## God's Promises Never Change

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   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" or "The Lord has shown favor"). Through John, God graciously prepares people for the Savior.*
   C. *See Malachi 4:5-6 & Luke 1:16-17. Note the word "turn." It is what repentance is all about. The OT prophet's primary job was to turn the people of God back to the Lord.*
   D. *John is described as a "Nazarite." This was an ascetic lifestyle, refraining from cutting of hair and drinking of alcohol. It marked someone as being in service to the Lord, similar to Samson (Judges 13:4-7) and Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11).*
   E. *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)?*
   F. *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).*
   G. *John's purpose and message would be the same as all other prophets. His purpose and message was repentance. Note: "bring back to the Lord their God" and "to turn the hearts" "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord".*
   H. *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*
   I. *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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2. When we think about greatness, popular culture often defines it by wealth, power, fame, and personal achievement. But Luke is showing us how God brings His kingdom in an upside down way compared to the world's expectations. Consider John the Baptist—by conventional standards, he wouldn't qualify as "great." Despite being born to parents from the Levitical priestly line, he didn't enjoy wealth or influence. Instead, as a teenager, he chose a life of solitude in the wilderness, dressing in rough garments and living off locusts and honey. His unconventional lifestyle and fiery message did not align with the societal norms of his time, and the powerful and influential viewed him as peculiar rather than significant.

   John's ministry was short-lived, we never hear of him performing any miracles, and his life ended tragically at the hands of a petty king. He did not establish a lasting organization or movement and faced significant opposition from religious authorities. Such has not the makings of a wildly successful man. Yet, in stark contrast to this, the angel Gabriel proclaims, "He will be great before the Lord" (Luke 1:15). In fact, from a biblical perspective, John was not just noteworthy; he was regarded as the greatest prophet and the most righteous man ever born, second only to our Lord, Jesus Christ Himself. See Luke 7:18-30. Given our limited knowledge of John the Baptist's life and his relatively brief time in the spotlight, what set him apart?

   John's greatness derived from his steadfast faith in God's promise to send the Savior. He had a profound impact on many lives and was pivotal in salvation history by directing people's attention to Jesus. Unlike figures such as Moses, Samson, Samuel, and Elijah, John never wavered in his commitment to his mission. Some might interpret John's inquiry—through his disciples—about whether Jesus was "the one" as a sign of doubt regarding Jesus' identity as the Messiah. However, neither Luke (chapter 7) nor Matthew (chapter 11) explicitly suggest that John's question stemmed from doubt. Instead, it appears that John was seeking a clear affirmation from Jesus about His identity, likely to strengthen the faith of others.

   Jesus acknowledged John's exceptional role, calling him the greatest prophet. However, He also stated that any Christian holds equal greatness because we possess the same Holy Spirit and a direct connection to Christ that John had. This means we have the capacity to do everything John did: we can point others to Jesus.

   John's job was to turn the hearts of the Children of Israel back to God. Apparently, many did not believe. Today many are baptized into the family of God but that doesn't mean they grow up in the family of God. Many today need their hearts turned back to God and to be reminded who their Father is!

## Another Baby on the Way!

3. Let's take a look at Luke 1:26-27. What insights can we gather about Mary from this passage? Who was she, and what relationships or connections does she have? What characteristics or qualities do you think made her God's chosen one?

   ✞ In the simplest terms, Mary is an ordinary person with no special significance. She is the epitome of God building His kingdom in this world in an upside-down way. This reflects what is often

termed the "_____" scandal of particularity—how God makes choices that don't always make sense to us and are based solely on His grace, without any merit or worthiness in us. For example, God chose Abraham in Genesis 12, and David was chosen over his seven older brothers in 1 Samuel 16. These instances illustrate that it's all by grace.

- However, it's fascinating to note that Mary is related to Elizabeth, who hails from the lineage of Aaron, the older brother of Moses and the first High Priest of Israel. This connection is significant because Mary is chosen to be the mother of the true High Priest—Jesus—who will open the way for us to access the Holy God.

  Hebrews 6:19 beautifully captures this hope, stating, *"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf."* Additionally, Hebrews 10:20 tells us that Jesus has provided "*a new and living way which he has consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh."*

  Furthermore, because Joseph—Jesus' adopted father—is from the line of David, Jesus embodies both kingship and priesthood. This remarkable lineage highlights the divine design in His identity, bridging the roles of king and priest in a way that fulfills God's promise and brings us closer to Him.

- Additionally, Mary just so happens to be a virgin! In Isaiah 7:14, we read: *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."* This verse is familiar to many of us, especially around Christmas time. However, its significance reaches back over 700 years before the birth of Jesus! Luke again takes us back to the Old Testament.

  At that time, King Ahaz was the ruler of Judah, and he found himself in a precarious situation. He feared that a powerful alliance between Israel and Syria might lead to the destruction of Judah. In a bid to protect his kingdom, Ahaz was even considering an alliance with Assyria as a form of insurance.

  But God had a different plan. He sent the prophet Isaiah to remind Ahaz of His steadfast promises to be with His people. In fact, God invites Ahaz to ask for any sign—no matter how incredible—and God would grant it to demonstrate His faithfulness. Surprisingly, Ahaz turns down the offer, refusing to ask for a sign, preferring Assyria's protection. So, God decided to give Ahaz a sign anyway!

