When Prayer meets Promise

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   So there stands Zechariah, the weight of all that history and expectation on his shoulders, at the literal epicenter of Israel's historic longing and hope. As he prays for God to be faithful, suddenly, to his astonishment, the angel Gabriel appears and announces that God will indeed answer Zechariah's prayer. God is about to demonstrate His faithfulness to His people. The Messiah is coming.

   How does this context make Zechariah's response to Gabriel's news all the more disappointing? What can we learn from this regarding our own attitude and approach to worship and prayer?

   Here was Zechariah, saying these prayers for what seemed like the billionth time, when suddenly an angel appeared and announced that God was finally going to fulfill His promise! God was actually going to send the Savior! It was going to happen—just as Zechariah and all the people had been praying for, generation after generation. But that's not all; the angel also announced that God was going to resolve another issue. Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, who was old and barren, was going to have a child, and this child would prepare God's people for the coming Messiah.

   Just imagine if you were praying and an angel appeared, announcing that God was about to answer your prayer. I'd like to think I would jump for joy. But Zechariah didn't! Instead, he doubted the angel's words. He struggled to believe that God would do such a thing—the very promise God had made from the beginning and upon which all of the Old Testament is built. It certainly doesn't make much sense. How could Zechariah be so doubtful? Yet isn't that typical? We sometimes pray in a faithless way, not fully believing that God hears and answers our prayers.

   We should never doubt that God will not do what He has promised to do.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

2 Corinthians 1:19-20

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

How often do we find ourselves in situations similar to Zechariah's—earnestly praying for God's faithfulness while struggling to fully believe in the incredible promises that are ours in Christ? Below is a list of remarkable promises that God makes to all believers. These promises are steadfast and trustworthy, offering us hope and encouragement, regardless of the challenges we encounter in life.

Salvation and new life in Christ

FORGIVENESS: *God promises to forgive sins in Christ.*
Ephesians 1:7 -- *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace…*

ETERNAL LIFE: *Through faith in Jesus, believers are promised eternal life.*
John 3:16 – *God so loved the World, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life.*

NEW CREATION: *God promises a new life in Christ when one believes.*
2 Corinthians 5:17 - *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

NO CONDEMNATION: *There is no condemnation for those in Christ.*
Romans 8:1 - *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"*

God's presence and love through Christ

BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST: *Baptism connects us to Christ and makes us a part of His body.*
Romans6:3-4 – *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in new life.*

CONSTANT PRESENCE: *God promises to never leave or forsake you.*
John 15:4 -- *Abide in me, and I in you...*

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Romans 8:38-39 *-- For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

RELATIONSHIP: *God desires a relationship with you.*
Romans 5:8 *– God shows his love in this, while we were sinners Christ died for us.*

PRESENCE IN WORSHIP: *He promises to be with us when we worship and to listen.*
Matthew 18:20 *– Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them*

Strength and provision

STRENTH: *God promises to give his strength to help you overcome challenges.*
Philippians 4:13 *– I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

PROVISION: *He promises to provide for all your needs, both physical and spiritual.*
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COMFORT & PEACE: *It surpasses understanding*
Philippians 4:7 *– The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"*

DIRECTION: *He promises to provide direction for your life.*
Romans 8:28 *– In all things God works for good of those who love him and have been called according to his purposes [in Christ].*

Protection and hope

PURPOSE & PROTECTION*: God promises protection & purpose in all things.*
Matthew 28:20 *– Lo, I am with you always to the end of the age.*

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE: *In Christ, God will make all things right in the end.*
Hebrews 16:19 *– This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil.*

GIVES THE HOLY SPIRIT: *Jesus gives this gift to help, guide, and comfort you.*
John 14:26 *– But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.*

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once stated, "It is a dangerous error, surely widespread among Christians, to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments, rejoicings—all of which the heart can do on its own—with genuine prayer." What does Bonhoeffer

mean by this and how does it highlight the importance of knowing the wonderful promises of God's word like those listed above?
True prayer is more than just our emotions or desires; it requires intentionality and understanding. He highlights the importance of distinguishing between simply feeling something in our heart and engaging in authentic prayer that seeks God's Word. This distinction matters for Christians because understanding and acknowledging God's promises can enrich our prayer life. When we are aware of the wonderful promises God has made to us, we can pray more effectively and draw closer to Him, fostering a stronger faith and trust in His plans for our lives. Thus, knowing these promises enables us to pray with purpose and clarity and confidence.

3. Zechariah had likely lifted his prayers to the heavens countless times, yearning for God to bless him and Elizabeth with a child. Yet, as the years passed and they grew older, hope began to wane. They found themselves well beyond the age of childbearing, grappling with the bittersweet reality of unfulfilled dreams. Luke notes that "they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren."

   This description invites us to ponder deeper truths, especially when we reflect on promises like Romans 8:28, which assures us that "in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purposes." One might naturally expect that a life of righteousness would lead to tangible blessings from God. So, if they were righteous people, why had God not answered their prayers? What was the divine purpose behind Elizabeth's suffering?
   Gabriel's words would illuminate a path filled with promise, demonstrating that even in the midst of our doubts and waiting, God's plans are unfolding perfectly. This was not just about a child; it was about the fulfillment of God's perfect timing and the incredible way He would bring forth salvation into the world. He would use the miracle of Elizabeth conceiving as a prophetic sign to validate John's ministry and point to the even greater miracle of Mary's conception and the birth of the Savior. In the way of Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel & Hannah of the Old Testament, God would use the child born of a barren woman to bring many to salvation.

4. The Gospel of Luke is very intentional to show us that the salvation that God brings through Jesus Christ is a continuation of the same faith and hope of the Old Testament.

   A. *Begins with An Old Testament Priest (Zechariah) performing old covenant religious acts in the temple in Jerusalem*
   B. *The angel appears to Zechariah and tells him that he and Elizabeth are going to have a baby. The angel says the name of the child will be John (1:13). In the Old Testament the name of a person is important. Names have meanings, and the meaning of the name and the person cannot be separated. This is especially true of heaven-sent names like Ishmael, "God hears" (Ge 16:11); Isaac, "He laughs" (Ge 17:19); and Immanuel, "God with us" (Is 7:14). The name John means* _____ *(God is gracious). Through John, God graciously prepares people for the Savior.*
   C. *The word "rejoice" in 1:14 is a word that makes a connection to the OT, especially the Psalms. In the following references in the Psalms "rejoicing" is connected with what act of God? (Ps. 5:9,11; 9:13-14; 13:5; 35:9-10; 51:10-12)?*

D. *In the OT, the leaders of God's people were Spirit-filled (e.g. Moses and elders [Num11:25-29]; Samson [Jud 13:25]; David [2Sam 23:2]; Elijah & Elisha [2Ki 2:9-16]; Ezekiel [Eze 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24]). John too was filled with the Holy Spirit (1:15).*

E. *John's purpose and message would be the same as all other prophets. His purpose and message was repentance, "bring back to the Lord their God" and "to turn the hearts" "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord".*

F. *Zechariah is confronted with unbelievable news that he will have a son and responds to the angel in a similar way as what OT figure?* Abraham

G. *The angel identifies himself as Gabriel. In the book of Daniel, Gabriel is also mentioned (8:16; 9:21). In both accounts, Gabriel appears at the hour of prayer, the hour of the evening sacrifice, the burning of incense (Daniel 9:21; Luke 1:10). Both Daniel and Zechariah react with fear and trembling (Dan 10:7-11; Lk 1:12). In both accounts (Dan 9:20-22; Lk 1:19), Gabriel speaks in similar ways: "I have now come to give you insight and understanding" and "I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news".*

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