

Part 6: A Promise for the Present

Stephen Kasun | Luke 1:57-80

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I love theme parks. Since I was a kid I've loved roller coasters and thrill rides. As long as I'm strapped in and relatively safe. One of my favorite things about living in southern California was being close to Six Flags Magic Mountain. It is one of the best roller coaster parks in the world. And our apartment was like an hour from this magical place.

But there is one aspect of that wonderful place that everyone dreads. If you've ever been to a popular amusement park, or Disneyland or Disney world, you've experienced the horror of a long. Perhaps like nowhere else on earth, except maybe the dmV sometimes, the wait at an amusement park lasts forever. But when you finally get there, to your seat, it feels worth it...until that 50 seconds is over, and you realize you just spent two hours waiting for a 50 second thrill.

Whether its lines at theme parks, que's at dmV's, or doctors office waiting rooms, when it's all said and done the wait rarely seems worth the effort. Our text this morning is all about waiting. Waiting in anticipation, waiting with dread, waiting with hope and without. We are going to spend our time this morning closing out Luke 1.

In our text this morning we are going to see the culmination of Zachariah and Israel's silent waiting on the Lord. And unlike a theme park that leaves you dissatisfied, longing for more, and questioning the value of such an endeavor, the waiting we are going to see this morning produces something beautiful and glorious. The reason our waiting this morning is different, is because it is a waiting grounded in the hope of the promises of God.

What we are going to see this morning is **The Promises of God are worth waiting for**. We are going to see this in three parts. **1. Waiting on God's Promise, 2. Worship in God's Promise, 3. Witness to God's Promise.**

The text we are in this week is the birth of a child promised. Appropriately, in light of the coming Christmas celebration of Jesus' birth, we are looking at the birth of the one who would prepare the way for Jesus. This morning our narrative is centered on the birth of John the Baptist and primarily his father Zachariah.

Pray

Look back with me to a couple of weeks ago, when we began our series in the book of Luke. **Luke 1:13**. Zachariah was a priest, serving the Lord by caring for and interceding for God's people. He was an old man, with a wife who was diagnosed as barren. Resigned to a fate of fatherlessness, Elizabeth being barren meant kids were not in the cards for them. Then an angel arrives while he is in the temple attending to his priestly duties, and tells him the impossible is going to happen. They are going to conceive and have a child.

Look at Zachariah's response to the angel Gabriel. **1:18-20**. Zachariah's disbelief and faithlessness inspired a consequence of muteness. The guy whose role it was to represent Israel's faith before God, stood faithless before God's very messenger. Appropriate then that the guy whose role it is to be a voice for God's people, lost his own. Zachariah becomes a mute, unable to speak. Yet a child still promised to him and his wife.

And so began their waiting. A promise from God delivered by an angel from the very presence of God, and now they wait. Elizabeth waits in anticipation for her belly to swell, and Zachariah waits in muted silence. **1. Waiting on God's Promise.**

It must have been agony for a priest, who was to communicate with God's people, and then go to God for those people. Where speaking was his very role, a role appointed to him by God. Waiting in agony for the day he could once again make utterances for himself and for God's people. Those months must've felt an eternity for him. Of course it was a consequence of his own faithless and disbelieving heart. But that certainly wouldn't diminish his frustration or struggle.

It would be a reasonable response, not a right one, but a reasonable one, for bitterness and anger to fester in his muted heart. As his wife is filled with the Holy Spirit and utters joy, as Mary sings the Magnificat and sings at the joy of a future child, here Zachariah sits, silently waiting. Unable to communicate. Unable to perform his duties as he would hope or expect. Just waiting.

Pick up the narrative with me in **Luke 1:57-58**. The birth of John. First notice the neighbors and family. The son is born and everyone is rejoicing with her. Undoubtedly all of these people would have been familiar with her struggles to have children her entire life and marriage. These communities were tightly knit and close. So when this miraculous moment arrives, where their fallenness is overcome by the power of God and this couple is blessed with a baby, of course there's a party.

This is, after all, a miracle. There is no medical therapy or fertility treatment. Pre-modern medicine, apart from a literal act of God they would remain childless. And an act of God is exactly what they got. And these God-fearing people, rejoiced with them.

