

THE LIGHT OF CHRISTMAS

The Way to Hope

Lk. 1:5-25, 57-80

INTRODUCTION: I think it is difficult for us to have a good feel for what life was like for people living in Palestine in the years preceding the coming of Christ into their world.

- Judea and Galilee, and all the surrounding region for that matter, was under the heavy handed domination of a foreign power, the Empire of Rome.
- The people chosen to rule locally cared nothing for the people they governed.
 - Think about what you know of Herod the Great.
 - Or Pontius Pilate
- Their religious leaders were not much help to them either.
 - Tradition had replaced the Scriptures as the source of truth.
 - Most religious leaders used their offices not to disciple their people as followers of God but as servants of themselves.
- **Life was hard.**
- **Hope was rare.**

Yet interestingly, **hope was available.**

It could be found in the prophecies of Holy Scripture, what we call the Old Testament.

- Some Bible students identify nearly 300 prophecies of the first coming of Messiah.
- While some of these were of a general nature, many were exceedingly specific.
 - The Messiah would be a descendent of Abraham, not of Nahor or Haran his brothers, nor of any of a multitude of cousins in his larger family.
 - The Messiah was also promised to be from the lineage of Abraham's son Isaac, but not of Ishmael.
 - He would come from the seed of Jacob and not Esau.
 - And Messiah would descend from the tribe of Judah and not from any of the other eleven tribes of Israel.

- Finally it was proclaimed that Messiah would come from the royal line of King David Himself.
- Prophecy declared that the Messiah would be born as a little baby, not enter the world as a grown man or mighty conqueror.
- It foretold His birth would take place in the little town of Bethlehem.
- Prophecy declared the Messiah would spend some time of his childhood in Egypt, and
- That He would be raised in Nazareth of Galilee, and thus be called a Nazarene.

We could go on and on with offering details of the prophecies, but that is not really the point. The point is that

- Hope was offered.
- **God made hope available to His people through the promises of the coming of the Messiah** who would bring
 - Help
 - Comfort
 - Peace
 - Salvation
- Admittedly, people did not have the Scriptures in their homes, nor could they download them onto their clay tablets.
- The Scriptures were, however, available at local synagogues.
- And most of the people went to the synagogues and were generally knowledgeable of these prophecies.
- Yet, like their leaders, the reading of the Word of God became a stale liturgy, with neither the reader nor the hearer paying much attention to what was said.

But there were some, who through the Scriptures, had found hope. You will recognize the names of some of them like Simeon and Anna.

- They latched onto that hope for all they were worth.
- Those who found it were always ready to share it with others, so great was their excitement.

- The sad truth was, many were not asking, so they had no hope.

Luke, in his gospel, begins by telling us of such a man. He was not only an Israelite, but a priest. As a priest, he did not live his life working at the temple in Jerusalem. He was one of so many that they took turns. Twice a year, it would be his turn to come to the Temple, put on the white linen garments of the priesthood, and minister in the Holy Place.

His name was Zacharias, and he was a faithful Jew, a keeper of the law. Sadly he was like most of his fellow countrymen, a man without hope. Not only was Zacharias sad because of the difficult times in which he lived, but daily he lived with the thought that God would not answer his prayers. He and his wife had prayed for a son for decades, yet no child had been granted them. In Luke 1:5, his story begins.

Luke 1:5-25 NKJV 5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

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

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. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

Let me pause here in the reading.

- At the miracle of the appearance of an angel,
- And at hearing that God, at long last, was answering his prayer for a son,
- We might think, "Well now Zacharias is going to have hope. He is going to hop, skip, and jump for joy as he comes dancing out of the temple telling people of his new found hope in the Lord!"

But what Zacharias has heard so far is not all the angel has to say.

In fact, it is not even the most important part. The angel continues.

Luke 1:15-17 NKJV

- 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."

The angel was saying, and this will be no ordinary child.

- This child will be great in God's eyes.
- He will be a Nazarite, a person especially devoted to God.
- He will be controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit while he is still forming in his mother's womb.

And then came the most astounding part of the message of the angel:

- This will be the man described by the prophet Malachi in the final two verses of the Holy Scriptures.

Malachi 4:5–6 NKJV

5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet

Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.

6 And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,

And the hearts of the children to their fathers,

Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.

Even the rabbis whose hearts were cold, made hard by years of religious traditionalism, even they knew these final words of the Scriptures were a prophecy of the coming of Messiah, and specifically that God would send a man in the spirit and power of ancient Elijah, to prepare the way of the Lord.

If the angel's message was true, Messiah's coming was soon, and the son of Zacharias would prepare the world for His coming.

- Even more now, we would expect the faithfully religious Zacharias to be exuberant.
- We would not be surprised to hear a holy Hallelujah reverberating off of the temple's walls.

