

“Gracious Providence”

Luke 1:5-25

November 27, 2022

In anticipation of Christmas, we are beginning a short mini-series from Luke 1-2. Today we are going to focus on vss. 5-25 (we will return to vss. 1-4 at a later time when we embark on a study of the entire Gospel of Luke).

[Prayer]

One of the reasons we struggle to live by faith is because we live in a world where the complexities of our fallen nature blur our ability to see God’s hand of providence. For example,

- We strive to live *godly* lives, yet sometimes we have to bear deep and lasting *grief*. Godliness does not make us immune to suffering.
- We know we walk in God’s favor in Christ yet often find ourselves struggling with *fear of circumstances*.
- We live by *faith* yet sometimes find ourselves *doubting*.
- We have the promise of God’s *blessing* yet sometimes have to endure His *discipline* simultaneously.
- We believe in the *supernatural*, yet we seem to be dominated by the *natural*.

Luke 1 gives us the opportunity to see that, through all these complexities in a fallen world, God is working by His providence to accomplish His redemptive plan.

Here’s the big idea: ***God is faithfully and providentially working to accomplish His plan through God-fearing yet faith-struggling people.***

Exemplary Godliness Mixed with Grief (Luke 1:5-7)

[5-7] Vs. 5 opens with more than an historical and geographical marker. The reign of Herod the Great represents a dark time in Israel’s history under the domination of Rome. While Herod did a number of things to win the Jew’s favor for the stability of his own reign, things like rebuilding the temple, lowering taxes, and buying food for the poor, he was also a ruthless pagan king who would kill anyone out of paranoia to “protect” his reign—including killing many of his own family members and all the little boys in Bethlehem

when Jesus was born (Mt 2:16-18). At the same time, most of the Jews, while proudly religious, had strayed from true faith and obedience to God. It’s against this dark backdrop of Jewish history that Luke introduces us to a humble, old, priestly couple that exemplified rare but genuine godliness in their day.

Not only was Zacharias a priest, but his wife Elizabeth was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Priests were only required to marry a Jewish virgin (Lev 21:7, 14), yet to have a wife who shared the priestly line of Aaron was especially honorable. Certainly they, of all people, would be blessed with children!

More importantly, vs. 6 says that both Zacharias and Elizabeth were “righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.” This doesn’t mean that they never struggled with sin, but that they were strongly characterized by God-pleasing lives of obedience. Zacharias and Elizabeth demonstrated true godliness not only in the eyes of men, but in the eyes of God. They were the real deal!

If any couple would be expected to have the full favor and blessing of God, it was Zacharias and Elizabeth. Yet vs. 7 introduces us to a deep pain and pervasive grief that penetrated their godly years. Elizabeth was barren. While wealth and riches might be measured in land and livestock, the Jews measured God’s blessing in childbearing. Yet this priestly couple had neither.

To make matters worse, it was assumed that barrenness was the result of some egregious sin bringing social disgrace on any Jewish woman that was barren. Because Deuteronomy declared that God’s blessings on His people would include childbearing while apostasy would result in the curse of childlessness, the logical implication of barrenness became a painful stigma (Deut 7:14; 28:4, 11, 15, 18).

You can imagine how Zacharias and Elizabeth must have prayed for God to bless them with a child. I wonder if, as the years wore on, it motivated them even further to walk blamelessly before God so that nothing would hinder their prayers. Yet God, in His providence, withheld the blessing. And every

day Elizabeth could see behind the wondering eyes of women who knew her so well, the looming question, “why has God withheld His kindness from Elizabeth? After all, it had to be by God’s providence. Jewish women knew well that only God opened the womb. There must have come a point in time when this couple, advancing in years, realized that the hope of pregnancy was past. Yet they continued to serve God in humble obedience. This begs a question: *Are we willing to keep serving God with humble obedience when He ‘appears’ to be withholding His blessing? Or do we only obey God when there seems to be some “payback” that benefits us?*

