

Christmas Restores Hope: God Keeps His Promises

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VIDEO: BROKEN PROMISES

God always keep his promises. God made a promise to Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through Israel. Over the years God revealed that the promise included a Messiah who would bring in the Kingdom of God. For centuries people eagerly looked for the Messiah. But after 2,000 years of waiting some began to doubt that God was going to keep that promise. They gave up hope. Fewer and fewer continued to hope for the promised Messiah. Among those was a priest and his wife, named Zechariah and Elizabeth.

There were so many priests in Israel that they took turns serving in the Temple. Perhaps only once in a lifetime would a priest be chosen by casting lots to burn incense in front of the Holy of Holies. It was considered a rare and special privilege. Zechariah was chosen on this day to burn incense. Let's see what happens.

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.⁶ Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, 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 righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Luke 1:5-17

Christmas—for children it is the most anticipated and exciting day of the year. As soon as Thanksgiving is over the countdown begins—how many days until Christmas? I remember as a kid the three days before Christmas were the longest, slowest days of the entire year. Time stood still—Christmas morning would never come. The saddest

night of the year was Christmas night when I realized it would be a whole year until next Christmas. Now as an adult, three days until Christmas causes panic. How will I possibly get everything done? Now Christmas night is a relief. It is over until next year!

The dynamic of waiting, anticipating Christmas that children experience sets the context for the Christmas story in the Bible. For many generations devout Jews waited every day for the coming of the promised Messiah. They got up every morning with the question: “Could this be the day that Messiah comes?” Hundreds and then thousands of years passed—no Messiah. Many quit looking. They gave up hope. A faithful few never gave up. They continued to expect God to keep his promise.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were among the few who believed God would keep his promise. There are times in our Christian life when we want to give up hope. The forces of evil in our world seem so strong; is God’s Kingdom where good triumphs over evil really going to come? Why do I still believe? Why am I going to church? Why am I giving an offering? Why am I serving? There are times in our spiritual lives when we ask those questions.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were hanging on to their hope, but sometimes they must have wondered “why?” They were both descendents of the high priest Aaron—Moses’ brother. All of their ancestors were priests. They were preacher’s kids from multiple generations. Unlike many preacher’s kids they were not rebellious. They were straight up—blameless. They did all the right stuff. They kept on believing the promise of God, even though there was not much evidence that God was involved with Israel. The Romans had been the latest of a long line of conquerors. But they still hoped the Kingdom of God would come—the Messiah would be born.

Even though they kept the faith; even though they were righteous and good; they were childless. Elizabeth was unable to conceive a child. They were faithful to God, but

he had disappointed them because they had no heirs and no one to take care of them in their old age. In those days a woman's worth was determined by the number of children she had. To have no children was to be worthless. It meant God had cursed you. Why would God curse such a righteous couple? Sometimes couples who are unable to have children wonder if they have done something wrong. Is God punishing us? The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth answers that question. You can be totally blameless and yet not have children. Childlessness is not the result of a curse or a punishment from God.

They had prayed for years. The NIV translation says, "They were both well along in years." I like the RSV translation better: "They were advanced in years." From now on when someone tells me: "You are aging gracefully," I'm going to respond, "I'm not aging, I'm advancing." It means I'm still alive and moving forward! Zechariah and Elizabeth were advancing in years.

As they advanced, they kept their hope. It had been 2,000 years since the glimmer of hope of a Messiah was made to Abraham. Yet Zechariah and Elizabeth continued to trust God and believe he would keep his promise.

Zechariah continued to faithfully carry out his responsibilities as a priest. It is his turn to offer the incense in front of the Holy of Holies: the place where the presence of God dwelled in glory. He is all alone when suddenly the angel Gabriel appears to him. Zechariah is terrified. Gabriel delivers the standard opening line of angels when they appear to humans: "Do not be afraid." Angels are terrifying creatures. They don't mean to be scary—they are just so powerful and glorious—they frighten us. They are not the cute little chubby cherubs with tiny bows and arrows that you see on Valentine's cards. These guys scare the daylights out of you when you see them.

