

The Rescuing Love of God

Luke 1:5-25

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A few years ago, we had the privilege of going to San Diego, California. The beaches there are beautiful and crowded. They are also well guarded. Every 50-75 meters, there was a lifeguard station. Each one had a lifeguard watching over the people. Now think about that title – life guard – a person who guards the lives of others. That’s a pretty high calling. These life guard stations were equipped with loud speakers and all kinds of saving equipment. Whenever people went too far out in the water or acted in ways that endangered others, you would hear the lifeguard’s voice over the loud speaker: “Please come in closer to the beach. Surfers to the right of the rope; swimmers to the left.” Or “Shark! Octopus! Giant Squid! Seals!” Then occasionally, if they saw people in trouble, they would rush out of their station and jump into the water to rescue them.

The life guard’s responsibility to guard and save lives reminds me of God. He pronounces warnings so people know they are in danger. He constantly intervenes to help those in trouble. He saves lives.

But sometimes people, like us, think we don’t need God’s rescue. We are like the people on the beach totally unaware of the tides and undercurrents. We may not know of a shark or a monster wave coming toward us. So we swim and go on with life as if the lifeguard shouldn’t be listened to or doesn’t even exist. Or we can get complacent and let ourselves drift into danger zones. We act like we know better than the life guard how far we can go out into the ocean. We can ignore warnings and keep paddling out further until we might get carried away.

If you’re a Christian here today, God has already done a rescuing work in your life. He has brought you into His family and forgive you from sin’s penalty. But we can think that once we’re saved, we don’t need any more saving or God’s guarding over our lives. Certainly we must cherish being saved from the penalty of sin. But we also need saving from the power of sin. We need this saving throughout our lives. We need the Holy Spirit to overcome the sins in our lives. We need saving from tough situations and complex problems that seem to have no way out.

And sometimes we need saving or rescuing from our unbelief. Maybe we have prayed for God to rescue a friend or loved one. But they are still lost. So we begin to conclude God is done His rescuing work in our or other’s lives. But I’m here today to tell you this friends. God intentionally works to rescue people. God has never stopped saving and rescuing people. We just don’t see the steps He’s working on towards the next rescue.

Today, we get to examine this reality in a less familiar part of the Christmas story. God will reveal a major step forward in His rescuing work. Yet the person who hears this news responds in a less than receptive way. We're going to see what happens. And then we'll consider how we might need to change so we'll be ready the next time God brings rescue into our lives.

Luke 1:5-25 (ESV) (Page 721)

⁵In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

⁸Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

¹⁸And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²²And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. ²³And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵"Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

This account centers on a priest named Zechariah from the division of Abijah. The priests were divided into 24 groups and across the country throughout the year ministered in their communities. But twice a year, a division of priests went to Jerusalem to serve in the temple. So they would have to travel there. Priests were allowed to marry in

the Jewish tradition. You had to marry an Israelite. But if you could marry a daughter of priests, you were considered especially blessed. Zechariah marries Elizabeth called a daughter of Aaron who was Israel's first high priest.

Verse 6 tells us that this couple lived righteously before God and walked blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. That sounds like perfection. But this phrasing shows us this couple carefully observed God's laws. They sincerely walked with God. So they weren't sinless. But when they did sin, it troubled them and they would quickly move to reconcile with God.

But then comes verse 7. "But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years." Why does Luke talk about them like this? Why didn't he just write "They had no children because they couldn't have children?" He writes "but they had no child." That implies some sort of contrast or some problem. And in 1st century Judaism, childlessness was a problem. Or many concluded that you had a problem if you were childless. Many thought not having children meant a lack of God's blessing. God blessed faithful servants with children. So imagine the whispers and even scorn they had to bear. "O Zechariah's a priest and Elizabeth comes from a priest's family. But they don't have children. So they must be hiding something. They must have some skeleton in their closet they need to confess." But Luke has already answered this question that there was no skeleton or skin in verse 6. "They were righteous before God, walking blamelessly." Their childless state could not have been because of sin in their lives.

So we have Zechariah and Elizabeth, an older, childless priestly couple. The time came for Zechariah's division to go on duty at Jerusalem. Every morning and evening, a priest had to go into the temple to present the incense offering. This table of incense stood right outside the Holy of Holies. The incense symbolized the prayers of God's people going up to Him. Since there were more priests than opportunities to offer incense, they threw lots or stones to decide who got the privilege. Maybe each priest choose a unique stone. And if his stone fell into the right place, he was chosen to offer the incense. Well Zechariah's stone or lot gets selected. Likely you only got to do this once in your lifetime if at all. So this would be a highlight of his life.

But in verse 11, Zechariah's special moment in the temple becomes a supreme moment. Luke tells us "there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense." So an angel appears before Zechariah.

Now for some of you, this is when you tune out. You might have concluded there's no such creature as an angel. For some, an angel story belongs in the realm of myth or fairy tale. It might inspire people but it's not real. Some of you might lean in that direction. You might live by trusting only what science can verify. Since you can't verify angels, this story doesn't deserve the label of a historical account in any form.

