

NOTES FROM PASTOR TIM'S Sermon – 27th Nov 2022 morning service

NEW SERIES FROM LUKE'S GOSPEL "God's love for the lowest"

Part 1 The faithfulness of a gracious God

Scripture references from the ESV

Luke 1:1-25, 57-66 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ 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, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

⁵ In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah,^[a] of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ 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."

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² 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. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." ⁶² And they made signs to his father, enquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbours. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

This is the start of a series of studies in what is essentially a biography of Jesus, written by a medical doctor, Luke. It is one of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), which tell us

The good news about Jesus

We are looking at Luke's gospel specifically because of the reasons why it was written (vv1- 4 above). Although Theophilus almost certainly was a Christian (his name means 'loved by God'), it seems he had some doubts. These are referred to obliquely in this gospel and in Acts. It is possible that, as a Gentile in a predominately Jewish movement, he may well have been questioning whether Christianity was truly of God, since Jews were persecuting its members. He might also have wondered whether, as a Gentile, he truly belonged among them.

Luke is writing to assure Theophilus that this new movement, that gets its name from Jesus Christ, really is of God, and it is not just for Jews but for all the Gentiles in the world too. Luke lets him know that he has researched all the material and spoken with eyewitnesses. He has weighed it all up and put it in an orderly narrative so that Theophilus can have confidence that the things he has been taught about Jesus are true.

We are just like Theophilus! We too have been taught the message about Jesus, we are probably all Gentiles and many of us are believers in Christ. We know we are loved by God. Luke's gospel will give us assurance that

- This Christian faith to which we belong is of God
- we have a right to belong to it, even though it is centred round a Jewish Messiah,.

Jesus is not just a Saviour for Jewish people. He is a Saviour for all people who live on earth, including you and me.

Can you say here and now that you fully trust God:

- to do what he promises to do?
- to forgive you and to give you eternal life through his Son Jesus?
- to sort out the mess of your life and bring you to a place of joy?
- to do something much bigger than just fix your personal problems?
- We will only fully trust in God if we have that confidence.
- We need to pray that, as we work through Luke, we will come to have absolute confidence in Jesus and the salvation he offers.

At the very start of Luke's gospel, we see God working in all the ways spelt out above.

We see how God enters into our personal tragedies for the sake of his global purposes.

We see a God who is both faithful to his promises and gracious to fulfil them, despite our unbelief.

We see a God who can be trusted to do what he says he will do when he says he will do it.

Luke starts with a narrative about the tragedy of a childless couple and the promise of God to them, which contains two deliverance themes. It is a story about real people, living in real places at a real time in history.

1. **Personal deliverance.** Zechariah and Elizabeth were a righteous (though not sinless) couple who had been unable to have children and were past child-bearing age. This was heart-breaking for them but also a shameful thing in their culture. God sends his angel to Zechariah with a message of hope in the midst of this tragedy.

Zechariah has reached the high point of his career in Judaism. He is the priest who has been selected by lot to go into the most holy place in the temple to offer incense to God. The Bible tells us that it is God who determines how the lot falls, so it is he who determined that Zechariah would serve that day. God did so because he had determined to send his angel Gabriel to meet him there (v11 above). Zechariah was understandably afraid.

Gabriel brought good news, however (v13 above), yet when confronted with the promise of God, which spoke into his personal tragedy, Zechariah doubted (v18 above). All he could see was

- His weakness and the weakness of his wife
- The impossibility of the promise

Zechariah interpreted God's promise through the lens of human weakness and that resulted in unbelief.

That unbelief resulted in him experiencing God's chastening (vv19-20 above). For at least the next 9 months, Zechariah was unable to hear or speak. Despite Zechariah's unbelief, God was not hindered in his purposes and still graciously kept his promise to give them a child. This narrative (and indeed the whole Bible) is about

The faithfulness of a gracious God

Zechariah and Elizabeth's personal tragedy turned to joy when she gave birth (vv57-8 above), but Zechariah was still deaf and dumb. In the silence, he would have been able to reflect on the promise of God and his own failure to believe.

On occasion, God may put us into a lonely place where we have no one but God to commune with. In that time of communion with God, he works in our hearts to create a faith that leads to obedience, as it did with Zechariah (vv59ff).

