

# Answered Prayers (Part 1)

## Series: Christmas at Grace

Luke 1:5-25

Dr. Matt Cassidy --- December 15, 2019

To God be the glory, right? These songs have so much power. They have such great truth, and then the magic of music can get into our souls. I love this season of the year at Grace, the Christmas season. You know, it's a birthday party, right! We know it's the birthday party of Jesus the Christ. But I want you to remember this: it was a surprise birthday. It was a surprise party.

**The very essence of Christmas is that it breaks upon you brilliantly and abruptly. At one moment the great day is not and the next moment the great day is.**

**--- G. K. Chesterton**

And here's why. G. K. Chesterton says this – I love this quote: “The very essence of Christmas is that it breaks upon you brilliantly and abruptly. At one moment the great day is not and the next moment the great day is.”

Jesus' birthday was a surprise party. There were people of faith praying that God would come and invade their experience, and He did. And they were surprised. They didn't think He would.

The Christmas story is a story of faithful saints praying that God would answer their prayer, and He does, and they're shocked. Men of faith, women of faith, maybe like me, maybe like you, and their faith isn't very strong, and they're asking that the God of the universe would take charge and be in control. And then He shows Himself to be in charge and in control and they're shocked by it. He does whatever He wants, whenever He wants, and then when He does it, we're like, *What?!* That's why it's a surprise. It's a surprise birthday party because people who prayed didn't think their prayers were going to be answered, and so they were surprised. That's why it's a surprise party.

## Israel in Submission to Greece and then Rome

Look at the players involved. You have to understand the context to fully appreciate the shock and awe of this. When you open the New Testament, you'll see that the Christmas story is a Jewish story. And in the context of the nation of Israel, the Jews, Israel is living in the God-promised land, but it's not really theirs. They're renting. They are in submission to Rome. And Rome says, *You can do what we say you can do. You must stay in subjection to us.* So, even while they're practicing some of their rituals and their rites, it's only because at that time Rome said so.

The emperor of Rome had appointed someone to be in charge of that area in the Middle East where Israel is. His name was Herod the Great. And do you know why they called him Herod the Great? Because Herod said so, and so the people did. Herod was a paranoid, bloodthirsty sociopath. Anybody that was possibly a remote threat to him – he killed them. He just killed them. He killed two of his sons-in-law; he killed his favorite wife. How do you think he treated his not-so-favorite wife? He had two of his own sons killed.

As he's coming to the end of his career, it's very obvious that he would be dying soon. And he knew that the people he had been ruling over wouldn't mourn his death. And so, he gathered up hundreds of the most popular people in the land and imprisoned them. And the order was that when he died, they all died, and that would ensure that all of the people he ruled would have a moment of mourning. He was trying to set the tone for his death. Wow.

Let me just say how that ended. He died and the man in charge of giving out the order to kill all these people said, "No, we're not going to do that." He set them all free. I just thought you might want to know that before we move on. Crazy story.

Anyway, before Rome had ruled over Israel, the Greeks ruled. In 330 BC or so (I'm rounding) Alexander the Great defeated Persia and took over the land of what we call the West and the Middle East. And do you know why they called him Alexander the Great? Because Alexander said so. That's right.

And under Alexander's rule, he was lenient to Israel and they got to practice – they had a great deal of freedom at the time. And after Alexander died it continued to digress and it spiraled down and it got worse and worse and worse. And even the last one hundred years under that rule was dreadful. And then that led to the Romans.

The point is this. By the time you open the New Testament there is a loss of hope and there is shame in their identity. If you could visualize this, Israel as a nation is descending into a dark cave for 400 years. It has gotten to the point where they are completely blacked out. There's no light of hope or identity or meaning. If you've been in these caves, you can't see your hand in front of your face. That's the context when we talk about in this story that we're going to look at.

### **A Glimpse of Light**

And the story that we're looking at today is not that bright. But when you've been living that long in that kind of darkness, this is just a baby lightning bug. When it lights, you can see a smile on someone else's face. That's the story we're looking at today.

#### **Luke 1:5-7**

**In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah ... And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup> And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. <sup>7</sup> But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.**

In Luke chapter 1 he says this: "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah ... and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron" --- very well bread, a good family line --- "and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes before the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years."

"In the days of Herod" – there has never been a sentence written with so much subtlety – "in the days of Herod." While he is holding them down with his boot on their throats -- that's what's this story is about.

