

Luke 1:8-17

"A People Prepared"

January 21, 2024

1. Intro

- a. Just to catch us back up since its been a couple of weeks...
 - i. Two weeks ago, we looked at the 400 years of silence
 1. This was the time between the books of Malachi and Matthew, where the prophets no longer heard from the Lord
 - ii. But God was still very much at work during this time, wasn't He?
 1. We saw how during this time, God was bringing to pass all that He had prophesied through Daniel
 - a. The rise of the Persian Empire
 - b. The reign of Alexander the Great
 - c. The madness of one of his successors, Antiochus IV, who desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem by making offerings to Zeus upon the altar of God
 - d. And the coming of the Roman Empire, into which Jesus would be born
 2. We also saw how God was bringing the people together through the Greek language and culture and education
 3. He was establishing future outposts through the synagogues dispersed in all the different countries of the Empire
 - a. We didn't talk about it, but all of these countries were also becoming even more interconnected through the roads built by the Romans
 - i. God was not speaking during these 400 years, but He was setting everything in place for the coming of His appointed King
 - ii. But in all of this preparation, there was still a crucial component missing... the hearts of the people
 1. The people of God were plagued by deep divisions over the old ways vs. the new
 - a. The Sadducees were pushing for political power, and alliances with the Roman politicians, as they taught the people that it was perfectly fine to compromise on the truths of God, as long as you gained favor and influence in return
 - b. The Pharisees were pushing for a return to the old ways, as they "fenced in" God's commands with hundreds of commands of their own, turning the path of God into one of legalism and moralism
 - i. A legalism and moralism that made you look really good on the outside, but turned your heart cold and hard
 - c. The Zealots were pushing for physical uprisings and revolts against the Roman oppression
 - d. And the rulers in Judea, led by the evil King Herod, were filled with deceit and greed and bloodshed
 2. The stage had been set for the coming of the King, but the hearts of the people were not ready
 - b. But as we ALSO saw two weeks ago, there was still a remnant of faithful followers of God

- i. Men and women who didn't just have an external righteousness, but whose hearts were truly humble before the Lord
 - 1. In spite of all the unrighteousness in the land, this remnant remained faithful
 - 2. And among this remnant, were the priest Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth
 - a. And as we also tragically saw, even though these two servants of God were faithful and righteous before God, Elizabeth was barren
 - i. Childless into their old age
- c. We learned something about righteousness from their example, didn't we?
 - i. We don't walk in the ways of God in order to receive blessings and rewards from God in this life
 - ii. We walk in the ways of God because He is God, and we are not
 - 1. He is our Creator, we are simply the creatures He has created
 - 2. He is the Potter, we are the clay
 - a. And yet, despite us simply being created creatures, who have a bad habit of continually rebelling against our Maker, God has chosen us to be His children
 - b. And IN THAT, we have reason enough to pursue righteousness like Zechariah
 - c. In our adoption as sons and daughters of God Himself, we have reason enough to walk blamelessly in His commandments like Elizabeth
 - i. Which leads us to where we are today, as we look at Luke 1:8-17

2. Luke 1:8-17

- a. *⁸Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."*

3. So, what are some of the things we see in this passage?

- a. The first thing we see is that Zechariah didn't normally serve in the Temple, but instead this was the set time that his division had been assigned
 - i. Back in verse 5, we saw that Zechariah was a priest in the division of Abijah
 - 1. The priests throughout the land of Judea were on a rotation for serving in the Temple
 - a. This was a division that had been in place since the days of King David, recorded in 1 Chronicles 24
 - i. We read in that chapter that the division of Abijah was eighth in the overall rotation

