

Retelling Christmas - Pt. 3

Zacharias & Elisabeth

Luke 1:5f - December 21, 2014

It is exciting when we are anticipating something. For example, it is exciting when a couple learns they are pregnant. The days that follow are filled with anticipation. There is the anticipation of the coming birth, the wonder whether they are going to have a boy or girl, and then there is the anticipation involving the child's health and future.

So it is exciting to anticipate something, yet when you add to the anticipation long unknown periods of waiting, it becomes more difficult, for example, we see this when one is waiting to become pregnant.

What makes that type of waiting more difficult is that it is not confined to a set period of 9 months as it is with the pregnancy itself. This type of anticipation is filled with many unanswered questions and concerns. Such as, "when will I ever get pregnant, how long will this take to get pregnant, and is it really God's will that I get pregnant?" Those periods of time are often more difficult to endure.

Another example most of us can relate to is those single years. In those days we are filled with the hopes and prayers that one day we will meet our perfect mate. Since this type of waiting is not confined to a set period of time, it is often filled with many unanswered questions and concerns. Such as, "when will I meet the right one, will I ever meet the right one, and is there really a right one for me?"

This type of anticipation and waiting can go on for years and even lead to desperation and finally to resigning to the fact that it may never happen. Then, after months and years of no one in sight: no prospects at work, no prospects at church, and no prospects among our friends. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, the perfect person appears. Then time shifts from lonely weekends and months of dryness to a long awaited fulfillment.

These desires are natural. It is how God made us. They are part of life. Remember Sara had to wait until she turned 90 years old before she got pregnant. Rebecca had difficulty conceiving and had to have Isaac intercede for her in prayer - Genesis 25:21. Rachel had to wait a long time to conceive. She even cried out to her husband Jacob saying, "give me children or else I die."

From the time of the fall, men have been waiting for the coming Messiah. He was first promised in Genesis 3:15, and then the nation of Israel is reminded over and over again of His coming. He is promised in Isaiah 7:14 to be born of a virgin. He is promised to come from the tribe of Judah, from the root of Jesse. He is prophesied in Micah 5:2 to come out of the town of Bethlehem in the province of Judah. There are many other prophecies, too numerous to mention in this message. This is the framework for Israel's long awaited desire for their Messiah.

Waiting was never easy for the nation. They experienced Egyptian bondage; many years with despot kings, the Babylonian Captivity followed by 400 years of silence and then Roman oppression. In all those years the people wondered, "Will it ever happen, will the Messiah ever come?"

Insight:

Sometimes it may feel like our long awaited desires may never come. The desire for a mate, a marriage, a child, a job, a home, the salvation of a loved one, the deliverance from a trial or bondage, and our Lord's coming in the air for His church. Remember, just because some desire has not yet occurred, it does not mean that God has left you. He never left Israel, even in their dry years. He was always near. From this we learn that God does not forget his own, even in times of great trial or difficulty. Sometimes He needs to get our attention. Other times He is testing us to see if we will be faithful. He may say no to one thing, but will have something even better than we can ever imagine later. Since, God is faithful in all His works, our job is to wait on Him.

Perhaps God allowed these long periods of desire to go on these lives to remind us that some things will take a long time to transpire, such as long anticipated desire of the of Messiah.

This morning I would like to focus on three long awaited desires that are fulfilled in our passage. The first is the long awaited desire of the people of God for their Messiah. The second is the long awaited desire of Elisabeth, the wife of Zacharias, for a child. The third was the long awaited desire of Zacharias to light the incense in the holy place. We will see all three of these desires develop as we examine our text.

We are given a timestamp for this story in Luke 1:5

"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea . . ."

These events took place in the days of Herod, the king of Judah. He was a very wicked king, (yet at times a generous king). He died on March 12, 4 BC. Therefore, this event was taking place somewhere around 6 BC while Israel is still struggling under Roman oppression. Because of this oppression many people longed for the Messiah to come and free them from their burden.

The passage continues with more details (Luke 1:5b). There was “a certain priest named Zachariah, of the course of Abia.” Since Zachariah was a priest, we know he was from the tribe of Levi and a descendant of Aaron. We also learn that he served according to the course or division of Abia. All priests served in the temple according to their division. These divisions were established 900 years before by king David and were faithfully kept by the Priests until the fall of the temple in AD 70. That is when Titus destroyed the temple.

The Priests were broken into 24 divisions. Each division served in the temple for two weeks. Therefore, because of this phrase, we can calculate the approximate time Zachariah was serving in the Temple.

