

Luke 1: 5-25 and 57-66; "Faith Tested and Proved", A Christmas Sermon delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on December 11th, 2011, in the Afternoon Worship Service.

The people whose lives we are to examine this afternoon are Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, the forerunner of our Lord. They are described for us here as both being righteous before God. They knew the Lord and it was a saving faith that they had because it was a walking faith which they lived out. These two went about their lives "walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord - blameless." A saving faith will always be a walking faith in this sense. A living and saving faith will always evidence itself in the pursuit of holiness by keeping the commandments of God. It was not only an imputed righteousness that they had, but it was an imparted righteousness as well. Do you profess to be a Christian? Then you will strive to do the same. But just because Zacharias and Elizabeth were righteous does not mean that they had learned every lesson that they needed to learn. Let us understand this; that until the day of our death we will still be learning the lessons of faith. Our faith in God, if it is true faith, will be tested. Our faith in what God intends to do through us will be tested. It will be tested at certain crucial points in order to prove and perfect the reality of our faith and to bring glory to God who brings these wonderful things to pass. I would like us to look at 4 crucial areas where our faith will be tested and perfected. **1st- Faith will be tested in relation to our prayers.** (Verses 5-13)

The truth is; that even though this couple was righteous, it didn't mean that they had never experienced disappointment in relation to answered prayer. Sometimes disappointment leads to unbelief. And unfortunately this is not always seen by Christians as a sinful mindset. Elizabeth was barren; she could not have children. They had tried many times for many years, but still no children. Now they were becoming advanced in years and they feared that they would have to bear this reproach all their lives. To be barren was looked upon as not having God's blessing, by many people in that day. To be barren would often mean that the woman, and the man as well, might be looked down upon or despised or even shunned by others. What a disgrace, some people thought, when God has promised the blessing of children to those who would obey him, as it is related in Deuteronomy 7: 14. "You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be a male or female barren among you." Well sometimes we misapply the scripture to ourselves or others. We do not see that it is the Lord who has shut the womb in order that He might be more glorified in the delay of the opening it. But this couple did not know this, at the time.

Here we see Zacharias going to do his service of burning incense in the temple. He had been chosen by lot to this privileged and holy task. All the multitude of people are praying outside in the court. This was probably the one and only time in his life that Zacharias would get to do this. To go into the holy place with

incense; to place it on the altar; to pray for the peace of Jerusalem and for salvation to come by the birth of the Messiah; this was prayer in highest and most glorious sense. And why not pray that somehow Elizabeth might have a child? "No, it is impossible he thinks." He is afraid that things could never change in that realm.

Perhaps you are like Zacharias this morning. There is something which God has not granted you, which you greatly long for, but which so far, has never materialized; and you fear that it never will. Is it having children? Is it finding a godly spouse? Is it having children come to know the Lord? Is it some position of usefulness in God's service? Is it to see God's kingdom come with power in your heart or in the church? God will oftentimes put some crook in our lot; some disturbing, bothersome circumstance in our lives which seems to hinder our Christian life greatly. We have prayed about it many times, but we do not see how that answer that we are looking for could ever come about. We are afraid that things will never change, or be resolved favorably. This is how it was with Zacharias. Just as he places the incense on the altar and has finished his prayer, an angel suddenly appears. When Zacharias sees him, he is troubled and fear falls upon him. But even though he does not know it; his prayers, the prayers of many years are about to be answered.

2ndly- Our faith in God's Word will be tested at the point of our hopes.

(Verses 14-20)

Zacharias, when he sees the angel Gabriel, he is troubled and afraid, the text says. The Lord, when He tests our faith, focuses on the point of the reception of His Word. He focuses on the initial reception to see how we will receive it. But then, He already knows that, doesn't He. The Lord brings the test to our faith in order to build our faith, if we truly know Him. He knows our hopes and our fears, and He lines up our hopes with the reception of His Word. The angel sees that Zacharias is troubled and afraid and he says, "Do not be afraid Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you shall call his name John." Sometimes when God is ready to answer our prayers, which we have prayed for many years, we fall into a sinful skepticism. Our hope of seeing the desire of our heart realized in respect to children or the progress of the gospel, has fallen to the ground and it leads inevitably to unbelief if it is not checked. We should be willing to have God surprise us and bring answers to our prayers in His own way, but instead we want it our way.

