**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**GOD’S MERCY FOR ALL WHO TRUST HIM**

**Luke 1:57-80**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to Luke 1. Today we continue our series, “The Gospel of Luke: Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt”. Over the last two Sundays, we have looked at the story of an elderly priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. They were a pious couple, righteous in God’s eyes for their obedience to his law and their trust in him. But despite their obedience and trust in the Lord, they had doubts about God. Zechariah doubted that God could and would fulfill his promise that he would give them a son. They had never been able to have a child, and even if they were able to have children in the past, they were now too advanced in years to conceive. Now, God had promised Zechariah a son, and God expected Zechariah to trust him. But rather than trust him, Zechariah doubted.

This, in essence, is what the Gospel of Luke is about. It’s about doubt, and how the true story of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection helps us resolve that doubt into faith. Doubt characterizes our culture. People have jobs, but they doubt whether it’s what they were meant to do. People have marriages, but they doubt whether they married the right person. And people have beliefs about God, but they doubt whether those beliefs are true. God gave us the Gospel of Luke to help us with our doubts about God, in order that we would no longer doubt, but believe.

That’s exactly what happened in Zechariah’s life. Luke Chapter 1 is largely about his journey from doubt to faith. It wasn’t an easy journey. It was a painful one. God made him temporarily deaf and mute, because he did not believe the words God spoke to him. But in God’s incredible mercy, the discipline he gave to Zechariah was the very means by which God led him from doubt to faith.

As God worked in the heart of this elderly priest, we saw that God was also working in a teenage girl named Mary. This young woman from a town of little repute was chosen by God for the very special task of bearing the Saviour of the world in her womb, and God’s promise to her was that she would conceive this Saviour as a virgin. Though she didn’t know how God would keep that promise, she trusted God nonetheless. As a result of her faith, generations upon generations of Christians have called her “blessed”, because she believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

Now we will see that, despite his initial doubts, Zechariah ends up in exactly the same place as Mary. Whereas before there was only contrast between Mary and Zechariah, now there will only be parallels. Both believe God’s promise made personally to them. Both believe God’s promise made to his people as a whole. And both overflow with joyful praise for the goodness and faithfulness of God.

I’m grateful that Luke, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, chose to begin his gospel with Zechariah’s story, not just because he’s easy to relate to, but because his story gives us hope. When we struggle with doubt, when we experience uncertainty in our faith, we can look at Zechariah and say, “If God helped him move from doubt to faith, then he can help me as well.”

The title of this message is **God’s Mercy for All Who Trust Him**. My intention today is to show you from our text that **God Keeps His Promises to Strengthen Our Trust in His Promises**.

We will have three points today:

1. God’s Mercy Shown to Zechariah
2. God’s Mercy Shown to the Fathers
3. God’s Mercy Shown to All His People

(1) **GOD’S MERCY SHOWN TO ZECHARIAH**

Our text begins with an allusion to two promises made by God to Zechariah in verses 13-14:

“But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth…”

God promised both that Zechariah would have a son, *and* that many would rejoice at his birth. Now we see these promises fulfilled in verses 57-58. Elizabeth has a son, *and* many rejoice at his birth. God is demonstrating, to Zechariah and to us, that he is faithful to keep every little detail of his promises. If he promised it, he will do it. God doesn’t over promise. God doesn’t let the little details slip through the cracks. God is faithful to fulfill everything that he has promised.

Unlike God, we make promises that we don’t keep. Among the few promises we do keep, we rarely keep them in full. We promise our children that we’ll spend quality time with them, but when we get half way through the board game, work calls and we have to leave. “But you promised, daddy!” your son cries. “I’m sorry son, but I have to go. At least we played half the game. That was fun right?” The sad thing is that our kids don’t remember the half game we played with them nearly as well as the half game we didn’t play with them.

