

Bible Studies for Life Series for December 9: Getting ready for the Savior

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Getting ready for the Savior

- Luke 1:5-25; 57-80

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What is it that you hope for this year? With kids around the house, our list grows with every TV commercial. But more than the stuff and the things, what is it that you hope and yearn for, that you anxiously await?

Hope springs eternal this time of year. It is evidenced in the movies we watch and the songs we sing each year. But what is the basis of our hope? Is it just a renewed feeling because of the lights and the songs? Or are we brought to hope because of the faithfulness of God?

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There is the real reason for our hope. Christian hope has nothing to do with sugar plum fairies. It has everything to do with the faithful God who is Immanuel, God with us.

Ultimately, it is the faithfulness of God that we see in the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was a priest—he was performing a duty that might fall on a person only once in a lifetime. Zechariah was a member of the eighth order of priests, the division named Abijah. There were 24 divisions of priests named for Aaron's 24 sons, and they served in the temple for one week, twice a year. This was hardly an everyday occurrence; it was a great honor for Zechariah to be chosen. It is the first step in which we see God's faithfulness played out.

Zechariah was chosen by lot. We might think of this in the same way we think of drawing straws, or throwing dice; the winner is selected purely by chance. This is not the case with choosing by lot in the Old Testament and before the coming of Pentecost in the New Testament. Luke doesn't tell us Zechariah was chosen by lot simply because it is an interesting historical footnote.

Until the time of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, casting lots was one of the methods used to determine God's will. When the disciples chose Matthias to replace Judas as one of the 12, they did so by praying and then casting lots. It is interesting that Luke mentions both of these events, but never mentions it again following Pentecost. Right from the beginning of his Gospel, Luke lets the readers know God is at work. There is no coincidence to be found in Luke's narrative. It is purely the work of Israel's faithful God.

We also see God's faithfulness displayed in the confines through which he worked and the people through whom he worked. God is at work through the institutions, practices and rituals of Judaism. Zechariah is a priest. He is on duty in the temple, offering incense to God in prayer and worship.

Luke reveals God working in the practices of the believing community. It is within the heart of Israel's life that God begins this new work. He will not abandon them, whether they choose to accept that or not.

Zechariah and Elizabeth fall within the faithful of the community of Israel. We are well aware of the corruption of Israel's institutions, but within that corruption are people who are faithful. That certainly is the case with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke says of them that they were "upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly." Here again is evidence of God's work and faithfulness—that he chooses a time of worship with faithful people to reveal he is sending the forerunner of the One who would take away the sin of the world.

We usually think Mary and Elizabeth were roughly the same age, because we know they were related and evidently were close enough for Mary to spend three months with Elizabeth. But Zechariah and Elizabeth were well along in years; they were well past the time for having children. Elizabeth falls into the same category as Sarah. Everyone knew her time had passed.

Isn't interesting that God tends to bring something special from those we would never expect? Abraham and Sarah, Hannah, Rebekah, Rachel and now Elizabeth. Isn't it also interesting that it became accepted that barrenness was a sign of God's displeasure and a sign of disgrace? And yet Israel was born from Abraham and Sarah, a couple no one believed would ever have children. Every good Jew, and even the half-hearted Jews, would have known that story. Zechariah and Elizabeth continue the story of God's faithfulness begun with Abraham and Sarah.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's response to God's faithfulness took very different paths. Zechariah responded to Gabriel in an almost dumbfounded manner, "How can I be sure of this?" and is made silent until God's promise is fulfilled. His silence is a sign God will fulfill his promise and Zechariah must trust that God will fulfill his promise. Elizabeth responds with

rejoicing, “The Lord has done this for me.” There is no disbelief for Elizabeth, just an outpouring of gratitude for God’s grace.

Though their responses are different in the first part of the story, when the promise is fulfilled and the child is brought to be circumcised, Zechariah’s response becomes one of gratitude and overwhelming joy. He celebrates God’s faithfulness to the promise Gabriel brought in the temple, but notice the difference. He now celebrates God’s future faithfulness in the One to whom John will point. Even faithful people have doubts on occasion, but those doubts have been erased for Zechariah, and he celebrates the coming salvation of Israel.

This is a story not necessarily about what God will do with our desires. It is a story about the people God uses in his work and their response to God’s work. It is about a faithful God working through faithful people to achieve his purposes in this world. God’s faithfulness revealed in this story should point us to faithfulness to him in every area of our lives. It should bring about in us a celebration and joy that cannot be kept to ourselves but must be made known to a world that does not know him.

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