And we're introduced to two of our characters here. And they are righteous and they are living a blameless life. And in this context, living by faith is moment by moment. Any given moment you could just snap and quit. If you made this into a movie the writers would inject some kind of sarcastic, nagging, cynical teenager as part of the plot, because he or she would

Speak what's on everyone's mind. So, while they're trying to maintain their faith and live righteously under all the statutes, there's this other teen saying, *What difference does faith make anyway? What's it getting us? It's so embarrassing being a Jew today. Everybody makes fun of us. Where's God anyway? You know it's getting worse, right? Every year it gets worse.* That's the voice.

And while Zechariah doesn't have a cynical, nagging teenager living at the house – he would probably like one, actually – he's childless – he has a cynical, nagging teenager living in his head. And he has to choose to rise above that. He has to choose to live by faith. And faith is the assurance of things hoped for. And when Zechariah hopes, he hopes that Israel would be rescued. He hopes that she would be restored with the dignity she deserves.

The other character that's introduced is Elizabeth. She hopes. She's hoped her whole life against her personal experiences and she has hoped against the calendar, against the hourglass. And she's run out of sand. When she was younger and of childbearing age, she could not conceive. She was incapable of doing that. Her hopes for a child are behind her.

And it's in that context that this story is written, these two characters are introduced. And then it is by lottery that it's Zechariah's turn to be picked to go into the temple and light the incense, the altar of incense. This is where we get this flicker of hope in this desperate, dark cave.

### **Luke 1:11-12**

**And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.**

It says, "And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him." One translation says, "He was paralyzed in fear."

### **Luke 1:13**

**But the angel said to Zechariah, “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.”**

Surprise! Look what happens. “And the angel said to Zechariah, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will call his name John.’” Surprise! – an answer to prayer. I can’t imagine what he’s going through, but this archangel Gabriel says to him, *Hey, you’re going to be a father, old man. Wait till you tell your wife! Because this is going to be a special boy.*

### **Luke 1:14-15**

**And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,<sup>15</sup> for he will be great before the Lord.**

And this is what’s going to happen next, obviously. “And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord.” Oh yeah, there’s joy and gladness and rejoicing, because it’s a surprise party, and that’s what people do. That’s how people respond. It’s a good thing. He’s going to be a special boy in the eyes of God. He’s not going to drink wine or any strong drink and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even when he’s in his mother’s womb. Prayer answered.

### **Luke 1:16-17**

**And John will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,<sup>17</sup> and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.**

And Gabriel here is almost playing Santa Claus. *So, Elizabeth got her prayer answered. What about you? I’ve got a little gift in my bag for you.* Gabriel says, *Here’s something for you,*

*Zechariah*, verses 16 and 17. “And John” – this son of yours – “will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready the people to prepare them for the Lord.”

Boom. I mean, this is everything Zechariah had hoped for his whole life. This is the answer to his prayer. He’s going to give birth to a son, but the longing that he’s always had is this restoration of Israel, that she would be returned to her glory. His whole life he prayed for this prayer. And his whole married life, for forty-two years, the day he was married, he was praying that they would have a child. And so, here it is, the answer to both these prayers. Surprise! And his response is, *No way*. And when he says, *No way*, he means, *No, there’s no way this could happen. Do you know how old we are? And my wife is barren.*

#### **Luke 1:18-20**

**And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”<sup>19</sup> And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.<sup>20</sup> And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”**

And that doesn’t go well. So this is what happens next. “And Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this? For I am an old man,’ -- *and my wife is not so good either* – “‘and my wife is advanced in years as well.’” *Don’t tell her I said that.* “And the angel answered him, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the days these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.’” *I answer to God Almighty. I spend my working days in His presence. I’ve seen His face. He sent me to tell you these things. Surprise. But you don’t believe, and so, this will be your sign. You’ll be mute until the day that boy’s born.*

Now, what’s happening outside – Zechariah’s been spending too much time inside this confined area and they’re wondering if he’s even alive. And when he finally comes out, the

people that have been waiting and praying for this event to take place – when he comes out he can't speak, and so he's doing sign language and trying to communicate with them. And they realize he's had a vision. He's had an experience with God. And so, that's how that part of the story ends. And they go home, it says, and Elizabeth is thinking, *Oh, my prayers have been answered. I've been praying to God that this man would shut his mouth. When I talk to him he can't talk to me. I've got a few things to say to him.*

But there's more, Elizabeth, there's more to your prayer, it says. It says a few days later they conceived. It continues to say that she didn't tell anyone for five months. Now we don't know, but I suspect the reason she waited five months is she has a history of miscarriages and she just wants to wait until that day when she can tell people and it will be a take. See? It says she waits five months and this is her: “ ‘Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when He looked upon me, and He has taken away the reproach of other people on me.’ ” Surprise. I told you it's a surprise party. Everyone in this story is surprised.

