

1. The First Christmas: Promises, Prophecies and Preparations

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[0 : 01] A reading this afternoon is shorter than the readings I took us to a couple of weeks ago. It's in Luke's Gospel, Chapter 1, and we are reading verses 67 to verse 80.

This is the prophecy of Zechariah, the priest who was the father of John the Baptist. And it takes place eight days after the birth of John the Baptist, beginning at verse 67, page 856 of the Church Bibles.

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. And we thank God for his inspired word.

[2 : 02] More often than not, predictions fail to come true. In the 19th century, the great Lord Kelvin, after whom Kelvin Park, his name, made several predictions.

Much of what he said was true, but much of what he said wasn't. He said in 1895, heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible. Commenting on medical technology, he said x-rays are a hoax.

A little later, 50 years later, another scientist, not Lord Kelvin, was talking about the personal computer. And at this time, a personal computer had 18,000 vacuum tubes and weighed 30 tons.

And this eminent man said, in the future, they may only have 1,000 vacuum tubes and weigh only 1.5 tons. I don't know if you could fit that under your Christmas tree, buying somebody a computer.

Perhaps one of the more amusing predictions I read recently was in 1969, somebody saying, it will be years, not in my time, before a woman will become prime minister. That was the voice of the younger Margaret Thatcher.

[3 : 13] So often our predictions fail to come to pass. But in Scripture, God's predictions always come to pass. The promises of God are always fulfilled, and his word is always true.

And that is the theme of Zechariah's prophecy, especially verse 72 and 73. God remembers his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham.

Zechariah is prophesying here on a very happy occasion. His son, John the Baptist, is eight days old, and as was the tradition, they would circumcise him, and they would name him. Now I, by virtue of having worked in paediatrics, have been present to a lot of births.

I've spent a lot of time with parents, with newborn children, and they tend to say things like, oh, we're very happy, or I'm slightly worried. They have this look of anxiety upon their face. But in all my time in paediatrics, nobody ever said, the God of the Old Testament is fulfilling his covenant promises to his people, when I was speaking to them about their baby.

And the reason is, this is no ordinary birth. And John the Baptist is no ordinary child. His father, Zechariah, was a priest. And in chapter 1, verse 5, we find him serving in the temple.

[4 : 29] And as he does, an angel appears to him. And in verse 13, the angel says, 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 them in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

John the Baptist was, his parents were told that he was to be a wonderful child. He was to be mighty. He was to be great before the Lord. He would lead a great many people to repentance. And I'm sure there are many parents who long to hear that about their own children.

But verses 16 and 17 are significant, because the angel says he will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah. And what the angel is doing is drawing Zechariah's mind back to the very closing verses of the Old Testament.

[5 : 43] The final words of the curtain closes on the history of Israel until that point. And 400 years earlier, the prophet Malachi had predicted the coming of the Lord, when he would bring salvation, when he would bring judgment, when he would refine his people.

And Zechariah had said, Malachi, excuse me, had said, before that day, 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. Zechariah was promised his son would go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah.

And it means that the day of the Lord is near. The Lord is going to come and visit his people, redeem his people, bring them salvation. Because that's what he promised to do in accordance with his oath.

And so Zechariah draws this theme out in his prophecy. Verse 69, God has raised up a horn of salvation in the house of his servant David. God had promised David that one of his descendants would sit upon the throne forever.

[6 : 50] He has remembered the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, the promise that through Abraham's descendants, the whole world would be blessed. An eternal king and worldwide blessing.

And his son John is to be the messenger that goes before the Lord. Tremendous message. Because John isn't the only baby that's delivered in chapter 1 of Luke's gospel.

And six months after he and his wife received this message, an angel appeared to a young lady called Mary. And he delivered a similar message. He said, Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God.

And then he says something very significant. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son. And you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom there will be no end.

[7 : 52] John the Baptist is to be a messenger of the Christ who is to come, who will reign over the throne of David, whose kingdom will fill the whole world in accordance with the promises of God throughout the Old Testament.

God is a God who fulfills the promises made. And the theme of fulfillment continues throughout Luke's Gospel. And 30 years later, Jesus Christ goes to the synagogue in Nazareth.

And he's handed the scroll of Isaiah and he reads in chapter 4, verse 17, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty, freedom to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And as he sat down, he turned to the synagogue and in verse 21 says, Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. And as the Gospel closes in chapter 24, he gathers his disciples around him after his death and his resurrection and he says to them, These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

The same word. God fulfills his promises in Christ. God fulfills the predictions he has made. He vindicates the prophecies. Christ came to fulfill the Old Testament and to bring salvation and forgiveness.

