

# YHWH Remembers!

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## Introduction

### The Text

Luke 1:5–17

<sup>5</sup> In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. 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.

<sup>8</sup> Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty,  
<sup>9</sup> according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

<sup>10</sup> And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> But 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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 he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.

<sup>16</sup> And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,

<sup>17</sup> and 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.”

### Is Life Meaningless?

A. Is life meaningless? Is it true what some of those existential philosophers say? At our birth we are hurled into chaos, and at our death we recede back into chaos, nothingness! There’s no transcendent reality, no purpose, no meaning. We just project meaning onto our lives, we invent myths to order things, but there really is no order, only, as Albert Camus describes, “*mute irrationality*”—the universe doesn’t have anything to say because it’s all unreasonable, unordered chaos.

1. Another question that gets at this: Is history cyclical? Is humanity merely driving around the same cul-de-sac, again and again, going nowhere. We triumph, we fail; we rise, we fall; we live, we die; we go in circles.

B. What do you believe? Do you side with the existentialists on this?

1. Some of you might not be Christians. This might be what you believe about the world. Christianity is for weak people who need a crutch and can’t face up to the

real absurdity and meaninglessness of life. We live and we die. And that's all. Get over it!

2. Most of you are Christians. And I bet, therefore, you would probably never say this out loud. But have you ever felt it? Have you ever found yourself frustrated with how your life's going? Have you ever felt stuck, like you're going nowhere? Has life ever felt like it did for Solomon in Ecclesiastes: "[Vanity of vanities! All is vanity](#)" (Ecc 1:2)?!
  - a. These past couple of weeks I've been trying to get up earlier than usual to spend time with the Lord before the kids wake up. I rise with great expectation of fellowship with Christ, I tiptoe down the hall, I get my coffee ready, I sit down in my chair, and...out comes Chloe. When I tell her it's not time to get up, she gets upset...up wakes Bella. A couple days of this and here's what I'm saying: "What's the point?! Why do I even try?! I'm trying so hard to get time with the Lord and getting nowhere! Life is meaningless. If there even is a God, I'm pretty sure He's against me." I'm being melodramatic, but that sort of worldview taking root in my heart in these moments.
  - b. What is it for you? I didn't plan to be single this long. I'm even on dating websites and still, no one. There's no point to my life. I'd thought I'd have a better career by now. I've worked so hard to climb the ladder and I'm right where I started. I didn't plan on my body breaking down so soon. I'm still young and I can barely get out of bed in the morning. What's the purpose in all this?!
  - c. To put the question one final way, in all of this we seem to be asking: Is there anything/anyone moving this apparent chaos forward to a meaningful end goal? In other words: Is there a plan?

## Israel's Burning Question

- A. This, I believe would've been the burning question of Israel at this point in their history.
  1. In [v. 5](#), it is true, we stand on the threshold of this magnificent divine intrusion—the announcement first of the birth of John the Baptist ([vv. 5-25](#)) and then that of the long-awaited-for Christ ([vv. 26-38](#)). But if we linger on [v. 5](#), a great tension and despair emerges. 100s of years of bitter history lay behind this single verse; years of unrealized hopes and dreams, of disillusion and disarray; years that led, I am sure, to a culminating cry: "What's the point?!"

<sup>5</sup> In the days of Herod, king of Judea...

- a. Herod, king, Judea? Herod was not in the line of David. He wasn't even a Jew. He was an Edomite, of Esau. In 2 Samuel we read that David warred against the Edomites, and now one is reigning over them? What is Esau doing over Jacob? Why is there no Davidic king in Jerusalem? Whatever

happened to God's promise? Whatever happened to God's plan? Has YHWH forgotten us? Is He even there at all?

## The Outline

A. [v. 5](#) is our text for this morning. Let's read it in its fullness again:

<sup>5</sup>In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

1. It is my thesis that, while the first part of this v. sets up a bitter tension, the last part gloriously relieves it. The question: "Is this pointless? Has God forgotten us?" is answered with an emphatic no! The coming of John the Baptist and ultimately of Christ is God's declaration to His people that He has not forgotten but remembered them. All has been according to plan.

B. So this morning we will proceed through 3 major headings: (1) YHWH Plans; (2) YHWH Promises; and (3) YHWH Remembers.

## (1) YHWH Plans

A. If we are to truly perceive the bitter tension and glorious relief that [v. 5](#) brings into view, we must spend some time looking at what lay behind it. We must look at the plan and the promises of God.