The angel goes farther and actually tells Zacharias that he will have joy and gladness and that many would rejoice at John's birth, because John was to be great in the sight of the Lord. What could be more heartening, more encouraging, or more conducive to praise than words like these? This is the answer to all of Zacharias' dreams and the desires of his heart. He is not only to be a father, but he is to have a son who will be great in the sight of the Lord. The Lord is doing "exceedingly abundantly beyond all that he could ask or think." It was to be his son who would turn the hearts of the fathers to care for the spiritual welfare and to

seek for the salvation of their children. He would be a man who would preach in such a way by the power of God's Spirit that he would turn disobedient people to the wisdom of the just. He would teach them in such a way that he would make ready a people prepared to follow and serve the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. What an astounding revelation of the Lord's mercy and kindness to grant this privilege to Zacharias. And yet, how does he respond to this? He responds in sinful skepticism. "How shall I know this?"

You and I need to learn a most important lesson from this. It is that faith and hope are essential graces to keep in exercise because there are many great and wonderful things which God does to answer our deepest longings, and to fulfill all our greatest hopes. In Zacharias' case it was not only that he didn't understand how God could bring this great thing about; he was not sure that he could believe that this thing could be done at all. It's like slapping God in the face. God tells him this great news through the message of the angel, that this thing that He would do would bring Zacharias joy and gladness; and he is skeptical. Oh how dishonoring it is to God to respond in this way! It is no wonder that Zacharias got into such trouble over his response. God's Word is to be received for what it really is; the Word of God which performs its work in you. But how much more in this case, when it was Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, who stood in God's very presence and was sent to him to speak to him these good tidings. If he would speak in thanksgiving and praise, then he will not speak at all, because he must feel and own his guilt in this matter. Will you not see that your faith is to be tested? And it will be tested at the point of your hopes, and whether you will receive His words through his servants? Whether it is an angel or whether it is a pastor, it is extremely important to God, and it is extremely important to us. Our response to testing is important to this church and the progress of the gospel in this place. God is looking at your response.

3rdly- Our faith in God's Word will be tested at the point of timing.

(Verses 20-25)

In verse 20 Gabriel says, "But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time." What do we do when God's timing of fulfilling His words is not ours? God's words will be fulfilled their own time, but we will have our faith tested at this point. What God is looking for from us as his child is the grace of waiting. Many things in our life are going to require waiting. Zacharias and Elizabeth had waited many years for children and none had come. What were they to do? Should they conclude against God's power and against His love or his favor? "I am an old man," says Zacharias, "and my wife is advanced in years." Why is it that we think that becoming old will prevent God from doing many things with us, in us, and through us, if He so wills it? No, our faith will be tested at this point. God would show Zacharias that the fulfillment of these things never did lie with him; even when he was young.

The people had to wait outside the sanctuary for Zacharias. They marveled that he lingered so long. But they did wait for him. When will we learn that God's intervention and revelation of Himself to do great things will always delay what we ourselves have conceived or scheduled? God's timing will always be perfect, but will we learn to wait? Will we think that we have seen it all, when it is only just begun? It seems that Elizabeth learned the lesson well. When she conceived, it says, in verse 34, she hid herself for five months. She was concerned with the grace of humility. She was not interested in boasting to other people. At the right time it would be made known and God would get the glory. She says, "Thus the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." There are days; there are times; when God will look upon to do great things for us. Will we be praying and looking for this, even if we have to wait? Or will we allow our hearts to become cold and indifferent to Him? Listen to a few verses that commend waiting on the Lord. Psalm 25: 4 and 5 - "Show me Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths." "Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; on You I wait all the day." Psalm 27: 13 and 14 - "I would have lost heart unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." "Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the Lord!" Psalm 130: 3-6 - "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared." "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I do hope." "My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchman for the morning- yes, more than those who watch for the morning." Let us ask ourselves this morning if we are interested in God's answer; in God's coming to us; in God's timing of things; or whether we are only interested in getting what we want as soon as possible. God is interested in building faith, and hope, and character, proven character in our lives so that when He does something for us that we will respond in a way that will bring glory to Him.

And 4thly- Our faith in God's Word will be tested at the point of fulfillment.

(Verses 57-66)

Now the words of the angel Gabriel were coming to fulfillment. The child is born and faith's testing concerning him is coming to an end. Faith has been perfected and God's glory is established. What will the child's name be? Zacharias? No, but his name shall be John. But none of your relatives is called by that name. The people make signs to Zacharias. What would you have him to be called? He writes on the tablet, "His name is John." Now the discipline is lifted. Now he praises God. Now people all around the hill country of Judea wonder, "What kind of child will this be?" Zacharias and Elizabeth have had their faith tested and in spite of discipline, which was needed in Zacharias' case, they have passed the test. What about you? True faith will always be tested at the point of your prayers, your hope, the timing, and the fulfillment of what God will do for you. If you will trust in the Lord Jesus you will pass the test.