Favor mixed with fear (Luke 1:8-13)

Having seen the *painful providence* of God not opening Elizabeth’s womb (7), we now see the *favor* of God’s providence to Zacharias in vs. 8. **[8-13]** Here we see God’s providence in two ways. First, vs. 8 begins with the Greek phrase *de ginomai* which the NASB rightly translates, “now it happened” (ESV simply uses the words “*now while,*” but the literal sense is *now it came to be*. From our modern point of view, we might take this to be mere coincidence. But it’s important to remember that the concept of coincidence was absolutely foreign to a Jewish mindset and the Bible as a whole. Luke is pointing us to the providence of God. Second, we see God’s providence through the casting of lots, which the Jews utilized in determining God’s will. This idea is captured in Prov. 16:33: “*The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD.*”

What Luke means for us to see here is that *God* chose Zacharias to offer up the incense in the holy place. Out of the 18,000 priests, it was a once-in-lifetime privilege (that not every priest got to experience) to be chosen for such an honor. God’s favor is upon Zacharias!

Last week in Ps 34 we discovered that walking in the fear of God is a means to experiencing the favor of God. Yet ironically, Zacharias’ experience of God’s favor will lead to an experience of great fear. As he offers up the incense which represents the prayers of God’s people, suddenly an angel appears next to the altar. Zacharias is not only “troubled” but gripped with

fear! This is a typical human response to angelic beings in Scripture. But immediately the angel reassures Zacharias, “*do not be afraid...for your petition has been heard.*” So not only has Zacharias experienced God’s favor in being chosen by lot to offer the incense, he has also been given the rare experience of an angelic visitation to announce God’s favor in answered prayer—God will give him and his wife a son! And not just any son, but one chosen by God for a very specific ministry. Before we unpack the angel’s message about this son, let’s consider which prayer is being answered.

We may assume from vs. 13 that because the *answer* is the birth of a son, that the *prayer* was for a child. That may very well be. Furthermore, we may assume that this is the answer to prayers from the *past* because the announcement of a forthcoming pregnancy to the elderly couple seemed incredulous to Zacharias. However, the point of the evening offering, for which Zacharias was offering up incense, was to pray for the nation of Israel. So it may be possible that God is answering Zacharias’s prayer for God to have mercy on the nation, by sending a messenger in form of a child through Zacharias and Elizabeth.

In a sense, we can only speculate as to which prayer God is answering, but based on the role this child will have, here's what we can conclude: “God is tackling two problems at once.”¹ The very provision that God is making for this elderly couple is also opening the door to God’s provision of mercy for the nation. As one commentator said, “*God is answering not only the prayers of a desperate couple but also those of a desperate people. Divine intervention in the lives of this couple is divine intervention for Israel. Their personal prayers have meshed with God’s plans in the drama of redemption to restore Israel to God.*”²

This is an amazing work of providence! The decades of pain and disappointment Zacharias and Elizabeth endured were a divine work of preparation.³ God withheld the blessing of childbearing until an impossible stage of life, so that when the child was born it would be a clear indicator to everyone that *God was at work!* What we are about to see is that this child

¹ Darrell Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT: Luke 1:1-9:50*, pg. 82.

² David Garland, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT: Luke*, pg. 66.

³ Just as Hannah’s pain and disgrace of barrenness in 1 Samuel 1 was divine work of preparation for Samuel and the work God would do through him.

would prepare the stage for Messiah's ministry of bringing ultimate mercy to Israel and to the world!

God is on the Move! (Luke 1:14-17)

We come now to the angel's prophecy of who this child would become. **[Vs. 14]** John's birth will be a source of joy not only to Zacharias and Elizabeth, but also to many who will benefit from his ministry of preparing the way for Messiah to come.

[15] This is remarkable. From the very time of John's conception, he will be filled with Holy Spirit. That is, his entire life will be under the influence of the Spirit. This explains why John was not to drink any wine for strong drink. He was not to be under any outside influence than God Himself. In this sense he would be *great*—not by human standards but by God's estimation. His life would be one of devotion to the purposes of God, an instrument in God's own hand to advance God's redemptive plan.

