

“The World Needs Hope”

Luke 1:5-14, 67-79

Christmas is clearly a season for hope. People are hoping to be with family for Christmas. Children are hoping for the right present. Some people are hoping for a break at Christmas because they are tired. These are small-scale hopes.

Some large-scale hopes are: hoping that maybe Christmas can be the event that keeps a marriage together. Or that the extra money from extra work at Christmas will help them financially. People who suffered in 2025 are hoping that 2026 will be a better year. Some people are hoping to afford a house, or to find the right partner or a job or healing from a disease. Many people are hoping for peace in war-torn countries or hoping for a better government. And the list goes on and on. When people talk about hope, it usually has to do with changed circumstances.

But even when our circumstances change, they don't necessarily offer spiritual hope for the soul. Many of us know that improved circumstances don't necessarily bring joy or contentment. Where then do we turn for hope?

When we open the pages of the New Testament, we must keep in mind how the Old Testament ended, 400 years prior in the book of Malachi. There are promises God gave to Israel that had not been fulfilled yet:

Mal. 3:1 *“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty.*

This wasn't a new promise but a reminder that an earlier promise was still waiting to be fulfilled:

Is. 40:1 *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*

³ *A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God*

Another promise, also from Isaiah that had yet to be fulfilled was in Ch. 9:1

9 *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan— ² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. ³ You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. ⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. ⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,*

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

So Israel was looking for the Messiah, who would rule again on David's throne and set up an era of peace and blessing. His coming would be preceded by a messenger, one who would pave the way for Him. The area of Galilee will play a major part in this. And He will be human – a birth – but somehow given by God, for He will be given to Israel.

When we begin the New Testament we see some of these promises start being fulfilled and the writers and the recipients start to put these pieces together. We especially see this when we open Luke's gospel since he traces the origins of Jesus' coming to the forerunner prior to Jesus' coming.

The plight of Zechariah and Elizabeth reflects on a micro level the larger-scale plight that Israel found themselves in. Walking with God but not seeing the blessings. A godly people who feel God has forgotten them. Their hopes have been dashed. They prayed for a child and God has been silent; like he's been silent for 400 years since Malachi's appearance. Where is God? Why hasn't He come through for the godly people (Zechariah & Elizabeth) or His chosen people, Israel? And are we not strangers to feeling hopeless and wondering where God is?

All God's People Experience Hopeless Situations **(1:5-7)**

Luke's introduction (1:1-4) said he carefully investigated everything from the beginning. He even tells us when these things happened to prove these things are true. *"In the time of Herod, king of Judah"*. Herod was appointed by Rome as 'king' of Judah. He began his reign in 37 BC and died around 4 BC. He was a vain, tyrant caring little for the Jews and their ways. He had a golden eagle statue placed at the entrance to the temple which infuriated the nation. He murdered his first wife, her mother and her brothers. Luke reminds us Elizabeth and Zechariah and their peers lived under

A godless government (v.5a)

The Jews hated Herod being called king because they knew he was an illegitimate king. The Bible promises the Messiah will come back and rule and that when He takes David's throne one day. God's people longed for that day since they were living under a godless government who cared little about their beliefs and values. This is the Herod who would order the killing of the baby boys born around the time of Jesus' birth on Bethlehem. Herod ruled for over 30 years. It had to have seemed an eternity for God's people, and yet he did eventually die of a nasty disease. Even though rulers change, they are often godless and oppressive towards God's people. God's people can identify with that kind of hopelessness.

After Herod died in 4 BC the Jews in the city of Sepphoris (not far from Nazareth) revolted against Rome but they were soundly defeated. Rome crucified 2000 rebels, burned the city and forced the rest into slavery. This was what it was like to live under the oppression of Rome. As well, like Zechariah and Elizabeth

We all experience personal disappointment (v.7)

We are told they were godly people, blameless, consistently keeping all the Lord's commands. He was a priest married to a priest's daughter (she even had the same name as Aaron's wife), so God should bless them with many sons to keep on in ministry? But God had closed the womb of

Elizabeth until a specific time. Zechariah was an honourable man who loved his wife since he never divorced her (which he could have since she produced no children). She felt disgraced (1:25) and no doubt people talked. 'Zechariah and Elizabeth must be hiding sin in their life because they have no children.' Things like that.

We've all experienced personal disappointments in life. It could be a sickness or an injury. The loss of a spouse, parent or sibling too early. Some of you have experienced job loss, divorce, bankruptcy, a fire, a miscarriage. It could be the pain of a child who walked away from the Lord. Even now you may have a financial, emotional, physical burden that you continue to carry.

What we need to grasp here is that Luke clearly shows that godliness is not a guarantee of a problem-free life, nor is the reality of pain in our lives a direct result of sin. So then, what do we do when we're living for God and we're experiencing disappointments?

