

Preparing The Way

“Providence” has a very special meaning and importance for me in my relationship with Christ. That’s because I believe so strongly that God truly is “Sovereign” over all that He has created. And that yes, without hesitation, He regularly inserts His Sovereign Hand into most all the matters of this “natural world”, bringing to fruition, all the plans and purposes that He envisioned when He first created this earth and mankind to fill it.

And these events that we see taking place here in this precious Book of Luke are a perfect example of His Providential Hand carrying forward all those plans that He made, especially those plans He had made to redeem men and women’s corrupt souls from their sins.

So, turn with me again to the Book of Luke, chapter 1, and beginning in verse 5, let’s read about how those eternal plans began to first unfold.

⁵ In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zacharias was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

¹⁸ And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zacharias, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."
(Luke 1:5-25)

If you and I had never before heard the precious Gospel Story about God sending His Dear Son to the earth to redeem sinful men and women from our lost condition and to bring us the gift of eternal salvation, these words that we have just read would not hold much excitement. But folks, because we do know the story, and we know it well, seeing and hearing these words as they unfold before us should give you and me great cause to rejoice.

Here, God is bringing about the beginning steps of a promise and a prophecy He had made several hundred years earlier, through the Prophets Isaiah and Malachi. Here God is telling us about how He, personally, is sending a forerunner, a herald to announce and to prepare the way for His Dear Son to bring blessed eternal redemption to the souls of the "sons and daughters of men", you and me and all the many others who will turn and give their hearts to Christ. Praise the Lord!

And to make sure that no one would confuse whether or not this was coming directly from His own hand, God used "means" which even the simplest of willing minds would have to accept.

First, He chose a fearsome angel to deliver the message. And then for the parents, He chose an elderly man and his wife. The wife had a barren womb, but would now conceive and bear a very special child, a child who would later grow up to be a great prophet, a prophet like no other, a prophet who would be a herald going out ahead of the coming Messiah, the Son of the Most High God, with a "voice crying out in the wilderness, prepare ye the 'way' of the Lord". What an exciting thought to consider!

As for this elderly man and woman that God chose to bear this great prophet, may we not err as so many who read these words are apt to err and think that God first looked to and fro throughout the earth to find just the right parents to bear this future prophet. No, not at all! God is eternal, living in a "forever now" time, seeing always the beginning and the end all at the same time.

And one of the wonderful attributes of God is that He is the "first cause" of all things, determining the time and the place of each person's being upon the earth, personally creating and weaving each person together in their mother's womb, knitting together not only the DNA of their body, but also their minds and hearts, and especially their spirits. And I have no doubt that that was especially so with both Zacharias and Elizabeth.

And as we are told here in verse 6, God had also put a devout faith within the hearts of both Zacharias and Elizabeth, preparing them for this special child that Elizabeth was to bear. Verse 6,

⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. (Luke 1:6)

As we read words such as these, we must always remember that, whether it be before Christ's coming to the earth or afterwards, such attributes as "righteousness" within the hearts of men and women, as is spoken about here, were always a "gift" from God.

Sinful men and women have never been able to achieve such attributes by their own efforts. And so, as we read these words,

⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. (Luke 1:6)

We know that God's own hand had prepared their hearts and minds for the calling He had placed upon them, carefully designing every step of the plan that would unfold to bring the Messiah, our blessed Savior, to earth. Zacharias and Elizabeth and their son, John, were just one part of God's blessed preparations.

And note here that for Zacharias and Elizabeth, the prophesied birth of their child, John, had for a long time, been a deep desire within each of their own hearts, this showing to us a magnificent attribute of God, how He works His plans "concurrent" with the plans that we make, those plans seeming to be our own but also perfectly the plans of God. Listen!

¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. (Luke 1:13)

And likewise, this son, John, who would be born to them was specifically created and given a divine purpose even before the foundations of the earth, to be and to do all that he would do, to preach and to prophesy and to prepare the way of the coming Messiah, the Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. Listen! Verse 14,

¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:14-17)

Note here in verse 15 that God would fill this child with His Holy Spirit even while the child was still in his mother's womb. We'll read about that later on in these words, when on the occasion that Mary, pregnant with the Lord Jesus, came to visit Elizabeth. And as Mary entered the room, John leaped in his mother's womb. Praise be to God!

Folks, the invisible hand of God is so evident throughout all that is taking place in these events. Yes, men and women are doing what they do, but clearly God is directing and carrying out every step.

