

Luke 1:16-25

Sermon: **God's promise**

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INTRODUCTION

1. To begin, let us remind ourselves of what we spoke about last time. Luke emphasized that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God.

I believe that the Law of Moses could be kept.

What exactly do I mean by “could”? Every Jew, while keeping the Law, if he had a righteous heart, came to understand that he could not fulfill the moral commandments of God. And with that realization, he sought Yahweh’s mercy and forgiveness. Through studying the Law he came to know the character of God, and he loved Him more and more. He kept the Law within his heart. That, in short, is what it meant to keep God’s Law.

1.1. We also spoke about the Spirit of Truth, who consecrates God’s chosen children from the very beginning of their lives—even though they are unaware of it, and others do not notice it¹. But there comes a moment in the life of a child of God when the Spirit of Truth begins to work more intensely in their hearts. He gives them ears to hear and eyes to see.

They begin to understand who they are and what the purpose of life is. They begin to love God in a personal way. They are interested in what He wants for them and from them—not what culture or the world around them demands.

2. Before we dive into the text, I want to say this: we, Christians of the 21st century, must stop reading this passage through the lens of our own context. This is not primarily about us—it is directly addressed to the Jewish people.

It is about the God who long ago declared: “You will be My people, and I will be your God².”

¹ (Matthew 13:24-30)

² (Leviticus 26:12)

— If we do not stop looking at this text through our own lens, we will miss its true meaning. —

JOHN'S MISSION

2.1. In **(Luke 1:16)** we read: **“Many of the children of Israel will turn back to the Lord.”**

This is not the same as when the Holy Spirit gives us, Christians of the 21st century, a heart to return to God. Here it is about the promise God gave to Abraham—that his descendants (physical Israel) would be God's people.

The Jews have a special role they must play in this age. That role concerns them and the fulfillment of that promise. The words the angel speaks to Zechariah are directly connected to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

2.2. So God promised the Jewish people: *“I will be your God, and you will be My people. But this is what it will look like: I will make a Covenant with you and give you the Law of Moses and the instructions you must follow if you want to be My people.”*

When we study the Old Testament, we come to the conclusion that the Jews, as a nation, did not fulfill their part of the Covenant. From the very beginning they were disobedient, rebellious, idolaters, and lovers of other gods.

And I believe that to this very day they have not fulfilled their part of the Covenant.

2.3. Yet there came a time in history when a great prophet appeared, named John the Baptist, who called the Jews to take seriously the Covenant God had made with them.

He called them to repent and return to their God. Many did so—and later became disciples of Jesus.

3. **(Luke 1:17): “He will go before Him.”** Here the angel is speaking of Jesus, I believe.

This text comes from the Old Testament, from (Malachi 4:1–6).

Malachi speaks of the Day of Judgment—the day when the Jews must decide: *“Either we will repent and begin to love God's Law, or we will be destroyed!”*

— I believe that day has not yet come. It will take place in the future, when Jesus Christ returns a second time. —

GOD'S PROMISE

3.1. It is fascinating to study Jewish history. It clearly shows us what Yahweh said to Moses:

“I will give you My Commandments, but you will not keep them. You are a stiff-necked people, and therefore I will scatter you among the nations. They will rule over you because you do not want to be My people³.”

And the very fact that they have preserved their language, their culture, and their faith through all their trials—that is remarkable.

³ (Exodus 32:9; Deuteronomy 9:6; Leviticus 26:33; Deuteronomy 28:64; Jeremiah 7:23–24)

Many nations that once existed in antiquity are no more. Their languages, cultures, and religions have disappeared.

3.1.1. Yet the Jewish people are still among us. Even though for thousands of years they were scattered throughout the world—just as Yahweh had told Moses they would be—even though many kingdoms in history oppressed them, and even though in our own recent past an attempt was made to commit genocide against them, they are still here.

3.1.2. They have preserved their culture, their language, and now they even have their own state. To me personally, this is powerful evidence that God will fulfill the promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: *"They will be My people, and I will be their God."*

3.1.3. That promise has not yet been fulfilled. And for it to be fulfilled—there must exist a people with whom God made His Covenant, must there not?