(The last priestly division that served in the Temple was the course of Jehoiarib. If you calculate backwards using the 24 divisions given to the priests by king David, to the time of Zachariah, we learn that the time of Zacharias service would be (according to our calendar) in early October. If this reasoning is correct, it then gives some credibility for a December or early January date for Jesus' birth.)

The rest of the year the Priests would service in their various cities or towns through out Israel. According to Luke 1:39, Zachariah lived somewhere in the hill country in one of the many cities in Judah.

In this passage we also learn about Zachariah's character. Both Elisabeth and Zacharias were from the priestly line - Luke 1:5c.

“ . . .his wife *was* of the daughters of Aaron, and her name *was* Elisabeth.”

For a priest to marry a woman of priestly descent was to make him a man worth of double honor. According to Luke 1:6, they were both, righteous before God, walking in all His commandments and ordinances and were considered blameless.

“And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.”

Therefore, they were a couple, devoted to God. They were respected in their community and were considered blessed.

They were childless - Luke 1:7.

“And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were *now* well stricken in years.”

There was a lot of pressure in their culture for a priest to have a child. Therefore, it was common for a Priest to divorce his barren wife and marry another. No one would have said anything if Zachariah had done this. From this account, we learn that Zachariah must have truly loved his wife. His action to keep Elisabeth made him stand out in his community.

Having a child was Zachariah and Elisabeth’s long awaited desire. Luke 1:7b says, “They were well stricken in age.” According to the Mishnah, this would make Zacharias and Elisabeth over 60. A priest, unlike a Levite could serve until he was physically unable.

Here we learn about the godly. Just because someone is godly and righteous does not mean everything will be perfect. They had no child. It was their desire, but God withheld their yearnings. No doubt there were many tears and times of sorrow over this matter.

In their disappointment they were still faithful to God and their calling - Luke 1:8.

Zechariah executed the Lord’s office as a priest two weeks a year in or around the temple. He was not a famous priest. He came from a small town in the hills of Judah. He wasn’t a scholar. If he were, he would have lived in a large city. He wasn’t from a big town, but a small village or hamlet with simple people. He was born to his position and he was faithful to the task.

From a human point of view, it is amazing that God had even regarded them. Yet, this is our God. He regards the heart.

In Luke 1:9 we find the casting of the Lot.

“According to the custom of the priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.”

Because there were many priests, lots were cast to determine who would do certain tasks within the temple. Aside from the high priest, a priest like

Zachariah could only serve in the holy place once. When chosen by lot, his job would be to light the incense or replace the bread before the altar. It was possible to serve all your life and never have the privilege of entering the holy place. It was a high honor to be chosen.

For at least forty years these lots were thrown, and Zachariah was not chosen. It was not until his appointed time that they fell to him. His desire to serve in the holy place may have taken much longer than he expected. But he never quit.

For some of us, it may feel like the lot will never fall to us. Don't quit. Choose to be faithful like Zachariah.

We know from the Mishnah that when the lot fell to a Priest, he would pick two people to assist him - A friend and a relative. The first cleared away the old incense. After he did this he would worship before the Lord and then leave the holy place. The second person would carry new burning coals into the holy place and leave them before the Vail of the Holy of Holies. After completing this task, he would worship before the Lord and leave.

Then Zachariah would enter the holy place to light the incense. The Priests and Levites would gather outside the holy place to worship while he lit the incense.

“And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense” - Luke 1:10.

Music would be playing and the congregation would waiting for Zacharias to return from the holy place to pronounce the benediction.

Yet he did not come out right away. It says, Luke 1:21 that “the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he tarried so long in the temple.”

Luke 1:11 tells us “there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.” This the same place that the Angel of the Lord would appear to Moses.

Fear fell on Zacharias, but the angel told him not to fear. His prayer for a child is heard. - Luke 1:12-13. He had waited 40 years for this prayer to be answered. He also waited an entire career for the lot to fall to him so he could serve in the holy place.

The angel tells him about the son that would be born - John, the Baptist . . . Many shall rejoice at his birth - v. 14. This child will be great. He will be set apart - v. 15. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb. He will turn many to the Lord - v. 16-17.

But doubt filled Zachariah - Luke 1:18.

“And Zachariah said unto the angel, ‘whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.’”