### Application

#### Hebrews 11:1

**Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**

And here's the application. This is the definition of faith. The Christmas story defines what faith is. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; faith is the conviction of things not seen.” Then and now. It is the things hoped for, it is the conviction of things not seen.

What do you hope for then and now? You hope to not be forgotten. You hope that God is listening. You hope that you are remembered. You hope that God knows you. You need assurance of that hope. The people in this story are living with very little assurance of what they hope for. Do they have a conviction of what they don't see? I would say maybe it's a belief and leaning towards an opinion. Then and now – what do you not see? You do not see, often times, that God is in charge, that God is the boss. And you look around, and in this context, you see

Herod. And to have a conviction that God is in control, that He is all powerful and loving and just and does whatever He wants, whenever He wants – that’s hard to have a conviction about. Because clearly, I don’t see it.

And the Christmas story is people in this story living by faith, and I would say a weak faith, but it’s a faith. They are surprised by YHWH knowing them and being in control, and answering their prayers because they believe. It is a husband and a wife that I personally can relate to, because they do have faith. It’s just not a really strong faith. And when God answers their prayer, they’re surprised. That’s the story here; the story of Christmas is God fulfilling His promises and we’re shocked.

### **God’s Promise Kept: “I Have Not Forgotten You”**

The promise He fulfills is this: you are not forgotten.

And ironically, the Christmas season is the time when many people feel isolated and alone. This is the time when suicide rates go up, where you can see on the internet in various places where people will advertise, knowing that this is the season of the year when people feel most forgotten. Does God even care?

And I say “ironically” because this is the time of year – this is the story that proves that God does care and God does know. But this is when loneliness sits heaviest upon our shoulders. And loneliness and isolation are not prejudiced. They are equal opportunity hunters. Whether you are in a corner office with panoramic views or you are a basement sorting the mail, you ask yourself, *Does anybody know? Does anybody care? Does anybody really understand what I live with day in and day out? Anyone?* This time of year is hard.

For me for the last twenty years, this season, mid-November to January 15, comes on me like a truck. I think somewhere around the 20<sup>th</sup> of November I think, *Look, there’s a little black spot on the sun today.* And I keep thinking, *No, this year it’s going to be different. This year it’s going to pass over, it’s going to be a great year, all twelve months.* But nope, the 20<sup>th</sup> rolls around and it’s like, *Hello, darkness, my old friend. Here you are. How long are you here?*

*You know the rules – until January 15<sup>th</sup>.*

The difference between my first decade of doing this and the last decade is I’ve made rules, because now I know better. I’ve made rules like I don’t make promises when I’m happy, I



don't respond when I'm angry, and I don't make decisions when I'm sad. There it is. Matt, don't make decisions from November 20<sup>th</sup> to January 15<sup>th</sup> and you'll stay inside the rails. It's every decision – *What are you going to have for dinner? – I don't know. I don't know – you decide. I don't know.* Other people make decisions for me during this time.

This October was especially awesome because I was reading Steinbeck's *East of Eden* – 608 pages of gloom and despair. And it's a longer book than I thought and I turned the corner and it was about November 10<sup>th</sup> and I still had 200 pages to go and I thought, *I've got to finish this before the 20<sup>th</sup>. Because what's going to happen to me? I can't be reading this book.* Every chapter is darker and meaner and crueler. So, I just stayed up at night and I'd put my little reading thing at two times the speed, two and a half times. Now it's a chipmunk reading Steinbeck because my due date was November 19<sup>th</sup> or else. I can't be reading this kind of literature during ... You've heard of the Incredible Hulk? I turn into the Incredible Sulk. You should invite me to your Christmas party – I'm a big hit.

Anyway, the point is the Christmas story – and it's a true story – and this is part of the story that you need to know -- that absolutely independent of your feelings, God cares for you. Separate from your experiences, separate from your situation, God is with you. God is with you at this very moment. And His presence is power. That's what this story says. It doesn't matter how you feel, it doesn't matter what your circumstances are, it doesn't matter your experiences. God loves you and He is for you.

One of the central themes of the entire Bible is God is present. One Old Testament scholar counted – there are 115 times in the older Testament where God says this promise: "I will never leave you. Be encouraged." It's the foundational reason why God required them to build the tabernacle and then later the temple. It is the reason that God sent His Son to be with us, to tabernacle amongst us. *Name Him Emmanuel, God with us.*

And when Jesus was here, who was He running around with? I don't know – guys like us – tax collectors, enemy soldiers, just regular people in other words, not people that had to qualify. He was with them. And then at the end of the story, Matthew's gospel, his biography of Jesus, it ends with this promise: "I will never leave you and I will never forsake you." That's His promise.