Hebrews 13:2 tells us that we need to be hospitable toward strangers because sometimes people entertain angels without knowing it. This tells us that angels can go

“undercover.” They can appear incognito. Do you remember a show called “Touched by an Angel?” The angels were undercover, but at some point in the show they would reveal they were angels sent by God. At that moment they got a little glow of light around them, but otherwise they still looked rather human. When real angels blow their cover and reveal themselves—they are powerful, majestic beings that look very scary to us!

While Zechariah is shaking in his boots, Gabriel says, “Your prayer has been heard.” Sometimes isn’t that all we want to know? We pray and pray for something, and we are not sure God hears us. Are our prayers bouncing off the ceiling? I just want to know that God heard me. He does not have to say “yes” to my request, just “I heard you.”

Then Gabriel goes on, “The answer to your prayer is yes. You are going to have a son. His name is to be John.” We will come to know him as—John the Baptist. He will be great in the sight of God. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord. John will preach a message of repentance to those who had given up hope and abandoned their faith. He would call them to return to God as the source of their hope. He would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

Now you would think Zechariah would be turning cartwheels by now. Not only will he have a son, but this son will be the forerunner of the Messiah. Wow! But apparently Zechariah has gotten over his fear of the angel, because he decides to ask a question: “How can I be sure of this? We’ve prayed for a kid for a long time. In our twenties we asked for a child. In our thirties we asked for a child. Even in our forties we asked for a child. Somewhere in our mid-fifties we gave up. This is really an old prayer request. I’m old; my wife is advanced—How can I be sure?”

Not a good idea to tick off an angel. Don't say to an angel, "I don't think you know what you are talking about!" Gabriel swells up even larger and says: "I stand in the presence of God. He sent me to deliver this message. Since you don't believe me, I'll give you a sign—you will not speak until my words come true at the proper time. Goodbye."

Some translations say, you will not speak until the "appointed time." There it is. Elizabeth and Zechariah would not have a baby until God's appointed time. They had waited and waited and given up hope; but in God's time they had a baby boy. Many in Israel had waited and waited for the Messiah. They had given up hope. Then God's appointed time came. A few months later Gabriel would return with another message from God. This time he appears to a young woman named Mary. And of course he would have to say to her, "Do not be afraid!" Then he would go on to tell her that she would give birth to the Messiah who had been promised long ago. God's appointed time had come.

Zechariah's and Elizabeth's story is our story. What have you prayed and prayed for? Nothing happens for weeks, months, years. You give up hope. You may even give up on God and abandon your faith. Is God there? Does he hear my prayers? Does he care?

Perhaps you have prayed for a broken relationship to be restored. You have done all you know to do, and there is no movement from the other person. Do you give up hope? Perhaps like Zechariah and Elizabeth you have prayed for a child and nothing happens. Have you prayed for a loved one with a serious illness to be healed, and their condition just seems to worsen each day? Do you give up hope? Do you give up on God?

Do you keep doing the right thing when everyone else around you just looks out for old number one? Do you keep your integrity at work when everyone else is ripping off the company at every opportunity? As a student do you refuse to cheat on your tests when everyone else is cheating? Do you refrain from underage drinking even though everyone else is doing it?

Do we keep going to church, reading our Bible, praying, giving our tithe, serving in a ministry—even when God does not seem to be doing much in return? There are times in our Christian lives when we wonder. There are times when we get tired of praying. There are times when we want to give up hope.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were among the few who had not given up hope for the Messiah. Even though they have given up hope that they would have a child, they still believed that one day God would send the Christ child. Their story is our story. Will we hold on to hope even when things look hopeless? Our trust in God is never misplaced—even when it seems like our prayers are not heard, and God is not doing anything. Our hope is not in vain.

Our hope is that God always keeps his promises. He promises to accomplish his purposes in his appointed time in our lives. He promises to work all things together for good. He promises to never leave us or forsake us. He promises that his Kingdom is coming in its fullness. Evil will be destroyed and good will prevail. Death will be overcome with resurrection to eternal life.

God is a God who can be trusted. Never give up hope, because God always keeps his promises--in his appointed time.