

**+ Luke 1:67-79 + Praise the Lord Who Keeps His Promises +
+ 1st Sunday after Christmas + 28 December 2014 +**

Trust is a difficult lesson to learn. As children, trust came pretty easily to us. A child typically assumes that everyone has his or her best interests in mind or that things are always reliable. Over time, however, failure and lying, unfaithfulness and the self-centered motives of others, broken promises and failed products eat away at that trust until we become naturally skeptical.

We're naturally skeptical about the trustworthiness of other people whether it's co-workers or friends, classmates or people of the opposite gender. They have to earn your trust rather than you willingly give it to them. Studies have shown that Americans, especially younger people, are quite skeptical, especially about the institutions that have been considered trustworthy in the past. That could be government, the church, schools of higher learning, traditional brands, authority, family, marriage, or customs. We naturally question if something or someone is reliable. Just think about your first instinct when you heard this or that product promise something during the weeks leading up to Christmas. Did you think, "Yeah, right"? If you received or purchased that product, did it live up to the hype?

It's no wonder that so many of us are naturally skeptical when people, institutions, and products have proven so untrustworthy, so unreliable, so unfaithful to their promises. Sadly you and I have a tendency to apply that natural skepticism to our God and his promises, even to Jesus.

While your trust in God's promises on a Sunday morning here in worship might be very strong, does that trust weaken during the week? A family crisis comes up or life doesn't go the way you expect. A loved one gets sick unexpectedly or your tight income gets pinched a little bit more. Then you have the issues and challenges that pop up on any given day or week.

You know the facts about what your God has done. You know what Jesus has done. You even know that God has made promises not just about Jesus, but about his care for you. **"Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."** (Matthew 28:20b) **"Call upon me in the day of trouble, I will deliver you..."** (Psalm 50:15) **"[Nothing] will be able separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 8:39b), but do you ever find yourself wondering if God will come through and keep those promises? Will he really be with you? Will he really deliver you? Does he still love you? Will he work all things for your good? Can you trust him?

That natural skepticism begs to come out, because your sinful nature wants you to doubt not only God's love or mercy or providence, but even God himself. "Will he really save me?" Your sinful nature dares you to ask that question even as it plants a little more doubt and despair inside you. Pretty soon your Christian life becomes nothing more than going through the motions fearful and skeptical that God and his promises are totally uncertain.

An elderly priest by the name of Zechariah had the same problem. You could describe him as a faithful Old Testament believer. He was even a faithful priest who served God's people at the temple, but he had a problem.

Like so many people of his own day and our own, Zechariah was naturally skeptical. As faithful Old Testament believers, he and his wife Elizabeth looked forward to the coming of the Lord's Anointed One—the Messiah, the Savior, but they were far along in years. As much as they wanted to see the Messiah, they didn't necessarily expect to see him. Plus they were without children. It seemed that the Lord had ignored their prayers for a family.

When Zechariah was called upon to serve as priest in God's temple, he eagerly carried out his task. One day as he was burning incense on the altar inside the temple itself, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and gave him some shocking news. The Lord had actually heard their prayer for a child. His wife Elizabeth was going to have a son, even in her old age, and he was going to be named John. He would **"go on before the Lord"** and **"make ready a people prepared for the Lord."** (Luke 1:17)

Zechariah was so shocked that his natural skepticism kicked in. **"How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."** (Luke 1:18) "We're going to have a child and he's going to prepare the way for Messiah? That's impossible!" He just couldn't trust what the Lord was promising. So the Lord decided to teach Zechariah the difficult lesson about trust. The aged priest would not be able to talk until John was born. Zechariah was going to learn how to trust the Lord and his promises.

When he returned from the temple, the Lord caused Elizabeth to become pregnant—just as he had promised. About six months later, the expecting family had a visitor—a dear relative named Mary, who was also expecting a child even though she was still a virgin, just as the Lord had promised 700 years before through Isaiah. Mary's child was the Son of God, the Savior.

The final trimester passed and John was born as promised. When it was time to name the child, their relatives wanted to name him after Zechariah, but Elizabeth said, ***"No! He is to be called John."*** (Luke 1:60) Unsatisfied, the relatives asked Zechariah what to name the child, but ***"to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.'"*** (Luke 1:63) This promised child was going to prepare the way for the Lord, just as God had promised.

"Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God." (Luke 1:64) What else could he do than praise the Lord who keeps his promises? With his natural skepticism gone and filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah praised the Lord. ***"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago)..."***

Does the Lord keep his promises? Zechariah would answer that question with a resounding "YES!!" The Lord of free and faithful grace came to this world with the intent to help, to rescue, to deliver his people, to ransom and redeem them from all their sins—just as his holy prophets had once foretold. The Lord of free and faithful grace came to save his people through One descended from the line of King David—just as the holy prophets Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah and others had once foretold. God was keeping his promises to his faithful people exactly as he had promised.

"...Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies..." God was keeping his promises through the One who would defeat the spiritual enemies of his people. You know those enemies well—sin, guilt, Satan, the sinful world, your sinful nature, even death. The Lord of free and faithful grace came to save us just as he swore to that faithful believer and spiritual forefather of all believers—Abraham.

Remarkably Zechariah sang about all this six months before Jesus was born. Jesus would still accomplish all these mighty deeds of salvation in the future, but they were as good as done for this believer who trusted in the God who keeps his promises. John would prepare the way for Jesus and would proclaim the good news that this world has desperately needed since the bad news of the fall into sin—***"the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God..."***

The ***"tender mercy of our God"***, his compassionate concern for souls in need moved the Lord to act through the sending of our Lord Jesus Christ into this world to save us. He is the embodiment of God's love for us and the embodiment of God himself—the Word made flesh or as Zechariah described him, ***"the rising sun...come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death..."***

Right before their eyes, God was keeping his promises down to the very last detail. It's not like he made these promises only minutes or hours or days before. All these promises kept, about which Zechariah sang, were given hundreds or thousands of years before through the holy prophets and through the oaths that the Lord had sworn to Abraham and David. The time had fully and finally come for God to keep his promises. So ***"God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons"*** (Galatians 4:4-5), to return us to his family.

That tender mercy, that undying love moved our God to keep every last one of his promises to rescue and redeem us, to save us and also to enable us to serve him. When we understand that God keeps his promises day in and day out, how else will we respond than with confident praise? Your life as a Christian doesn't have to be fearfully going through the motions filled with uncertainty about your God and his promises. Instead look to Jesus!

Look into the manger. Look into Mary's or Joseph's arms. Look to the One who breaks the darkness with his light, who humbles the proud and raises up the lowly, who rescues his people from their enemies without and within, who came to save you as God's greatest Gift. Look to the cross. Look to the scars in his hands and feet and side. Look to the blood shed for you and the empty tomb. Look to the open gates of heaven and the welcoming embrace of the Most High. Look and see God keep his promises again and again.

What else can we do than praise? His tender mercy doesn't just rescue us, but ***“enables us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”*** In view of God's tender mercy through Jesus, we see that God's will is always best and therefore we want to serve him with every moment of our lives. Our entire lives become living sacrifices of praise—because the Lord always keeps his promises!

Praise the One who promised to ransom you and did. Praise the One who promised to defeat your enemies and did. Praise the One who promised to save and care for and watch over and forgive you—and did. Praise the God who has kept all his promises by fearlessly and righteously serving him. Blessed be the name of our Lord for he has kept all his promises! Amen.