

Zechariah — Do I Believe God Answers Prayer?

November 30, 2014

Good morning CrossWinds. Welcome to the first week of Advent. This year we are launching into a small Christmas study for the month of December called Christmas from the Book of Luke. It is a study of the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel.

Our theme for the month comes from Luke 2:15-17.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. Luke 2:15–17 (ESV)

We have a two-part goal for the month.

1. We want to see the story of Jesus as we study on Sunday and in our Advent devotional.
2. We want to make known the story of Jesus to our friends and neighbors then invite them to join us at CrossWinds.

Before we launch into the Gospel of Luke, I want you to turn to Malachi. That is the last book of the Old Testament. In the pew Bibles it is found on page 802.

The Bible is different from other religious books. One of the things that makes it unique is prophecy. God declared how the future would unfold hundreds of years before it happened. Every time biblical prophecy is fulfilled it confirms the Bible as God's Word. Only God can predict the future with 100 percent accuracy. Only God knows holds the future. You won't find prophecy in

the Quran or the Vedas. You will find prophecy in the Book of Mormon but it is repeatedly wrong.

The reason you won't find accurate prophecy in other religious books is because flawed men wrote those books. God wrote the Bible. God inspired the apostles and prophets to say exactly what he wanted spoken so we know the Bible is without error.

In Malachi, the last book of our Old Testament, God inspired Malachi to prophetically speak about events just prior to the arrival of God's son, Jesus.

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. Malachi 3:1 (ESV)

This was written 400 years before Jesus arrived on the scene. These are called the 400 silent years because between the closing of the Old Testament and the arrival of Jesus there were no prophets or no angelic visits. People felt discouraged. Some people thought God went on vacation. That is understandable. Four hundred years is a long time. It is the rough equivalent of the latest news bulletin from God arriving in the 1600s and nothing new coming until today. What happened to God? He was gone a long time. People began wondering if God checked out for lunch.

God also inspired Malachi to say this about the messenger who would prepare the way for God's son.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. Malachi 4:5 (ESV)

There was a great and powerful prophet that would arrive just before God sent his son. Incidentally, these verses needed to be fulfilled before 70 A.D. because the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. and the Dome of the Rock was build on the temple mount a few hundred years later. There is no use waiting for this prophecy to happen in the future. The window of time when the temple existed and this prophecy could only take place is closed. There is no more temple. The list of possible fulfillments of this prophecy is small. Jesus and the John the Baptist are the only candidates.

Let's turn to the beginning of the Gospel of Luke where these prophecies from Malachi were fulfilled.

Background

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. Luke 1:5 (ESV)

Who is Herod the Great?

Like many of us, for years I read those initial words and skimmed them. Who cares about Herod? We didn't study him in school.

When I took the time to study Herod, it changed the picture. This is like saying, "In the days of Germany when Hitler reigned," or "In the days of Syria when ISIS took over the town." These words tell us things were not good for the Jews.

Herod was king of Judea. He was not the highest king in the Roman system. He was not Caesar. He ruled just where the Jews lived. He was not to

be messed with. History tells us three things about Herod. He was brilliant, evil and insane. That is a dangerous triple combination for any leader.

He was brilliant. He was a gifted leader who loved to build buildings, cities and palaces. He built it all for himself, for his glory and fame. His architectural skills were amazing. Some of the architectural feats he accomplished even astound modern architects, and they took years to accomplish.

For example, did you know Herod invented quick-dry cement? He did it by combining ash from Italy and sand. He even devised a way to float the ash and sand into the ocean, mix them with water so they became instant concrete blocks that would drop to the ocean floor. Using this technique, he built an entire harbor of concrete for the city of Caesarea. He built Masada an impenetrable rock fortress as well as the Herodium. He was a brilliant architect that loved stone and cement.