But even after his birth we see yet more waiting. **Luke 1:59-63**. More waiting. Waiting to name the boy as the angel had instructed. Eight days they waited, eight more days Zachariah was silent. Everyone is experiencing this moment with all the happiness and joy to be expected with a child birth, and to be expected when God does the impossible. And here is Zachariah, still mute. Still silent. Still afflicted by the consequences of his disbelief.

So eight days pass, and it comes time to circumcise and name the boy. As they began to name him, there were expectations. Expectations that the boy's name be tied to his family. That his name somehow reflect the honor of his household. Perhaps his name should be Zachariah. Their friends and family were there in support and rejoicing with them, yet had their own ideas and expectations for the boy, starting with his name.

Elizabeth's response is a simple 'no'. His name shall be John. And then a moment of comedy. They all turn in response to the father Zachariah. His wife has declaratively given the boy a name, they don't

like it, they turn to Zachariah for support, signing to him, what he would call the baby. What's funny here is that Zachariah is mute...not deaf. So signs probably weren't totally necessary, the dude could still hear.

He writes for them the phrase, "His name is John." With conviction and purpose, as if it is already a reality, Zachariah writes on that stone tablet, "His name *is* John." Remember, the reason Zachariah is in the state he is, was due to his lack of faith and belief that God would do what he said he would do. His lack of faith that God would give a barren woman and an old man a child. And yet here we are, Zachariah's faith is as certain as his muteness. To him, John's name isn't a decision to make or matter of debate. The reality already is unshakable. "His name *is* John."

This is what is so fascinating, and I think important, about this part of our text this morning. The last time Zachariah was able to speak he was doubting, questioning, disbelieving an angel. How often is it we get an angel making us promises from God himself? I'd tend to believe those. Not the priest Zachariah. Yet nine months later his faith is so unshakably strong, for him, John's name is already a reality because God has declared it so.

So for Zachariah, this period of waiting in silence produced faith. It was in the silence that Zachariah's faith in the Lord was strengthened not weakened. It was in the suffering of muteness that his belief became an internal reality. It was an affliction that provoked Zachariah to return to the well of Lord in faithful belief.

Could you imagine too, this is eight days after the birth. I'm sure he expected his voice back after the birth at least. And yet for those eight days he remained mute. It must've been excruciating for him, perhaps expecting his voice back, only to be left waiting still.

Waiting is hard. It's often in the waiting we find our faith wavers. When moments in life seem uncertain, expectations are left unsatisfied, where God's promise of joy, peace, satisfaction, and hope remain a future promise, but far from a present reality. There are a millions of circumstances in which we find ourselves waiting on the Lord.

Sometimes it's maturity. Growing out of the sin that binds our flesh. Struggling constantly to put off the temptations our hearts are drawn to. For me it's selfishness. Every day I wake up and have to wrestle, what feels like physically wrestling with my own heart to look to the good of others and not myself. Every hour of every day my heart is pulled to serve itself and not my wife, or my children, or neighbors, or my church. And I have to confess, my waiting looks a lot less like Zachariah's than I'd like it too.

Maybe you're waiting on circumstances outside of your control. Someone else to come to their senses. Maybe a milestone in your career or life that you've been hoping for or expecting. But even beyond literally waiting, this waiting can just be periods or seasons of struggle and suffering. An illness that is gripping your body and mind and won't let go.

There is an appropriate posture in those moments. And by the grace of God, Zachariah was given this period of silence to examine his heart and land at faithful certainty rather than the doubt he first

displays. At the end of his silence, Zachariah arrives with a certain faith, an unshakable conviction that promises of the Lord are already a reality. In his waiting, Zachariah's faith grows.

Jonny talked about this a while back in his sermon on 3 John, but waiting isn't passive. The only way Zachariah arrives at this kind of conviction and exuberant worship, is by intentionally pressing his heart into the promises of the Lord. That's pressing into promises is what we see in Zachariah's worship in our second point this morning.

Zachariah's waiting produces faith. A stronger faith on the heels of doubt. But it also produced a worship. **2. Worship in God's Promise** Bottled up inside a mute shell for so long, what comes out once the waiting is over is entirely directed at the wonder, beauty and faithfulness of God.