Instead, we witness the despair that has accumulated in the heart of a man who has ceased to hope.

Luke 1:18-23 NKJV 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."

Instead of rejoicing, there is unbelief.

Instead of believing the Word sent by God through the appearance of an angel, there is a request for the angel to prove himself by showing Zacharias a sign.

Instead of praise and thanksgiving, there is contention and contradiction.

Now I think we hear anger, righteous indignation, in the voice of the angel.

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. 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."

Do you not marvel at how appropriate God's chastening of unbelieving Zacharias was?

"I send you good news that should make you shout with joy,

- and you respond with doubt and unbelief,
- demanding that I, the Lord of Hosts, prove my word is true by giving you a sign,
- arguing with God out your ignorance with foolish arguments.

You will not offer praise and thanksgiving, which are appropriate for this occasion,

- so you shall say nothing at all!"

21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. 22 But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless. 23 So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house.

That must have been an awful walk home.

- Zacharias lived in a village in the hill country of Judea, so it would not have been a long journey.
- But I think it must have felt like a hundred miles.
- I suspect he replayed the words of Gabriel a thousand times in his mind.
- I don't know if repentance came while he was walking and contemplated his own faithless response or if repentance came later, after the words spoken by the angel came true.
- I would think that at the very least, he carried a heavy pack of regret on his back for the words he said to the messenger of God.

Have you ever felt like Zacharias?

Have you ever felt like you lost hope? (Don't lift your hands, but be honest with yourself.)

- Have you felt like God does not hear your prayers?
- Have you felt like God does not really love you?
- Have you felt like God does not even know who you are?
- Even now are you giving in to the despair of difficult times?
- Are you worried that evil is going to prevail?

Listen, God tells us what happened in Zacharias' life to help us, to teach us!

God is telling us

UNBELIEF STEALS OUR HOPE!

Unbelief stole the hope of Zacharias!

- If he had really believed that God was sending the Messiah, the Deliverer, the Savior as a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of Judah and David,
- And this Messiah was going to be born in Bethlehem, just five miles southeast of Jerusalem, and
- That God was going to send a forerunner to prepare the way of the Lord,

Zacharias probably would have studied prophecy a little more.

And if he had, he would have discovered the prophecy of Daniel, which would have told him the time for Messiah to come was drawing very, very near.

If Zacharias had believed the promises of God contained in the prophecies, he would have had hope, and he would not have struggled so much believing the promise that he would father a son who would be John the Baptist, the man who prepared the way of the Lord Messiah.

I tell you, my friend, believe the promises God makes to us in His Word!

Cling to them!

- Have you felt like God does not hear your prayers?

Believe the Word of the Lord!

Matthew 7:7 NKJV “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

- Have you felt like God does not really love you?

Believe the Word of the Lord!

Jeremiah 31:3 NKJV The Lord has appeared of old to me, *saying*: “Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.

- Have you felt like God does not even know who you are?

Believe the Word of the Lord!

2 Timothy 2:19 NKJV Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His,”

- Even now are you giving in to the despair of difficult times?

Believe the Word of the Lord!

1 Samuel 17:47 NKJV Then all this assembly shall know that the Lord does not save with sword and spear; for the battle *is* the Lord’s, and He will give you into our hands.”

- Are you worried that evil is going to prevail?

Believe the Word of the Lord!

John 16:33 NKJV These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

Now, I am glad to tell you that some time before the promise of God was fulfilled and the son of Zacharias was born, Zacharias repented and believed the Word of the Lord!

So now, we read the rest of this story, and it is a happy ending indeed.

Luke 1:24-25 NKJV 24 Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, 25 “Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on *me*, to take away my reproach among people.”

Luke 1:57–66 NKJV 57 Now Elizabeth’s full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. 58 When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.

59 So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. 60 His mother answered and said, “No; he shall be called John.”

61 But they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.” 62 So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called. 63 And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, “His name is John.” So they all marveled.

64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue *loosed*, and he spoke, praising God.

65 Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. 66 And all those who heard *them* kept *them* in their hearts, saying, “What kind of child will this be?” And the hand of the Lord was with him.

BELIEVING THE WORD OF THE LORD BRINGS HOPE TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE AND TO MANY OTHERS AS WELL.

CONCLUSION: Because Zacharias repented of disbelief and instead acted in faith, the account of this portion of his life ends joyously.

Luke 1:67, 76-80 NKJV 67 Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: 76 “ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, 77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, 78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; 79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.” 80 So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

In the days ahead, let all the visible signs of the Christmas season remind you of what Christmas is really about, that God kept His promise in the sending of His Son, the Messiah, the Savior, Jesus.

Let us remember the precious promises of God that yet remain for us and believe them. They will give us hope!