By the way, John's being filled with the Spirit while yet in the womb is evidence that the unborn are no less than human. In fact, the sanctity of life is determined, not by the level of a fetus's maturation, but by the fact that God has ordained that a life come into existence, which is initially manifested through conception—God's act of opening the womb (cf. Jer 1:5).

[16-17] John the Baptist would have a ministry of revival and spiritual awakening. His message would be one of repentance that restores wayward Israel back to true faith and obedience. When vs. 17 tells us that he will come in the spirit and power of Elijah, Luke clarifies what he means by quoting from Malachi 4. The last two verses of the OT end with a promise that God would send Elijah (or one who closely identified with his message) to "*restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers*" before the great and terrible day of judgement.

When Malachi and Luke say that the hearts of fathers and children will be restored to one another, it is because they are returning to the ways of the Lord. This is a picture of repentance and conversion that will result in reconciliation.

Malachi was the last of the OT prophets apart from John. When Malachi finished speaking, Israel would not hear another word from God for 400 years! Not until they heard John the Baptist declare, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt 3:2). And how was the kingdom of heaven at hand? Because heaven's King, Jesus the Messiah, had come and was ready to inaugurate His kingdom. John's ministry was one of preparation. Calling the people to repent so that they could receive the ministry of Jesus through the gospel.

This is why John had such great honor among the prophets because he stood the closest to Jesus (Luke 7:28). Just as in a wedding the maid of honor comes in closest the bride of all the bridesmaids. Yet not even she is the closest to the bride, but rather the flower girl, dropping peddles preparing the way for the bride, signaling that the next one to be seen when the door opens will be the bride herself.

What's most important to see in this announcement of John's birth, is that after 400 years of silence, *God is on the move!* He has resumed the execution of His plan and is about to fulfill the promises that his people have waited for so long.

Faith mixed with doubt (Luke 1:18-19)

Now in light of this overwhelming news, how might you expect Zacharias to respond? Well, we expect him to be ecstatic, when in fact he can't 'believe his own ears.' **[18]** In other words, "what sign or evidence can you present that such an impossible feat will take place?" Zacharias's faith is intercepted by momentary doubt.

Don't miss the "contrast between Zacharias's demand *to know* (vs. 18) and Gabriel's emphasis on *belief* (vs. 20). Knowledge and faith are not the same thing. Knowledge can give you a false confidence of being in control, but *faith* aligns you with God's providence. Knowledge has its place, but never as a replacement for trusting God. Beware of the idolatry of knowledge which stops short of living by faith in the promise of God. Knowledge puffs up, faith transforms.

Furthermore, compare Zacharias' response to the angel with Mary's response to the angel. Zacharias says, "How can I know this for certain" while Mary says, "How can this be?" (Lk 1:34). The difference is that Zacharias asks for more *evidence* out of a heart of doubt while Mary asks for an *explanation* how of a heart of faith.⁴ As John Piper clarifies, "*it is not wrong to want evidence for our faith*" but "*it is possible to demand too much evidence before you believe God's promises....There is evil in demanding signs beyond what a humble and open heart would require.*"⁵ We must never forget the angel's final words to Mary about both her and Elizabeth: "*Nothing will be impossible with God!*" (37).

R.C. Sproul says, "*The reason we doubt the Word of God is not because His Word is unbelievable or not credible but because we project onto God the untrustworthiness that describes our own condition....But authentic biblical faith is grounded in the trustworthiness of God. Nothing could be more unreasonable or more irrational than to doubt a word that comes from God.*"⁶

Do you hear the rebuke in the Angel's response: "I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God..." (19). What more evidence do you need Zacharias!? Its not everyday that you get a visit from Gabriel. I am your sign!