We are so used to broken promises that we rarely expect promises to be kept. That’s one of the reasons why we struggle so much with believing God’s promises. Life is so full of broken promises, that when we consider God’s promises, we expect him to break them as well. But God isn’t like us. He is God. He doesn’t just do what is faithful. He *is* faithful. Faithfulness is part of *who he is*. He is the source and origin of faithfulness. He is the Faithful One who cannot be faithless, for as the Scripture says, “if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.” (2 Timothy 2:13).

That is precisely why the neighbours and relatives rejoice, for as verse 58 tells us, the Lord had shown Elizabeth “great mercy”. The word “mercy” here relates to God’s *hesed* love, the Hebrew word used in the Old Testament to refer to God’s covenantal love, the unbreakable promise that he swore to his people to pursue and preserve them. It refers to his faithfulness to keep his promises to his people. It’s usually translated as “steadfast love” in the ESV. “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his *steadfast love* endures forever”, as Psalm 136 says.

We see this emphasis on God’s “mercy” or “steadfast love” throughout chapter 1. Mary sang of God’s mercy in verse 50, “His *mercy* is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” Mary experienced firsthand God’s mercy in seeing him fulfill his promise to give her a son through a miraculous, virgin conception, and that personal experience of mercy strengthened her confidence in God’s greater promises to his people. That’s why she sings in verses 54-55, “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his *mercy*, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

Zechariah does exactly the same thing. Like his neighbours and relatives, he sees the “great mercy” shown to him and his wife, and like Mary, it leads him to sing of God’s mercy to his people:

“…to show the *mercy* promise to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant” (v. 72)

“…because of the tender *mercy* of our God whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high…” (v. 78)

This is the key to moving from doubt to faith: believing that God is great in mercy, meaning that you must believe that he is faithful in his steadfast love to keep his promises.

Zechariah shows us what this looks like in the next part of the narrative. Verse 59 says that their neighbours and relatives wanted to name the boy Zechariah after his father, since it was customary to name children after close family relatives. In reply, Elizabeth says in verse 60, “No, he shall be called John.” The neighbours and relatives are confused, because none of their relatives are named John. And so, they ask Zechariah himself what his son shall be called. His reply is striking. “His name is John.” Elizabeth’s reply was, “He shall be called John”. Zechariah’s reply is, “His name is John”. For Zechariah, his son didn’t need a name. He already had a name. “His name *is* John.” His name was John the moment the angel Gabriel declared that his name was John. Zechariah knew that it wasn’t his place to name his son, for God had already named him.

With this reply, Zechariah shows us just how much he had changed during his nine months of silence. The Zechariah nine months ago may have said, “I think I should name him John, but I’m not sure. After all, it’s true that no one in my family is named John. Naming him John would be strange, uncustomary, perhaps even offensive to some of my relatives. I need a sign to confirm that this is what I should do.” The Zechariah nine months ago would have been uncertain, full of doubt that his son had been named by God, full of doubt that his son had been chosen by God to be the great prophet who would prepare the way for the Messiah. But the Zechariah of nine months ago no longer existed. The Zechariah of nine months ago had changed into a different man. No longer was he full of uncertainty and doubt regarding God’s promises, and no longer would he hesitate to play his part in fulfilling them. Zechariah, the priest who doubted, had become the priest who believed.

Do you struggle with uncertainty towards God? Do you doubt God’s promises? Zechariah shows us that God turns doubters into believers. If you doubt God’s goodness, or his faithfulness, or his power, start by trusting that God will help you with your doubts just like he helped Zechariah. That’s where you must start. The beginning of belief is believing that God will help you believe. So don’t run away from God if you doubt. Run towards him. Cry out to him for help. He will help anyone who truly wants to believe.

That doesn’t mean the road to faith is easy. We assume that if we doubt, God will just drop faith into our hearts. That’s not how he works. He strengthens our faith through his means of grace: the Scriptures, Christian fellowship, prayer, the Lord’s Supper, even discipline. It is through God’s varied means of grace that, over time, we grow to believe. For Zechariah, it took nine months. Nine months of enduring God’s discipline of silence, unable to speak, unable to hear. But when the nine months were finally up, and he confidently declared, “His name is John”, the discipline was finally lifted, and “immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed” (verse 64).

