

# GOD ASSURES US THAT OUR FUTURE IS SECURE BY WORKING THROUGH HUMAN WEAKNESS

## Luke 1:5-25

### INTRODUCTION

We received this magazine in the mail. The cover captured my attention because it promises that within the magazine are “9 surprising strategies” to give you a happier new year. I’d like 2011 to be happier than 2010, wouldn’t you? Here are a few of the strategies: breath cold air, make your bed, exercise, don’t dwell on your failures, eat a nutritious snack around 2pm, start baking or some other hobby, ... The author has surveyed lots of research that has been done on what sorts of things lead to an increase in happiness and has written a book about it. I want you to notice what this magazine is doing. First there is a promise of a happier future. Second, the way to obtain this happier future is to trust the research and insights of this author. You are invited to have faith in the author and her plan of salvation. Third, if you trust the author, then you must do what the author says. At the core of the argument is an appeal to the trustworthiness of the author.

The gospel of Jesus Christ shares a lot in common with this argument. Listen to how Jesus states this in Luke 9:23-24, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?” Here is the advice prescribed by Jesus: Lose everything now in order to follow him and in the future you will gain everything. Seek to gain everything in this life now and thus do not follow Jesus and in the future you will lose everything. Just like in the case of the magazine article, whether or not you trust Jesus and follow him is determined by whether or not you are confident that Jesus is reliable. This is the question: is Jesus trustworthy? Can he deliver what he promises?

Luke’s two volumes, the gospel of Luke and its sequel, Acts, were written to answer that question. How do I know that? Look at vv. 1-4 of the first chapter of Luke. Luke tells a man named Theophilus that, after carefully researching the facts surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus he has written down these two books so that Theophilus might be certain the things he has been told about Jesus and his saving work are true. That word translated “certain” in the ESV is a word that is not merely talking about intellectual certainty but about assurance. Luke wrote these two books so that we can be confident that Jesus Christ really lived, died and rose again so that we will have assurance that what he promises about the future will actually come true. These two books are written so we can have hope; so we can live out our lives on this planet following Jesus full of security and joy and confident expectation of a glorious future even as we lose the pleasures of this life.

During this Christmas season we are going to examine the first chapter of Luke’s gospel in three sermons. Our objective, as we consider this first chapter in Luke’s two volume work, will be to grow in our assurance that we can indeed abandon all hope of finding life in this life and depend entirely upon Jesus Christ to give us eternal life. We will seek to come to that place where we can confidently say that if we belong to Jesus Christ and lose everything in this life, we have lost nothing of value for we are going to live forever with him in his eternal kingdom. Is it really a wise and safe thing to entrust your whole life, your entire future to this man, Jesus Christ, who lived and died some 2000 years ago? That is the question I aim for us to answer together.

### MAIN POINT

**You can be sure that God has a good future for you because...**

#### **I. God works for and through his oppressed people (vv.5-7)**

Luke begins his story of assurance and certainty by describing for us an old, godly, childless couple. The way in which he describes Zechariah and Elizabeth connects them to dozens of OT believers. The language of verse 6 identifies them with righteous Noah and blameless Job and David worshipping before God and faithful Abraham and obedient Josiah and many other OT believers. Luke also mirrors here the beginning of the story of God’s salvation in Genesis 12-19 where we are introduced to an old, godly, childless couple by the name of Abram and Sarai. As we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth we are reminded of them and those other childless couples in the OT: Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Manoah and his wife, Elkanah and Hannah. To each

of these barren couples God gave a son who became a significant character in the story of God's deliverance of his people; Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Samson and Samuel, respectively.