3.2. Imagine this: thousands upon thousands of years ago, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be God's people. That promise has not yet come to pass.

— But the day will come when Israel, as a nation, will acknowledge God and will begin to love Him with all their heart, all their soul, all their strength, and all their mind⁴. God will supernaturally transform their hearts, turning them into hearts that love Him. And then the promise given to Abraham will be fulfilled—the Jews will finally become God's people. —

JOHN HAS THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH

4. In **(Malachi 4:5)** we read that the prophet Elijah will come as God's instrument through whom He will carry out the promise given to Abraham. The prophet Elijah will call the Jewish people to repentance. And in verse 6 we read: **"He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children."** Who are these fathers? They are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the fathers who wholeheartedly loved Yahweh and trusted His promises. And Israel, as a nation, will be given those very same hearts. It will be as though the hearts of their physical fathers are transplanted into them as a people.

4.1. Here, in (Luke 1:17), we see that John the Baptist will come with the spirit of Elijah. John is not the Elijah spoken of by the prophet Malachi, but he carries Elijah's spirit. In history, before the first coming of the Messiah (Jesus), John the Baptist did the very same kind of work that the Elijah of Malachi will do before Jesus comes a second time. John did not bring the entire nation of Israel back to God, but he did turn many individuals back to their God. This event in Luke is a foreshadowing of what is yet to come in the future.

⁴ (Mark 12:29-30)

4.1.1. John the Baptist helped fulfill the prophecy from (Isaiah 40:3–5), which Luke confirms in (Luke 3:2–6). His role was to prepare the way—to prepare a people ready for the coming of the King. — In other words, only those Jews who truly repented received the heart of the fathers—a heart no longer in darkness, a heart no longer blind to the truth. And the Jew with such a heart accepted Jesus Christ as his Messiah. —

4.2. As we interpret this passage, we must not forget this fact: the Jews at that time did not have the revelation that we as Christians have today. They did not have the New Testament. They did not know that Jesus would die and rise again, and that He would return a second time to establish His Kingdom over Israel and over the rest of the world.

4.3. It is true that in the Old Testament this could be sensed through prophecy, but very few understood it—and never fully. Examples: King David (Psalm 110), the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 53).

4.4. What do I mean by this? The coming of Jesus brought together the complete picture of God's plan and purpose. He is the cornerstone that connects all the other stones, the final piece of the puzzle, the part that gives meaning to the whole.

— The Jews of that time did not yet have this. —

DOES OUR GOD LOVE TO PUNISH?

5. **(Luke 1:18–20)** When I first studied this text, I came to the conclusion that Zechariah did not have enough faith in God, and that God punished him because of it.

Why did I come to such a conclusion?

Even as a child, I would go with my parents and friends to church—for Christmas, Easter, weddings, baptisms... And I remember always feeling uncomfortable being there. A huge building with high ceilings, statues staring at me, the priest always with a stern face while performing his duties. People repeating the same words in unison after the priest. To me, all of it felt eerie.

5.1. That was my experience—it does not have to be yours.

But in the culture I grew up in, people often used the expressions: *"God punished him!"* or *"God will punish him!"*

And I believe this left a deep mark on how I perceived who God was and how I understood Him. I thought of God as always stern, an angry God, a God who wanted to frighten people simply because He could. And through those lenses, I read this text—unfortunately.

5.1.1. But did God really punish Zechariah?

5.1.2. In verse 20 we read, and it seemed logical to conclude, that God punished Zechariah. The Bible teachers I listened to held the same view as I did.

5.2. However, after a longer time of study, I came to realize that the God of the Bible is not like that at all. He is not a self-centered God who says: *"You didn't believe Me when you should have—and now I will punish you for it!"*

In the Old Testament we have many examples of people asking God for a sign—and God granted it⁵.

5.3. Let us also take this into account: Luke clearly portrays Zechariah and Elizabeth as righteous before God. This means Zechariah was not against the truth—he was for the truth. He loved God and trusted God.

