

THE FORERUNNER OF THE SON OF MAN
LUKE 1:13-17

Every child wants to believe his dad is a hero; but John Cromwell Jr.'s father really was a hero. A Navy Captain, **John, Sr. died in 1943** in his submarine off the Gilbert Islands in the south Pacific. His submarine was one several that was in a line that sustained significant damage from Japanese depth charges as they prepared to attack a Japanese stronghold. Cromwell surfaced his submarine to enable his crew to abandon ship. A firefight with the Japanese ensued and the submarine was badly damaged, and Cromwell rode it to the bottom of the sea and his grave.



It's a hero's story, and Cromwell received a posthumous Medal of Honor for his bravery. But something didn't add up to John Jr. — and especially after he also joined the Navy. "I never could buy that original story," he said. "Once I got on active duty, and I saw how things went, it didn't seem like that was that big of a deal that he would have had to give up his life for it." Then he learned [the rest of the story...](#)

...by late 1941 Navy cryptologists had deciphered the Japanese naval code, and senior officers were reading decrypted enemy messages.

As a division commander, Cromwell was privy to this highly classified intelligence, code-named ULTRA, his son said. He also happened to be close friends with one of the people who helped crack the code.

If the Japanese knew the code was compromised, they would have changed it and made it more difficult for the U.S. Navy to track their vessels.

When information about ULTRA eventually came to light, the son said that it "all came together." It was this secret that his father died to protect.

"It was probably the biggest secret of the war," he said. "And even when the citation was written up, it was still top secret. So in his citation, they waffled and didn't give the true facts or the reason he went down. He knew the code was broken." [WSJ, 5/26/23]

He had trouble with the story because he didn't know the full story. And when the full story was revealed, *then* he was especially grateful for his father's service and bravery. The full story gave him understanding.

As we wait for God to answer our prayers, we sometimes think He is distant, or uncaring (even aloof), or unwilling to answer. We don't know the realities of what He is doing to bring about His plan. He *is* answering our prayer, and He *is* acting on our behalf. We just can't see it yet.

That is what Luke is doing with the story of the forerunner to Jesus, the Son of Man. He is telling us that while there were 400 years of silence, God *is* acting and *has been* acting. He is pulling back the curtain so we can see the backstory of Christ's birth and see the gracious working of God. That backstory gives us confidence about Christ's story (which is its primary intent), but it also stimulates confidence for our story.

BECAUSE GOD IS ALWAYS ACTING GRACIOUSLY, DO NOT FEAR.

In short, this is a story of God's grace. It's a story about answered prayer for Zacharias and Elizabeth, and it's a story of the ministry of John the Baptist, but supremely it is a story about how God is orchestrating the advent of Christ — and in that way, it's a story of grace. And it is a reminder that even when we can't obviously see it, God is acting graciously in our lives. And because of God's grace, Zacharias (and we) should be peaceful and not fearful. In this story, see **four aspects** of God's grace:

1. The **PROMISE** of the Forerunner (v. 13)

2. The **JOY** over the Forerunner (v. 14)

3. The **POWER** for the Forerunner (v. 15)

4. The **MINISTRY** of the Forerunner (vv. 16-17)

- ✓ He works for repentance (v. 16)
- ✓ He works by the Spirit's Word (v. 17a)
- ✓ He works for sanctification (v. 17b)

- As we come to this story, remember Luke is a historian, recounting the story of **Jesus, the Son of Man**:
 - ✓ He tells the story geographically, beginning in **Nazareth**, to **Galilee**, to the **Jerusalem Rd.**, and finally to the events of the crucifixion in **Jerusalem**.
 - ✓ In these **opening two chapters** Luke tells us the foundation of the story (prologue) and the promises of Christ in the story — and we will be in those promises for the next several weeks.
 - ✓ **In this passage**, Luke tells the story before the Story — the promise of John the Baptist.
 - ✓ In the story of the promise of John's coming, we learn a story of grace —

BECAUSE GOD IS ALWAYS ACTING GRACIOUSLY, DO NOT FEAR.