So Luke brings to mind the whole story of the OT by the way in which he describes this couple. The story of God's making Israel into a great nation and giving to them the land of Canaan does not end well. After centuries of disobedience and rebellion to God and his ways, God finally pours out his wrath upon Israel and drives them out of the land and scatters them among the nations, while promising that one day he would bring back to the land a remnant of Israel and then he would fulfill all his promises to them. Listen to this promise in Isaiah 10:20-22, which follows his promise to destroy Israel by the hand of the Assyrians, "In that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return." However, while a remnant of Israelites did return and were able to rebuild the temple, yet they never experienced the fullness of those glorious promises which stated they would be the head of all the nations and all the peoples of the earth would come to worship Yahweh in Jerusalem. David's greater son had not yet appeared to shepherd Israel, to destroy all their enemies, to establish his kingdom of peace and prosperity. Luke reminds us of this story at the beginning of his account of Jesus. It has been over 400 years since the remnant of Israel returned to the land from their exile, since the last prophet, Malachi, spoke to God's people and still Messiah has not come.

Zechariah and Elizabeth show that God's people still live in the land of Israel and still worship the Lord at his temple. However, verse 5 informs us that they are not a free people. There is a vassal king ruling over Judea, whose name is Herod. He is Jewish and rules over most of Israel but he does so at the behest of the Roman government. He is a Roman lackey. They are the ones who are truly in charge. The people of God, while present in the land, are oppressed by others in their own land. Zechariah and Elizabeth are living by faith, they are faithfully following the commandments and regulations of the Lord but the rule of God over and through his people is not being realized. In addition, their personal situation illustrates the oppressive condition in which the people of God live. Elizabeth is barren, which, as she says in v. 25 is a cause of shame and reproach, just like not being the mighty nation God promised, but being a nation ruled over by Rome is also a cause of shame and reproach.

Isn't it true that the things which shake our assurance in God's promised glorious future, which cause us to question the sanity of trusting in Christ are the experiences of persistent oppression by sin, the ongoing losses and sufferings where God appears to be silent and absent, the unrelenting misery that we see in the world, the apparent lack of God's fulfilling of his promises? So the story of God's sending his Messiah into the world does not begin with armies marching out to overthrow evil people, or God sending fire down from heaven upon the wicked or the appearance of a fully grown Messiah who conquers evil like some superhero. Rather the story begins by describing an old, godly but barren couple living under Roman rule in the land of Israel. A couple who has almost come to the end of their lives without seeing any indication that God's promises are going to be fulfilled. The story begins with people like us who are trusting in God's promises and waiting for him to do his work. We are going to see that God now works for them and through them. Thus we gain assurance that our waiting will not be in vain, our banking our future on Jesus will be rewarded. God will work for us and through us in the midst of these oppressive conditions just as he did for and through Zechariah and Elizabeth.

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## **II. God is working out his plan to save his people (vv.8-17)**

Zechariah has left his home in the hills of Judea, south of Jerusalem and has come to Jerusalem to serve in the temple with the other members of his priestly division, the division of Abijah. These divisions were organized by King David around 1000 years prior to this. Each division of priests would serve in the temple for one week, two times each year. One of their duties was, in accordance with the Law of Moses, every morning and every

evening, at the time of the morning and evening sacrifices, to take coals from the altar of burnt offering into the Holy Place. They put the coals on the altar of incense which stood in front of the curtain behind which was the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place. Once the coals were placed on the altar of incense the priest would cover the coals with powdered incense which would burn up and so fill the Holy Place with sweet smelling smoke. On this occasion, Zechariah was chosen to offer the incense by lot which is like drawing straws. This was viewed as a very great honor. While he entered the outer sanctuary of the temple a multitude of Jewish people stood in the courtyard praying.

Suddenly, while he is placing the coals on the altar of incense, an angel of the Lord appears, standing at the right side of the altar. As happens every time an angel shows up, Zechariah was terrified. Then, as also happens every time an angel shows up the first thing he says is, "Don't be afraid." Then the angel informs him that the Lord has heard Zechariah's prayer. He is going to answer him by giving him a son through his wife Elizabeth and his name will be John. We can be certain from what Zechariah says in v. 18 that he was not praying for a son while offering the incense. Rather, the angel is referring to past prayers that he and his wife had prayed for the Lord to provide for them a child, prayers which they had not prayed for a long time as Elizabeth was past the age of fertility. The angel tells him that not only he and Elizabeth will have joy but many people will be full of joy over the birth of John.