And what were the first words he said? He didn’t mope around because he failed to believe. He didn’t condemn himself. He didn’t even apologize to his wife for not being able to speak to her at all during the entirety of her first pregnancy! Instead, his first words were words of praise. According to verse 64, “he spoke, blessing God”. This is why God disciplines doubters into becoming believers. He wants us to praise him with the kind of worship that only comes from a heart of faith, not only because he is glorified with that kind of worship, but because we find the fullest of joy in that kind of worship.

(2) **GOD’S MERCY SHOWN TO THE FATHERS**

These were amazing events. They left the neighbours and relatives so shocked that they wondered with fear, “What then will this child be?” Who would he be, and what would he do, if God had gone through such great lengths to demonstrate that his hand was with him? This leads us to our second point, God’s Mercy Shown to the Fathers.

The answer to the question, “What then will this child be?” takes up the rest of our text today in the form of Zechariah’s song. But it’s not *just* Zechariah’s song. It’s God’s song. We see this in verse 67, where it says that “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied”. Like Mary, Zechariah isn’t just sitting down with pen and paper and giving expression to how he feels. He is composing this song under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. His words are God’s words, and therefore they are absolutely true. But the amazing thing about how the Holy Spirit works is that he doesn’t hijack people. He doesn’t put people in a trance and make them utter words that are not their own. This song, though it is God’s song, never ceases to be Zechariah’s song. It truly communicates Zechariah’s thoughts and feelings about what God had done for him, and what he believes God will do in the future. Therefore, as we read Zechariah’s song, we can continue to see his amazing transformation from a man of doubt to a man of faith.

The song begins with verses 68-69: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David…” Zechariah begins by praising God for visiting and redeeming his people through the anointed one, the promised Messiah, the descendant of David whose kingdom would have no end. But why? Why is Zechariah praising God as if he had already done all of this?

Remember that, at this point, Jesus Christ, who was the promised Messiah, hadn’t done any miracles to show that the Kingdom of God was near. He hadn’t died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. He hadn’t been raised to life to show his triumph over sin, sickness, and Satan. He hadn’t even been born yet! And yet, Zechariah speaks about him in the past tense: he has “visited”, he has “redeemed”, he has been “raised up”. Zechariah is speaking about Jesus as if he had already completed what he was sent here to do. This shows us something very important about Zechariah. It shows us his newfound confidence in God. His trust in the Lord was so strong that he believed that whatever God said he would do was as good as done.

Our tendency is to thank God only after he has fulfilled his promises. When things are financially tight, we pray for God’s provision, but we don’t *praise* God for providing for us until we see the money in our bank account. Or when we have uncertainty about our future, we pray for God’s guidance, but we don’t *praise* God until the decision is made. Don’t you know that what God promises is as good as done? We should be praising God, not only *after* we see the provision, but *before* we see the provision, because when God says he will do something, it’s as good as done.

This is the confidence that God wants us to have in his promises, whether they be his promises to provide for us, satisfy us, lead us, sanctify us, or forgive us. He wants us to be so confident in him that we can praise him for fulfilling his promises even before we have seen them fulfilled.

This is so important, because some of God’s promises will not be fulfilled in our lifetime. Some promises are made for this lifetime, such as the promise of the forgiveness of our sins, or having peace with God, or the promise that God will be with us to provide for us and lead us. These are promises that we can and should expect to be fulfilled now. But other promises are not for now. They are for the life to come. Promises of justice against those who oppress the vulnerable. Promises of vindication for the righteous. Promises of complete physical healing. Promises of freedom from sin. Even promises to finally satisfy our deepest longings. God may at times fulfill these promises, in part, in this lifetime. He will help us overcome sin, he will bring justice upon wrongdoers, he will fill us with a joy that is more satisfying than anything else we can taste in this life. But none of these promises will fully and completely be fulfilled until we die or Jesus comes back again. If we wait for the complete fulfillment of these promises before we praise God, we will never praise God.