He was evil. He was extremely paranoid someone would kill him. He killed anyone he thought might plot against him, even if they had done nothing to him. Out of evil and paranoia he murdered his wife, her brother, her mother and a few of his own children. He murdered many people. He had no qualms of murdering all the baby boys in the town of Bethlehem because he heard of birth of Jesus from the wise men. Mass murder was always his style.

He outlawed free speech. He had his troops eavesdrop in public to find anyone who spoke against him, then they bumped off dissenters with a dagger thrust in a busy crowd. Everyone lived in fear.

One of the ways he bumped off his closest associates was by inviting them to pool parties at his palace in Caesarea. In Caesarea there is a jetty into the ocean at his beautiful seafront palace. Into this rock jetty he dug a pool. Being a



master architect, he even designed a way to have fresh water run into his oceanfront pool. It was beautiful.

It was also deadly. If he didn't like you, you mysteriously

drowned while swimming at his pool party. Many people drowned in this pool. The saying of the day was that it

was safer to be Herod's pig than

his son because he killed so many people. He was so hated that he feared his death would be a day of rejoicing rather than mourning. He arranged to have



a large group of distinguished Jews brought to Jerusalem and murdered when he died so he could be sure there would be mourning in the city. Thankfully, Herod's son did not carry out his final wish.

He was insane. History tells us he would wake up during the night yelling at his servants and threatening their lives because they wouldn't bring him his

wife. He conveniently forgot he murdered her and other members of his family. With Herod on the throne, things were really bad in Jerusalem.

What was it like in Jerusalem at the temple?

Our story takes place in Jerusalem at the temple. Jerusalem in the days of Jesus was a huge city, maybe 100,000 people. That is not large by our standards but it was huge by ancient standards. Most small towns only had a few hundred people while Jerusalem had 100,000. That made Jerusalem seem huge to almost everyone. Jews traveled to the city one or more times a year for religious celebrations.

The Bible describes Jerusalem as a city set on a hill. That description is literal. When people approached Jerusalem they always walked uphill. It is a steep climb to the city. This is why when you look at the book of Psalms you will find Psalms of ascent. These are songs the Jews were to sing while they were walking up the steep hill to the city. These songs are much more God-glorifying than singing 100 bottles of beer on the wall to pass time.

God used David to help design the temple and Solomon to build it. The problem is the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians when the people went into exile in 586 B.C. The Jews returned and began rebuilding the temple in 516 B.C. The rebuilt temple was half the size of Solomon's temple.



I love the way God works. He took the extremely evil Herod, the master builder, and used him to build a new temple.

Around 20 to 18 B.C. Herod decided to completely rebuild the temple making it more than twice the size of Solomon's temple and one of his master projects. Herod's temple didn't last long because it was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans. In this window of time the Jews were expecting God was up to something exciting because the temple was being rebuilt. I love the way God was sovereign even over Herod's evil heart and used him to do his bidding.

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will. Proverbs 21:1 (ESV)

Today parts of Herod's temple still exist. Jerusalem is a city with 10 tells. That means it has 10 layers of civilization built one on top of the rubble of the other. Archeologists digging through the tells are able to examine previous civilizations. One of the things they have done is examine the foundation stones of Herod's temple. They are 36-by-12-by-12 feet Each stone weights more than 747 pounds. In addition, archaeologists discovered that every single stone in the temple has Herod's logo on it. Think of the Apple logo on every stone in the building. Herod wanted everybody to know that while the temple was God's house, he was responsible for it. He even built his palace right next to the temple. His palace rivaled the temple in splendor. Herod had an ego problem but it is fun to see how God used him anyway.

Who are Zechariah and Elizabeth?

They were Mr. and Mrs. Ordinary. Elizabeth was a great lady. She came from the priestly line of Aaron. Think of her father as a pastor. Her father's father was a pastor. They gave her a great name which ends up being prophetic of

what God would do with her life. Elizabeth means “God’s oath” or “God keeps his promise.” He doesn’t forget his people.

Her husband was Zechariah. His name means “God remembers.” That is another prophetic name.