But we need to think carefully about whether science is equipped to evaluate this account. I was listening to an interview with a man named Ian Hutchinson. He is a plasma physicist and professor in nuclear science and engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or MIT. He wrote a book entitled "Can a scientist believe in miracles?" He said that when most people talk about science, they mean natural science. It is based on reproducible experiments and observations. This science aims to discover how nature behaves in the normal course of events. But miracles or angels are outside the normal course of nature. Science can say something about miracles or unusual events. It can show that some supposed miracles can actually be reproduced. Or it may expose some sort of trickery going on.

But if some unique event happens that everyone agrees is not part of the reproducible core of nature, the question becomes how does science evaluate that? How do we investigate that scientifically? How do we test if the angel Gabriel really did show up in the temple that day? He then says, "If science does not find defeating evidence like an ability to reproduce the event or the exposure of some sort of trickery, then science is poorly equipped to answer whether or not there are miracles in general

So let's apply this test in this account. Luke claims that an angel appeared before Zechariah in verse 11. Did Luke just make that up to start off his gospel with a bang? Or maybe Zechariah was lying? But look up at verse 1-4 of chapter 1. "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." Does that sound like someone who has just come up with a wild idea for a fairy tale? He talks of other narratives, eyewitnesses, delivered communication and an orderly account. So what Luke writes has passed his investigative standards. The people he talked to agreed that this unique event happened.

We get further reinforcement for the likelihood of this unique event actually happening by Zechariah's initial response to the angel. Verse 12 – "And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him." So Zechariah reacts like this is a very unusual moment. He is troubled and afraid. He does not think it's another priest who slipped in beside him. He does not think it's just a shadow. He sees this figure and recognizes it is someone totally unfamiliar.

The angel senses Zechariah's fear. So he says "Do not be afraid Zechariah, for your prayer has been answered." Commentators speculate quite a bit about what prayer the angel referred to. Zechariah and Elizabeth likely prayed many times for a child. But would Zechariah, offer a personal self-centered prayer when he was there to represent the whole nation's prayers before the Lord. I think it's more likely that he prayed for the redemption of their people. They were defeated, occupied and a foreign ruler over them. They weren't free. So it could be that Zechariah offered this prayer for the redemption of Israel before the Lord.

But then the angel answers "your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John." Well how could that be an answer to a prayer for the redemption of Israel? This child would be part of God's rescue plan. Verse 14 – "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." So yes, Zechariah and Elizabeth will experience joy. But many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great before the Lord." So this child will bring widespread joy.

"And," verse 15, "he must not drink wine or strong drink and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb." So this child must not fall under the influence of wine or strong drink. But he will be under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Notice when this will happen in this child's life. "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb." So we could conclude this means at the moment of birth. But further down in the story, we discover this filling took place before birth. Elizabeth is a relative of Mary who will be the mother of Jesus. After the angel appears to Mary, she goes to visit Elizabeth. When Mary calls out to Elizabeth in greeting in Luke 1:41, the baby in Elizabeth leaps for joy. Now this implies there is some sort of supernatural infilling of this baby to recognize the voice of a stranger when it hears it. So suddenly back in the temple with Zechariah, the angel has elevated the child to one chosen by God for a very special work. This child will somehow have the Holy Spirit while still in the womb.

The angel then expands on the vast influence of this child. Verse 16- "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God." Now think about what this statement implies. The children of Israel were by definition,

the people of God. Yet they needed to be turned to God? That must mean they had turned from God. Maybe they were following the religious practices but had not turned their hearts towards the Lord. People can be religious yet not have a heart for the Lord. The word “turn” became the term for Christian conversion. These supposed people of God needed to be turned to God.

Then verse 17 – “And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children.” Now any religious Jew who knew their Scriptures would be going “whoa, whoa, whoa,” at the first half of 17. Elijah? Turn the hearts of fathers to the children? Those words come quite directly from the last prophets of the Old Testament. The prophet Malachi, who spoke 400 years before Jesus’ time declared “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

Now the angel says this child will go forward in the spirit and power of Elijah and will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. So the angel announces the child will fulfill this prophecy. What does it mean to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children? It could mean a restoration of family relationships. It could mean a time of great repentance by the children so that the fathers turn towards the children who have returned. It could mean the children receive the new work of God and the fathers then also turn. Or it could mean that the fathers of the nation turn their hearts to see people made ready for the Lord. But this child will minister with great power that will cause a turning of hearts.

We don’t know the origin of the second phrase of “the disobedient to the wisdom of the just” comes from. But here again is a heart change. The disobedient will somehow turn towards the wisdom of the just. All this will result in the end of verse 17 – to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” The people somehow needed to be prepared to meet the Lord.

Did this people believe the Lord had abandoned them? Had they given up; had they slid into comfortable conformity with the way others lived who did not walk with the Lord? Were they ignoring their lifeguard’s warnings? Had they drifted so far they didn’t even hear it anymore? They seemed to need preparation and awakening to this fresh movement of God. This child who would be called John the Baptist, often called for repentance – to turn back towards God with an attitude of receptivity and openness.

