

GOD'S PROMISES AT CHRISTMAS
Luke 1:5-17, 24-25, 65-66, 80; Galatians 4:4-5

(NLT) When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah.... and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. ⁶ Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. ⁷ They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old. ⁸ One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. ⁹ As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying. ¹¹ While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. ¹² Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. ¹³ But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. ¹⁴ You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. ¹⁶ And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly." ²⁴ Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. ²⁵ "How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children." ⁶⁵ Awe fell upon the whole neighborhood, and the news of what had happened spread throughout the Judean hills. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked, "What will this child turn out to be?" For the hand of the Lord was surely upon him in a special way. ⁸⁰ John grew up and became strong in spirit. And he lived in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

Galatians 4:4-5 (NASB): "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, ⁵ so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."

INTRODUCTION

How do you like it if someone promises to do something for you but fails to follow through with it? Years ago, two boys were getting ready to boil some eggs to decorate for Easter. The older brother told the younger one, "If you let me break three eggs on your head, I'll give you a dollar." The younger one's eyes grew wide. "Really?" he said, "a whole dollar?" "Yep," his brother replied, "If you let me break three eggs on your head I'll give you a dollar." "Promise?" asked the small boy. "Promise," his brother said. "Okay, then; go ahead." The younger brother closed his eyes and held his hands at his side as the older brother giggled and cracked open the first egg. As the yolk began to roll down his cheeks, the older brother said, "That's one. Here's two." As he cracked open the second egg, he said, "This is so cool!" The younger boy then braced himself for the third egg. After about ten seconds he said, "Come on; I'm ready for the third egg." The older brother then slyly said, "Are you kidding? That would cost me a whole dollar." People are very creative about why they fail to honor their promises. If it's due to circumstances beyond their control, like a family emergency, we have no good reason to be upset but we are often still disappointed.

Does God ever truly fail to live up to His promises? Cheryl Herndon and her husband were growing, relatively new Christians, eager to live out the truths of the Bible, when God memorably answered this question for them. Cheryl Herndon today is quite successful as a nurse practitioner. She's been married 44 years, with 2 married children and 9 grandchildren. She's contributed to the books, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Celebrates Nurses* and *All is Calm: True Stories of Christmas*. But 41 years ago, Cheryl and her husband, Steve, had been married three years and were already blessed with two children. As Christmas approached, they struggled with too many bills, as do many young couples. They lived in a tiny house that shared a yard with an equally small home.

Their immediate neighbor was a single mother with finances worse than theirs. Cheryl wished to provide her three children simple gifts. Unlike her babies, they were old enough to be aware of Christmas. Across the street, a mother of six was again pregnant. She liked pretty things and kept an immaculate house, but rarely got anything for herself. Cheryl wanted to get her a new maternity blouse to replace the stretched-out T-shirt she wore. A friend of Steve, Cheryl's husband, was a "starving student" and obsessed with his rapidly balding head. Research convinced him a boar's-hair brush might preserve his remaining hair. Cheryl and Steve wanted to buy him this special brush. Lastly, Cheryl wanted to provide cookies and punch for a neighborhood block party a few days before Christmas to promote honoring our Savior's birth.

Cheryl and Steve had been reading marvelous Bible passages like **Matthew 6:31-33** (NKJV), where **Jesus** taught, "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" ³²For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." Cheryl also read **Jesus'** words of **Matthew 7:7a**, "Ask and it will be given to you." Cheryl writes, "In my naïve way, I did simply that." She shopped and priced each of these gifts she sought to brighten the Christmas of others. The total came to \$142.72. She began to pray earnestly in faith God would supply it.

The Sunday before Christmas, a member of her church, whom Cheryl knew only by name, came up to her. This woman's husband had recently died in a tragic plane crash. She'd received an unexpected check from the final settlement after her husband's death; some sort of interest payment. She asked God who needed a Christmas blessing at that time. God's Spirit directed it be given to Cheryl. Cheryl only agreed to accept the envelope from this recent widow after this woman insisted it was the only way she could remain obedient to the Lord. When in their car for the ride home with her husband and babies, Cheryl Herndon slowly opened the envelope. Inside she found \$143 in cash! Tears welled up in her eyes and her heart overflowed with gratitude to a loving God who fulfills His promises in such wonderful ways!