5.3.1. Now, with a joyful heart, I can say the following: I do not believe this was unbelief. Put yourself in his shoes: *"I am entering the Holy of Holies—and the very event itself makes me anxious. Suddenly, an angel appears and tells me I will have a child. This is the first time in my life I am speaking with an angel. I have read about it, but I have never experienced it. The angel tells me I will have a child!? But I am old! That means I had long ago come to terms with not having children. I wept and prayed to God to give me the strength to accept it. And now—an angel stands before me and says that Elizabeth and I will have a child!?"*

5.3.2. Is it not a logical, reasonable, human reaction—to doubt? I think it is. That is why Zechariah asked the angel a question. He was asking for a sign.

5.3.3. Someone may say: *"But in verse 20 it clearly says that God punished him!"*
To that I would answer: *"The text does not explicitly show God's pleasure or displeasure."*

Two interpretations are possible:

1. *"Because you did not believe my words—cursed be you!"*
2. *"Because you did not believe my words—which is understandable!"*

— I believe it is the second. Because the first contradicts the very nature of the God of the Bible. He simply is not like that. —

5.3.4. Now, why did God choose that particular sign—silence? I do not know. But I believe it was a sign that reminded Zechariah every single day that this would indeed come to pass.

GOD'S SIGNS

5.4. As I mentioned in an earlier sermon—when God wants to strongly emphasize an

⁵ (Book of Judges 6:36–40; Second Book of Kings 20:8–11; Isaiah 38:7–8; Genesis 15:8–17; Exodus 3:12; Isaiah 7:11–14)

important event, He always involves many people and witnesses. And so it was here. The people were gathered outside, praying and waiting. Everyone knew Zechariah—he had been among them for years, and some knew him personally. While they waited, he remained inside longer than usual. When he finally came out of the Holy of Holies, all eyes turned toward him. And immediately it became clear—something had happened. His gaze, his face, and above all—his silence. He could not speak. That sign was confirmation to everyone: Zechariah had seen a vision. God had spoken.

5.5. Yet Zechariah did not go home immediately after this event⁶. He stayed in the Temple and completed his service.

We can only imagine how many questions arose during those days—from the priests, from the people, from all who saw him. And Zechariah, though mute, with a heart full of excitement, told what had happened. With his hands, through gestures, in writing—he explained the vision he had experienced. And he did not do this just once, but again and again, day after day, for as long as his service lasted. Every time someone asked, he bore witness anew. And every time people saw him, the sign of his silence remained a living reminder: — God had spoken. —

JOYFUL ELIZABETH

6. (Luke 1:24–25) In the text we read that Elizabeth hid herself for five months. Why did she do this? I do not know, but I assume it must have been a shock for her. The angel had told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have joy and gladness. Most likely, Elizabeth wanted to spend those five months in silence, alone, personally savoring the truth of what had happened to her—and giving thanks to God for the blessing He had given her.

6.1. In our culture today, being childless is not considered unusual. But in Elizabeth's time, and in her culture, it was a shame. Surely she was judged, surely she was gossiped about. Perhaps people even said: *"God has punished her, she is cursed!"* That shame likely fell upon the household of Zechariah and Elizabeth as well.

But Elizabeth did not allow culture to shape her life. She was righteous before God. Why? Because what mattered most to her was that God's will be fulfilled in her life—even if that meant never having children.

— An incredible humility and obedience on Elizabeth's part toward Yahweh. And that obedience surely flowed out of her love for Yahweh and for His Law, the Law she treasured in her heart. —

6.2. When I reflect on this passage, I realize that I too have things in life that I long for passionately—just like Zechariah and Elizabeth. One of those desires is my health. I pray that God will answer that prayer, but so far He has not. The crucial thing is how I respond to this.

⁶ (Luke 1:23)

Am I like Zechariah and Elizabeth—still righteous before God? Or do I grumble, curse, and grow angry with Him? I believe that for now, I want my life to align with the role God has given me. If that means I will never be healed, then:

— *“Let Your will be done, my Father. For what matters most to me is Your will for my life. You know the path by which You will bring me home, to be with You in Your Kingdom. Amen.”* —