

*From Days Of Old: Promises Kept*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Psalm 130:1-8; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 1:68-79*

Our final Scripture reading today is from Luke 1:67-79. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “[John the Baptist’s] father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us -- to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.””

Do people still believe in promises? The ancients took promises seriously. To break your word was a serious breach. Kings who broke their word to their subjects were dishonorable and might be overthrown. People took oaths to their gods, believing that their gods would judge them if they broke their oath. Did people still do it? Sure. Proverbs 6:16-18 says that two of the things God hates is a lying tongue and a false witness who pours out lies. In 1 Timothy 1, Paul says that God’s law was given not to convict the righteous but sinners – and he puts liars and perjurers alongside murderers, adulterers, and slave traders! It’s serious business, not keeping one’s promises.

I thought about it as I started my first full week as office manager at Compassion Pregnancy Center because I was tasked to buy some things we need – printer ink, a surge protector, that sort of thing. And the modern corporate promise is a little thing we all call a warranty. I read about surge protectors guaranteed for ten years to save your electronics. And 99% of thousands of reviews were positive. The problem was with the 1%. Apparently, if you actually have a bad power surge, you’re out of luck. It’s virtually impossible to prove that your surge protector was at fault, even if all your electronics get fried at once. I read horror stories about getting companies to actually honor their warranties.

Sound familiar? Probably all of us have had something go wrong only to find that a company’s promises weren’t up to snuff. Cell phone providers, car manufacturers, even the guys who make my racquetballs put their warranty and guarantee right out there. But good luck trying to get them to honor them. And it’s not just companies. As a culture, we no longer trust in promises. The American divorce culture of the last fifty years shows that we aren’t good at keeping our word. Millennials are getting married less and putting it off if they do. It’s not because they don’t have relationships or children. It comes down to a different question: why make a promise you aren’t sure you *can* keep or even *want* to keep?

This all might sound very pessimistic. It should. The human race has always been pretty terrible at keeping promises. But on the other hand, those of us who believe in God and put our faith and trust in Him have every reason to be optimistic. Because God keeps His promises. If the first week of the Advent season reminded us that Christ is coming again and gave us a glimpse of life when God's Kingdom arrives in all of its glory, the second week of Advent gives us more reason to believe Jesus will return for us – because God has been faithful to His promises in the past.

Let's set the stage for today's main passage. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are faithful, upright people of God. When we first meet them in the Bible, they're already older, and they don't have any children – something looked upon culturally as a curse, since Psalm 127:3 says that children are a blessing from the LORD.

Zechariah's from the house of Levi, which means he belongs to the tribe of priests. The priests were separated into divisions, and his was the division of Abijah. (It's kind of like today in the military when you might have Alpha Company and Bravo Company. He's in Abijah Company.) Eventually, his division was called up to serve at the temple. One day, he is randomly chosen to go and offer incense inside the temple. This is a pretty big deal; because the priestly jobs were drawn by lot each time, some Levites might have done special jobs several times while others never actually served in the temple.

So Zechariah goes in to do his job. It doesn't take long to do; maybe just a few minutes at most. But while he's there, an angel is suddenly standing by the altar of incense. And of course, nobody's supposed to be in there, so Zechariah starts to freak out. And as with almost every angel appearance, the first thing said is, "Don't be afraid." As it turns out, this is Gabriel, who stands before the presence of God, who we've met before in Scripture – in a vision the prophet Daniel had in Babylon 550 years earlier.

Gabriel has awesome news. He and Elizabeth are going to have a son they are to name John. He's going to be like a Nazarite of old, someone holy to the LORD. He won't eat or drink anything made of grapes. He's going to have the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare God's people for the coming of the LORD, and lots of people's hearts will turn back to God because of his ministry. He will become who we know as John the Baptist.