1. The **PROMISE** of the Forerunner (v. 13)

- When Zacharias went into the Holy Place to provide the offering at the altar of incense, he probably thought of it as the highlight of his ministry as a Priest. It is likely he only would have done this once in his career. And while it was a singular event in his life, he would have been quick. There was a measure of fear about entering the Holy Place — would God receive his offering, or would he be rejected and killed for an inadequate offering; there is a hint of that in v. 21 — “will we have to go get him...”
- It is in that moment of fear and concern that the angel Gabriel — **an angel of the Lord** (on the Lord’s mission, a particular emissary with a particular mission, v. 19) appears. It didn’t seem like good news.
- Yet it *was* good news. And immediately, the angel starts to reveal the full story...
 - ✓ His first words are — **do not be afraid**. He said that because Zacharias *was* afraid — all worked up!
 - ✓ The response of fear at the sight of an angel was typical — why should Zacharias not be afraid?
 - ✓ **for** (because) **your petition has been heard**. “You prayed, God listened, and God answered.”
 - ✓ For what did Zacharias pray?
 - While the passage does not say this, we know he has been praying for a child, even while he and Elizabeth were now past the child-bearing years because the angel says **Elizabeth will bear a son...** Their son is the answer to prayer.
 - But as a priest in the Holy Place, offering daily incense, he would have been praying for the Messiah — and we know that he did because that was his expression of gratitude after his lips were opened when John was born (vv. 67ff).
 - The angel hasn’t revealed it yet, but we also know that John is not just a child, but the Messiah’s forerunner (v. 17). So, the immediate answer was for the personal child, but the greater answer was for the provision of the Messiah who would follow John the Baptist. This is typical of the Lord’s work in answering our prayers! He gives us more than we might ask or anticipate.
 - As John hears these words, he is assured — God hasn’t abandoned; God *has* listened; God *is* compassionate; God *will* provide.
- But there is even more going on in this verse of promise.
 - ✓ I mentioned last week that Luke likely wants his readers to read this story and think: “Abraham and Sarah...” And when we do that, we notice that the content of promise (**Elizabeth...**) is identical to the promise made to Sarah in Gen. 17:19 (except for differences in names).
 - The message to Abraham and Sarah fulfilled the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3).
 - The message to Zachariah fulfilled the promise of the Son of David who will sit on David’s throne (2 Sam. 7:16).
 - Zacharias and we are meant to think that the same God who made and kept the promise to Abraham is providing for Zacharias with the full completion of that promise.
 - Both received a child — and far more than a child.
 - God is faithful, always has been faithful, and always will be faithful.

- ✓ And then he says, ***You will give him the name John.***
 - The norm would have been to name the child after Zacharias (vv. 59-60). But the name ***John*** was to be a reminder to them.
 - The unexpected name is a reminder that God gave and named this child, not Zacharias & Eliz.
 - The unexpected name is also a reminder of God's character because it means, "God is gracious."
 - So this small family is surrounded by reminders of God's grace —
 - ... ***Zacharias*** means "God remembers." He will be faithful to His (gracious) promises.
 - ... ***Elizabeth*** means something like, "My God is my fortune" — God is her blessing and provision.
 - ... And now ***John*** means "God is gracious." God has given an unexpected and undeserved gift. And the gift is not just about the provision of a child for Z&E but a revelation of God's provision in the plan of redemption
- ✓ Remember that we've said that this book is not just about Jesus, but about the triune God. Jesus came to reveal God (Jn. 1:18) and this story tells us about God and His nature.
- ✓ In this part of Jesus' story, we discover God to be overwhelmingly gracious.
- ✓ Robert Murray M'Cheyne said, "God will either give you what you ask, or something far better." Wasn't that the experience of Zacharias? They prayed for a son and they received the son, *and* the Redeemer to follow him. Such grace and kindness to care for the little and big needs of that family.
- ✓ He is just as gracious today; see God's grace in the promise of the forerunner. And...

2. The **JOY** over the Forerunner (v. 14)

- I suspect there were quite a few happy people this week. There were happy children at the parade, gathering candy. There were happy shop and booth owners selling their wares. There were happy people eating burgers and dogs and watching fireworks. There were happy people when it rained.
- And there were unhappy people who didn't receive all the things they wanted this week...
- Gabriel told John of grace — *and the joy* — that would come through John's birth.
- Zacharias and Elizabeth would have ***joy and gladness.***
 - ✓ Luke is a happy writer. It's appropriate — he's telling the happiest story.
 - ✓ He is a happy writer because he uses the noun ***joy*** 12x in his two books (and the verb 18x).
 - ✓ Most of the time that Luke uses the word "joy" he is thinking about joy because of salvation. "I'm safe, loved, forgiven, freed, and made hopeful." It is the joy that is settled, even in hardship.
 - ✓ And this word ***gladness*** is only used here in the NT but means "extreme exultation."
 - ✓ It would seem obvious for Gabriel to say to Zacharias that they would be happy (after all, a long-desired son is coming). But Gabriel is looking past the child and saying, "You will be happy far more than for just the child...there is something even better than the baby."
 - ✓ And it gets even better...