Because the events associated with Christ's birth embodied the fulfillment of many of God's promises, not only to the nation of Israel but to all of mankind, it's fitting that we reflect this Christmas on the theme of how the Lord delivers upon His promises. Let's take up two points: How God Delivers upon His Promises May Disappoint Us. Secondly, How God Delivers upon His Promises May Delight Us.

I. HOW GOD DELIVERS UPON HIS PROMISES MAY DISAPPOINT US

Nearly all of us have been or will be parents. What if you knew God would answer your prayers about having children like this? You would have but one child. He'd be born so late in life you would already be in your retirement years. By his late teens, he would sense such a strong calling of God upon his life that he would leave home for years of intensive training in which you would rarely see him. After he began his career as a preacher of God's Word, he would experience a meteoric rise in popularity when thousands heeded God's call. He would then be unjustly jailed and executed at the hands of a government conspiracy.

In essence, I've just described to you the life of the man history knows as John the Baptist. God's will for Zacharias and Elizabeth meant they would live most of their married lives without children and have no children to comfort or care for them in their old age. They were as faithful to the Lord as anyone else they knew, yet they had to endure the trial of God appearing to ignore the prayer dearest to their hearts for decades. It would have been very easy for them to cry out in bitterness, anger, or despair, "Why us, Lord?" Or, Zacharias could have taken matters into his own hands by divorcing Elizabeth, which Jewish law at that time allowed, to gain the children he wanted by another, younger wife.

Later, Simeon would warn Mary when he held the baby **Jesus** in his aged arms, "a sword will pierce your own soul" as part of the cost of being mother to the Christ Child (**Luke 2:34-35**). As **Jesus** grew into manhood, Mary undoubtedly grew in awareness her son must endure torture, abuse, and hatred scarcely

imaginable, or **Jesus** would fail to accomplish His mission in coming to earth as the Son of God. Her beautiful and devoted child; her good, thoughtful, and compassionate boy, would be more brutalized than the worst treatment most animals are ever subjected to, in order to become the sacrificial "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (**John 1:29**). This too would be the will of God.

We should celebrate the awe and wonder of the events associated with the births of John and of **Jesus**, described in **Luke 1 & 2**. But the experiences of Zacharias and Elizabeth, and of Joseph and Mary, should remind us of something else. We can trust God to deliver upon His promises to us, but we may not always like *how* God delivers His promises. The more precious His promises to us are, the more of a price we may need to pay for God's promises to be fulfilled. If we cannot trust Him beyond how *we* are convinced God *should* deliver upon His promises, for Him to be a "good" God in our eyes, we will be disappointed.

II. HOW GOD DELIVERS UPON HIS PROMISES MAY DELIGHT US

Galatians 4:4-5 conveys a lot to us in a few choice words about how God works. "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law,⁵ so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." What God is telling us is that the interval of time between when He makes a promise to us and when He delivers upon it is based upon proper preparation; in God's eyes, not ours. God never does anything prematurely or poorly planned. The Greek word for "fullness" refers to a completeness of preparation to achieve a goal. Most of us would not attempt to drive to Virginia in a car with little tread left on the tires, that overheats frequently, with brakes that squeal from the shoes being almost gone, with a half-tank of gas, and just \$30 in our pocket. Often, though, we do not realize how unprepared we are to succeed until problems defeat us. A woman was telling her three boys the story of the Nativity one day. When she described how the Wise Men brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for the infant **Jesus**, her six-year-old gave this a lot of thought and then remarked, "Mom, a Wise Woman would have brought diapers."

Due to the crucial importance of **Jesus'** mission being a success, in saving us from our sinfulness and restoring us to the Lord in a relationship of family devotion, God the Father waited until He knew the best possible preparation had been made before sending His Son to be born in Bethlehem. God waited until Roman troops, ships, and roads had brought the greatest peace and stability to most civilizations on earth that the world had then known. The good news of the salvation God offers us through Christ **Jesus** could then spread rapidly across much of the globe in ways that would have never before been possible.