So the angel announces all of this to Zechariah in the temple. In verse 18, Zechariah responds. This is a lot to take in. He's seen an angel which troubled and scared him. He's heard that he and his wife will have a son though they are both beyond child bearing years. And this son will be the fulfillment of the last verses of their Scriptures. That's a lot of pressure.

So he says, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." That seems like a pretty reasonable question, doesn't it? Humanly, this is impossible. In fact, in just a few verses, Mary will ask the same angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Yet by the angel's response and words, we learn that Zechariah's question comes from a heart of unbelief while Mary's question comes from a heart of not understanding.

It seems Zechariah asked for a sign to confirm the angel's words. The angel responds with a breath taking list of his credentials. "How shall you know this will happen Zechariah?" Verse 19. "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news." And if the angel stopped there, I wonder if Zechariah would have been satisfied. Yet here is a God-fearing upright priest who doubts God's Word. It kind of shouts out a warning to those of us who have walked with God for decades. Beware lest we think we're above allowing disbelief to creep into our hearts.

I wonder if that's what happened to Zechariah. Maybe he had kind of settled into a comfortable walk with God? Yes life was hard. But he and Elizabeth were faithful and carried their duties with a servant heart. And they knew how life worked. So Zechariah tells the angel why this wouldn't work as if the angel that stood in God's presence didn't know? God arrives to announce a new work and Zechariah's immediate response is disbelief? It warns me to guard against thinking I have God all figured out and I know what can and can't happen or what needs to and doesn't need to happen. It causes me to wonder how receptive I am to a new word of God.

Yet Zechariah's plea is answered in a way. He does get a sign. Verse 20 – "And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." Now that's quite a sign. Can you imagine not speaking for more than 9 months? Yet think about the richness of his thought and pondering. Think about how much he would reflect on his life and faith. Then upon the child's birth with the Lord's word fulfilled, he will speak again.

So all this happens in the temple while Zechariah offers this incense. Remember a multitude outside in prayer. So in verse 21 “the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.” Maybe it was a day’s journey. Soon Elizabeth is pregnant. The Lord’s rescuing word is fulfilled and takes another step forward.

Then Elizabeth goes into seclusion for 5 months. Why? Why not tell everyone that God has visited them with blessing? Some think she wanted to engage in intense worship or to prepare for something she never thought would happen. But maybe the real reason is contained in her words in verse 25. “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among the people.” Remember the common belief that if you didn’t have children, it was because God didn’t bless you? Some people can’t help but make those cutting comments. Then maybe Elizabeth became pregnant and dared to tell a couple of people. Maybe they responded with the same scorn. “You’re going to have a baby Elizabeth with that nearly dead dog Zechariah. How delusional.” But if you’re 5 months pregnant and go out in public, you don’t have to say anything. You don’t have to defend the claim of pregnancy. The account finishes.

So what have we seen? **God is always at His rescuing work.** He worked in and through Zechariah and Elizabeth’s lives to bring them to this point. He kept a faithful remnant of Israelites going in anticipation of the Messiah. He continues to work in our lives even though we might not be aware of it. He sometimes only reveals His work just before it comes to fruition. So how might we need to change so we are more prepared for God’s next work among us?

Repent and Receive Christ’s rescue. Some of you need to do this for the first time. Repent of living and pursuing life apart from Christ. Instead of trusting yourself or trusting the way of life you see your friends running with, you trust Christ. You turn your heart towards Him and put your trust on Him. We humans can do nothing to reconcile the rebellion we’ve committed against God. But through Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for us on the cross, we can receive God’s rescue. So we must look in faith outside of yourself to Christ and his cross as the sole ground of forgiveness and hope.¹ If that is you today, I would like to invite you just slip up your hand for a moment so that I can see it and I will lead you in a prayer turning to Christ.

¹ Sam Storms; Packer on the Christian Life, Wheaton, Ill., Crossway, 39.

Maybe we need to **Admit and Affirm**. We may need to admit our impatience towards God's rescuing work in our lives or the life of someone close to us. We may need to admit that we have allowed disbelief to creep into our hearts that God can save or rescue people around us. Then we need to affirm that God's timing is beautiful. And that God can do far more than we think or imagine.

We all need to **Promote and Participate** in God's rescuing work. We promote it by listening to people's stories and their problems. Then we promote the hope we have found in Christ that reorders the messes of life. Or we promote the good news that God has come to turn the hearts of the father to their children and to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

We need to seek His leading to share this saving work with others around us. Participate in God's rescuing work. Go where He calls you to go. Speak where He wants you to speak. Reach out to those He wants you to reach out to. Pray fervently for those you know don't know Him. Speak up about the hope that is found in Christ. Ask the Spirit to make us ready for the next part of the Lord's work in us. God is always at His rescuing work. So we must receive it, wait for it and join Him in it.