

## *GOD WILL REMEMBER*

Waiting for answers to prayer is the most difficult thing about praying for most of us. During this period the word of God encourages us to **“wait on the Lord.”** In Mark 13:35 Jesus uses the word “watch” as in watching and waiting in prayer. Most people do not “wait” well, and because of this, the time between asking and receiving requires from them a tremendous amount of patient endurance. And I might add, many give up during this period just as their prayer was about to be answered all because they misread the silence of God and defaulted.

What does the Christ-mass have to do with faith, prayer, watching and waiting? Everything! Yes, Christmas is about the first advent of Christ. Advent means visitation. The whole month of December is called Advent, calling attention to the events that set into motion the birth of our Lord. And when Christians devote the entire month to the detailed study of these things, wonderful truths begin to stir up new hope in them again. Faith concerning the word of the Lord for them returns. Things once believed in that have been allowed to fade away and die, begin to come alive again with a vision for new possibilities.

### **THE SILENCE OF GOD**

I once preached a sermon on Palm Sunday entitled: *“The Silence of the Lamb”* about the silence of Jesus when standing before Pontius Pilate. My point had to do with the negative aspects of the silence of God, and that, at times; this was a sign of judgment. But this isn’t always the case. Sometimes the silence of God is a test to see if the faithful will continue to remain obstinate in their faith. When God wants to do something spectacular in someone’s life, the process usually involves: 1) a revelation of His will; 2) a promise rooted in a covenant; 3) abrupt silence, during which things that contradict His promise and will are allowed to happen (a “testing” period); then, in time, 4) He fulfills His promise.

There were many promises given through the Old Testament Prophets proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. Many of these were very specific, covering the time of His birth, the town he would be born in, the fact that he would be born of a virgin, etc...And God continued to speak forth these promises through the prophets right up to the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi. Then, silence. We’re talking no sign, no wonder, no Angelic visitation, dream, vision or prophetic word. Silence.

### **The “How Long” Psalms**

King David often lamented the silence of God. Repeatedly he prayed, **“How long, oh Lord?”** *“My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?”* (Psalm 6:3); **“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy**

*triumph over me?”* (Psalm 13:1-2); *“We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows **how long** this will be.”* (Psalm 74:9). When a long time elapses between God’s promise and its fulfillment, it is natural for us to become impatient and wonder “How long, Oh Lord?” But how long is long? Two years? Ten years? Twenty years?

From the prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6 till the Angel broke the silence to Zachariah in Luke 1, four hundred years had elapsed! Now that’s a long time to wait for God to answer prayer, wouldn’t you agree? Even the priests, scribes and teachers of the law no longer expected God to fulfill His promise of a Messiah (Matthew 2). Yet we are told that there was a group of faithful, humble people doing just that just before the birth of Christ. Luke tells us there was an old man by the name of Simeon who was **“waiting for the consolation of Israel”** (Luke 2:25). A prophetess named Anna went about telling **“all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel”** (Luke 2:38) that she had seen the Christ child. The terms “consolation” and “redemption of Israel” are messianic fulfillment terms. They speak of God finally putting an end to His long silence and seeming inactivity, to fulfill the promise He had made to His people. So as incredible as it seems, after more than four hundred years of divine silence, there was a small group of faithful people who continued to believe steadfastly in God’s promise of a Redeemer.

## **Contradictions**

Two of these people were an aged couple by the names of Zachariah and Elizabeth. We are told by Luke 1:6 that they were an elderly couple who *“were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.”* In other words, they were *walking their talk*, being consistent in their observing of the Mosaic covenant and Levitical law. The Jews believed in those days that if people obeyed the Lord and were faithful, they should be blessed in all they do. The flip side of this belief was that if a person appeared to not be blessed, it was because they were under judgment, cursed by God because of sin in their life. So here we have a godly couple who seemed to not be blessed by God, because, as verse 7 tells us, *“they had no children... Elizabeth was barren...”*

Deuteronomy 28:2 reads, *“All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God...”* In verse four one of the many blessings bestowed on the obedient was children. But poor Elizabeth *“had no children, because [she] was barren...”* and to make matters worse, *“they were both well along in years”*. We know that Elizabeth’s bareness was not due to her husband’s or her own sin. Nevertheless, among her own people she was disgraced because of her infertility (Luke 1:25).

In the Bible, bareness was often associated with thorns, briars and thistles; symbols of accursedness and judgment. When God laid waste the land because of the wickedness of His people, briars and thorns covered the barren ground (Isaiah 5:6). Desolate valleys were infested with thorns (Isaiah 7:19). Jesus used

thorns and thistles when teaching about fruitfulness and fruitlessness (Matthew 7:16), and when teaching about land that was unable to receive seed (Matthew 13:7). In 2 Peter 1:8 bareness is synonymous with unfruitfulness. Proverbs 26:2 put it this way: *“There is no curse without a cause.”* When the land was barren because of drought, famine, etc, it was as if God was silent and passive, not saying anything, and not doing anything, and thorns and briars were the result.