And when Jesus leaves, He doesn't leave like in the older Testament. He leaves a new way where the Spirit of God dwells in our souls so that we are never without the presence of

God. That's the point. *I am here*. And the power that we have is in that very presence. It is the power to make weak people strong. It is the power that has old people and the need for courage and gives them hope in their old age. It is the resurrection power that helps people in addiction overcome those addictions.

The Christmas story is this. It is the fulfillment of the promise that God is with us. Don't be surprised.

### **God's Promise Kept: "I Am in Control"**

The second promise that this story is about is that God is in control – the conviction of things not seen. God rules all of creation. And the promise is *I am in control*. That's what God said. Here's the thing. In God's sovereignty – that means He rules with a plan – He is playing like a three-layer chess game, and quietly. It's more than we can understand and subtler than we would like. He's moving pieces around and we need to trust by faith to have a conviction of things that we don't see, or else we'll give in to the demons in our lives that are messages.

Like Jean-Paul Sartre: "We are meaning seeking creatures in a meaningless existence."

Richard Dawkins says this – I know, this is the cynical teenager that's trying to get in. "The universe offers no design, no purpose, but blind, pitiless indifference."

That's the doubt that we're trying to force away from our lives.

### **Romans 8:28**

**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.**

Or we can hold on to this promise: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, and are called according to His purpose." God works all things together for the good for those who love Him and are called to His purpose. That's a fact. Don't be surprised.

## **Galatians 4:4**

**But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son,  
born of a woman, born under the law.**

Here's a bigger picture, an absolute declaration of how God's ruling the universe and in the context of this story. It goes like this. "But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law." When the time had fully come ... Some of you know this verse as saying, "In the fullness of time ..." Three-layered chess in quiet.

When this declaration to Zechariah and Elizabeth is made, it's 400 years in the making. Alexander the Great conquers Persia and the West and the Middle East. His personal tutor is Aristotle. Aristotle was hoping that Alexander the Great would be the philosopher king that Socrates wrote about. And so, everywhere Alexander would go, he would set up these education centers. And in the context of those centers, everyone would learn Greek so they could learn classic Greek philosophy – everywhere he went. He realized he could unify this great empire through a common language. Alexander the Great, uniting that empire with language.

Or, it could be in the fullness of time that He used this nerd and all nerd values to make sure that everyone would be able to receive the invitation to the big surprise birthday party in a language they would understand. The invitations are going out soon, and by soon, I mean about 300 years. But I want to make sure everyone can read it. *So, Alexander, make sure everybody learns Greek. – Got it.*

Alexander the Great – he was a pawn. And when the Romans moved in --- the nerds did as much as they could – the Romans – they're Klingons, they're jocks, they like military strength. So, they said, *We're going to build roads everywhere. All roads lead to Rome. Because the way we rule, we want a battalion of the military to show up at your door two days after you make some stupid comment.*

And so, they built the Roman roads to advance their military power and control. They were going to unite their kingdom through these roads. Or ... maybe there was something else going on. "In the fullness of time ..." All of these invitation letters written, but there's no mail system to deliver them. What we need is some roads. And so, the Romans have the first UPS mail delivery system. Thanks, guys. The surprise party invitations made their way and the gospel

went all throughout Europe and the Middle East because God was using the Greeks and the Romans and everyone else, because that's what YHWH does, because He's the boss.

Is YHWH the boss? Is He in control? Can He do whatever He wants? Can He use anyone He wants? Can He use Alexander? Uh-huh. Can He use Herod? Sure. Can He use Caesar. Yeah. That's the way it was then, it's the way it is now.

So, why so afraid? Why so angry? Boy, would you be surprised when you found out what was really going on. Living by faith means that you're not surprised, or not as surprised as you would be. Because you begin to understand that the Christmas story is this: God is saying, *I am with you, always have been, and I am in control and always have been.*

### **The Christmas Story: "I Hear Your Prayers"**

The Christmas story is an answer to prayer. The Christmas story is this – God saying to us, *I hear your prayers.*

Think about Elizabeth here. She's wanted a child since her childhood. And she was praying all along. And then it's way past her time and she continues to pray. And surprise, shock, joy –it's going to happen. It says repeatedly that she is past her time. She is in old age and so is Zechariah.