2. It was time for the division of Abijah to take their turn
 - b. Luke tells us in verse 9 that Zechariah was chosen by lot to enter the Temple of the Lord to burn incense
 - i. In modern-day language, we might say that they drew straws to see who would get this great privilege, and Zechariah was the winner
 1. But we know that this didn't happen by chance, or luck, did it?
 2. For Proverbs 16:33 tells us that,
 - a. ³³*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.*
 3. The priests in the division of Abijah cast the lots on that day, but it was GOD who had determined that Zechariah was chosen
 - a. So Zechariah would enter the Temple, and he alone would burn the sacred incense, according to the commands of God given way back in Exodus 30
 - i. The altar of incense was in the Holy Place of the Temple, but not in the Holy of Holies, which was behind the great veil
 1. For in the Holy of Holies was where the very presence of God was to dwell
 2. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies
 - a. And he could only enter the Holy of Holies on one day out of the entire year... the Day of Atonement
 - ii. But, if you remember from last week, the presence of God no longer dwelled in the Holy of Holies
 1. The priests kept up the routines, and they might have even believed that God was still there
 - a. But He was not
 - b. God was silent
 - c. God no longer dwelled in this earthly Temple made by man
 - iii. But things were about to shift in a MASSIVE way, weren't they?!
- c. As Zechariah was burning the incense inside the Temple, and the people were praying outside the Temple, verse 11 tells us that an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah, standing on the right side of the altar of incense
 - i. We'll see in just a few verses that this is the angel Gabriel
 1. Gabriel, who had appeared to Daniel to explain to him the visions we talked about last time
 2. Gabriel, who would soon appear to Mary to announce the coming of the Messiah in her womb
 3. Gabriel, God's messenger angel who stands in His presence, now appeared before Zechariah
- d. And verse 12 says that "Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and great fear fell upon him."
 - i. This reaction is consistent with what we see throughout the Scriptures
 1. We live in a day when the angels of the Lord have been tamed, and stripped of all the majesty and glory that God has bestowed upon them
 - a. We have little statues of chubby little cherubs, with harps or a bow and arrow
 - b. We speak lightly of our guardian angels, and talk as if they are just like us
 - c. There's a popular church out in California that even teaches their people to go around blowing trumpets to wake up angels in different cities, as they shout out, "Wakey wakey!"
 - i. Our view of the angels of God has not only become comedic – it has become downright absurd

- d. But over and over and over again throughout God's Word, when people encounter an angel of the Lord, they are filled with fear
 - i. And rightly so
 - 2. Which is why the first words we often hear from these angels is something along the lines of "Fear not!"
 - a. Or in this case, "Do not be afraid..."
 - ii. Starting in verse 13, Gabriel says to Zechariah,
 - 1. *¹³"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. ¹⁴And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."*
4. So what do we see in these words from the angel, Gabriel?
 - a. Well, first we see that Zechariah's prayer had been heard by the Lord
 - i. We might think that Gabriel was referring to Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayer that God would give them a child, but most commentators agree that this was probably not the case
 - 1. Verse 7 told us that both of them were advanced in age
 - a. The implication that Luke is making here is that all expectation for children had long passed for these two faithful servants
 - b. So it isn't likely that they were still praying that Elizabeth would get pregnant
 - 2. The more likely prayer is that Zechariah was praying for the coming of God's Kingdom
 - a. As Zechariah stood in the Temple and burned incense before the veil, he stood there as a representative of the people of God
 - i. His prayers most likely would not have been focused on himself, but on his fellow Israelites
 - 1. And therefore, Zechariah was likely praying for repentance for God's people
 - 2. He was likely praying for the restoration of God's Kingdom
 - 3. It's possible that he was even praying for the promised Messiah, the Anointed One who had been foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament
 - 3. And Gabriel comes to Zechariah and gives him an absolutely astounding answer:
 - a. God has HEARD your prayers
 - i. After 400 years, the silence has been broken!
 - 1. God has heard, and God has spoken!!
 - a. Your wife will bear you a son
 - i. His birth will bring much joy and gladness
 - ii. He will be great before the Lord
 - iii. He will not drink wine or strong drink
 - iv. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb!
 - v. And in the spirit of Elijah, he will make ready for the Lord a people prepared
5. Just stop for a moment and think about what just happened
 - a. For CENTURIES, priest after priest after priest had gone into the Temple to burn incense on the altar, and then they had left and gone back to life as normal

- i. No word from God... no supernatural encounters... just burn the incense, say some prayers, and go back home
 - ii. But Zechariah doesn't just get to talk with an angel on his turn
 - 1. This angel tells him that God would begin to turn the hearts of the people back to Himself
 - 2. And He would do it through the son that Elizabeth would give birth to in nine months
 - a. Elizabeth, who was barren and advanced in years
 - b. Elizabeth, who had likely given up all hope of ever having any children
 - c. Elizabeth, who had quietly born the reproach of her people for her entire married life
 - i. This Elizabeth would very soon be pregnant with child
 - ii. And this child would be named John
 - b. Incredibly, John would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even in Elizabeth's womb
 - i. We'll see confirmation of this later in Luke, as John leaped in his mother's womb when they came into the presence of Mary and her unborn child
 - ii. So John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even in the womb
 - 1. And once he was born, he was to be set apart for God
 - 2. Many believe that John was set apart as a Nazarite, which was why he was forbidden to drink wine or strong alcohol
 - a. These were men who had made the commitment to live an extreme life of holiness and devotion to God
 - b. Like John, Samson was set apart as a Nazarite from birth
 - i. But we know that his devotion to the Lord was much more external than it was from the heart
 - c. Even the Apostle Paul was believed to have taken a Nazarite vow during a certain season of his ministry
 - 3. So John was to be set apart... great before the Lord
 - c. And his ministry would be threefold:
 - i. To turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God
 - ii. To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children
 - iii. And to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just
6. So first, John would turn many of the children of Israel back to the Lord their God
- a. Remember what we talked about earlier in the sermon
 - i. Yes, there was a faithful remnant among God's people
 - 1. But by and large, the people of God were in rebellion against Him
 - a. They had become consumed with power and greed
 - b. They had become cold and legalistic
 - c. They longed for a Messiah to save them
 - i. But they didn't want a Messiah to save them from their own sins
 - ii. They just wanted a Messiah who would save them from their oppression under Rome
 - 1. They wanted a King would fight battles and win wars
 - 2. They had seen Cyrus of Persia, and Alexander the Great, and the Caesars of Rome, and they prayed that God would give to them a King like that!
 - d. The people of God, had turned their backs on God
 - 2. But Zechariah's son, John, would turn many of them BACK to their God
7. Second, he would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children
- a. Again, just think of the prevailing attitude of those days

