

"THE FORERUNNER FORETOLD"

I. Introduction

- A. Luke begins his orderly account of the things that had been accomplished in Jesus Christ by telling us about the angelic announcement concerning the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner who was sent to prepare the way for Jesus.
1. Have you ever wondered why it was necessary for God to send a forerunner?
 2. Why didn't God just send Jesus into the world?
 3. What purpose did John's ministry serve?
- B. The answer becomes clear when we realize that John was the last of the old covenant prophets, the messengers who were sent to God's people with oracles that began with the words, "Thus says the Lord."
1. The prophets were agents of special revelation.
 2. And as Geerhardus Vos explains in his classic book *Biblical Theology*, "Revelation is the interpretation of redemption; it must, therefore, unfold itself in installments as redemption does." [6]
 3. The key moments in the historical unfolding of God's plan of redemption were accompanied by special revelation that interpreted the meaning of God's mighty acts and called for the appropriate response to those acts.
 4. The coming of Jesus marked the climactic fulfillment of God's redemptive plan, but it had been some four hundred years since any prophecy had been given in Israel.

5. John was sent to declare the meaning of the coming of Christ, and to call God's people to repentance.

II. A Childless Couple (5-7)

A. Our text opens with a reference to Herod, king of Judea.

1. This was Herod the Great, who ruled from 34 BC to 4 BC.
2. Even though Herod reigned over the Jews, he was not a Jew himself but an Edomite.
3. Rome appointed him as a client king and ruled the Jewish people through him.
4. Herod's reign was a dark and turbulent period for the people of Israel.
5. While he tried to win the favor of the Jews in various ways, chiefly through his elaborate renovations of the temple, he proved to be a vicious and paranoid ruler.
6. He arranged the assassinations of three of his sons and one of his wives.
7. He slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem in an effort to kill the infant Jesus.
8. The Jews under Herod were longing for their true king, the Messiah who would reign on David's throne forever.

B. Two of these Jews were a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth.

1. Luke introduces them by telling us that they were "righteous before God."
2. This does not mean that they merited God's favor by their works.

3. It simply means that God accepted them as righteous according to his covenant of grace as it was administered under the Mosaic covenant.
 4. These were godly people, people who trusted in the Lord and sought to do his will.
 5. One reason why Luke calls our attention to this is because he wants to emphasize that their childlessness was not due to any sin on their part.
- C. The theme of childlessness comes up frequently in the Bible.
1. It is a factor in some of the key moments in the outworking of God's plan of redemption.
 2. Abraham and Sarah were well beyond their childbearing years when the Lord gave them a son.
 3. Isaac's wife Rebekah was barren for twenty years before God granted their request for children.
 4. Jacob's wife Rachel was barren for many years before she gave birth to Joseph.
 5. Samson and Samuel were born to women who were barren before the Lord opened their wombs.
 6. God had a reason in working out his purpose in this way.
 7. He did this in order to call our attention to the fact that the plan of salvation is not something that we can bring about by our own efforts.
 8. It is entirely his doing.
- D. God was the one who allowed the hardship and heartache of barrenness to be a part of Zechariah's and Elizabeth's life.

1. He heard them pray fervently for the gift of children year after year.
2. He saw their disappointment when it became evident that they were past their childbearing years.
3. He saw that, in spite of their sadness, they kept on trusting him and walking in his ways.
4. These were God's people, the sheep of his pasture.
5. They were precious in his sight.
6. God ordained this trial for them in order to refine and strengthen their faith, and in order to display his power and glory.
7. We need to remember that the same is true of the trials that the Lord ordains in our lives.

III. A Prayer Answered (8-17)

- A. The event that Luke records in this text took place on an occasion when Zechariah was serving in the temple.
 1. The priesthood was broken into twenty-four divisions, each of which served at the temple for two weeks every year.
 2. On this particular occasion, Zechariah was chosen by lot to enter the temple and burn incense in the Holy Place in front of the curtain that separated off the Most Holy Place.
 3. The incense offering was done twice per day, right before the two daily burnt offerings.
 4. It was symbolic of the fact that we need a Mediator in order for our prayers to be acceptable to God.
 5. Because there were so many priests in Israel (around 18,000 in the first century), a priest could only be chosen to burn incense in the

temple once in his lifetime.

6. In other words, this was not some routine task that Zechariah was performing.
 7. It was a very special moment for him, a once in a lifetime opportunity.
- B. Imagine what it would have been like for Zechariah to suddenly realize that he was not alone in the Holy Place.
1. There he was, serving in the earthly representation of God's sanctuary, and he was met by this being who serves before God in the true heavenly sanctuary.
 2. Zechariah responded in the same way that others in the Bible respond when angels appear to them.
 3. He was terrified.
 4. This reminds us that real angels are not at all like those Precious Moments figurines of angels, or the ones on greeting cards or on top of Christmas trees
 5. Angels stand in the presence of the Lord, and they reflect the divine glory.
 6. Even a small glimpse of that glory strikes fear in the human heart.
 7. It gives us a sense of God's greatness and of our sinfulness.
- C. The angel responds to Zechariah's fear by telling him not to be afraid, offering the reassurance that God has been gracious to him and has heard his prayer.
1. Which prayer is the angel talking about?