  The sign that God provided is found in Isaiah 7:14: a virgin would conceive and bear a son, and this son would be called Immanuel, meaning "God with us." This prophecy was much more than just a message to King Ahaz; it pointed toward the ultimate act of salvation. It shows how God would become one of us, entering the world in a humble and miraculous way—born of a woman!

  In the immediate context of Isaiah's prophecy, it's essential to consider that there would have been a young woman known to Ahaz who would soon have given birth to a child. This child's birth would have served as a tangible sign of God's presence and reassurance to Ahaz. In the preceding verses, Isaiah makes a profound statement: before this child is old enough to discern

between right and wrong, God would demonstrate to Ahaz that he could confidently abandon any reliance on Assyria for protection. Ahaz unfortunately doesn't learn his lesson and his choice to ally with Assyria, later will lead to Assyria invading Judah. (2 Kings 18:13, 2 Chronicles 32:1, and Isaiah 36:1).

But Isaiah 7:14 isn't just a localized promise; it was a sneak peek into a much grander narrative! Isaiah 7:14 serves as a pivotal point in Scripture, this sign becomes THE SIGN! It is the ultimate sign pointing ahead to a far more significant truth—the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. The verse resonates across centuries, unveiling a divine plan that encompasses all of humanity.

In the face of uncertainty, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by worldly fears and pressures. We often seek refuge in temporary solutions, just as Ahaz contemplated turning to Assyria. But the beauty of Isaiah's prophecy reminds us that we don't need to place our trust in anything worldly or fleeting. Instead, we are invited to rest in the promise of "God with us."

This prophetic declaration isn't merely historical; it's a heartfelt invitation to recognize that God Himself desires to be intimately involved in our lives. In the person of Jesus, we see that God stepped into our broken world—He became Emmanuel, God with us.

- Also, God's choice of Mary echoes back to a significant moment in the Bible known as the "Protoevangelium," found in Genesis 3:15. In this verse, God reveals a powerful promise: there will be enmity between the serpent and the woman, and the woman's "seed" will ultimately triumph over evil. This remarkable prophecy points to a future deliverer who would be born of a woman only! One who would defeat the hold that sin and darkness has upon mankind.

  When we think about this promise, it becomes clear that there is only one person in all of history who fulfills this role in the most literal sense—Jesus Christ. He was born of a woman, truly and miraculously from her "seed." This is most certainly the fullest sense of what Paul says in Galatians 4:4-5 – "But when the fullness of time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons.

  This connection underscores the incredible significance of Mary's role in God's grand plan of salvation. Through her, God brought forth the Savior, who would conquer sin and evil once and for all. It's a beautiful reminder of God's faithfulness and the miraculous ways He works through ordinary people to accomplish His extraordinary purposes!

- Finally, throughout Scripture, Israel is often depicted as a woman, referred to as the "daughter of Zion." The prophets illustrate Israel as God's unfaithful wife, yet God remains steadfast in His promise to reclaim her. Importantly, God foretold that the Messiah would emerge from Israel, making Mary the new "daughter of Zion" through whom God brings forth His Son.

  This marriage imagery continues in the Gospels, where Christ is portrayed as the bridegroom and the Church as His bride. In this context, Jesus, God incarnate, comes to reclaim His beloved bride—the Church, which awaits Him (as seen in the parable of the ten virgins in Luke 25:1-13). This emphasizes Mary's virginity and her role as a reflection of the Church, the pure bride of Christ.

The New Testament reinforces this analogy further. Revelation 12 depicts a woman who gives birth to a Son destined to rule all nations (12:5). After His ascension, she, like the Church, faces attacks from the devil, along with her children—all Christians (12:17). Thus, Mary is not only the mother of God's Son but also symbolizes the nurturing church, which "mother's" all believers.

4 Read Luke 1:28. What does Gabriel mean when he says, *"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"?*

Since the seventh century, the Roman Catholic Church has maintained the belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, officially recognized as doctrine in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. This doctrine asserts that Mary was conceived without the "stain" of original sin, a condition that affects all humans due to the fall of Adam and Eve. According to this belief, she received divine grace from the moment of her conception and lived a life completely free from personal sin.

Though this belief is deeply entrenched in Catholic tradition, it is important to note that it is not explicitly stated in the Bible. Yet, proponents of this doctrine often cite Gabriel's greeting in Luke 1:28, particularly the phrase in the Latin Vulgate that reads "Hail, Mary, full of grace." The original Greek word, kecharitōmenē, means "full of grace" or "highly favored." But the perfect tense of this word implies that this grace is a completed action with lasting significance.

✞ Why do we reject the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, and how can Mary be considered "full of grace" while still being subject to the original sin that all humans inherit?

✞ Also, what errors does the belief in Mary's Immaculate Conception create concerning the broader understanding of sin and the need for salvation in Christianity?

Rome's interpretation can be misleading. While the term does imply that Mary was graced by God, it fails to support the notion that she was exempt from original sin. The very concept of original sin is rooted in the need for salvation, a need that the Church asserts applies to all humanity—including Mary herself.

Furthermore, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception undermines the fundamental Christian belief in the universality of sin and the redemptive work of Christ. If Mary were truly without sin, how can we justify the necessity of Christ's sacrifice? The idea of Mary as a sinless vessel not only distorts the biblical narrative but also raises theological inconsistencies that question the integrity of the Catholic Church's teachings. Ultimately, the belief in the Immaculate Conception seems more like an attempt to elevate Mary to an unreachable status than a genuine reflection of the biblical message about salvation and the human condition.

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