- i. Conflict and strife was the norm for the people of Israel
 - 1. You were either on the side of the Pharisees or on the side of the Sadducees
 - 2. You either aligned with the political rulers in Judea, or you aligned with the Zealots who fought against them
 - 3. And if you chose to stay in the middle, well, that was a side of its own, wasn't it?
 - a. And you would be ostracized for not choosing any side
 - b. But it wasn't just the people of God who were so harshly divided
 - i. It was within individual families as well
 - 1. Fathers took sides against sons
 - 2. Mothers took sides against daughters
 - a. And the love of many had grown cold
 - 4. But Zechariah's son, John, would turn the hearts of the fathers back to their children
 - a. His ministry would begin to heal the wounds that had long existed within the families of God's people
8. And third, John would turn the disobedient back to the wisdom of the just
 - a. When Gabriel refers to "the disobedient," he is talking specifically about those who were walking in rebellion against God
 - i. These were those people who had made the decision to reject everything that God had commanded
 - 1. They were living in outward spiritual rebellion against the God of their fathers
 - 2. And, in their minds, they would NEVER be persuaded to do otherwise
 - ii. And yet John would come to turn these rebels BACK to the wisdom of the just
 - 1. The better translation would be that John would turn them back to the wisdom of the righteous
 - a. Back to the wisdom of those approved by God
 - b. Back to the wisdom of those who lived their lives in conformity with the commands of God
 - 2. The people of Israel in those days were walking in great folly
 - a. But Zechariah's son, John, would lead them BACK to the wisdom of the righteous
9. And Gabriel says that John would do ALL of these things in the spirit and power of Elijah
 - a. So what did he mean by that?
 - i. Well, if you know your Old Testament history, Elijah was one of God's great prophets
 - 1. He certainly had his moments of doubt and weakness, but in those times when his faith was strong, Elijah was a man to be feared
 - 2. King Ahab, one of the most wicked of the kings of Israel, had a name for Elijah the prophet...
 - a. The "Troubler of Israel"
 - b. Ahab had hundreds of prophets employed in his service
 - i. These prophets told him exactly what he wanted to hear
 - ii. They kept him nice and safe and comfortable in his idolatry
 - 1. But not Elijah
 - 2. Elijah was the Troubler of Israel
 - a. For Elijah constantly reminded them of their rebellion against their God
 - b. And many centuries later, Zechariah's son, John, would once again "trouble" Israel with his message of repentance
 - i. Many would flock to see this new prophet in his final years
 - 1. Many would turn back to God through his words

- 2. Many families would be restored
- 3. Many would return to the wisdom of the righteous
- ii. But there would also be many who would mock him and scorn him for his words
 - 1. There would be many who would not receive John with rejoicing, but they would instead see him as the new “Troubler of Israel”
 - a. But John was not to worry about these people
 - b. For his ministry would have one overarching purpose and goal:
 - i. To make ready for the Lord a people prepared
 - 1. We’ll see in the coming weeks that John certainly had an amazing ministry
 - 2. Even Jesus himself would say in Matthew 11:11 that there was no one born of women who was greater than John the Baptist
 - 3. But John was not the point, was he?
- iii. No, John’s role, as incredible as it was, was to make ready a people prepared for the Lord
 - 1. The TRUE Messiah, the Son of God, would soon enter this world
 - a. God had set the stage for the salvation He would bring
 - b. He had put all the pieces in place for the explosion of His church throughout the Western world
 - c. But the hearts of the people were not yet ready
 - i. So John was sent to prepare their hearts
 - ii. The last of the Old Testament prophets would soon be conceived in Elizabeth’s womb
 - 2. And as he grew into a man, full of the Holy Spirit, he would prepare the hearts of the people by turning the children of Israel BACK to their God
 - 3. He would prepare the hearts of the people by turning the hearts of the fathers BACK to their children, healing the divides that had grown so deep
 - 4. And he would prepare the hearts of the people by turning the rebellious and disobedient BACK to the wisdom of the righteous
 - a. This is how John the Baptist would make ready for the Lord a people prepared for his first coming