B. We begin with YHWH Plans, because behind and beneath every promise God ever makes is His plan. This plan runs from eternity past on into eternity future. It is as sure and stable as the being of YHWH Himself—and YHWH is the same yesterday, today, and forever: "I am who I am!" This is why Paul would say: "[He] works all things according to the counsel of His will" ([Eph 1:11b](#)).

1. All the disparate facts of the universe are ordered, governed, mobilized by almighty God. All the diversity is brought into a unity in the plan of God. All of life is bursting forth with meaning. All of history is marching forward with purpose. The existentialists got it wrong!

C. This is the God Luke presents to us here, and in the rest of Luke and Acts. In these 2 volumes, He labors to show that what God is doing with Christ is a continuation of the plan of old—He is bringing that plan to a climax in Christ's first coming, and will ultimately bring it to completion and final consummation at His second coming.

1. One of the ways he does this, particularly here in the first 2 chapters of Luke (the Infancy Narrative) is through the use of allusions—references, parallels, echoes, lines drawn back in some way to the Old Testament. As I will do my best to show you in the coming weeks, behind this story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, John the Baptist and Jesus...is the story of Abraham and Sarah, the story of Moses and the Exodus, the story of David and Solomon, the story of the exile and the prophetic hope, the story of the whole Old Testament.

- a. The allusions to the Old Testament here in the first chapters are staggering! I don't know how else to describe it. You've heard of trying to drink from a fire hydrant, right? Well as I've begun to study these 2 chapters, it feels more like trying to drink from a tsunami. Every stream of biblical revelation is converging here at this single point in the coming of the Christ, and Luke is trying to help us get our minds and hearts around that!
2. Another, perhaps more immediately accessible, way Luke tries to highlight the plan of God in his project is his overwhelming use of a single Greek word often translated "It is necessary" or "must." The word is used 99 times in the NT, of which 40 are in Luke-Acts.
- a. The first instance shows up in [Luk 2:49](#). Joseph and Mary are looking for the young Jesus and they find Him in the temple: "And he said to them, 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'"
  - b. Later, Jesus says of His mission: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well... (4:43a).
  - c. Speaking of the end of the world Jesus says: "And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place..." (21:9a).
  - d. We are left asking: But why "must" any of this happen? Answer: the plan of God. It must be this way because God has ordained it to be so. Beneath every historical fact is a theological "must"!
- D. No matter how crazy, chaotic, irrational life feels to us, then, the plan of God rests beneath it and moves it forward!

## (2) YHWH Promises

- A. But YHWH not only Plans, He also Promises. His promises, if you will, can be understood to be His letting us in on His eternal plan. You have this eternal plan stretching from alpha to omega, and then you have these promises, given in time and space: "Here's what I'm planning to do!" In the temporally conditioned promises of God, then, we are given windows into His eternal plan. Another way of putting it: His promises reveal His plan!
- B. So we have the plan of God like a bedrock path beneath our feet, and we have the promises of God like a lamp unto our feet. What more do we need?! Why would you ever doubt or struggle?
  - 1. I think the answer is found when we consider the nature of a promise. Promises have a future orientation to them. To make a promise is to speak into the present something one will do in the future.

- a. Therein lies the possibility of tension: “What happens if what I see with my eyes in no way seems to accord with what I’ve heard Him say with my ears? Am I still on the bedrock path of His plan when it feels like the ground is convulsing beneath my feet? What if it takes Him a long time to enact the promise? What if He never does?”
- C. And this returns us to the tension of [v. 5a](#): “[In the days of Herod, king of Judea.](#)” Israel had been given incredible promises from YHWH throughout their history. And I don’t know if there was anyone in Israel who could make sense of this contemporary scene. “Where is YHWH?!”