But there were exceptions to the rule. Sometimes God used bareness, not as a punishment but as a pre-requisite for a glorious, miraculous episode? Of the seven barren women in the Bible, six conceived and bore children over time. Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel, the mother of Samson (wife of Manoah); Hannah, Michal, and Elizabeth were all barren, and except for Michal (long story), all were healed of their bareness, with each of their children being important to the lineage of the Messiah. None of these women were barren because of personal sin, but because of a timing issue. God wanted to glorify Himself in them and honor them by including them in the “big picture” plan of redemption. Each felt the sorrow and shame of bareness acutely; didn’t fully understand the reasons for their infertility, but rejoiced when their bareness was lifted. And had they been given the opportunity to do it all differently, they wouldn’t have changed a thing. Greater blessings are always worth the wait. The season of Advent and especially Christmas, keys on this point, both for them and for us. Nothing of value comes easy.

### **Winning the Lottery**

Zachariah belonged to a lower level of priests known as “idiot priests” which meant that he was a common, ordinary, rustic, illiterate priest, probably only able to read Hebrew or Aramaic, not Greek. Most of them lived in the hill country around Judea. Zachariah was “born on the other side of the tracks” as they say. The fact that his wife was barren, and that they were elderly made matters worse. However, Luke 1:9 tells us Zechariah won the lottery! That is, he received the privilege of serving as priest in his division due to the drawing of straws called the lot. Because there were so many priests in those days (18,000 to 20,000 according to the Jewish historian Josephus), most would never be chosen to serve in this way, and no one did so twice. Zechariah regarded the news as the most important moment of his entire lifetime. His responsibility would be to replenish the incense that burned in a golden altar just inches in front of the veil dividing the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, behind which was the Ark of the Covenant! Such a responsibility was not taken lightly. People died who played around with the Holy things of the Temple. If they so-much-as parted those curtains in an unprescribed way, **ZAP!** Crispy critters.

There were lots of stories concerning the golden Ark of the Covenant. This sanctified piece of furniture was the only thing behind the thick veil separating the holy of holies from the holy place. It resembled a solid gold chest with two poles through holes on its sides. On the top of the ark was a lid consisting of two cherubim - one on each end, bent over and looking down on the top of the lid, wings outstretched toward one another and touching at the tips. The top of the lid

resembled a grill or grate. It was called the judgment seat. But once a year, on the Great Day of Atonement, the high priest would ceremonially wash and dress, and after making atonement for his own sins, would take the blood of the sacred lamb and carry it in a bowl behind the veil, inside the holy of holies, and sprinkle the blood on the top of the lid, between the cherubim changing the judgment seat into the mercy seat. Thus God would forgive the sins of the nation for another year.

Before the high priest took the blood behind the veil, a rope was tied around his ankles, held on to by those outside the Temple. If he neglected to do all he needed to do to enter into the holy of holies and be accepted by God, **ZAP!** So golden bells and pomegranates were sewn on the hem of his priestly garment. So long as the sound of the bells could be heard by those outside the Temple, all was well. But if the noise of the ministering high priest could no longer be heard behind the veil, those holding the rope would then pull his corpse out! Now knowing this, and the stories of people who died because they didn't take ministering in the temple seriously enough, wouldn't you be a little bit afraid knowing you would be servicing the golden altar of incense only inches away from **the Veil?!**

Zachariah's heart must have been filled with joy and awe. He had been selected to minister at the very altar that represented the prayers of his people, and God's faithfulness to answer those prayers. Perhaps his and Elizabeth's hope had faded away years ago, as they reconciled themselves to the fact that God had not heard their prayers for children. Yet they remained faithful to the Lord, and waited for Him – all the while silently bearing their suffering.

And so it was in the first week of October, 748. Zachariah's division would be ministering from October 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup>. As a side note, if you counted six months from October, it would place Mary's immaculate conception in the month of April of the next year, which aligns perfectly with a late December birth of Jesus Christ. What all this means is what looks like the "luck of the draw" concerning Zachariah being picked to minister in the Temple, was actually a divine appointment set by the Almighty who had not forgotten them!

### **“Zachariah” And “Elizabeth”**

In the Bible, names give insight into people's natures and tendencies. Parents named their children intentionally. Whether in honor of an ancestor, or as an act of faith in a prophetic vision, or intuition about the future destiny of the child, or as a way of commemorating an event, names were chosen for a reason. Zachariah's and Elizabeth's parents were among those who believed God would fulfill His messianic promise. They believed He would do so in their lifetime or the lifetime of their children. Many in those days believed this due to the prophesy of Gabriel to Daniel (Daniel 9:23-27 – see side panel).