Luke 1:64. Immediately after his declaration in faith, his lips are opened. And the first words he utters are blessings and praise to the Lord. There was no bitterness or frustration with God that he would make Zachariah suffer like this, or struggle like this, or live in an unexpected way, no! He would open his mouth after such a trial and bless the Lord. Worship him for the gift he would give to such a faithless man. Praise him for the underserved grace of a child he could not himself produce.

I think of this song, like one of those wind up cars. Those ones that you pull the wheels backwards until it starts to click, and then the tension in the building releases and it sprints off across the floor.

Unable to utter words of worship and praise until this moment, we are given a Holy Spirit filled song of worship. A song that's been building since the moment the Lord took away his voice. An overflowing blessing from the mouth of Zachariah. **Luke 1:67-79.**

With this we skip over verses 65-66 because I believe this the blessing that Zachariah speaks in verse 64. It is the blessing that the people are going to respond to as we arrive at the end of our narrative.

What a beautiful song it is. If we break down this worship into two parts we see half of it referring to the larger promise of God in Jesus, and the second half referring to John's role in preparing the way for that promise. And it is with the first half, his first words, where he ruminates on the larger promises of God in redemption.

He mentions Israel, he mentions David, he mentions Abraham, he mentions the prophets of old, he talks about the promise and covenant God made to his people to redeem them. It's the second half that he talks about his own son. This first half is the horn of salvation, in the house of David, the redeemer promised.

What is first is often what is most important. And we can assume that with the first words he has spoken in nearly a year, was what was closest to Zachariah's heart. And that was the long promised fulfillment of God's saviour.

Notice though the tense of his opening lines! **Luke 1:68-69.** Zachariah has the same unshakable faith that what God says he will do will be done. To him the prophets of old didn't speak of mere a possibility, the promises to David and Abraham were not platitudes meant to comfort the ailing soul,

but present realities to be cherished and believed. Just as he wrote, His name *is* John, he speaks of the coming messiah as an already a present reality.

Almost as if a correction to his earlier lack of faith, he will not make the same mistake again. He will not question the declarations and promises of God. To him, reality is God's to dictate, and as the son of God resides in Mary's womb, the horn of salvation has already arrived.

This Jesus will be the fulfillment of the covenants God made to his people. To David he promised a rule and kingdom that would never end. From his line would come a ruler who would last forever, **2 Samuel 7:12-13**. And to Abraham, God promised he would bless the families of the world through Abraham's offspring, **Genesis 12:1-3**. The most remembered words from the mouths of prophets in the OT are probably those spoken in Isaiah 53, where God promises that the seed of Abraham, from the line of David, will bring peace and redemption through his own suffering and blood, **Isaiah 53:4-6**.

It is these past promises that inspire a present worship. He is overflowing with praise based on promises and covenants made centuries and millennia ago. Fueling his worship is certainty in the present fulfillment of the words spoken by the prophets of old. In his very household. Through his wife – the one who will prepare the way, and through their relative Mary – the one who is The Way.

It is on the promise of the gospel that Zachariah placed his hope. In his waiting. In his suffering and muteness, his present joy wasn't shaped by the suffering of his circumstances, but by the certainty of God's promises. And it's that certain hope that demands an overflow of worship that cannot be contained.

It would've been easy for Zachariah to praise the Lord for relief from his affliction. It would've been appropriate. But his suffering isn't what he needs delivering from. His muteness and silence wasn't his true affliction.

Look at what they are being delivered from. The problem that the promises answer. **Luke 1:70-71, 73-74**. It is from their enemies they are being delivered. For nearly their entire history, the nation of Israel has been fighting to survive. From Egypt to Babylon to Rome, they have been the subject of abuse and occupation.

Undoubtedly in the minds of those hearing this song, what was provoked in their hearts and minds was deliverance from their present circumstances. Their occupation by Rome and any other people that rule over them and deny them their identity as the people of God. The expectation of a saviour was one that would overthrow their enemies and reestablish rule by God through his appointed monarch and the law of Moses. For so many, the past promises are only fulfilled in temporal and immediate deliverance.

