

“YOUR PRAYER HAS BEEN HEARD”

Luke 1:1-25 (13)

“But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.’”

Today we start the Christmas season with the first of 5 studies from Luke’s Gospel. Chapter 1 contains 80 verses. These 80 verses perfectly set the stage for Jesus’ birth in chapter 2. So in the next four weeks we will have 4 studies from chapter 1 and then the main Christmas study from chapter 2 (on the 19th of December) when we will celebrate the birth of Jesus! Indeed, we celebrate Christmas every year. However, this year, I pray that the Lord use these 4 studies from chapter one, starting with today’s study, to deeply prepare our hearts we can embrace baby Jesus with full conviction and heavenly joy! May this year’s Christmas be the best Christmas you have ever had in your lives! Amen!

Let’s look at verse 5. The events of today’s passage takes place in the time of Herod king of Judea. Now Herod reigned in Judea for about 37 years from around 40 BC to 4 BC. Historically, this was one of the spiritually darkest times for the people in Israel.....because, since the last prophet Malachi who lived 450 years earlier.....God did not send a single prophet with any word of encouragement or direction to His people. Eventually, spiritual darkness culminated in the tragic invasion of the oppressive Romans, who placed Herod, as a puppet king over their Jewish subjects. But Herod was an evil madman and a power hungry dictator. He was so paranoid that when it looked like two of his sons might challenge him for political power.....he simply strangled them with his bare hands to death. If that was not shocking enough, when Herod could not find baby Jesus, born as king of the Jews, he ordered the immediate execution of thousands of baby boys two years and younger – hoping to murder Jesus in the process!! Herod’s horrible actions reveals just how dark and horrible the times had become in those days.

In these dark and tragic times there was a very old priest named Zechariah and his very old wife Elizabeth. (5b) This very old couple had been around long enough to have seen and experience the worst of those dark times. Moreover, in the midst of their daily sufferings, Zechariah and Elizabeth had their personal heartache of being childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive. (7) If being unable to have children was not bad enough, bareness

in those days were regarded as a disgrace and a form of punishment from God. (25) So it safe to say.....that they lived under very difficult circumstances until their old age..... with sufferings upon sufferings coming their way.

Look at verse 6. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. This is amazing right!? Think about it.....in a time when the madman Herod looted and killed God's people.....in a time when the Romans extracted heavy taxes for their evil empire.....in a time when God seemed to have abandoned His own people.....and seemingly even punished Elizabeth with barrenness.....in such dark and uncertain times.....when most people lost faith and hope in God..... Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are both described as righteous in the sight of God.

What does this mean? It meant that they had faith in God! As we know the righteousness that God acknowledges is righteousness that comes through faith in Him; right?! (Rom 3:21) So despite the dark and tragic timesand despite the shame and pain of not being able to have any children of their own.....Both Zechariah and Elizabeth believed in God and depended wholeheartedly on his faithfulness to take care of them. That is why, despite the extremely unfavourable circumstances.....Zechariah and Elizabeth kept observing..... ALL..... the Lord's commands and decrees..... As bible students ourselves, we know how difficult it is to first of all study the word of God and secondly practically observe it in our lives. Right?! It truly requires sincere and humble faith in God..... to deny our sinful natures to instead live by His word of truth! Yet, this is exactly what Zechariah and Elizabeth didand they did so BLAMELESSLY.....in the sight of God What an amazing couple! Their faith was pure and their hearts humble before the Lord.

The question is, how could they have and maintain such pure faith in God? If we look again at verse 6, we see that as they study God's word and as they observe all of it practically in their daily lives.....they managed to focus their hearts on God.....on who He is.....on what He had done.....on what He had promised.....and on what He could do in their lives. Therefore, instead of allowing their tragic circumstances to discourage them or push them away from God.....they used the circumstances by drawing closer to God through His word. Indeed, though Zachariah and Elizabeth were very old.....they are beautiful examples of what it practically means to have faith in God.

But in context of today's key verse, we see another example of Zachariah being a man with faith in God. Can you see it? Yes, **Zechariah was a man of prayer**. Look again at verse 7. It says that Zechariah and Elizabeth were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive. To most couples, even believing couples, it would simply be the end of the matter right? Yes of course, people will have a sense of bitterness and great disappointment. But ultimately, if a woman cannot conceive then she cannot conceive. What can you do?

Well Zechariah, the man of faith, found something to do. According to our key verse, Zechariah prayed.....Through prayer Zechariah poured out his greatest desire before Godto have a son. Through prayer Zechariah brought his wife's bareness to God, and asked Him to do the humanly impossible..... open Elizabeth's womb so she could conceive and bare him a son. Without faith, Zechariah would never ever have been able to pray for a son?! For as we know: prayer is a measure of our faith. Therefore, show me a man who prays and I will show you a man of faith. Also, it is safe to say that Zechariah prayed for many years with this same prayer topic: for God to graciously give him a son. Exactly how many years we do not know, but we can assume it was during the course of his marriage and for as long as Elizabeth was within the age of child bearing.

The question is, how did God respond to Zechariah's heartfelt prayer? Honestly speaking, at first God did not respond at all!! In fact, it did not seem as if God even heard Zechariah's prayer. For surely, if Zechariah was righteous in God's sight and He heard Zechariah's prayer.....the Lord would do or say something; right? But throughout the entire time while Elizabeth was within the age of child bearing, God did nothing. But this did not mean that God did not hear Zechariah's prayer. It also did not mean that God will not answer the prayer. All it meant, was that God's time had not yet come to respond.....that was until both Zechariah and Elizabeth was very old!