His faith is displayed in the obedience of giving his son the name chosen for him by God, and only then is his tongue set free. As soon as this happens, he praises God!

God had delivered on his promise despite Zechariah's unbelief.

Yet God is doing something much bigger than just delivering one couple from the shame of their personal tragedy.

2. National deliverance. God gave two promises about John. One was made through Gabriel (v16-17) and the other was spoken by Zechariah after he was filled with God's Spirit (Luke 1:76-79 below)

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins,

⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high

⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

God had made many promises to his people that he would deliver them. Right from the beginning of time he had spoken of a rescuer who would crush Satan's power and set people free from sin and death. Throughout Israel's history, the promise was repeated that a child would be born who would save God's people from their sin. The time was drawing near when God would fulfil his promise to deliver the nation through his own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

John would have a pivotal role to play in this.

- He is not the Messiah but would act as a signpost to point the people to Jesus.
- He will be used by God to turn the hearts of God's people back to the Lord, and will act as a prophet of God to prepare the people for the coming of God's Messiah.
- He will preach the message that there is salvation for the people, the forgiveness of their sin, because of God's mercy.

God's gift of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth was much more than just personal deliverance. It was part of God's plan to save his people from their sin, and not just Israel but all who would put their trust in God to save them.

In delivering a childless couple from their shame

God was also keeping his promise to save the world from the shame of their sin

We all have things going on in our lives that require God's deliverance, but our lives are part of the bigger story of what God is doing in the world. When God works in our lives, it is never just for our own sake.

There is always a greater purpose in the personal deliverance.

How can we apply this to our lives?

- a) **We can trust God to keep his word.** Everything God promised to Zechariah through the angel came to fulfilment. God is faithful, which means we can trust him. When we read a promise in his word, we can trust him to keep that promise.
- Will we take him at his word, or will we be like Zechariah and see all the human obstacles and the impossibility of situations?

Nothing grieves God more than unbelief

When we fail to trust God to do what he promises, it is as if we are saying that God does not speak the truth.

- We call into question his integrity, his truthfulness and his faithfulness.

The Bible is a testimony of God's faithfulness to keep his promises, and Zechariah knew of God's power to give children to other childless couples, like Abraham and Sarah. He should have been able to trust God, but he allowed human reason to take over his mind. **That is the way to unbelief.**

The way to faith is to take God at his word. We read the promises of God in the Bible. We work out how they apply to us and we come to Christ with our faltering faith and say: **Lord I believe, help me in my unbelief (Mark 9:24).**

Then we act on what God has said, trusting that he will do as he has promised. In so doing, we find that he is faithful.

- b) **Sometimes we must wait.** Zechariah had prayed (v13 above) but as the years passed, they probably gave up praying for a child since there seemed little point. Perhaps that is why Zechariah didn't believe the angel. When he prayed in the temple now, he had probably been asking God to keep his word and send the promised Messiah to bring salvation. He uttered prayers for a child long ago, and now he prayed for God to save the nation. Neither prayer was wasted.

Both prayers were heard and both prayers were answered.

**Despite Zechariah's unbelief and Israel's unbelief, God heard, and God answered.
The greatest incentive to keep praying and to keep trusting is that God hears prayer and
God answers prayer**

We must also remember that God works when he wants and in whatever way he wishes. He didn't act when Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted him to act or in the way they thought he should act. We can't organise him or dictate the timing.

**God acts when he wants to and how he wants to, and he has every right to do that
because he is God.**

**Sometimes we have to wait for him to fulfil his promises and we have to accept his way
of fulfilling him.**

That is not a reason to stop praying or to stop trusting.

Think and pray about this:

- What personal deliverance do you need God to do for you at this moment in time?
- What are you going through that is humanly impossible to resolve, that you have given up praying about or is causing shame?
- What national deliverance do you want to see God do at this time?
- What in the world or in our own nation grieves you and is dishonouring to Christ, needing God to change it?

Speak to the Lord about it, telling him what's on your heart.

**Ask God to speak into the need and to show you sure promises from his word,
shining a spotlight on the text of scripture.**

When he does that, trust him and wait for him to work.

God is faithful and God is gracious.