Our text shows us that God has always kept his promises in his own time. Look at verses 70-71, where Zechariah sings that the promised Messiah would bring salvation just “as [God] spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us”. Think about what this means. The promise of the Messiah’s coming came from the mouths of the first prophets. That was centuries before the events in our text. That means that generation after generation of God’s people heard God’s promises, but lived and died in exile and captivity without ever seeing their fulfillment.

But now, these same generations of God’s people would finally see God’s mercy, his steadfast love, in the person and work of the Messiah. Look at verse 72: “to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham.” The phrase “to show the mercy promised to our fathers” literally means “to do mercy to our fathers”. God isn’t just showing us the mercy promised to our spiritual forefathers. He is *doing mercy* to the fathers *themselves*. From Abraham and Isaac to David and Solomon, God is finally showing *them* the mercy he promised he would bring to his people, centuries after they had lived and died. How? It’s obvious isn’t it? When our spiritual forefathers died, they did not remain dead. They live! God is not the God of the dead, but the living! They live forever in God’s presence, waiting with eager expectation for the fulfillment of his promises. And now, finally, they would see God begin to fulfill those promises through Jesus Christ.

What incredible mercy. God is so perfectly faithful that, though it may take centuries, he always keeps his promises to his people. We are no different. We live in the “in-between age”, the age after Jesus’ first coming when Jesus secured all of God’s promises, but before Jesus’ second coming when he would fulfill all of God’s promises. We live in the “already and not-yet” age of history. All of God’s promises are *already* secured through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but the complete fulfillment of God’s promises have *not yet* come. They will not come until Jesus returns. Often people doubt God because they mistakenly believe that all of God’s promises are supposed to be completely fulfilled *right now*. That’s just bad theology. If we truly understand our Bibles, we will understand that, though God’s promises are true and secure *now*, they will not be completely fulfilled until *then*, whenthe fullness of God’s Kingdom is here on earth. And so, we wait. We wait with eager expectation for God to fulfill his promises.

But what are those promises? What are we longing for? I love how Zechariah summarizes God’s promises to us in verses 74-75: “that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” This is what all who love God long for. We long to be delivered from our enemies, not just those who persecute and mock us, and not just spiritual forces of evil, but the evil that dwells inside us. We long to be delivered from our *sin*, the power of evil that has caused all of us to offend God and to bring harm both to ourselves and to others.

And ultimately, we long for deliverance in order that we might “serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” We’re longing to *serve God*. That’s the longing of every Christian who has tasted the goodness and love of God. Some of you may be thinking, “Wait a minute. *That’s* what we’re supposed to long for? What’s so exciting about *serving* God? I don’t want to be saved just so that I can serve. I want to be saved so that I can do what I want.” Those are the thoughts of those who know very little of the love of God shown to us in Christ. But for those who have truly tasted the grace of God in the gospel, who have trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, and who have experienced the joys of being adopted as the very sons and daughters of God, there is nothing that we want more in life than to serve God in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. Jesus gave his life for us, and we in turn want to give our lives to him. We don’t serve him to try to repay him. Nor do we serve him merely because he commands us to. Instead, our service is a loving gift to our God who gave us the ultimate gift of his Son. We know exactly what the Psalmist meant when he wrote in Psalm 84:10,

“I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”

(3) **GOD’S MERCY SHOWN TO ALL HIS PEOPLE**

This leads to our last point, God’s Mercy Shown to All His People, and for this we turn to the last four verses of our song.