[9 : 22] The question is, of course, do we believe that? Do we believe that God is as good as his word? Do we trust in him and his promises?

It's challenging, isn't it? Do we believe in his diagnosis of the problems of mankind, of the sinful corruption of our hearts? Do we believe in the forgiveness which he freely offers, that no effort or merit of our own can make us clean and acceptable in God's sight, that it is simply the free gift of eternal life?

Do we believe that God's ways are the best for his people? Do we believe that his laws and his commandments are the way in which we should walk? Or do we know better than he? Do we believe that he is able to provide for his people in times of need and of difficulty?

Do we believe that he will give us daily bread when we ask for it? Do we believe that if we seek first his kingdom, all these other things will be added to us? Do we believe in our suffering that all things work for the good of those who love God?

Do we take God at his word day by day? Hudson Taylor had a saying. He said, there is a living God. He has spoken in the Bible. He means what he says and will do all that he has promised.

[10 : 41] And the problem with Zechariah is at the beginning of the gospel he didn't believe God. chapter 1 we are told he is a priest he is an exemplary priest he has got this wonderful pedigree his wife is the daughter of Aaron chapter 1 verse 5 we are told in verse 6 they were both righteous before God they walked blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

Wonderful pedigree but he lacked faith. You see Zechariah and his wife were old and in verse 7 we are told that they had no child because Elizabeth was barren and were both advanced in years.

And when the angel appears to him he says you will bear a son your wife will bear a son and you shall call his name John. And Zechariah says in verse 18 how shall I know this?

For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years. And the angel replies saying I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God and I was sent to speak to you and bring you this good news and behold you will be silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their time.

Zechariah had a religious exterior he was a paid priest of God but he didn't believe the words of God and he didn't believe God could fulfil his words when it seemed very improbable that he would.

[12 : 06] And there is an irony there isn't there in his unbelief not just that he was a priest serving in the temple but the thing he couldn't believe God could do was to give a child to an old man and an old woman.

And yet the very foundation of his faith the very bedrock of Judaism the very reason there were any Jews in the first place was because God had promised exactly that to Abraham an old man with a barren wife and he said you're going to have a son and Zechariah had forgotten that and he said how can this be Lord how can you give life to dead bodies an angel said you will be silent and unable to speak a priest isn't much good is he who doesn't believe the things he's paid to preach and on this occasion God shut his mouth for nine months and there are many Zechariahs today I met one last week I had an invitation to go to a university event where people of different faiths would present their convictions and a colleague and I gave a simple gospel outline we spoke about the authority of scripture the centrality of Christ and his cross the need for personal conversion and new birth and then twenty minutes later another Christian minister stood up and rather than extolling the wonders of the Lord or the goodness of God or the majesty of the saviour he said

I don't agree with my friend who's spoken we don't believe the bible is inspired word of God we don't have such settled convictions we'd prefer to speak about doubt rather than faith the spirit of Zechariah is alive and well isn't it sadly God does not always shut their mouths but Zechariah was given a chance wasn't he and as he saw the pregnancy developing and his wife's belly expanding he knew God had been faithful and on the day his child is born there is this eight days later there's a debate about what they're to call him and it goes to and fro and his wife says we'll call him John and the people say well nobody else is called John and they're Zechariah and in verse 63 he takes a writing tablet and he writes on it his name is John I believe what the angel has said I believe that God is able to fulfil his promises even though to my human eye it seems very unlikely and at that point Zechariah's mouth is opened and he speaks blessing God finally he has something to preach and he preaches of the faithfulness of God in fulfilling his promises in bringing about all that he has said he will do for his people salvation redemption freedom to serve God light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death well next week we hope to look at this prophecy in more detail looking particularly at what salvation is but I leave you today with the words of Hudson

Taylor which could very well be the words of Zechariah there is a living God he has spoken in the Bible he means what he says and he will do all that he has promised let's pray together father we thank you that you are good and trustworthy and faithful lord we thank you that we can trust your word we can trust the Bible we can trust the precious promises you have given us in the Bible and lord we thank you that we can commit our way to you our work our relationships our faith trusting that you will provide protect and guide us lord we thank you for these wonderful promises of salvation and we ask that we might live lives worthy of your gospel trusting in you day by day and we ask this in Jesus name amen