Zechariah and many others will be joyful at John's birth because he will be great before the Lord. This is not a reference to his person but to his office. He will be counted as one of the greatest of all the prophets of God. Also, like Samuel, like Samson, like the priests while on duty, like those lay persons who took the Nazarite vow, he would not drink wine or strong drink for his whole life. Like all the prophets and servants of God in the OT he would be filled with the HS. However, unlike most of the prophets and other servants of God in the OT that filling would be permanent and would begin at his birth. Please note here that John's work as prophet is a matter of God's sovereign grace. He doesn't do anything to earn or work for this position. It is freely given to him by God. God is acting according to his own plan and purposes and according to his free grace.

Then in vv. 16-17 the angel describes the work of John in language that is full of OT allusions and references. The word "turn" is the word which fills the OT prophets. Usually it is translated "return". Listen to this one verse from Malachi 3:7, "From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts..." However, John will succeed in doing what most of the prophets of Israel failed to do; he will return many in Israel back to the Lord their God (v. 16). It is important to note that while the turning is here ascribed to the work of John it is obvious that the only reason John will be able to do this is because God has promised that he will do this. This promise of God is in sharp contrast to what God told the three major OT prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. He told all three of them that they would preach but that none would listen. Thus it is God's will alone and his HS alone that makes John's preaching successful in turning many, though not all, in Israel back to the Lord their God. It is impossible for any human being to turn another human being away from sin to God. This is only a work that God can do. However, he does it through, by means of the faithful proclamation of God's word by men. John will be one of those chosen tools of God whose words God will use to turn men from sin to himself.

Verse 17 then connects this turning work of John with the coming of the Messiah into the world. All the other prophets said that the Messiah would one day come. John is going to go before the Lord, before the Messiah as his herald so that the people of God are ready for his appearing. The list of OT passages to which the angel is referring is too long to mention. His language is most directly related to the last book of the OT, the prophet Malachi, who preached to the remnant of Israel that had returned from Babylon to Israel and had rebuilt the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. He was the last prophet to speak prior to this angel's announcement to Zechariah of John's birth. Listen to these three sentences from Malachi 3:1 & 4:5-6, "Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts... 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..." Do you hear

all the connections? John is the coming of the great prophet Elijah promised here. Not that he is the reincarnation of Elijah but he will possess what made Elijah a great prophet, his power and his spirit, which is a reference to the HS.

He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, as God promised through Malachi. What does that mean? Think of how divided Israel was in the days of Elijah (1 Kings 17-19). The vast majority of Israelites were worshipping false gods. There were only 7000 people in all Israel who had maintained the true worship of God. So Elijah, by his work destroys the worship of Baal and reunites Israel in the worship of Yahweh. So too, John will reunite Israel, not all Israel, but many in Israel in the true worship of God. This is what the gospel does; it unites former enemies, alienated family members, in and around the true worship of God. When sinners understand and trust that, contrary to every expectation, they are loved by God and forgiven of their sins by his gracious work in Christ, then we love all others who also have been loved by God. Fractured families are reunited around the knowledge of this love. Former enemies embrace as they recognize the beauty of salvation. The disuniting power of sin is broken as families and neighbors and the races of humanity are brought under the sway of God's gracious salvation. That is the meaning of that next clause, "to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous/just". Here is conversion. Men, women and children who live in rebellion towards God and in disobedience to his laws have their minds changed so that rather than hating God and his laws they now love God and his laws. Rather than preferring the pleasures of sin, they now prefer the pleasure of belonging to God and the pleasures of obeying him.

Clearly God, by his angelic messenger, is letting Zechariah know that the birth of this child, John, is a part of God's eternal plan to save his people. Luke by recording this conversation for us is letting us know that a reason to trust in Jesus is that his coming is the culmination of what God had been doing in and through Israel for thousands of years. Let's be honest, the thing which most often shatters our confidence in God, our trust in Jesus' ability to fulfill his promise to bring us to heaven is when we look at the chaos that is in the world and when we experience chaos in our private world. This is the most serious threat to our assurance, the fact of human suffering, the apparent power of evil in the world and in our lives. How can I trust in and gain hope from the promises of God in Christ when my child has a dread disease and God does not heal, when my friends and family betray me, when terrorists blow up people, when earthquakes level countries and millions of people continue to live in tents in Haiti, when... you fill in the blank. When you read the history of the Bible you see the apparent chaos that is in the world. However, what the Bible does for us is gives us a "behind the scene" look at what is actually going on. God is working out his plan. The announcement of the birth of John shows that while all seems to be falling apart in the world, God is accomplishing his will. While the world does not see what he is doing, yet those who believe can see that the this is not a world of chaos but a world under the sovereign control of a just and loving God who is working out his perfect plan to save his people through Jesus. So we can have hope because we can see the ways in which God's plan has been worked out in the past against all odds and thus we know he will finish what he has begun.