Verse 76 says, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” Finally, near the end of the song, Zechariah answers the initial question that prompted it: “What then will this child be?” By placing the answer here, and by answering the question the way he does, Zechariah shows us that the question is not so much *what* his child will be, but *who* the child will prepare the way for. And the answer to that question is that the child came to prepare the way for the Messiah, God’s Anointed One, who would bring about the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Verse 77 tells us how John would prepare the way for the Messiah: “to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.” John didn’t come to give salvation itself. He came to give *knowledge* of salvation. But how? In the *forgiveness of their sins*. We often talk about salvation as if it were synonymous with the forgiveness of sins. We say that being forgiven means being saved. But that’s not how the Bible talks about salvation and forgiveness. Salvation means being saved from the wrath of God toward us for our sins. Forgiveness means that God does not count our sins against us. It is when God forgives our sins that we are saved. Forgiveness of sins *leads* to salvation, because forgiveness saves us from the justice of God against our sins.

This is important, because when we conflate forgiveness with salvation, we forget about God’s justice. Everyone loves talking about God’s forgiveness. Hardly anyone likes to talk about God’s justice. But every time the Bible talks about being saved, about *salvation*, it’s talking about being saved from God’s justice. God forgives our sins in order to save us from *himself*.

John came to give us *knowledge* of salvation in the forgiveness of our sins. This was a sacred task, but ultimately insufficient. He could not bring us salvation. The only one who could bring us salvation through the forgiveness of sins was still to come. As the angels would declare to the shepherds just outside Bethlehem just one chapter later (2:10-11),

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David *a Saviour*, who is Christ the Lord.”

John would *point* us to the Saviour. Jesus Christ would *be* the Saviour. Jesus brings us salvation from God’s justice, not by waving a magic wand and declaring our sins forgiven, but by dying for our sins on the cross in our place. That is where the Gospel of Luke is ultimately headed, and that is where God is calling us to go. Wherever you are in your faith journey, God is calling you to come to the Saviour. Turn away from your sin, and turn towards the Saviour. Stop trusting yourself and start trusting Christ. He will save you by forgiving your sin, and he will satisfy you by giving you himself.

Zechariah didn’t know exactly how this would work. God didn’t reveal to him that salvation would come through the death of the Saviour. What he did know was that the Saviour was coming, and that he would change everything. He says in verses 78-79 that Jesus would come, “because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Once again, we see God’s mercy, his steadfast, covenant-love commitment to pursue his people and save them. But this time, God’s mercy is described as *tender*, meaning literally the bowels, which were the seat of the deepest personal feelings, especially the feeling of compassion.

God is moved in his tender mercy towards us. He sees us trapped in the darkness of sin and ignorance, suffering under the curse of death, and he has compassion on us. And so, he gives us a Saviour. Jesus would change everything, like the sunrise changes the night. Jesus would take us out of our brokenness, out of our conflicts with one another, out of our alienation with God, and guide our feet into the way of peace. Only Jesus could do that. Not John, the one who would move in the spirit and power of Elijah. Only Jesus. As the Apostle John would tell us in Chapter 1 of his gospel,

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

All who know Jesus know what this means. Jesus is the “true light, which gives light to everyone”. He has brought light to the darkness of our hearts and minds, not just to reveal who we are in our sin, but to change who we are in our Saviour. Jesus is the light of the world, and he has led us out of our darkness, out of the shadow of death, and into the way of peace: peace with ourselves, peace with others, and peace with God.

**CONCLUSION**

This brings us to the end of Chapter 1 of Luke’s gospel. This narrative about Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and John is only the first “Act” of many in this incredibly beautiful, insightful, challenging, and encouraging biography of the life of Jesus Christ. We have learned so much about God’s mercy, God’s promises, and God’s plan of salvation, and we haven’t even gotten to the birth of Jesus yet. We have read about the one who would give knowledge of salvation, but we have not yet read about the one who would bring us salvation.

And so, if you continue to struggle with doubt and uncertainty, be assured that much more is coming. We have Chapter after Chapter of God’s inspired Word to guide us away from the darkness of our doubts and into the way of peace. It will be a long journey, but if it serves as one of the many means of grace that God uses to lead you out of the dangerous canyon of doubt and into faith, it will be a journey well worth taking.