Picture this – if she's in this church, what Sunday school class would she go to? What adult community? One of the older ones, right, maybe? So, she's in this older women's senior sabbath school class and they're doing prayer requests and it's like this: *Thelma's getting a new hip on Tuesday, let's all pray for Thelma. And Wanda ... Wanda fell down again. Okay, that's it. Let's pray. Wait ... Elizabeth? Wait, settle down. You have a prayer request? You have something to announce? What? You are what?*

*I'm pregnant! Hey, Wilma, I have not been gaining weight – I'm pregnant! I'm giving birth to a boy.*

Forgive the details on this and the biology here, but this is where the miracle takes place: she could never hold a conception in the days of her prime. She has nothing but a series of miscarriages and it even looks like it even might be a miscarry of hope. She finds no serenity in accepting the things that she cannot change. That's her young life. And then came menopause. And she didn't stop praying. Menopause is a declarative statement that says, *Your dreams are*

*dead. Your hope is in your past. That's what that word means for a woman like Elizabeth. But she kept praying, and then ... surprise! Who shows up in her life but Jehovah Jireh, the God who provides; Jehovah Rapha, the God who heals. Wow. Let me be clear. It only takes one egg and you have one left. I've been hiding it all of these years. Think about that. And you're going to bring him to full term and his name will be John and he's going to change things around. You are not alone, Elizabeth. You are part of a sorority of greatness. You joined the ladies: Sarah, Abraham's wife and Rebecca, Isaac's wife, and Rachel, Jacob's wife, and Samson's mother – all barren, all past their age, all miraculously gifted with a child. You are not alone, but rather, you can relate to some of the greatest saints in all of history. So there. Surprise!*

What are we to do? If we just have a little more faith we would be a little less surprised, right? If we had a little more faith we'd be a little less surprised. And when we pray, I think we should look and seek and seek out how God would answer our prayers, whatever they might be. They might be prayers like, *Am I alone? – I would love to have a conviction of things I don't see. – I would love to have assurance of things that I just hope for. – I long for justice and mercy and safety.*

And maybe it's there and you just don't see it, and maybe you don't see it because we're not looking for it. Many of you know the modern parable that makes the point. A Native American is in New York City during the holiday season, and he's taken there by one of his friends. And they're right in the middle of New York, with all the horns honking and the cab drivers yelling at each other and sirens going off constantly, and all the people. It's just noise, the city of unrelenting sound. And this is the epicenter of all that volume.

And the Native American said, "I just heard a cricket."

And his friends said, "No, you didn't. That was something else."

"No, I heard a cricket."

"It's impossible. You can't hear anything like that with this level of decibels."

So, he crosses the street and goes into one of these concrete potted plant things and pulls out this cricket and says, "There it is."

"Oh, you've got that super Native American hyper-sound thing going, right?"

He says, "No, that's not it at all. You can hear what's important to you. You can hear what matters to you. It's what you're listening for. That's the difference. And what you're listening for is what's important to you."

He says, “No, you’ve got super hearing.”

He said, “Watch this.” The Indian pulls out a bunch of coins and throws them on the sidewalk. *Ping!* Everyone twenty feet from that sound stops, turns, and looks. And the Native American says, “See? That’s what’s important to them. That’s what they were listening for.”

So, it all depends on what’s important. Living by faith, graduating and growing in our faith, means we’re looking for how God is working amongst us in His power, and looking for how God is with us in His presence.

And one other application: God has, in His sovereignty, a plan. He has the power to make the plan work. He put you in this place at this time for this very purpose. He has sent you here to be His priests to your family and to your friends and to the people on your street and to the people who you work with. Open your ears. See what God has for you. The point is this: you bring that message, you bring this message that we’re talking about, that Christmas is a surprise party, and the surprise is that our souls, your friends – they’re praying not to be so lonely. They would love to know about the presence of God and the power that accompanies that. They would love to know that God is in charge in the crazy world that we live in right now. You could be that messenger. Look around – not just for what God is doing, but what God has brought for you to tell that story about. It’s a good story, the Christmas story, about a surprise party.

We’ll talk more about that next week. Let’s pray.

**“But the angel Gabriel, the archangel, said to Zechariah, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard, and your wife Elizabeth is going to bear a son, and you shall call him John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before our Lord.’”**

*Lord, we just sang that you know our needs, and our weaknesses are no stranger to you. I’d ask that we would have a conviction of that thing, that we might not see, that we would have certainty about the things that we hope for. Lord, would You give us a vision for what You’re doing all around us? Would you give us a clarity of Your presence in our life? And Lord, I want us to be less surprised at Your miraculous interventions in our life. So, I’d ask that You would give us ears to hear and eyes to see who You’ve placed in our lives so that we might enjoy being Your spokesperson, Your ambassador, Your Gabriel archangel to the people in our lives. We*

*pray that we would be a church like that, a group of people that just hear and see things that only angels do. Let us be that. In Jesus' name. Amen.*