10. I wonder friends, how will WE make ready for the Lord a people prepared for his second coming?

- a. Turn with me to Matthew, chapter 24
 - i. In this chapter, Jesus and his disciples are leaving the Temple, and the disciples are pointing out to Jesus how beautiful the building is
 - 1. As we saw last time, in an attempt to win over the Jewish people, but also as an effort to build a monument to himself, King Herod had dumped tons of finances and resources into remodeling and restoring the Temple
 - a. By all accounts, it was truly a marvelous thing to behold
 - b. But Jesus wasn’t impressed
 - i. For the next 24 verses, Jesus stunned his disciples with a prophetic word about the destruction of the Temple, wars and earthquakes and famines, many falling away from the faith, and a great tribulation that has never been equaled in the history of the world
 - ii. And after this great tribulation, verses 29-31 tell us that the Son of Man will return, his angels will be sent out with a loud trumpet call, and all of the elect will be gathered, from one end of heaven to the other
 - iii. But Jesus warns them in verse 36...
 - 1. NO ONE knows when this day and hour will come

- a. Not even Jesus himself
 - 2. Only the Father knows
 - a. And when HE is ready, Christ will return
 - b. So what is Jesus' word to us in light of these things?
 - c. In verse 42, he simply says, "Stay awake"
 - d. In verse 44, he says, "Be ready"
 - e. And in verses 45-46, he says *"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes."*
- b. My friends, we have been charged with a task
 - i. God COULD HAVE set things up in such a way that, as soon as we place our faith in Jesus, and surrender our hearts wholly to him, that we would immediately be transported up into heaven, and our life here on earth would be over
 - 1. Wouldn't THAT be incredible?!
 - 2. But that's not the way He has ordained things to be, is it?
 - a. Christ has purchased our freedom from our sin through his death on the cross
 - b. He has secured our eternal life through his resurrection from the grave
 - c. And now, he is seated in the heavens, at the right hand of God the Father
 - i. But he did not leave us alone
 - ii. And he did not leave us without purpose
 - 1. The Father has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in the hearts of those who have surrendered their lives to His Son
 - 2. And Jesus himself has said to ALL OF US,
 - a. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."
 - 3. He has said to us, "Make ready a people prepared for my return."
 - a. And how do we do this?

11. By becoming like John the Baptist

- a. In the same way that Elijah did, we are to proclaim the Word of the Lord, even if people look at us as the "Troublers of America"
 - i. For Elijah did not answer to Ahab... he answered to God
 - ii. John the Baptist did not answer to Herod... he answered to God
 - iii. We do not answer to the politicians in Washington DC... we answer to God
 - 1. So we proclaim the Word of the Lord
 - a. With graciousness and humility, but also with unashamed boldness
- b. And the message that we proclaim is the same message that John would proclaim... a message of repentance
 - i. Like John the Baptist, we are to call people to turn back to God
 - ii. Like John the Baptist, we are to call people to turn back to loving one another as they love themselves
 - iii. Like John the Baptist, we are to call people to turn back to the wisdom of the righteous
 - 1. We are to call them to turn back to the Word of God
 - a. And the Word of God does not say that "God loves you just the way you are"
 - i. The Word of God says that "God loves you so much that He sent His one and only Son to die on the cross in your place"

1. You are a sinner... a rebel... a traitor to the Kingdom
2. You deserve death... you deserve judgement... you deserve the wrath of God
 - a. Yet in spite of all of this, in His LOVE, God has made a way for your forgiveness
 - b. HE has made a way for you to receive amnesty
 - i. And the way to your freedom... the ONLY way to your freedom... is by surrendering your heart to His son, and confessing that Jesus is Lord of your life
 - c. THIS is the love of God that we have been entrusted to proclaim
- b. My friends, this is the ONLY way that people will be prepared for the second coming of Christ
 - i. We cannot make ready a people prepared by compromising on the truths of the Scriptures so everyone will like us more
 - ii. We cannot make ready a people prepared by tolerating their sinful lifestyles and embracing their sinful choices
 - iii. We cannot make ready a people prepared by looking to Washington to make laws on the church's behalf
- iv. God could have just sent Gabriel to proclaim to the whole world the Gospel of repentance and faith for the forgiveness of sins
 1. But He didn't do that
 - a. He sent YOU... He sent ME
 - b. If you bear the name, "Christian," then you have been entrusted by the Master to make ready a people prepared for his return
 - i. Friends, Christ IS returning... on a day and hour which no one knows except the Father
 1. How will he find us on that day?
 - a. My prayer for all of us is that when he does return, each of us will hear these words of Matthew 25:21...
 - i. *"Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the JOY of your Master."*