

Planned

God's promises point to His redemptive plan for His creation.

LUKE 1:13-25

Several current television shows highlight the secondhand retail industry. The stars of the shows shop for bargains in barns, flea markets, and pawn stores. They are looking for treasures among items that most people would deem used up or worthless. Most of the shows save one final purchase for the end of the program, when the star of the show stumbles upon an item of great price, purchases it, and repurposes it to highlight its value to the new owner. These shows highlight the concept of redemption.

What items have you repurposed that were once viewed as used up or useless?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

LUKE 1:1-25

Luke is one of four Gospels the early church recognized as authoritative and trustworthy as the Word of God. Rather than taking the Gospel accounts and combining them into one book, the early church valued having four Gospel accounts, written by inspired, first-century writers.

Though the writer of the third Gospel is not named in the text, evidence points to Luke, a coworker of Paul (Philem. 24), as the writer. As part of a two-volume set, this Gospel is the prequel to Acts (Acts 1:1-3). Luke is referred to as a doctor in Colossians 4:14. His thorough writing method would lend credence to this.

Luke emphasized Jesus' concern for all people, especially those who were social outcasts. These included poor people, women, and those labeled by society as sinners. Luke also emphasized prayer

by recalling the prayers of Jesus (Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18) and included parables about prayer (11:5-13; 18:1,10). One of the most striking features of Luke's Gospel occurs at the beginning. He recorded the most detailed and orderly portrayal of the birth of Jesus and the events surrounding it.

The infancy narratives in Luke are a direct reflection of Luke's approach to writing. He was aware that others had written Gospels about Jesus (1:1), and he tested these writings by the

original eyewitnesses (1:2). Luke then carefully investigated everything in order that he could provide an orderly sequence to his readers (1:3).

Luke began his Gospel by focusing on two births—the birth of the forerunner to the Messiah and the birth of the Messiah Himself. The story of the forerunner’s birth took place in the household of Zechariah, an aging priest, and his wife Elizabeth. This is where the redemption story would begin to unfold.

As you read Luke 1:13-25, observe the instances of irony in the passage. What is the significance of Luke emphasizing these points of irony as he began unfolding the redemption story?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PRAYER ANSWERED (LUKE 1:13-17)

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. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

VERSES 13-14

An extraordinary day in the life of an ordinary priest initiated God’s redemptive plan on earth. Zechariah was a priest in the division of Abijah, one of twenty-four divisions in the priesthood. Each division would have the privilege of choosing a priest to serve in the holy place of the temple every other month. God used the process of casting

lots to place Zechariah in the place where He would send a message of redemption (Luke 1:8-9). This message would involve the sending of the Messiah but would also include God’s sending a special child to Zechariah and his barren wife (v. 7). As the priest entered the holy place, the

people of Israel were assembled outside praying (v. 10). Such an occasion would have also provided Zechariah a chance to lift up to God his own desire for a child as he tended the altar of incense, which represented the prayers of God's people.

As Zechariah approached the altar of incense, an *angel* appeared next to the altar. As was common in Luke, the witness to an angel's appearance became *afraid*. (See also Luke 1:29; 2:9.) The same was true for those who witnessed angels in the Old Testament. (See Judg. 6:22-23; Dan. 8:16-17.) The angel would later identify himself as Gabriel. He would later appear to Mary (Luke 1:26).

Gabriel announced to Zechariah: *your prayer has been heard*. How many times had Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed for a child? How much time had passed with no positive results of a child? Yet even in their old age they continued to pray. It had happened to Abraham and Sarah. Could it happen to them? Not only did Gabriel announce they would have a *son*, he also named the child *John*, which means "the Lord is gracious." The angel also noted that this child would be *joy and delight* for John. The first word, *joy*, is based on the root for *grace* found in John's name. The second word describes exceeding happiness. A child after so many years of barrenness would indeed make the parents happy but would do more than that. The angel declared that *many will rejoice because of his birth*. The birth of John would inject a note of joy into the world because he would prepare the way for a greater birth to come.

DID YOU KNOW?

Gabriel is one of only two angels identified by name in the Bible. The other is Michael the archangel (Dan. 10:13,21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7). Gabriel appears four times in the Bible. Twice he appeared to Daniel (Dan. 8:15-27; 9:20-27), and he announced the births of John the Baptist (Luke 1:8-20) and Jesus (Luke 1:26-38).

VERSES 15-17

The special nature of Zechariah's son was emphasized by the requirements given to him. First, he would be *great*. This same word was used of both John and Jesus (Luke 1:32), though that is not to say they were equal in their greatness. God had plans for John to announce the coming of Jesus. Because of his specific calling, Zechariah was to set John apart by withholding alcohol from him. This could be a reference to the Nazarite vow mentioned in Numbers 6:1-12. The Bible does set

a precedent of requiring some leaders to refrain from alcohol (Prov. 31:4; Jer. 35:6). As in this passage, it also contrasts the filling of alcohol with the filling of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18). The angel announced that John would be *filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born*. From conception, this child was set apart by God for God's glory.

Through the angel God revealed two purposes for John. First, he would *bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God*.

Even *the children of Israel* would need to repent and turn to God through Jesus Christ. Zechariah's son, John, would emphasize the need for conversion in his preaching to the Jews (Luke 3:3). The result of John's ministry would be to ***make ready a people prepared for the Lord***. The preparatory work of Zechariah's son was prophetically described by Isaiah (Isa. 40:3-5), and the connection with the ***spirit and power of Elijah*** was foretold by Malachi (Mal. 4:5-6). The work of Elijah was to prepare the people ***to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous***. This was the message of repentance that characterized John's ministry.