- ***And many will rejoice at his birth...***
 - ✓ You aren't going to be the only happy people for John's birth — ***many*** (others) ***will rejoice ...***
 - ✓ Gabriel isn't saying that this joy would be on the day of John's birth — certainly the friends and family would have been excited for the couple. But Luke says very little about general excitement on the day of John's birth.
 - Gabriel is looking past his birth to his ministry, so that there would be many who would rejoice that John had some as the forerunner — "Praise God for the gift of this man and his life..."
 - And many did just that — **Mt. 3:5-6; Lk. 7:28-29**. Many believed his message and were grateful.
 - ✓ Because of John, the lives of many were influenced (even eternally) and that gave them great joy.
- This promise is a reminder that if we have salvation, we have the best and greatest grace and we should be satisfied, content, and joyful. Maybe we won't be "giddy," but we will be settled in our joy and peace.
 - ✓ Do you take time to regularly rejoice over God's provision for you in salvation? Rehearse that grace.
 - ✓ Consider **Romans 15:9-13** — the Gentiles were overwhelmed with joy over unexpected grace!
 - ✓ There is another aspect of God's grace in this story...

3. The POWER for the Forerunner (v. 15)

- The angel tells Zacharias that this is no ordinary baby — it is a baby that will have a prominent position: ***he will be great in the sight of the Lord...***
 - ✓ Many people desire greatness for their children, so they name their babies after sports legends or war heroes or political or social influencers. But most of those children become like most of us — just ordinary people doing ordinary things — faithful perhaps, but not especially remarkable.
 - ✓ Undoubtedly Zacharias and Elizabeth were content to have a baby, but the promise was even better.
 - ✓ To say that John would be ***great*** means that he would have a significant place in God's plan. In fact, Jesus would say, "I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John..." (7:28). Think about that — he is greater than Enoch, Noah, Abraham and the patriarchs, Moses, Elijah and Elisha and all the judges, Solomon and David and all the Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and all the prophets, and greater than all in Heb. 11. He is more influential than all of them.
 - ✓ We should notice that this is not because of anything inherently great in John because he wasn't great; he was born with indwelling sin like everyone else.
 - ✓ He was great because in His grace, God chose him to be influential in his ministry. No other ministry would compare to his ministry introducing and leading the pathway to Christ (3:4; **Is. 40:3**).
- How will John achieve this greatness? On what basis will he do this? Gabriel tells Zacharias...
 - ✓ ***He will drink no wine or liquor...*** suggests that he would take a Nazarite vow, but it also included a 30-day initiation rite, not cutting his hair, and not touching a dead body. No indication he did that.

- ✓ Some have suggested that he was an ascetic, because he also dressed and ate meagerly (dressing in camel's hair and eating locusts and honey). All those things do suggest he is not depending on his own wisdom, position, or influence but that he is depending on the Lord, like Elijah.
- ✓ But there is an even simpler solution — he would not be controlled by wine (alcohol), but he *would* be controlled (**filled**) **by the Holy Spirit**. It is the same thing Paul says of the believer in **Eph. 5:18**.
- ✓ Like every other follower of Christ is to be, John would be submissive to the Spirit of God.
- ✓ This introduces the **Spirit** in this book and begins laying the groundwork for His influence —
 - He is the empowerment of the ministry of John the Baptist (1:15, 41)
 - He is the means of the conception of Christ (1:35)
 - He is the empowerment of Zacharias (1:67) and Simeon (2:25, 27)
 - He is the source of revelation for Simeon (2:26)
 - Christ's ministry is Spirit-empowered (3:16) and Christ was Spirit-filled (3:22; 4:1, 14, 18)
 - The Spirit was a source of joy for Christ (10:21)
 - The Spirit was a promised gift for Jesus' followers (11:13)
 - Blasphemy of the Spirit (denial of the Spirit's work in Christ) was the unforgivable sin (12:10)
 - The Spirit was a source of revelation and instruction for the disciples (12:12)
 - The Spirit was also likely in view as the power of the Pentecost experience (24:49)
- ✓ In summary, John would succeed because of the Spirit's power in his life; Jesus resisted temptation and fulfilled the Father's purpose for Him because of the direction of the Spirit; we come to faith and grow spiritually because of the work and presence of the Spirit in us.
- ✓ It's the Spirit's work. No man succeeds on his own; what John did and what we do is because we have received a grace gift of the Spirit to guide and provide for us (**Rom. 8:9a, 11**).
- ✓ Notice a fourth and final aspect of God's grace in the provision of John — it's his ministry...

