

“PREPARING THE WAY OF THE LORD”

Psalm 63:1-5, Isaiah 40:1-5, Luke 1:5-25

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In his book, *The Sacred Romance*, John Eldredge writes:

“As a young boy, around the time my heart began to suspect that the world was a fearful place and I was on my own to find my way through it, I read the story of a Scottish discus thrower from the nineteenth century. He lived in the days before professional trainers and developed his skills alone in the highlands of his native village. He even made his own discus from the description he read in a book. What he didn't know was the discus used in competition was made of wood with an *outer rim* of iron. His was solid metal and weighed three or four times as much as those being used by his would-be challengers.

“This committed Scotsman marked out in his field the distance of the current record throw and trained day and night to be able to match it. For nearly a year, he labored under the self-imposed burden of the extra weight, becoming very, very good. He reached the point at which he could throw his iron discus the record distance, maybe farther. He was ready.

“The highlander traveled south to England for his first competition. When he arrived at the games, he was handed the official wooden discus—which he promptly threw like a tea saucer. He set a new record, a distance so far beyond those of his competitors that no one could touch him. For many years he remained the uncontested champion.

“Something in my heart connected with this story” Eldredge says. *So, that's how you do it: Train under a great burden.*¹

So many people today ask the question of God, “Why am I having to go through this? No one else I know is dealing with this. Why me?”

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 124-125)

While I don't begin to speak in God's place, I have come to understand why we are sometimes allowed to go through testings and trials in our lives. God is training us through great burdens so that we might excel in living for Him. As I looked in my life at some of the trials I had to face, I began to see that the courage and faith that I developed through those struggles and trials enabled me to touch the lives of those around me that later experienced those same or similar struggles and trials. Because I had gone through those difficult times, and had been strengthened by God's presence throughout them, I am able to encourage and help support others in their own faith journey. God allowed me to experience those hardships so that I could build into the lives of others who are faced with enduring those same hardships.

And even though I prayed that those struggles would go away, that God would take them from me to make my life easier, I found that by having to push harder and strive for God's peace even more during those trials, the reward came when I was called to perform for God's purpose in the life of another. Who knows but that our current struggles and hardships are how God is preparing us to be used for the inspiration of another during their testing? Because we have endured the trials and tests, we can empathize with those who are hurting and struggling, too.

David came to understand this. As he was in the Desert of Judah, running from King Saul's armies that were bent upon killing him, David found God's presence and peace. Everything was taken away from him, so he had to rely upon God's provision. So he calls out to the Lord, "*You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek You; I thirst for You, my whole being longs for You, in a dry and parched land where there is no water*" (Psalm 63:1). Through those struggles and trials David prepared his heart to be used by God for His glory. So looking back upon those experiences allowed him to praise the Lord God for guiding him and strengthening him to become the king that God had called him to be.

Struggles and trials give us opportunities to really appreciate what we have, and how we've gotten them. Had David never been tried and tested before he became a king, he might not have become the man after God's own heart that he did become, having first experienced the trials and tests, and seeing God's deliverance and supply in the midst of them. Without trial and testing, there is little appreciation for the mercy and grace of God as He leads us through them to find His presence and peace. It is through trial and struggle, hardship and, often disappointment, that God makes known to us His purpose.

Listen to the account of Zechariah and Elizabeth. This is Luke 1:5-25. (READ Luke 1:5-25)

Zechariah was a priest, serving in the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. All his life he had wanted children so that he might create a lasting heritage. Yet as the years passed by, no children were born to him by Elizabeth, his wife. She was not able to conceive. Oh, the prayers they must have given to the Lord! Oh the heartache that must have been theirs! While all the other women in the community were able to have children, Elizabeth could not. Why God, why?

Many could have cast judgement upon them both, that they were doing something that displeased the Lord God, and that was God's judgement and punishment to them. Yet "*both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly*" (Luke 1:6). So why couldn't they have children? It was a very heavy burden to bear, and Elizabeth felt great disgrace among the other women. Yet, life went on and Zechariah and Elizabeth lived faithfully before the Lord.

And that's where the account begins today. Serving with his division of priests, as an old man, Zechariah was chosen to burn incense before the Lord. And it is there that God's messenger delivers some astounding news. God had heard Zechariah's prayer, and Elizabeth

was going to become pregnant and give him a son. And not just any son, but a son who would *“be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”* (1:15b-17).

But it is easy for us to ask why God waited until they were old before giving them this child? Why not grant them a child when they were young and they could enjoy him for most of their lives? Why then, when Elizabeth was *“well along in years”* (1:18)?

God had been preparing them for this child so that when he arrived, they would understand the tremendous role he would play in the bringing of God’s Messiah. And God’s timing had to coincide with many other events that had to happen. God had chosen Mary to be the earthly mother of the Messiah, but she hadn’t been born yet when Zechariah and Elizabeth were young. Mary needed the wisdom and assurance of Elizabeth in order to complete her task of being the mother of God.

And if John were to *“go before the Lord”* (1:17) to ready the people of Israel for the Savior, he couldn’t be born too much before the Messiah. John lived very prophetically, and died years before Jesus did at the hand of Herod, the king of Judea. God’s timing was perfect, but that required postponing the birth of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s son until they were old.