Let’s consider the backstory that led up to this point of confusion:

1. We might recall promises made to Abraham, the father of all Israel, that God would give Him a land and a people, that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed ([Gen 12:1-3](#)). That kings would come from him ([17:6](#)).
2. And, later, a king does come from him, David. And He rules from Jerusalem over all Israel. And YHWH zeroes in on Him as His anointed and makes to him further promises of a kingdom that would last forever ([2 Sam 7:11-13](#)).
3. But with the sins of his son Solomon, this kingdom starts to corrupt, and spirals into division and, ultimately, exile. This land and nation and kingdom, had come to nothing. The temple of their God, razed by the Babylonians. But in their place of exile, God came in the prophets and gave remarkable promises of a glorious return to the land and re-enthroning of a Davidic King!
4. And with Cyrus of Persia these promises appear to be nearing fulfillment. For he releases the exiles to return to their land and rebuild the temple ([2 Chr 36:22-23](#)), which they do with great expectation under Zerubbabel and Joshua and Ezra and Nehemiah.
5. But then there’s this haunting scene in [Ezra 3](#), where the foundation of this second temple had been laid, and we’re told this: “[But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy \(v. 12\)](#). And we begin to discern at this point that something isn’t quite right. While there is great joy here, there’s also this indication that the second temple will never measure up. Something is missing. In fact Jewish tradition lists some of the things that were strangely missing from this second temple, 2 of the most significant being: the glory of the Lord that filled the first, and the ark of the covenant.
6. Beyond this, no Davidic king ever resumes the throne. They don’t have independence as a nation like they once did. They’re still subject to the Persians. And the OT just ends here. With all this unfinished business. “Where is YHWH?!”
7. And it doesn’t get any better in the period between the OT and the NT, between [Mal 4:6](#) and [Luk 1:5](#). You think the American political scene is bad. We have nothing on postexilic, second temple, intertestamental Israel! It’s full of chaos. These years are often referred to as the “400 silent years” because there was no prophet from God to guide the people. Israel was just left to itself, it would seem.

- a. Under the Greeks, there's severe Hellenization; the high priesthood going to the highest bidder ("It doesn't matter if you're from Aaron, do you have money?"); Antiochus Epiphanes escorted in by the high priest to plunder the temple for his military exploits; later he would desecrate it by slaughtering pigs on its altar.
  - b. Some Jews trying to remain faithful to Law of Moses saw this and decided to take things into their own hands. They're often called the Maccabees which is probably from the Hebrew word meaning "hammer", because they dropped the hammer on the Greeks, I presume. "If YHWH's not going to fulfill His promises, we'll fulfill it for Him!"
  - c. They gained independence for a short period of time and then civil war breaks out and in come the Romans. Its Mark Antony of Rome who appoints Herod, the Edomite, "King of Judea."
- D. Does that sound like meaninglessness to you? What's the point?! Sounds like history going in a circle to me. They've been in exile out of their land, now their back in exile even while in their own land! "In the days of Herod, king of Judea..." YHWH has utterly forgotten us!

### (3) YHWH Remembers

#### Zechariah & Elizabeth

- A. But now, let's keep reading: "...there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth." After 100s of years of despairing that they would ever see the fulfillment of God's promises to them, YHWH is about to intervene.
- 1. Do you want to know what Zechariah means in the Hebrew: "YHWH remembers!" Historians have noted the popularity of this name among Jews particularly during exilic and postexilic periods. Perhaps as a plea to their God! This was their hope. Remember us! Well, here, with Zechariah, YHWH remembers! But what exactly does He remember?
  - 2. Do you want to know what Elizabeth most likely means in the Hebrew: "My God swears!" Putting the 2 names together: YHWH, my God, remembers what He's sworn, He remembers His oath, His covenant, His promise, His plan! And He is sending His Son in whom "all the promises of God find their yes!" (2 Cor 1:20a). The age of fulfillment is beginning!
- B. It is not surprising, then, that we see both of these realities (remembrance and oath) brought together in the praise-hymns of Mary and Zechariah in [Luk 1](#). They just start singing about what God is doing in their midst!
- 1. Overwhelmed with joy, Mary praises Him saying...

[Luke 1:54–55](#)

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

<sup>55</sup> as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

2. Speaking of the Davidic Messiah God is raising up in Christ, Zechariah says: He is doing this...

Luke 1:72–73a

<sup>72</sup> to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,

<sup>73</sup> the oath that he swore to our father Abraham...

## A New & Greater Exodus

- A. All of this, again, is reminiscent of that constitutive moment in Israel’s story: the Exodus from Egypt. For that too began when, after 400 years of affliction in Egypt (Gen 15:13), we’re told in Exo 2:24 that “God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham...” and redeems His people, bringing them through the waters of the Red Sea into freedom. And what are the Israelites doing, in light of this redeeming remembrance of their God? They’re singing hymns on the banks (Exo 15), much like the hymns of Mary and Zechariah! And from here God leads them to Sinai, enters into covenant with them, gives them His law and becomes their King!