We can find ourselves in that same mindset. We like to think we are special. We have the internet, smartphones, electric cars, virtual reality, worldwide connectivity through social media, apparently I found out this week, real flying cars. Too often I think we blame our present circumstances for our struggles to worship and obey. The need for immediate gratification may certainly be exacerbated by

having the world at our fingertips, but as you'll see reading any of the four gospels, the need and demand for immediate deliverance is an expectation of the flesh, thrust upon Jesus by the ancient world as much as it is by us.

And yet that doesn't make our temptation to think that way any less harmful. Perhaps you aren't a believer, and you look around you, and what you see are buttoned up, happy, contented lives of religious people with little suffering to get in the way of their life. And in evangelical culture, that is certainly a facade painted on the faces of many that call themselves Christian. We hide our struggles, we hide our suffering, we hide our doubt, we hide our pain, that none might think us unworthy or unbelieving.

It is both inside of and outside of his suffering that Zachariah cherished the promises of the Lord. Cherishing these promises means not ignoring the need for those promises. The need for deliverance. The need for saving from our true enemy. The moment we hide our need is the moment we tell ourselves and those around us that we don't need saving.

We need Jesus. We need help. And the first place that Zachariah goes when he receives it, are the promises of his saviour. In the waiting, in the long night of darkness, uncertainty, sin, and suffering, we are not without hope for today.

These past promises shape how we experience the waiting, because these past promises offer a certain hope. And that hope is not just eternity. Sometimes it can feel disingenuous when we are offered eternity as a hope for our present sufferings.

When you've faced disaster, or heartache, or pain, or suffering that you can barely understand much less describe, and the only hope offered is eternity, it can feel hollow. Oh you lost your job? You didn't get into the school you wanted? Somebody hurt you? Well just think of eternity! Guaranteed unemployment rate of 0% No sin to be hurt by!

Now two things, first, that is a very real hope, and one that lasts. **Romans 8:18**. Not even worth being compared. Eternity is very real, and the joy is very eternal. We mustn't let our sinful pessimism or selfish demand for immediacy cast a shadow on a very real and beautiful hope that God promises his people.

And yet, there is truth to the hollowness of that feeling, when the *only* hope offered is eternity. Because it's not! God offers his people a life without fear lived in the mercy of God. **Luke 1:72-75**. Notice again the tenses of this whole song. It's a present reality and a present hope. All our days aren't just the days after we die. It's the days now, right here today, tomorrow and next week!

So often a missing piece in our understanding of God's promises, is what it means for our hope now. Yes life is messy, yes waiting is hard, especially when it doesn't seem like anyone else is waiting like you are, but promised in your waiting is faith, hope and purpose. Like Zachariah, our seasons of waiting are an opportunity to be wound up like a toy car, ready to explode in joyous praise as our hearts and minds become clear. As we wade through suffering and as we emerge from trial there is a joy in walking in faithful consideration of his word.

When things are hard, the last thing we want to do is think about our holiness and righteousness. But our holiness and righteousness are the joy. The answer to Israel's deliverance from the hand of their enemies is serving him without fear, in holiness and righteousness all our days. Because their true enemy isn't Rome. Their true enemy is the sin of their flesh and the temptation of their depravity.

This is all only confirmed by the message that John himself will bring. The message of John was probably loaded with as much expectation as the coming messiah was. The people likely expected a herald to proclaim the dominant and conquering coming of God's deliverer. And what they got was **Luke 1:76-77**.

John's preparation is laying the soft soil to examine your own heart. Consider your sin and your need for forgiveness. Think on your own weaknesses and sin, not the oppression of your enemies or circumstances. The message is for those, who like Zachariah, wait in the long night. **Luke 1:78-79**.

Hope is offered to those who sit in darkness with no light of hope. The message of the gospel is for those who have nothing but the eternal night, who have been waiting without potential. And the hope isn't material. It wasn't material for Israel, and it isn't for us. And what a pleasure when we get that.

What an inspiration when hope lasts and isn't shattered by the fog of our present circumstances. What freedom is there when our emotions are not bound to the darkness of our suffering and waiting! How much more brightly do the promises of God shine when it is in the midst of the darkness and waiting that we hold even stronger him.