How did connecting the birth of John to Old Testament prophecy communicate the importance of this child? How does connecting our prayers to Scripture help us understand how God's answers relate to His redemptive purposes?

BIBLE SKILL: *Compare similar Bible stories.*

Compare Zachariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1 to Elkanah and Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. What similarities and differences can you identify between these two stories? Reflect on these narratives personally. What prayers have you been asking that seem to go unanswered? In what way do you see God's plan in the way He has responded to your prayers?

DOUBT EXPRESSED (LUKE 1:18-20)

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." ¹⁹ The angel said to him, "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. ²⁰ 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."

VERSE 18

Zechariah expressed doubt about the angel's announcement that he and his wife would finally have a child. At first his question may seem innocent: ***How can I be sure of this?*** Mary would ask a similar question when she received the news that she would have a child even though she was a virgin (1:34). Even with the proof of an angel speaking to him and Scripture foretelling the event, Zechariah had a difficult time believing what was happening to him.

Zechariah was a righteous man in a holy place and yet he struggled with doubt and unbelief that the Lord could use him. That's the danger of doubt; it can sneak into the middle of a worship experience even for those who are living for the Lord. Zechariah had served God for a lifetime and yet still struggled with the belief that God would do what He said He would do.

VERSES 19-20

The angel identified himself as ***Gabriel***, which means "mighty man of God." Why should Zechariah believe the news that he would have a child? An angel was speaking to him, and that angel was one who stands ***in the presence of God***. Maybe Zechariah had reason to doubt the angel himself, but not the One who sent the angel. God had commissioned the angel and told him to go and tell this news to Zechariah. Luke used two verbs that would be adopted by Jesus' followers as they went forth with the message of Christ. The word ***sent*** is the word from which ***apostle*** is formed, and it meant "to send with a message." The angel was not there by accident or for a random reason. He had a special message to deliver to Zechariah. The second verb (translated as a noun in some translations) is ***tell you this good news***, which is the basis of our English word ***evangelism*** and also the word for ***gospel***. The angel's proclamation to Zechariah resulted in him preaching the gospel to the aged priest.

Zechariah's unbelief involved doubt that God would do what He had promised in Scripture and announced through the angel.

His doubt was serious enough that it carried consequences with it; he would not be able to speak for the next nine months.

This is not the first time in the Bible that muteness was given as a sign. (See Ezek. 3:26; 24:27.) The inability to speak would not be a permanent situation for Zechariah. He would be mute only until the birth of his child. Although the muteness was because Zechariah ***did not believe*** the words of the angel or the word of God, it also would serve to strengthen his faith.

Can a person be devoted to the Lord and still express doubt? How can doubt sometimes result in greater faith?

REALITY SEEN (LUKE 1:21-25)

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. **22** When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. **23** When his time of service was completed, he returned home. **24** After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. **25** “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

VERSES 21-23

All the *people were waiting for Zechariah* and *wondering why he stayed so long*. As he left the holy place, Zechariah would have joined other priests in pronouncing a benediction. But since he could not speak, he tried to communicate with his hands. What must the people have thought as Zechariah tried to explain such a miraculous event? They realized he must have *seen a vision in the temple*, though they certainly could not have understood the vision from his hand gestures.

Zechariah completed *his time of service*. The priest’s ministry included one week of service, so he would not have had to wait long to go home to his family. After a period of silence in Jerusalem, he returned to his home ready to believe the promises of God.

VERSES 24-25

Zechariah’s wife *Elizabeth became pregnant*. One cannot overemphasize the magnitude of this moment, as she had waited all her married life to share this news. Curiously, *for five months* she *remained in seclusion*. Was she afraid she might miscarry in the early months of pregnancy? Did she want to avoid the public until she was clearly showing evidence of a child? Did she want to avoid the gossip and incredulity of neighbors who could doubt the good news with no visible evidence of a child? The text does not give a reason for her seclusion.

However, the text does indicate Elizabeth’s gratitude that God had answered her prayers and kept His promises. She explained that *the Lord has done this for me*. How many times had she and her husband come together, hoping for a child? This was not their doing but God’s. He had given her a child in her old age. He had *shown his favor* on her. God had noticed her barrenness and had removed the *disgrace* from her. She had endured the reproach of those who criticized her because of her barrenness even though she faithfully served the Lord. Childlessness was often viewed as a disgrace (Gen. 16:4,11; 29:32; 30:1,22-23;

Lev. 20:20-21; 1 Sam. 1:5-6,11; 2:5-8; 2 Sam. 6:23; Jer. 22:30; 36:30). Quite the opposite, her lengthy period of childlessness served to further the reality that God keeps His promises, not just to her as a woman but to Israel as a nation through the sending of Messiah.

What are some of the promises of God that you are still awaiting? How does patience and time only enhance the anticipation of the fulfillment of that promise?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Stewardship*

God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him (Deut 8:18).

APPLY THE TEXT

- God is working to bring about His redemptive plan.
- God has the power to do what He says He will do.
- Believers can live with the confidence that God keeps His promises.

What role do you play in spreading the message of God's redemptive plan for His creation? Who do you know that needs to be told about God's salvation through faith in Jesus?

As a group, discuss some of the doubts that you have about your role in God's redemption story and spreading it to others. What assurances do you have that He indeed wants to use you?

List points of gratitude to God for the promises He has fulfilled in your life. Look for these fulfilled promises throughout the week and immediately offer gratitude to God for involving you in His redemptive plan.

PRAYER NEEDS
