Gabriel referred to their prayer in v. 13
But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”
 - a. From the perspective of heaven – it wasn’t *many prayers* that had been offered *a long time ago*.
 - b. It was *one* request that stood before God; not in the past, but *presently*.
“ . . . your prayer IS heard . . . ”
 - c. God had never said “No” to their request for a son.
 - d. His answer had been “Wait” but they’d taken that to mean “No.”
- 9. This story teaches us that as long as our requests are in line with

God's will, we must hold fast to them & never give up hope that He hears & will answer us, sending the blessing at precisely the right moment!

10. God had a special plan for the child of Zacharias & Elizabeth.
 - a. Next to Jesus, he was the greatest man the nation of Israel ever produced – that's what Jesus Himself said about John in Matthew 11:11.
 - b. As much hope & desire as Zacharias & Elizabeth could hold out for their child, they would never dare to dream that he would be the fore-runner of the Messiah.
 - c. What God eventually gave them was far better than anything they'd thought of in the years they'd prayed for a child.
 - d. It was just that John could *not* be born *until the time was right* – A time when God alone saw things coming to a climax.
 - e. John could not be conceived until Joseph betrothed a young Jewish maiden named Mary in the distant village of Nazareth.
11. The plans of God may seem to us to unfold slowly but history proves - He is **NEVER** late!
12. What He does, He does perfectly & at the right moment.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Hold Fast

1. Never lose your hope in God. Never give up praying for His blessing.
2. Never leave off holding before Him your request to see His kingdom come and His will done on earth as it is in heaven.
3. *The key* is to ask God for that which is a part of His will.
4. If you have scriptural basis for your request – then pray it boldly & steadfastly.
5. Hebrews 4:16 says –

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

6. In Matthew 7:7 Jesus said,
“Keep asking and it will be given to you; Keep seeking, and you will find; Keep knocking, and it will be opened to you.”

B. For the Lost

1. In 2 Peter 3:9 we find this most important insight into God's will – **The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.**

2. What Peter means is that Jesus isn't procrastinating & putting off His promise to come again.

3. On the contrary, the delay is the evidence of His great love & desire that people repent & come to faith in Him.

4. He doesn't want *anyone* to perish – instead He gives them time to repent.

5. But Peter warns that the delay will eventually end.

6. So let me conclude with that today.

7. Christian – is there a lost loved one you've prayed for again & again, and though the years have passed, they're still lost?

a. Have your prayers that they become *a child of God* gone unanswered just as Zacharias' prayers *for a child* had gone by unfulfilled?

b. Have you given up praying for them because it seemed no matter how much you prayed there was no answer?

c. Let me ask – Is it God's will that they perish or gain eternal life?

d. It's God's will that they repent. As the Word says -

1) He takes no delight in the death of the wicked, [Eze. 33:11]

2) But all heaven rejoices when a sinner repents. [Luke 15:7, 10]

e. The story is told of a wonderful, godly woman who prayer for her son every day of her 87 years.

1) They'd had many talks about God & faith but he'd always refused her urging to put his trust in Christ.

2) He lived a hard & morally loose life,

3) And there were times when she'd told a few of her friends she'd grown weary in praying for him.

4) But she never gave up and they all remarked on how often they'd heard her pray for her son, pleading with the Lord to save him.

5) She died without seeing his repentance.

6) There at the graveside service, as he stood beside her

gasket, the minister of the church she'd attended for decades giving the final prayer, his whole life flashed before him.

- 7) The conversations he'd had with her about God came to his memory with great force, and suddenly he realized he'd been a fool to resist God's offer of forgiveness.
 - 8) Right there, he knelt on the ground beside the grave & surrendered himself to Christ.
 - 9) God heard & answered that mother's prayers.
 - 10) And though she never got to see his conversion in *this* life,
 - 11) She would get to enjoy it for all eternity.
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- f. Is there a lost son or daughter you've *stopped* praying for?
 - g. How about a mother or father? A brother or sister? A husband or wife?
 - h. God is not willing that they perish – so pray! Pray on, never give up.
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8. Last – What about YOU! Have you surrendered to God?
 - a. The reason why Jesus Christ has not returned is for one reason alone –
 - b. He's waiting for you to turn to Him.
 - c. The time will come when the delay is over & the waiting will be done.