Zachariah was looking for a sign

“I am Gabriel,” Luke 1:19. In Jewish tradition, Gabriel was regarded as inferior to the archangel Michael. By tradition, Gabriel was considered to be the minister of justice and Michael, the minister of Mercy. Because of this fact, it was believed that Gabriel stood on the left side of the throne not on the right where he was standing in this passage.

The sign is given - Luke 1:20. First, Zachariah would be unable to hear or speak again until all that was prophesied was completed. Second, this sign was to the people who were waiting outside the holy place. It signaled that the Lord was going to do something unique. Third, it served as a sign to Elisabeth that she through Zachariah would conceive and have a child, the forerunner to the Messiah. Fourth, it remained as a sign to Zachariah that what the angel said would be so. Fifth, it was a sign to all who knew Zacharias that the Promise of the Messiah was about to be fulfilled.

In Luke 1:21-22 we find Zachariah leaving the holy place to face the people. He was supposed to speak his benediction. Apparently he tried to speak, but he couldn't. He beckoned to the people that he had seen an angel.

Now keep in mind he was to speak some of the 18 eulogies usually quoted by a Priest. He had prepared his entire career to one day say these words, but he couldn't.

They were as follows,

“Speedily make to shoot forth the Branch of David Thy Servant, and exalt his horn by Thy salvation, for in thy salvation we trust all the day long. Blessed are, Thou, Jehovah Who causeth” to spring forth the Horn of Salvation.”

Yet, after he saw the angel he could not speak the closing benediction to end the incense lighting ceremony.

Luke 1:23 tells us “as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.” During that time, he had at least 10 months to meditate on the meaning of the angel’s appearance and the words of his unsaid benediction.

His wife probably conceived soon after his arrival home - perhaps late October. She retreated for 5 months or until March. During that time both contemplated the wonders of the angel appearing to Zachariah. What could all this mean?

Then, in the sixth month (March/April), around the time of Passover, Mary, the mother of Jesus conceived - Luke 1:26. Shortly after her conception she left her village to visit Elizabeth - Luke 1:36, 39-40.

Mary’s visit no doubt gave Zachariah and Elizabeth a better understanding of what was happening. Luke 1:43 indicates that at some level Elizabeth understood that the Messiah now with Mary was about to be born. She also understood that her soon to be born son John would be His forerunner. - Luke 1:17.

Mary’s arrival confirmed all their thoughts. He is here, the long awaited desire of Israel and Savior of the world has come.

In Luke 1:57-60 we have the birth of John. During John’s circumcision Elizabeth interrupts the Rabbi’s closing prayer by saying, “**Not so**; but he shall be called John” - Luke 1:59-60. His name is not Zacharias, but rather John, meaning, Jehovah is gracious.

They made a sign to Zacharias to get his attention and then asked him what his sons name should be - Luke 1:62. Zacharias then spoke - Luke 1:64.

He spoke words very close to the benediction he was to speak at the time of the incense burning. However these words were no longer an appeal to God to visit them by sending the root of David - the Messiah. Zachariah now made it in the present tense - He has . . .

He completed the benediction by saying, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for **he hath visited** and redeemed his people” (Luke 1:68) i.e. Mary with them and was with child.

“He hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” (Luke 1:69) i.e. God has already given them the Messiah since He is in Mary’s womb, and His forerunner is in Elizabeth’s womb.

Summary of thoughts:

We learn from this passage that God does not forget, even when there are long periods of silence. If you are going through a long silent period in your life, remember this passage. God has not forgotten you. He is still doing something good. Romans 8:28 - “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

Furthermore, just because someone is godly, like Zachariah and Elisabeth, it does not mean everything in life will go smoothly. Life will have plenty of trials. Remember, even in the midst of the social pressure for Zechariah to have a son, he did not give in to the worldly advice to divorce his wife. He stuck it out and loved his wife. Also remember it must have seem to Zachariah that the lot would never fall to him. He waited years in order to experience the highlight of his career. Regardless of their long wait, and closed doors, they remained faithful.

Again, we found that God uses ordinary people who are faithful. Zacharias was not famous. He was not a scholar. Both he and Elisabeth were from a rural community in Judah. However, God placed them there for a purpose and they waited 60 plus years to be used in God’s unique plan. This appeals to us to keep on serving. God honors faithfulness. We often do not see all God is doing or why he has us where we are. This should be a reminder for us to keep on being faithful.

Finally, it may seem that it is taking forever for the Lord to return. This passage should remind us that His return is certain. It will happen, in His time just as He has promised. “He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus” - Rev. 22:20.