But Zechariah's like, "How can I know this? I'm old. Elizabeth is old." You kinda want to shake Zechariah and say, "Dude, it's an angel. He knows." It seems crazy to be terrified of an angel one minute and then start questioning him, "I don't know about that." But that makes it all the more truthful. There's something honest in that Zechariah and Elizabeth are so faithful, but there are things that are even beyond Zechariah's ability to believe. I mean, this is Israel's history. The forefather of Israel, Abraham, the one to whom all Jewish history leads back - God promised to give him nations through Isaac. He had Isaac at 100, when, as Romans 4:19 puts it, he was "as good as dead." But Zechariah's here arguing with an angel about it! He's done what we do – he's forgotten his history, the history of his people, the history of his faith. This is a gigantic blessing, a huge honor, to be the father of the child that prophecy has told about, the one in the desert preparing the way for the Messiah. And Zechariah's like, "Yeah, right...really?" It's a big reminder to us not to count out that God can do the miraculous in our lives too.

So Gabriel's like, "How will you know that this is actually happening? Well, tell you what – since you didn't believe my words from God, how about you not be able to speak any words until it comes true? Will that work?" And Zechariah can't say anything about it because he can't say anything. He's mute. The people outside the temple are nervous...why isn't Zechariah coming back out? He should have been done a long time ago. Finally, he appears, and he has to play charades with them for them to realize he'd had a vision. He goes home, and eventually Elizabeth does get pregnant. We don't know the exact timeline. But probably for about a year, Zechariah can't say a word.

Finally, the baby is born, and Elizabeth knows his name is supposed to be John. They get to his circumcision day, the eighth day after his birth when they would name him, and all her relatives are like, "There's nobody in your family named John to name him after. Why would you want to do that?" And Zechariah writes on a tablet, "His name is John." And suddenly, he can speak again. He begins praising God, and word gets out about this whole miraculous situation. And our Scripture today is the prophecy he made about Jesus and John. It's utterly joyful, and so we're going to spend the rest of our time seeing where our joy comes from. If we're doing Advent right, we're taking some time in joyful appreciation of what this prophecy tells us.

First, *our joy in God comes from remembering the reliability of God's promises over time.* Zechariah refers to history and historical figures several times. He mentions that the Lord has raised up a Savior in the house of David – there's one promise accounted for, the promise that the line of David would always rule. Then Zechariah says that we know this because God has spoken through the holy prophets of long ago. That's another set of promises kept, the revelation to all the people who spoke for God over a thousand years. Then he goes all the way back to the oath God swore to Abraham. There's yet another promise, the one that God would bless all nations through Abraham.

Zechariah's original problem was that, in the stress and fear of meeting the angel, he forgot his heritage. He forgot where He came from. Had he remembered, he wouldn't have challenged Gabriel. He would have rejoiced that God was going to do in his life what he had done in the past for Abraham and Sarah. He would have considered all the times the LORD did exactly what He said He was going to do. He eventually remembered, but he had a long time in silence to think about it.

How often do we think about all the many blessings poured out on us over our lifetimes? We live in the moment, so we focus on the issues we've got right now and in the immediate future. But that can blind us to remembering God's faithfulness over time. We just got done celebrating Thanksgiving, but even then, our thanks is usually for the things that have happened in the last few days, or maybe the last year if we're really thoughtful. But God has been faithful throughout our entire existence.

God's taken care of us through financial setbacks and family heartbreaks. He's been there through disastrous car wrecks and scary injuries. He has given us children and a home. I've never been without what I needed. He has given us friends all over the places, including all of you here. And He has been faithful through dark days when I have not been very faithful.

God is faithful throughout our lives, and He has been faithful throughout history. He has been faithful to His promises, faithful to His people, faithful to even those who have rejected Him. He has kept every promise He has made. There are promises yet to come, but we can trust they will happen because of all the promises God has already kept. God's timing is not our timing, so we can't judge God's faithfulness based on our immediate circumstances. But we can know this: God is reliable. Keep trusting in the promises.

And what are those promises? That comes in point two: *Our joy in God comes from remembering the content of the promises He has kept.* Specifically, the verbs. Listen to all the verbs Zechariah gives praise for: God has come. God has redeemed. God has raised up. God has shown mercy. God has remembered. God has rescued. God has enabled. God is not up in heaven watching from a distance. God is not fretting over what someone on earth is going to do that He can't control. God is active, and He's acting for us. We're the ones He does these things for. He's redeemed *us*. He's remembered *us*. He's raised up a horn of salvation, Jesus, for *us*. He has shown *us* mercy. God has rescued *us*. God has saved *us*.