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### **III. God's work does not depend on human faithfulness (vv.18-25)**

Zechariah responds to this revelation of the angel, not with faith but with unbelief. "How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years." The angel responds to this unbelief by saying, "Seriously? You're kidding me, right? Don't you know who I am? I am Gabriel, the same angel that came to Daniel to explain to him his vision about the coming of the Messiah. I live in the very presence of God. God himself sent me to tell you this good news which was foretold in the prophets, which you have read and know. What is wrong with you that you have not believed what I have said? Why won't you accept this good news? So you want a sign that what I have said is true? I'll give you a sign. You will not be able to speak until John is

born as I have said.” Most of us, if we were honest, would be on Zechariah’s side. We naturally think that unbelief in God’s promises is completely justified. We act as though there is no evidence of God’s power or presence in the world and so he has to do a lot to prove to us that he is trustworthy. Humans act as though skepticism is the only sane way to live. However, God thinks unbelief is completely irrational and that the only sane way to live is to trust his promises.

Zechariah has spent a lifetime studying the OT and has professed faith in the God who is revealed there for a lifetime. Everything we have observed that connects his situation with the OT narrative together with the appearance of the angel and the angel’s words ought to have convinced him of the trustworthiness of the promise. There is no excuse for his unbelief, just as there is no excuse for our unbelief. The power and presence of a great and glorious creator is set before the eyes of every human being every day of their lives. For us, as for billions of other humans on this planet, we also have the word of God available to bear witness to this creator’s plan to redeem all those who trust in Christ. Thus, we have no excuse for not trusting and loving the Triune God.

However, please note that while God’s word is met with unbelief, yet God’s plan is accomplished. Zechariah comes out of the temple and cannot speak. He must make signs to the people. The people, for their part, realize that Zechariah has seen a vision but they have no idea what it is that he has seen. Thus, the one man who knows what God is going to do is unable to tell anyone about it. The people of Israel remain blind to God’s work until the time of God’s choosing to reveal it. Zechariah goes home and his old wife becomes pregnant, just like Gabriel promised. The barren woman conceives. Her reproach, her shame is taken away. God’s plan moves forward in spite of human unbelief and blindness. And this is not simply God’s plan to give this old couple a son but God’s plan to save his people.

Again, this final act and these final words in our text this morning connect to a common OT motif. Unbelieving and disobedient Israel is compared to a barren woman in Isaiah 54:1. In Isaiah 54 God promises that the barren woman, Israel, will bear many children. In 54:4 the Lord promises barren Israel that she will not remember her shame, her reproach, anymore because of God’s saving work through his suffering Messiah. This is the same word that Elizabeth uses to describe her own situation. Thus we see that in the conception of John that God is to give to barren, unbelieving Israel as many descendants as there are stars in the heavens and sands on the seashore.

God’s plan moves forward while humans are faithless and unbelieving. Nothing and no one can halt his work. You can have assurance that God is going to give you a glorious future because his fulfillment of his purposes does not depend in any way on human faithfulness. You can trust him and be full of confidence in the future because what God begins he completes, because all those whom he predestined, he called and all those he called he justified and all those he justified he glorified. God himself is the author and perfecter of our faith. Just as he disciplined Zechariah in such a way that, as we will see next week, his doubt was turned to faith, so God works in us so that we hold fast to Christ in faith to the end of our days. God will successfully bring every believer into his heavenly kingdom, just as he successfully brought John into the world through an unbelieving old man and his old, barren wife.

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