By the way, Zacharias' struggle to believe, in spite of his own godliness and the angelic visitation, demonstrates just how supernatural John's birth would be—completely impossible without divine intervention!

Lest we be too hard on Zacharias, keep in mind that this is a *momentary* lapse of faith for Zacharias. We know from vs. 6 that his life was characterized by the genuine faith of obedience that God approved of. We will also discover from his Psalm of praise at the end of chapter 1 that Zacharias' faith would rebound and take hold of God's promise.

This should be a great encouragement to all of us. How many of us don't have doubts from time to time of one degree or another. Yet we learn from

⁴ John Piper, sermon: "How Not to Talk to An Angel" (Nov 17, 1980):

www.desiringgod.org

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ R.C. Sproul, *Luke: An Expository Commentary*, pg. 16.

Zacharias that our journey of faith is defined not by momentary faltering, but by faith that is tested and tried through the course of life.

Blessing Mixed with Discipline (Luke 1:20-22)

Yet, its also instructive to see that Zacharias' momentary unbelief would have consequences. [vs. 20-22] Zacharias asked for an additional sign and a sign is what he got. He was struck mute and also likely deaf based on vs. 61. And this would last until the appointed time of fulfillment—another pointer to God's providence (20). God graciously responds to doubt with discipline to restore our trust and confidence in the God who is *always* faithful to His promises. And while our faltering faith will complicate our lives, it will never undermine God's ultimate plan. *Do you believe that God can do the impossible? Do you pray that way?*

The Supernatural mixed with the Natural (Luke 1:23-25)

Our passage concludes with a blending of *supernatural* intervention with *natural* means. [23-25] When vs. 23 says Zacharias "went back home," it's a subtle way of saying, 'he went back home *to his wife* where they could have a marital union'—that's the *natural* means. But the supernatural is captured in those beautiful words: Elizabeth "became pregnant."⁷ Do you see God's providence? Working through natural means to do something only God could do.

We are not told why Elizabeth kept herself in seclusion for 5 months. She would be 'showing' by the time she re-engaged in public life. Perhaps she wanted to spare others the consequences of unbelief that her godly husband had endured. Or perhaps she wanted to avoid the added disgrace their unbelief would cause her to bear. We don't know. But what we can surmise is that Elizabeth's response was not *unbelief* but *amazement*. ***God is faithfully and providentially advancing His plan through this humble God-fearing couple, despite her husband's struggle to believe.***

⁷ Unlike Mary's pregnancy which would be solely supernatural without the Joseph's involvement, Elizabeth's pregnancy would be the result of God's supernatural intervention through the natural union with her husband.

So why did Luke choose to begin His gospel with this account of Zacharias and Elizabeth?

- *Historically*, this account links the story of Jesus and the gospel with the continuing story of redemption from the OT—building the bridge from Malachi to Jesus through John the Baptist; to show that *God is on the move*, advancing history and redemption to His climactic end!
- *Theologically*, this account shows the unparalleled significance of John's life and ministry that will be supremely surpassed by the Lord Jesus.
- *Practically*, this account teaches us how to properly respond to God's promises and supernatural work with faith and to encourage us to see that God is faithful to accomplish his plan through God-fearing, faith-struggling people.

Just as God was writing *His story* through Zacharias, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist; just as we will see Him write *His story* through Joseph, Mary, and Jesus; so God is writing *His story* today through *our story*. And for each one of us, our story will be defined by what we believe of God's promises.

How is the Lord speaking to you through His word today?

- Is it possible that you are experiencing some discipline from God in your life because you have not believed or obeyed what you know He has clearly said?
- Perhaps, like Zacharias, you have elevated *knowledge* above *faith*. Is your confidence based on what you *know* about what God has said, or is it expressed in *trust* that God is true to what He says?
- Are you willing to keep praying for God's intervention in your life, your marriage, or a particular situation, even when it seems against all hope?
- Take a moment to pray, "Lord, give me a heart to believe what you say and to take your promises at your Word."