And with all this being said about this little baby leaping in his mother's womb, does it not give us pause to think about how meaningless our current culture of people consider unborn babies to be. This current culture is called a "cancel culture", cancelling out the value and meaning of anything that they disagree with, including the very lives of unborn babies, seeming to regard unborn babies as being worthless, throwaways.

But thanks be to God, He does not think that way. He knits each baby together in its mother's womb, forming each one in His own image, preparing each child for their purpose and calling in life.

. . . Looking back for a moment at these words in verse 6 where we're told that Zacharias and Elizabeth were righteous and blameless, we must not assume that they had some form of "perfected holiness". No, that was not the point of these words. And we can immediately see that not to be so in the response that Zacharias gave to the words of the Angel, Gabriel. In his response, we are reminded that each person is still a sin-prone creature, subject to weakness in their faith.

Though Zacharias was a devout believer and a Priest in full-time service to the Lord, still His "faith" was shown to be tentative. And here, as a loving Father will always do, God demonstrates some gentle discipline of Zacharias for his "unbelief". Verse 18,

¹⁸ And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." (Luke 1:18-20)

While the word, "faith" is not used here in regard to the response of Zacharias, it is clearly the missing condition within his soul that brought about his doubt and then the discipline. And this is the first indication within this gospel that "faith" would be that very "special relationship" between God and man that would bring God's blessing to fruition.

A question . . . was Gabriel's response of taking away Zacharias' voice a decision made by Gabriel alone? No, not at all! Elect Angels ever and always say and do the exact Will of God. I have no doubt that the discipline of taking away the voice of Zacharias came directly from God.

Here also, we're given a short glimpse of what this child, John, would later be like. We are told here that he would, in some ways, be a very simple person, but in other ways, he would be exceptional beyond our comprehension. Verse 13

¹³ . . . the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:13-17)

This baby that the angel, Gabriel, is here telling Zacharias about would truly be special in every way, a man who would go ahead of Jesus, preaching a message that would "prepare the way" for all that the Lord Jesus would do.

And Jesus would later say of John the Baptist that he was one of the greatest men to have ever been on the earth.

Had the other local priests, and the Scribes and the Pharisees been paying attention to the scriptures they valued so highly, they would have known about

this special child and would have been looking forward to his coming. And they should have immediately recognized him when he arrived.

How often do you suppose it was that the Scribes and Pharisees studied and even taught their congregations about those words spoken by the prophet Isaiah, over 700 years earlier, in Isaiah 40, verse 3?

³ The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert, A highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3)

And then also those words in the Book of Malachi chapter 4.

⁵ Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse." (Malachi 4:5-6)

This baby that Elizabeth would soon bear, John the Baptist, would later be given this very special calling and opportunity, to prepare the "way" for Jesus, a very special preparation that would prepare people's hearts and minds to receive the Lord Jesus as Savior and Lord. And John's principal message would be that of the need for "repentance".

And yes, "repentance" was something that the then current day Jew was very familiar with, but at the same time "not" really. Their then understanding of "repentance" was accomplished through certain "works of righteousness" and through animal sacrifice. But all of that would change as John would later preach, and as Jesus would later teach. Repentance would soon take on a whole new meaning!

And John's calling would be the necessary beginning of that "new understanding". In the same way that a farmer must till the soil before seeds can be planted, John would soften the hearts of the people to hear the message of salvation that Jesus would bring to them. And that softening would take place through their "repentance for their sins".

Sadly, it seems that too often in today's evangelical efforts, preachers fail to stress the need for repentance, for a person to see themselves as being sinful and for their need to repent of their sins. We too often are so busy trying to get a person to pray a sinner's prayer that we forget that they have sins in their hearts that need to be dealt with, sins that are barriers to true conviction that must come to a person's soul before they even realize that they are sinners in need of a Savior.

But here in this special calling of John the Baptist, we can see that God places a great deal of importance on repentance. And that you and I need to do the same.

As we close our time of meditation today, I want to remind you and me that each of us has a calling that God has placed upon us. John the Baptist was sent ahead of Jesus in that day to "prepare ye the way of the Lord", but what about today? Who will go before Jesus in these days?

That folks, is our calling, yours and mine. You and I are the modern day "John the Baptists". It is our job, our assignment, our calling to "make straight in the wilderness the path of the Lord".

You and I are to go out in the spirit of Elijah, preaching a message of repentance and turning the hearts of people to the Lord. And you and I are called to give the good news of the soon coming day of the Lord. Are we fulfilling our call? Listen!

³ The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert, A highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3)