He was a small town priest. Think of a small town pastor. He never wrote a book. He never had his own podcast. You couldn’t find his sermons on the Internet. He was about as ordinary as you could get. He was in a small town with probably 100 people, serving in a tiny synagogue, maybe 10 to 30 people showed up on a Sunday. I have seen these churches and preached in them.

Before I came to Spirit Lake I filled the pulpit for a friend of mine in a small corn town in Indiana at a tiny Methodist church. It only had five pews. My living room was the size of their sanctuary. It felt weird preaching and needing to look down to see the front and back row of pews. That is what life is like in a very small town. That was Zechariah’s church.

I was also at a small town church in Santa Margarita, California. The church had two rooms. The main floor had four or five rows of pews. From the pulpit I could spit to the back wall. The basement was the nursery and children’s ministry. It was a piece of carpet rolled out on the concrete floor with snakes occasionally slithering side to side. This is the kind of church Zechariah pastored. He served a small rural town.

In our minds Zechariah was a failure, but in God’s eyes, he was just the guy he wanted. He was a faithful pastor in a small town with a faithful wife who loved God. Herod thought he was great with his logo on every block over every

building living in the big city, controlling the world and taxing everybody to death as he built cities, palaces and temples to his glory.

God didn't choose Herod to be the father of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. He chose Zechariah and Elizabeth. God was looking at their hearts and faithful lives. Everyone else thought they were passed over by God. God hadn't forgotten them.

They had a family problem. Zechariah and Elizabeth had broken hearts. They were old and they didn't have a child. How old? We don't know. Maybe 60 or 70. This was devastating. As you grew older, you depended on your children for help. There were no nursing homes. There was no social security. Your kids were there for you. Your kids took care of you. As Zechariah and Elizabeth got older, they could feel the world closing in around them.

This was especially devastating for Elizabeth. A woman's job was to provide children for her husband. When she didn't provide Zechariah children, she became a social outcast. Imagine all the women's ministry meetings in the small church where everybody held a baby or talked about her fourth or fifth child. Older ladies talked about grandchildren but Elizabeth sat there and didn't have any children. Every holiday and it was her and Zechariah staring across the table with an empty house.

In those days a barren woman was considered evidence of God's judgment upon a her life for her sin. Other women were sure Elizabeth was a sinful woman judged by God.

Things are not always what they appear. On the outside Zechariah and Elizabeth looked like they were failures under God's judgment. That wasn't true.

Do you remember Job? He looked like he was under God's judgment too. In reality, he was righteous and suffered for it. Job's problems didn't come from his sin on earth but they originated in heaven as a showdown between Satan and God. In a similar way, Zechariah's and Elizabeth's childlessness didn't originate from their sins on Earth but God had them childless for a reason. He had a better plan for their lives than they could have imagined. God was going to give them a son, and not just any son. He was going to give them an extraordinary son. God was going to give them one of the best men to walk the planet. In Matthew 11 Jesus said nobody has arisen greater than John the Baptist. We often underestimate John the Baptist's ministry. Josephus wrote more about John the Baptist's life than he did about Jesus' life. John the Baptist turned into a complete rockstar. He was a long-haired man that lived in the woods and changed a nation. God was answering the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth but he was doing it in his timing.

Some of you can identify with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Life is hard and it doesn't seem like God is answering your prayers. Trust God. Maybe he is answering your prayers but it is in his timing. He has a better plan than you imagined. He always has a better plan than we imagine.

The day everything changed

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 lot 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, 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." Luke 1:8–17 (ESV)

It doesn't sound special to be on duty or to be chosen by lot to burn incense. It almost sounds like a punishment. In reality, it was a great privilege. In those days there were 18,000 priests. They were subdivided into 24 groups of 750. Each priest went to Jerusalem for one week twice a year to serve at the temple. The priests essentially rolled dice twice a day to determine whose job it was to place incense on the altar and say a prayer for the people. This happened in the morning and evening. Once you won the dice roll, and offered incense, you were done for life. It was a once-in-a-lifetime privilege. For 50 or 60 years of Zechariah's life he felt like a loser. He never won the dice roll. This added to his feeling of being forgotten and passed over by God. The Bible tells us his prayer for a child was not forgotten. The Bible tells us his hope to win the dice roll and offer incense was not forgotten. God had intentionally kept this once-in-a-lifetime privilege from him until just the right time.