2. At that moment, Zechariah would have been praying on behalf of God's people as he burned incense in the Holy Place.
 3. He would not have been praying for his personal concerns but for the redemption of Israel and the coming of the Messiah.
 4. That prayer was about to be answered.
 5. At the same time, it was going to be answered in such a way that it would also be the answer to the prayers that Zechariah and his wife had prayed for many years, pleading with the Lord to grant them a child.
 6. Now think about this for just a moment.
 7. Zechariah and Elizabeth were advanced in years.
 8. They had given up on the possibility of having a child.
 9. Yet the Lord was about to grant their request in a manner that went beyond their wildest dreams.
 10. Here is a reminder that the prayers of God's people are never left unheard.
 11. The Lord does not grant all of our requests.
 12. And he sometimes grants them in ways that we would not have expected.
 13. But the one thing of which we can be certain is that the prayers of believers, imperfect as they are, always ascend to the throne of grace as sweet-smelling incense, because they go through the mediation of our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.
- D. The angel then tells Zechariah about the role that his child will play as the one sent "to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

1. John will be specially set apart for this task, a fact that would be symbolized by his abstinence from alcohol and his being filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb.
2. In his ministry, he will turn many of the people of Israel back to the Lord.
3. This will mark the fulfillment of the very last prophecy that was given in the Old Testament, where the Lord said through the prophet Malachi, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 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." (Mal 4:5-6 ESV)
4. This did not mean that Elijah was going to be reincarnated.
5. Elijah was mentioned because he was the archetypal Old Testament prophet.
6. Like Elijah, John will call God's people to repentance so that they can be reconciled to God.
7. This was of critical importance in preparing the way for Jesus.
8. No one would be able to endure the day of his coming unless their hearts were prepared for him.
9. The same is true today.
10. We cannot receive God's grace in Christ unless we first understand our need for that grace.

IV. A Sign Given (18-23)

- A. After hearing this remarkable news from the angel, Zechariah says, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

1. In asking, "How shall I know this?", Zechariah was asking for some sign to confirm what the angel had told him.
 2. While he trusted in the Lord, in this particular matter he simply could not see how God could make good on his word.
 3. Zechariah was stumbling over the fact that he and Elizabeth were too old to have children.
 4. We stumble in the same ways.
 5. We too let our circumstances cause us to doubt the veracity of God's word.
- B. The angel responds to Zechariah's unbelief by saying, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."
1. This made it clear that in expressing doubt over Gabriel's announcement, Zechariah was calling the truth of God's word into question.
 2. As a result, Zechariah was given the sign that he asked for, but it was a sign that also served as a form of chastisement for his unbelief.
 3. Because he had doubted the word that was delivered through God's angelic messenger, he himself would not be able to speak until the the word that was spoken came to pass.
- V. **A Child Conceived (24-25)**
- A. After Elizabeth conceived her child, she did something that might seem a bit odd.
1. She kept herself in seclusion throughout the first five months of her pregnancy.

2. Why would she do this?
 3. This pregnancy was the thing for which she had been longing for her entire married life.
 4. It happened at a point in her life when such things just don't happen.
 5. You would think that she would be out sharing her remarkable news with everyone.
 6. Instead, she kept to herself until she reached the point in her pregnancy when it would be immediately apparent to anyone who saw her that she was with child.
 7. Perhaps she kept herself hidden for those five months because she felt the need to ponder the remarkable thing that the Lord had done for her.
 8. She simply wanted to worship God and give thanks to him for how her prayers had finally been answered.
- B. In first century Israel, as in most cultures before modern times, one of the things that a woman dreaded most was the prospect of not being able to bear children.
1. Elizabeth lived with that dreaded reality for her entire married life.
 2. She had resigned herself to the fact that barrenness was her lot in life.
 3. Then suddenly, when she was well advanced in years, her reproach was finally removed.
 4. Elizabeth's experience serves as a picture of what God does for everyone who puts their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. We too bear reproach, both because of our own sins and because of the fact that we live in a ruined world alongside other sinners.
6. In one way or another, many of the things that we dread do come upon us.
7. And sooner or later, the dreaded reality of death overtakes each one of us.
8. Yet these things will never dishearten us if we belong to Jesus Christ.
9. For we can be confident that “He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.” (Is 25:8 ESV)