When I think of all those things God has done, I am blown away. Zechariah's prophecy is only three sentences, but they are jam-packed, overflowing with all that God has done. The last sentence prophecies about John and Jesus – John will be a prophet who prepares the way of the Lord, who teaches the people of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. He will make the path ready for Jesus to come and shine on us and guide us into His way of true peace. God is working through John and Jesus for our benefit. We benefit from every promise God keeps.

God has done so much on our behalf. Our salvation's already a done deal. He's given us mercy through His Son so that our sins are not counted against us. We have been rescued from the darkness of sin. God remembers us over and over again and shows us His favor. We don't get what we deserve; we receive grace. That's cause for joy. There are plenty of joy squelchers in our world – everything from car repairs to relationship troubles and everything in between. But we find joy when we remember what God has done through the promises He has kept.

And perhaps the best way to experience that joy is to know that the promises are for a purpose. Zechariah says that God has done all these great things and kept all these great promises "to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." We don't have grace from God so we can sit around and watch TV. We haven't received mercy from God so we can indulge our hobbies and interests and whatever. He has given us mercy and grace and enabled us to serve Him. We are blessed to bless God in return.

I encourage you, don't ignore this truth. Make the time in your schedule to serve God. We do that in part by praying and reading Scripture and learning in church, but we also serve God by serving others. Figure out where you can do that. Ask God what He would have you do. See if He's put a passion on your heart where you can serve with joy. Maybe it's through singing or taking photos or packing groceries or tutoring. But God has kept these promises so that we can serve Him and tell others why we serve. He's kept His promises so we can do it without fear. If I donate my time somewhere and share God's love with someone and they don't want it, so what? We serve God not so much through effectiveness as we do faithfulness. Serve God through drawing close to Him, then serving others, and God will do the heavy lifting.

So we find joy in God's keeping His promises throughout history, and we find joy in the content of those promises, the active way God fulfills them. But there's one more joy left in this passage. *Our joy in God comes from remembering where the promised Messiah comes from.* Zechariah speaks of Jesus in a unique way. He calls Him "the rising sun [who] will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

The Christmas season is full of reminders that Jesus was a little baby. Because He is born of Mary, He's obviously human. But if He's just human, there's not much reason to pay attention to Him. He might have been good, even godly, but if He was just human, He isn't enough. He cannot bridge the gap between God and man. And since God told us in the Old Testament that it was a huge affront to Him if we worshiped anyone but Him, if we worship a Jesus that is only human, we sin. We give glory to a man instead of God.

But Zechariah knows that Jesus is not just human. No other human can be called "the rising sun who will come to us from heaven." That was the kind of language that earthly kings called themselves when they wanted their subjects to consider them to be divine. It was blasphemy. But it's not Jesus who calls Himself that title. It's Zechariah speaking the Word of God. Jesus is the eternal King who is from heaven; that's His rightful place. The Bible is clear that we are of the earth; as God said to Adam when he sinned, "You were made from the dust, and you'll return to the dust when you die." We aren't from heaven. But Jesus is. We aren't the natural children of God. But Jesus is.

And that should be a huge place of joy for us. Joy that we don't have to do it all, joy that we won't be measured on a scale of how much good to bad we've done, joy that God has taken care of it. Jesus makes the way for us to approach the Father. He can go to the Father with our needs because He's been where the Father lives – that's home to Him. He is our rising sun because He shines light into our dark places. He lights even the darkest paths we have to take so that we know we don't walk them alone. Because Jesus is from heaven, He can show us what true peace really is.

This Advent and Christmas season, take some time to let your joy shine through to others. Just reflect the light the Son of God has shined on you. Find joy in God's promises. Because while we wait for the second coming of Christ, He has already fulfilled all the promises that assure our salvation. Find joy in the fact that God has been at work in our world and in your life. And live in that joy not just this holiday, but forevermore.