1. The vast number of parallels here confirm for us, God is getting ready to enact for His people a new and greater Exodus in His Son, who will make covenant with us, write His law on our hearts, sit down on the throne of David as King forever!

- B. Christ would be the Messianic king, the One all the promises pointed to! But He would be such in a way no one expected. You see, the new and greater Exodus would not be from the Egyptians, or the Persians, or the Greeks, or the Romans, but from sin. We are slaves not to an enemy nation, but to sin. We left YHWH—“I will be king”—and we became slaves to self!

1. It was to the cross that the plan of God was always marching. It was to the cross that the promises of God were always pointing. “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Luk 9:22). He was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Act 2:23).
  - a. It was the cross that YHWH must remember above all else. For it is only in His remembering the cross that YHWH can forget all of my sin! This is the glorious agreement of the New Covenant is it not? In Jer 31, God compares the covenant He made with Israel after the first Exodus, with the one He will make after this new and greater Exodus, and in v. 34, here’s the punch line: “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more!”

## Conclusion

- A. After 3 days in the grave, Christ is raised from the dead, and He ascends to the throne of David in the heavens, where He is seated at the right hand of the Father. But do you remember how Christ responds when His disciples ask Him “Lord, will you at this time

restore the kingdom go Israel?'... 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority!'" (Act 1:6-7). We don't know when He's going to fully usher in the kingdom. We only know that He will remember, He will return, and He will restore it.

1. As such, we too now find ourselves in a period of promise, between His first coming and His second, between our great Exodus and our final entry into the Land. We too find ourselves struggling in the tension of our own personal v. 5's—Has YHWH forgotten or remembered?

B. How are we going to respond to this?

1. Are we going to be a Herod? Here's the unbeliever. It's not about God's plan, it's about my plan. I'd like to try my hand at being king. Being a Herod is anxious business. He's an imposter to the throne and he knows it. He's always trying to gain the loyalty of the Jews, but never gets it. You have to sleep with one eye open. You know your plan isn't stable. It's not bedrock beneath your feet, it's shifting sand. You're not in control but you want to be. And this makes you crazy. Herod was crazy. To keep his "throne" he killed his sons, he killed his wife. When the magi came with news of "he who has been born king of the Jews" (Mat 2:2), he is threatened and orders the slaughter of all the male children in Bethlehem younger than 2 years old.
  - a. Is there an Herodian dynasty in your heart. You're an imposter. You're not in control, but you're trying to be, and it's so draining. Lay down your arms, give up the fight, and bend your knee to Christ. You will find Him truly to be the Prince of Peace!
2. Are we going to be a Maccabee? We have the promises. But we're not willing to wait for His remembrance. We want to take them in our own hands, help God out. We aim for Isaacs but end up with Ishmaels. We claim it's for God but it's really for ourselves. The Maccabees, for all their energy, got nowhere. A few years of independence from the Greeks only to be taken by the Romans.
  - a. Is there a Maccabean revolt in your heart. I know it's hard to wait, but you don't want to be a Maccabee. You have the promises but you don't have the peace. Maccabees are frustrated, not living the joy-filled life. It is for God to remember and act, yours is to remember and wait!
3. Are we going to be a Simeon or an Anna? These 2 are depicted as part of the faithful remnant of God, waiting in the temple for the Lord to remember His promises and bring the Christ. Simeon is described a man "righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Luk 2:25). Anna, it is said, "did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day...waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (vv. 37b, 38b). And when they see the infant Christ being presented to the Lord at the temple, they erupt with joy! YHWH does remember! Wait for it!



- a. You want to be a Simeon or an Anna. They have peace because they trust the promises. They know Christ will come again for us and brings us to Himself. And when He does we will know, every millisecond of a moment in our lives had a purpose! Every small stumbling step of this foot was part of the advancing march of His eternal plan. Every unrealized expectation, every minor and major frustration, every sorrow and struggle, however aimless and meaningless they felt at the time, were not lost on God, but ordained and directed by His hand.
  - i. This doesn't mean waiting is easy, but it does mean waiting is worth it. YHWH plans, YHWH promises, and YHWH remembers!