Elizabeth and Zachariah's neighbors were floored when Zachariah started speaking, blessing God, and worshiping by the very words of the Holy Spirit. Understandably there was shock, amazement, and certainly a demand that they pay attention to what was happening. **3. The Witness of God's Promise.**

The message of the gospel, the message of forgiveness and repentance demand an audience, and demand a response. And these people respond. **Luke 1:64-66**. We see two responses by the people witnessing this moment. First we see the word spread to all the countries of Judea.

By the mouth of those present, the news of the song of Zachariah, and his sudden outpouring of praise post silence spread through the hills. After experiencing such a miracle, of course this would be on the lips of all. But more significant than the watercooler gossip, the news of the saviour and the message of John demands to be spoken and demands to be heard. The gospel demands an audience.

It is not enough to experience hope for ourselves, only to hoard it. When you've been given the joy of eternity, and the gift of present joy despite a present affliction, what selfishness to not share it. If the news of the gospel truly is the greatest news, if the promise of deliverance is really true, if the hope of the gospel is as solid a certainty as Zachariah would have us believe, then what else could we do but let that light shine before men.

The witness of God's promise is the word of his people. After Jesus rises from his death, he appears to thousands of human eyeballs. All of which go and tell it to their neighbors and families. Here, fame is

the mechanism of God's message going out to the world. To experience true redemption is to raise the horn of salvation wherever we go. Evangelising the good news that God forgives and offers redemption.

As all of us know, just pointing out the necessity of evangelism doesn't really get us to a place of comfort or conviction that would lead us to actually share the good news of the gospel. We often lack evangelism because we feel ill equipped for such a task. In one sense that's bunk. These people didn't have training in how to share the good news, it just came out of them. The news was so profound and shaping they just shared it.

But there is an element of not know what to say or how to say it. So come the new year, we are going to be doing a class on evangelism to help with our uncertainty. We'll go over the motivation and hope that drives it, and practical tools to help us overcome our fears and anxieties. So that we might have no excuse not to go tell it on the mountain like the friends and family of Zachariah.

The second response the people had is the very thing we've been talking about all morning. **Luke 1:66**. These people have been waiting in line much longer than we ever did. These men and women have been longing for hope and redemption for centuries. And when Zachariah proclaims the precursor has come, his name is John, and the Lord has visited and redeemed his people, and the horn of salvation has come – they cherish it and store it within themselves.

As much as the promises of God are on the lips of his people, they are equally as pressed into their hearts. Internalized and believed. Trusted and held true. To witness the glory of God in that moment with Zachariah, to hear the certain utterances of the Holy Spirit, how could they not treasure God's promise.

We long for those moments of certainty, especially in our waiting and suffering. But we have it. We have it in Jesus. The historical reality of Jesus the son of God. If you are a Christian you have every assurance and hope that those witnessing this moment did. You have the certain reality of history that beyond doubt proves that Jesus came as a man. You have the already fulfilled promise of Isaiah 53, the lamb slaughtered for your transgressions. And the very Spirit of God that inspired the words of Zachariah, also moves in your soul to inspire and remind you of those very same promises.

We don't have to wait to have certainty that Jesus is who said he is. We don't have to wait to know that God will accomplish what he said he will. But these people did. Hope arrives in the form of two babies, the silence of the Lord is finally lifted through Zachariah, the horn of David is here, the waiting is over! Right? **Luke 1:80**.

The people of God, Zachariah and Elizabeth had another thirty-ish years to wait in faithful contemplation. John and Jesus are born, heralding in the fulfillment of kingdom without end, and yet they again wait.

Faithful waiting is storing up in our hearts the promised redemption, the present hope, and our future glory. Because just when we think the waiting is over, when hope feels the most real, suffering, trial and waiting are sure to follow. Between Eden and eternity we wait. Between Genesis 3 and Revelation 22 we wait in fallen world with this fallen flesh.

We must assess what our waiting looks like. Does it produce faith, joy, worship, certainty? Or does it leave you longing for better days? Looking only for relief from whatever circumstances necessitate your waiting. If you are holding fast to the promises of the Lord, holding fast to the certain reality of the gospel, then not only will the long lines be a paradoxical joy, but this present suffering will be outshined by the glory that is to come.