Look at verses 8-9. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. This was an amazingly precious privilege! At the time there were 24 priestly divisions. In each division there were a 1 000 priests who all **wanted to have the privilege of burning incense in the temple. But because there were so many priests, most of them died without enjoying this privilege. Yet, on that day, out of 24 000**

priests, Zechariah was chosen by lot to go into the temple. It surely was no accident, but the hand of God beginning to move in response to Zechariah's prayer.

Now usually when the priest entered the Holy Place, he would burn the incense and pray for God's people. Afterwards, he would turn around and exit the temple – no voices or spiritual beings popping up. However, when Zechariah entered the Holy place something supernatural happened. Look at verse 11. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. Even though God had the best of intentions to send an angel to Zechariah we can understand why when Zechariah saw [the angel], he was startled. I can only imagine Zechariah closing his eyes while praying... and then suddenly, out of nowhere this awesome spiritual being appeared.....who knows from where and to do what!! I am sure each one of us would also have been gripped with fear if we were in Zechariah's shoes. Yet, there was no reason to be afraid. God meant Zechariah no harm.

Let's look at today's key verse. Can we please read verse 13 together? "But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John." For many ...many years.....it seemed as if God did not hear his prayer; especially since Elizabeth was now old and past the age of childbearing. However, here the angel revealed that God indeed heard Zechariah's prayer. And after all these years.....God was now about to respond by doing exactly for Zechariah what he prayed for..... The angel said; your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you. (14) Praise God for hearing and answering the prayers of a very old couple!! Praise God for filling their hearts with so much joy and delight in their old age!! Have you ever felt like God ignored one of your prayer topics? Or that no matter how you pray it just seems as if God does not hear you? It's indeed discouraging! However if God heard Zechariah's prayer then we can sure that He also heard your prayer. And if this is how God answered Zechariah's prayer.....then we can be sure that is how God will answer your prayers. Even when we stopped praying for something, we can be sure that God still heard our prayer and will most definitely respond at the right time and the right way.....just as he did with Zechariah. So do you have an urgent or sensitive matter that only God can resolve? Or do you have a prayer topic you stopped praying for? Bring it with faith to the Lord in prayer like Zechariahfor you can be very sure that God will hear you and answer you, just like he did with Zechariah.

But there is one more thing that we need to take note of when God answered Zechariah's prayer. Though God gave Zechariah what he asked for, God also gave him so much more! Look at verse 14-17. (Read like an angel. ☺) This is mind blowing stuff! All that Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted was to enjoy having their own child. Yet God would so bless their son that not only they will rejoice but many will rejoice because of [John's] birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord..... he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. That was never part of the prayer topic!! This is because as human beings we are limited in our thinking, praying and behaving. We only see the here and now. However, God always sees the bigger picture.....and want to fulfil His greater plan for our lives. Just like Zechariah and Elizabeth. Unbeknown to them, God was about to bring His son into the world, being born as a tiny baby. Yet no one knew about this. So God wanted to use the birth of their son.....as an opportunity beforehand for people to see God's working hand. More than this, God planned using John to bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.....by going on before Jesus in the spirit and power of Elijah - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Again, this was never part of Zechariah's prayer topic. Yet, God in His love used their prayer topic to advance His greater purpose of saving the world through His son, Jesus Christ. I believe this is why many of our most sensitive prayer topics takes so long to be answered. It is not because God did not hear our prayers. But rather that God is waiting for the perfect time and moment to answer us in a way that not only fulfils God's purpose for our lives.....but also glorifies His name as He uses our prayer topics to powerfully advance His kingdom work here on earth.

Then how did Zechariah respond to this good news? Look at verse 18. Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Zachariah was a man of prayer. He had faith in God. But when his prayer was answered, he fell back into his human thinking and failed to believe the word of God. So the angel said to him look at verses 19-20. "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens..... Because..... you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." Indeed, God was sorry that Zechariah failed to believe God's promise word. But God didn't give up on him, or move on to someone else. Instead, God muted and deafened Zechariah for 9 months.....so he could carefully think and accept God's wonderful work in his life.

Personally I am encouraged by the fact that God heard Zechariah's prayer and how He then in His own time and manner answered it. Many years ago, I had a sincere prayer topic for the Lord to help me live a meaningful life. I was still a student at the time and very uncertain of what I will do, who I will marry and how I would survive in this world. But one thing I was certain about was that I wanted to live a meaningful life. Even at that stage I knew this would not be easy, simply because 99.9% of people live only to make money so they can survive and live a stable and comfortable life. As nice as that sounds, I knew that this kind of life is meaningless. Since then I have married, had a couple of jobs, bought a car and started my own business. Yet, with the struggles of this world, my heart these days are weighed down by the meaninglessness of working simply to pay the bills. By preparing this message, I am encouraged to not be crushed by the financial stress of this world but newly take up the prayer topic for God to help me live a meaningful life. Surely, God heard my prayer back then and surely He will hear my prayer now. And based on today's passage will answer in His time and His own way, and exceed my expectations. And not only me, but also each one of you.

In conclusion. We live in a time that is similarly dark and uncertain, just as in the days of Herod king of Judea. Many of us are weighed down by the worries of this life. We lose hope and faith in God. However, in today's passage we learned that when we have faith in God and when we sincerely pray like Zachariah, then God definitely hears our prayers. And when He hears our prayers, He will most definitely answer our prayers. In His own time and in a way that far exceeds our expectations. So this Christmas season, let's not be discouraged by anything but have faith in God and pray to God like Zechariah. Amen.