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. Proverbs 16:33 (ESV)

Zechariah rolled the dice and won. He knew his job. Go into the Holies. He threw a little frankincense and myrrh on the altar and said a prayer for the

people, asking God to send the savior. The altar of incense was small. It was 18 inches square and 36 inches tall in Exodus.

I think Zechariah got his prayer for the nation and a savior done and in his prayers he also threw in a little request for the burden of his family. They had no children. “God, while I am here. I know we are old but could you send a child? Amen” The altar of incense was small.

Zechariah was probably bent down praying. He stood up and opened his eyes and there was an angel standing right in front of him. It says “fear fell” upon him. I think that is the understatement of the year. Visitors weren’t allowed in this room. This angel was Gabriel. He showed up in Daniel and Luke. Every time he showed up he struck fear into people. He must be quite impressive. The angel told Zechariah he would finally have joy and gladness. They were going to have a son. They were to call him John. He would be great before the Lord. He would not have an ordinary kid. He would have a great kid. Zechariah was praying for just a child. God’s plan was to give him a child better than he could have imagined.

A boy set apart to the Lord

...for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink... Luke 1:15 (ESV)

John was to be a man whose entire life was set apart to the Lord. He was to avoid all forms of alcohol. The Bible doesn’t tell us exactly why. I personally believe it was to identify him as set apart for the Lord. He wasn’t to be under the influence of any spirit but the Holy Spirit.

This brings up the topic of Christians and drinking. Should we be like John and avoid all forms of alcohol? The Bible tells us we have the freedom to drink but drunkenness is wrong. The Bible also tells us that we should not be mastered by anything. It also tells us to be willing to relinquish our freedoms if we might cause another person to sin.

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. 1 Corinthians 6:12 (ESV)

I have never drank. Cindy, when we began dating, decided she would give up drinking. While I have the freedom to drink, here are a few reasons why I chose to give up that freedom entirely.

1. When you drink, you can get drunk. If you don't drink, you can't get drunk.
The easiest way to avoid getting drunk is to not drink. It works for me. I recommend it.
2. Almost every example of drunkenness in the Bible ends in disaster. Noah gets drunk and acts shamefully. Lot gets drunk and has sex with his daughters. Belshazzar gets drunk and loses his kingdom.
3. I have never seen a benefit of drinking, only problems from drinking. In 20 years of ministry and counseling, nobody can show me how they made better choices because they were drinking. I have a large list of examples from counseling and in my family where marriages were ruined and lives destroyed from drinking. Since there is no benefit of drinking, why spend your time drinking?
4. As a leader, I can influence someone toward drunkenness. Some people are genetically predisposed to becoming an alcoholic. If they followed the

example of my life, I could nudge them toward disaster. I want my life to be as immitatable as possible.

While we are free to drink, it is good to sometimes think less about exercising our freedom and more about restricting our freedoms out of love for others.

God is pro-life.

...and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. Luke 1:15 (ESV)

We are a pro-life church. We are not being political. We are being biblical. John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit even from the womb. He was be born again before he was born. A clump of tissue cannot be born again. A person is born again. In a few weeks we will see that John leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb. Babies have joy. Clumps of tissue do not have joy.

The language of the Bible helps us. The word for baby in the Greek is the same word used to describe a child of 5 or 6 years of age in Greek. From the Bible's viewpoint, a child of 5 or 6 is the same as one in the womb. What stronger arguments do we need for a child being a person while in the womb? What I find amazing are some statistics that say up to 25 percent of the women having abortions claim to be followers of Jesus. That is concerning. If you have had an abortion, repent and run to Jesus. God is amazing. His grace is sufficient. He will forgive. His mercy is even more powerful than his justice. Repent and seek it. You will find it. God is clearly pro-life.