4. The MINISTRY of the Forerunner (vv. 16-17) — what was significant about John? What would he do?

- **He works for repentance (v. 16)**

- ✓ His ministry was quite simple — preach repentance **turn...back to the Lord their God**.
- ✓ "To turn" is to move away from sin and toward obedience as a righteous replacement (**17:4; 24:47**).
- ✓ While repentance is often the general turn of a sinner from His sin to the Savior, John would preach a return of the nation to God — to turn away from idolatry to humble worship of the true God (**their God**, the One who had called them as His chosen people).
- ✓ He is anticipating the arrival of the Messiah and preparing the nation to receive Him as the King of the great Kingdom (**Mt. 3:2; Lk. 4:43; 8:1** — as they one day will, Rom. 11:26-27).
- ✓ The repentance John preached for Israel was corporate and national, but the same elements are in the call to the repentance for individual sinners today — to be saved from God's wrath, repent.

- ✓ Repentance means you are weary of your sin, and you desire righteousness. You can't be right before God on your own (you can't be perfect, and once imperfect can never become perfect). So repentance simply means asking God for the forgiveness and cleansing of your sin so that you can obey Him and live with Him and for Him — you want God more than you want your sin.
- ✓ If you are not a follower of Jesus, I exhort you to repent and begin living for Christ today....

- He works by the Spirit's Word (v. 17a)

- ✓ To say that John will *go before Him* (God, v. 16) *in the Spirit and power of Elijah* quotes Mal. 4:5-6.
 - Those are the “last words” from the Lord before the 400 years of silence; they are also the “first words” when the silence is broken. God has not forgotten His word and promise.
 - Gabriel captures the nuance of Mal. 4 — Elijah will not literally return to preach, but one like him will come and preach with his kind of authority.
 - John acknowledged he wasn't the literal Elijah (Jn. 1:21), but he did preach according to Elijah.
 - And how did Elijah preach? He was uncompromising and preached with boldness (1 Ki. 18:18).
 - He preached the Spirit's message and word — repent or God's judgment will come (Mal. 4:5) — and if they responded to the message, they would be spared judgment and MK would begin.
- ✓ This affirms that John would not be great because *he* was great, but because he had a great *message* — he simply was faithful to do what God chose him to do.
- ✓ Preaching God's message was God's grace to John (it was a privilege) and the message was a grace to the people that heard it as well — it was an opportunity to change. Grace is everywhere...

- He works for sanctification (v. 17b)

- ✓ When John would preach he was preaching for two things: repentance and transformation — justification and sanctification. Justification was in v. 16, while sanctification is in v. 17b.
- ✓ How would they know if they repented? By transformation of relationships — *fathers to children* (and children to fathers, Mal. 4:6), and *disobedient to righteous...*
- ✓ When repentance is made, relationships that are broken get restored — even the most difficult (familial) relationships. That's what God does by His grace. He gives a new way to live.
- ✓ John's gracious preaching would turn hard-hearted sinners into repentant redeemed servants.
- ✓ This is the message John preached, preparing the way for salvation in Christ. He is a story of grace.

CONCLUSION: Now you know the rest of the story of John the Baptist's arrival. It is a story of God and His work, and it is a story of His grace. In the 400 years of silence after the prophets and before Christ's arrival, God was working and He was extending grace to His people. They just couldn't see it — yet.

And in your life and mine, God is also working. And His work is a work of grace. Maybe you've lived past your trouble long enough that you can start to see some of those evidences of grace. If not, the words of Gabriel are not just for Zacharias, but they are for you also — “Do not be afraid...God hears your prayer...Joy is coming. Be at peace.”