It was also another example of God being able to do anything. Very few women give birth to children when they are old, beyond the years of childbearing. God blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth with a son as a testimony of the greatness of God. And when John was born, He was loved greatly by his parents, because God had heard their prayers, He had not forgotten them, and He provided a son who would become the forerunner of the Messiah. And as a result,

all people who read the account of the Messiah learn about the faithfulness and righteousness of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Think about it - how many of God's servants were born when the mother was old? There's Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, Samuel the Prophet's mother. There's Sarah, the wife of Abraham, Isaac's mother. And there's Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah, John's mother. Three women who were desperate for a child, yet God postponed their pregnancies for just the right time to be at work for the Lord. God heard their prayers and answered them, but in His special time and way.

Zechariah could easily have followed Abraham's example, taking his wife's handmaid so that he could have a child through her. But instead, Zechariah remained faithful to Elizabeth and waited for the Lord God to provide. And even if He didn't provide a child to them, these two descendants of Aaron remained faithful to the Lord, and served Him blamelessly. God knew their hearts, had heard their prayers, and was delighted to use them to bring forth John, even in their old age, so that he would be the one who would prepare the people of Israel for the coming of the Lord's Messiah.

John was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-5 that we heard earlier. He would become *"A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's Salvation"* (Luke 3:4-6).

Now it's interesting to me that when the angel Gabriel informed Zechariah about the Lord's plan to give him a son, Zechariah found it very hard to believe. He used almost the exact words that Mary would when Gabriel told her that she would give birth to a son even before she

was married. While Mary was astonished about the possibility of God doing such a great thing in her and asking “*How can this be?*” (Luke 1:34), Zechariah questions, “*How can I be sure of this?*” (Luke 1:18). And while Mary is assured, “*Nothing is impossible with God*” (1:37), to convince Zechariah of God’s possibilities, Gabriel tells him “*And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time*” (1:20).

So all nine months of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Zechariah was mute, unable to express the wonders of God, and unable to tell Elizabeth what God was doing. Oh, he could write things down in order to express himself a little, but his voice would be silent because of his doubt.

Now all the time that Zechariah is talking to Gabriel, those outside the Temple praying began to wonder what had happened to him. Going into the Holy of Holies before the Lord was not a certain thing. If the man was not acceptable to the Lord, if there was some impurity in his heart, if he had not gone through the purification process correctly, it was met with sudden death right there before the altar of God.

In order to make certain that the priest didn’t die on the spot before God’s holiness while he was lighting the annual sacrifice of burnt incense, a rope was attached to the leg of the priest, in the event that they had to extract the body from the Holy of Holies. While Zechariah was taking so much time in the presence of the Lord to burn the incense, some may have begun to worry about what happened to him. They may have given a couple tugs on the rope to see if Zechariah was still alive or not. And “*when he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the Temple, for he kept making sign to them but remained unable to speak*” (1:22).

Imagine not being able to tell everyone what you had seen and heard! And when

Elizabeth becomes pregnant, imagine the frustration of not being able to share the good news with anyone. For some wives it would have been a pleasure not having their husband saying anything for nine months. Yet, I'll bet it was tough for Zechariah and Elizabeth. What they had long hoped for was finally happening. The Lord had indeed heard their prayer and the excitement must have been tremendous, too.

However, Elizabeth remained secluded for the first five months of her pregnancy. She may have not wanted to become the talk of the town for that time. Certainly there would have been some giggles from the other women. There may have been some ridiculous stories told, and maybe even some judgement cast her way. She may have been a little uncertain about what God was doing, as well. Zechariah was not able to speak to her to assure her that this was a special child given by God. All they could do was to remain faithful, despite the uncertainty, despite the growing joy in them, despite the frustration of Zechariah's mute condition. But through all that struggle, hardship and trial, God was at work to bring about His messenger who would proclaim to all of Israel the coming of the Messiah. God was preparing the way of the Lord.

So how does all this relate to us today? What can we take from this account of an amazing angelic appearance, a miraculous pregnancy, and the joy of a woman finally able to give birth to a child?

First, remember that God has a plan for the salvation of the world. We don't know who He will use to bring about His great plan, but God usually works in marvelous ways in those whom He has in mind to use to accomplish His plan.

Second, when things get tough, and testing and trials come your way, remember that God is with you as you put your faith and trust in Him. He hears your prayers and He knows just

what is best for you right at that moment. He'll not leave you hanging. If God calls you to work for Him, He will do whatever is necessary to prepare you for achieving His work. He wants you to diligently seek Him and follow Him.

Third, nothing is impossible with the Lord our God. Though we may think that what we hope for is far beyond anyone's accomplishment, God is greater than anything we could ever imagine. But we must be willing to give ourselves over to His plan for us in order for Him to use us. It's not about us - it's about us being His servants to bring about His glory through us.

Fourth, no matter what, stay faithful to the Lord and trust in Him. His plan may be far different than what we expect or hope for, but if we remain committed to serving Him, no matter what happens, He will use us to achieve a great thing, if we remain blameless and holy. Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.*"

Finally, though you may be faced with great struggles and hardships at the time, be ready to proclaim the glory of the Lord when He allows you to do so. When John was born, God opened Zechariah's mouth and allowed him to praise the Lord for all that He was doing. Give praise to the Lord for His great work in you so that others might see your life, and be able to get ready for Him to use them, too. There is so much left to be done before Jesus returns. Be the example of faithfulness and trust in the Lord so others may become like you.

Let's pray. Father, thank You for the struggles we have in our lives. As we face those difficulties, You grant us strength and courage to endure them. Thank You for examples of men and women who have gone before us, living obedient and righteous lives so that we can see how it's done to honor and glorify You in all our lives. Grant us hope, even in the darkest moments of our lives, so that we might shine brightly before others with the light of Jesus within us. This we pray in Jesus' great and powerful Name. AMEN