How to mess up the best day of your life

And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall 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. 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.” Luke 1:18–25 (ESV)

Zechariah doesn't have a garden variety angel in front of him. He has Gabriel. Gabriel and Michael are some of the top angels. Only two angels are mentioned by name in the Bible and Gabriel is one of them. The last time Gabriel showed up was in the book of Daniel to give prophecy about Jesus. He showed up to here to give prophecy about the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. This is obviously a huge announcement. Apparently Gabriel only does the important announcements.

Amazingly Zechariah didn't believe. He won the dice game. He was looking at Gabriel who last appeared to Daniel. Why didn't Zechariah believe the angel's words? Here is my guess. I think he had prayed for so long and not seen anything happen that he didn't believe God would actually show up and change things. He loved God. He studied God. He believed in God, but he didn't believe God would actually do something that seemed impossible or out of the ordinary. He couldn't get it through his mind that God would keep his word and answer his prayer. I think this is true of us. After following Christ for years

and praying for something for years, when God finally decides to answer our prayers, we have a hard time believing him, especially if we are older Christians. This is a challenge for all of us. Have we become practical unbelievers like Zechariah? Do we believe God will keep his word?

Now the story gets funny. Zechariah was in the temple offering incense for a long time. The people outside were praying on their knees, which really hurt after a while because the temple floor was marble. Everyone was on their knees praying Zechariah would be quick with his prayers. Zechariah didn't come out for a long time. What happened? Did he fall asleep? Did he cat-nap inside? Did he have a stroke? What happened? When Zechariah finally came out he couldn't talk or hear. The Greek tells us he was mute and deaf so it was charade city trying to explain everything to everyone, which I think is pretty funny. Personally I think Gabriel was standing in the shadows watching everything holding his side just dying of laughter. God has a sense of humor.

When Zechariah went home, his wife became pregnant. She was doubly blessed. Not only was she pregnant as an old woman but Zechariah could not say "No" when she asked to use the credit card.

Conclusion

As we look back on this story, I have four lessons we learn and one action step to take.

1. **What matters is what God thinks of us, not what everyone else thinks of us.** The important people in God's eyes are usually not the important people in everyone else's eyes. Everyone thought the important person in town was

Herod. He had his logo on everything. He controlled everything. He held life and death for the entire nation in the palm of his hand. In reality, the important people God took note of were the ones most overlooked by everyone else, a small-time country pastor and his wife from a rural hick town who never had any kids but they were still faithful and trusting in God. What matters is what God thinks of us, not what everyone else thinks of us. Everyone else fixed their thoughts on Herod. God fixed his thoughts on Zechariah and Elizabeth. Remember that this week.

2. **When it comes to answering the prayers of our hearts, trust God's timing.** Continue serving and trusting God even when he doesn't seem to answer. This was one of the great strengths of both Zechariah and Elizabeth. They stayed faithful to God in a small town in small ministry even when God never gave them a child. They didn't divorce. They didn't give up. They continued trusting. It is easy for us to feel God has forgotten us or ignored our prayers. God hasn't. If we can trust him to save our souls we can trust he will answer our prayers in his time and in his way.

3. **Don't become spiritually stiff and refuse to believe God answers prayer.** Zechariah is a great example of what I call a spiritual stiff. He was so used to hearing "No" that he refused believe God when he finally said "Yes." Many of us have things we have prayed over for years and nothing has happened. For you it might be your children coming to Jesus. It might be God repairing your marriage. It might be your spouse coming to Christ. After a long time of

God not answering our prayers we lose hope and no longer believe God can do an extraordinary answer. That is the Zechariah syndrome.

Will you stand as I close in prayer?



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America. He enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics are preaching and ancient rhetoric. Feel free to contact him at www.Christ@RCulture.com (www.c2rc.com)

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