Keep serving God (vv.5b-6)

Zechariah served as a priest in the division of Abijah. Each division served two one-week shifts during non-holy day times. During the three feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, everyone worked.

Apparently, there were 300 priests per division and lots were cast each day as to which ones would get special roles like, burning incense on the altar of incense. If the lot rolled to you, it was the only time you could do this. Since there were so many priests, you only got one turn. Most would not get a turn.

In spite of his personal disappointment in God (as shown in Elizabeth's comment that God had now looked with favour and now taken away her disgrace; implying that they believed He had withheld these things from them for a time), he goes and still serves God, remains faithful to his wife yet Luke says, they were blameless, meaning, it was difficult to find any sin they were guilty of. When we keep serving God, we give God an opportunity to work. And so Luke states v.8 "Now it happened ..." and 'he was chosen by lot'. These are not coincidences.

Stick with God. Don't give up on God. He's not done with us yet. So, yes we all experience hopeless times in our life and ...

We All Experience Unanswered Prayer **(1:8-20)**

We've all prayed for long periods of time that God would change our circumstances but it didn't happen or hasn't happened yet. Had Zechariah not served God as he normally did he would have missed out on an amazing blessing that God was waiting to show him. So we have to learn to

Trust God's timing (vv.8-10)

... when we're waiting on answers to our prayers. God's timing was initially lost on Zechariah. What was he chosen to do? Burn incense on the altar of incense which is a symbolic reminder that God hears our prayers. What are the people outside doing? Praying. Praying for what? Hope. Hope that God is going to change their circumstances. When Gabriel shows up, where is he standing? At the right side of the altar, the side of favour. Where is the altar of incense located? In front of the curtain inches away from the Ark of the Covenant, the symbolic presence of God. And Gabriel, who

literally stands in the presence of God in heaven (v. 19) and comes from God to tell Zechariah in person

Know that our prayers are heard (vv.11-13)

What prayer?

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 give him the name John.

Whether Zechariah prayed that prayer at that moment is hard to know but he certainly prayed it many, many times. Most likely he was praying for the Messiah to come or at least relief from Roman oppression; for God’s promises to come to fruition, for relief from Roman oppression. We know what prayer Gabriel is referring to: their no-longer prayed for prayer of a child, specifically a son to carry on the family name. This son will be in ministry because the answer to their prayer is also the answer to Israel’s prayers. In our myopic view of our prayer life, we often don’t connect God’s broader work to our specific prayers. Here’s a revelation about our prayers we need to understand:

Believe that the answer is not only for you (vv.14-17)

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 from birth. ¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back 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 fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

“Many” will rejoice because he will be greatly used by God, empowered by the Spirit to turn people’s hearts back to God. And v.17 connects Malachi 4:5-6, the last words of the Old Testament, to John, saying, this is why you’ve had to wait for a son. And we know Zechariah struggles to believe this, is stricken speechless by God until John is born. He has 9 months to meditate on these truths. And let’s jump to 1:68 and see how he now sees what God has done as he sings this song once his mouth is enabled to speak again:

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— ⁷² to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

First, Zechariah sees the big picture, which in our pain and disappointment we sometimes forget. We forget that as believers,

We All Experience Blessings that Remind Us To Focus Upward (1:67-80)

Luke says Zechariah “prophesied”. But prophecy essentially means he spoke God’s truth. He forget in his personal pain that God’s promises are still true and this blessing from Him reminded him

to thank God and look up again and forward. Because a lot of what he said still didn't happen. Israel would suffer under Rome even more. His own son would be beheaded for confronting governing leaders with God's Word. We are still waiting for salvation from our enemies and all who hate us and still looking for the time when we will serve Him in holiness and righteousness all our days.

But every promise that has come true reminds us that every promise will come true. And every blessing in our life now, is a reminder that God cares and there's far more to come in the future. Notice how Zechariah's focus is all on what God is now going to do for others because he and Elizabeth's prayer has been answered. He talks about all that first before he talks about his so John's role:

⁷⁶ *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, [Mal. 3:1; Is. 40:3] ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven [Mal. 4:2] ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness [Is. 9:2] and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."*

So what are you hoping for now, at Christmas, next year, or a few years from now? What have you been praying for that hasn't been answered yet? What disappointment has God not lifted from you yet?

Keep serving God because you may miss what He wants to do for you but also through you to others. Keep praying because *'your petition has been heard'*. He's got a perfect time and a greater purpose that we're not ready or the circumstances aren't right for - yet.

And don't let the temporary hopelessness blind you from seeing blessings all around you. Watch for them. Thank God for them. Write them out daily. Every small blessing reminds us that God will bless us and keep us and make His face shine on us, and turn His favour toward us and change our circumstances? Yes, one day. But for now, give us Your peace that surpasses all understanding as we wait for You to answer our prayers. Why will He do that? Because he has put His Name on us.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net