Galatians 4:4-5 reminds us today God will deliver upon His promises to us in the "fullness of time," when God knows the best possible preparation has been made to achieve His goals. If we cooperate with the Lord by enduring disappointments when He does not give us the answers *we* think are best, or in the *timing* we think He should deliver them, He'll delight us by exceeding our expectations of what we thought He might do. Was this not true, when all was said and done, of Zacharias and Elizabeth, who became parents of Christ's forerunner, John the Baptist? Was this not true of Joseph and Mary, known for all the ages as the earthly parents of the Christ Child who was God in the flesh? This will be true of us, as well.

CONCLUSION

Someone once wrote, "Sure it takes a lot of courage to put things in God's hands, To give ourselves completely, our lives, our hopes, our plans; To follow where He leads us and make His will our own; But all it takes is foolishness to go the way alone!"

Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) became one of America's first foreign missionaries. In September 1809, at age 21, he read a sermon by a man who'd been a chaplain to the British East Indies Company for many years. The sermon, "The Star in the East," had for its text **Matthew 2:2**: "For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." For the next few days, young Adoniram could think of little else but

this sermon. The Lord then inspired him with a vision of how God would use him mightily if He would take up Christ's command of **Mark 16:15**, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."

On February 19, 1812, only days after getting married, Adoniram and his wife Ann set sail for Calcutta, India, to join the Baptist missionary William Carey of England. But when they were forced to leave India by the British East India Company, they believed God led them to Burma, despite William Carey warning the Judsons of the hostility and savagery of Burma awaiting them. On their journey, their ship was tossed about in a 3-week monsoon, Ann became very sick, and had a baby that died and was buried at sea.

Burma was a constant battle for the Judsons, with humid heat reaching 108 degrees, cholera, malaria, dysentery, and daily life among a people of filthy living habits. Entrenched Buddhism made the Burmese stubbornly resistant to the Gospel. Six years passed before anyone converted to Christianity. The church in Rangoon had but 18 members after 10 years. During the British-Burmese war of 1824-26, Judson was arrested as a spy and spent 20 months in a wretched prison cell. His beloved wife Ann died in late 1826 from exertions to keep him alive. By the end of 1827, Judson had buried Ann and all of their children.

Upon his release from prison, someone asked Adoniram Judson what he thought of his prospects as a missionary in Burma after he'd experienced such hardships and heartache. Judson replied with these immortal words, "The future is as bright as the promises of God!" These were not idle words. God was about to deliver upon His promises to Adoniram in ways that boggled his imagination!

In 1828, Judson ransomed a debt-slave of one of Burma's first Christian converts. This slave had been a mean-spirited bandit who'd killed over 30 men. But as Judson shared with him the Christmas story, his response to the good news of **Jesus Christ** was electrifying! This man was a Karen, an ancient tribal people who'd migrated centuries earlier from Tibet. The 800,000 Karen living in Burma had refused to embrace the national Buddhism, despite the persecution this caused them. Why? Because in a thousand villages, Karen teachers called Bukhas reminded them of the ways of the true God their ancestors had worshiped, whom they called "Y'wa." They described Him as "eternal" & "perfect" in His praiseworthy attributes. They believed the human race had become subject to sickness, aging, and death after two of their ancestors had eaten the "fruit of trial," after they were tricked by an evil deceiver. They felt they were further cursed because they had negligently lost their copy of Y'wa's book revealing how the true God wanted them to live and worship Him. But they clung to a prophecy for hope. A Deliverer had been promised the Karen. He would be a "white foreigner" who would come across the sea from the west bringing them a copy of Y'wa's "white book." This book would restore to them the knowledge of the true God.

After this former bandit-murderer gave his heart to **Jesus** and soaked up the essential teachings about **Christ** from Adoniram Judson, he became an apostle to the Karen people. Within two years, tens of thousands of the Karen had embraced the Gospel; rejoicing that the Lord had not forsaken them as He'd promised. Many Karen became missionaries spreading the good news of **Jesus** throughout Burma. Shortly after Judson's death in 1850, at age 61, a government survey recorded 210,000 Christians in Burma! Since 1850, several million Karens and other Burmese have experienced transforming salvation through the Christ of Christmas. Why? Because Adoniram Judson cooperated with the Lord in delivering upon His promises to him as God thought best; not as Judson thought best. Our challenge as Christ's followers this Christmas Day is to cooperate with the Lord by trusting Him to deliver upon His promises to us as He knows best, rather than faithlessly insisting God must deliver upon His promises as we think best.