Because they believed this so strongly, both sets of parents named their children intentionally, by faith. “Zachariah” means “God will remember.”

Elizabeth means “God has promised” or “God has sworn an oath.” Both names evoked faith in God’s faithfulness to keep His promises, generation to generation. Every time faithful and obedient Elizabeth called to her husband, she was reminded that **God will remember**. And Every time Zachariah gently spoke to his wife, he was reminded that **God had promised**. And yet the years continued to slowly pass and God remained silent. Oh the pathos of it all. It drives me every year into deep, contemplative meditation. As time goes by, from sunrise to sunset, Christian folk need to be reminded that **God will remember** them. He will not forget you. He remembers His promises. Paul wrote that all God’s promises in Jesus Christ are without a doubt, “yes and amen” (2 Corinthians 1:20).

### **Hindsight is Better than Foresight**

After maintaining His silence for 400 years, God speaks. Zachariah is alone in the holy place. The only light comes from the golden candlestick lamp. As the cloud of perfumed smoke rises and fills the shadowy room with plumes of incense from the altar, an eerie glow fills the holy place. As he quietly and reverently goes about his business, he suddenly receives the fright of his life. None other than the angel Gabriel appears out of nowhere, to his left, between the candles and the altar.

Now listen carefully to Gabriel’s words. The last words God spoke were in Malachi 4:5-6 and dealt with the coming of a person who would minister in the spirit of Elijah. Gabriel first words reassured Zachariah that the prayers he and Elizabeth prayed all those years for a child did not fall on deaf ears, but that God was waiting to “kill two birds with one stone.” The time had come to fulfill His messianic promise, while also keeping his promise to the faithful couple by blessing the fruit of Elizabeth’s womb. He waited all those years not to cause them sorrow, but to bless them with double honor. Luke 1:13-17 records Gabriel saying first, that their prayers for a child had reached God’s ears and they would indeed have a son, and they were to name him John (v. 13); that the boy would be great in God’s sight, be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb and throughout his life; that he would turn many backslidden children of Israel back to the Lord.

We need Advent to remind us once again that there is a game afoot. When my kids were young we played Hide and Seek all the time. I even used their tape recorder to tape my voice – something like “Hey, I’m over here!” or “Don’t look in the closet!” The kids loved the game. One of their favorite renditions was when I would turn out their lights when I put them to bed, and shut their bedroom door, but they knew I was still in their room, lurking in the shadows, creeping up to tickle them. How they would squeal with delight. You see, my kids taught me a valuable lesson about this game: that the point of the game was not in the hiding, but being sought (and found).

Beloved, there is a game afoot when it comes to you and God. The game is Hide and Seek. One theologian remarked that God is like a person who loudly

clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away every time. Over and over in the Bible, God encourages us to seek and find Him: But who likes to play the game if no one will look for them? Phillip Yancey remarked that the joy of hide and seek comes from being found, not staying hidden.

In my own church I have labored to remind our people to watch and wait for God concerning His promises. Years ago I established an Advent tradition in our congregation to remind them of these themes during the Advent season. Beginning with the first Sunday in Advent, we hand out a wristband and bookmark each the same color as the Advent candle for that particular week. The bookmark contains scriptures to be read each day of the week. Week one's color is yellow (for light). The slogan on the wristband reads: ***"Watch and Wait"*** and focuses on watching and waiting expectantly, for God to fulfill His promises, as do the scriptures on the bookmarker. The second week's color is red, and the slogan on the wristband is ***"God will Remember."*** The red band serves much like a red ribbon tied around one's finger. It is a sign to remember that God will remember His promises. I wrote a Christmas carol many years ago about folks like Zachariah and Elizabeth, which captures the essence of this theme. I would like to share its words with you in hope that you will be reminded to never forget that God will remember.....you.

### **THE WATCHING CANDLE CAROL**

By Pete Bertolero

They waited long and faithfully watched  
In hope the Day drew near.  
When secret longings of the heart  
Would shed the last of their tears  
Would shed the last of their tears

"Why Wait?" mocked they who had not the light  
"Your kind's been wrong for years."  
"God has not heard, no answers in sight.  
"Your prayers have not reached His ears."  
"Your prayers have not reached His ears."

"How long, Oh Lord! How long!  
Until the time has come."

"When will He come?" the faithful folk sighed  
But waited patiently.  
God is not deaf nor is He blind  
The Lord's salvation we'll see.  
Jehovah's salvation we'll see.

The Day Star dawned and Shiloh did come  
His promise He did keep.  
He's never late for those who wait (pause)  
But passes by those who sleep

He passes by those who sleep  
He passes by those who sleep  
He passes by those who sleep