

Your Prayer Has Been Heard

Introduction

The Text

Luk 1:5-13

⁵ 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.

⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

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

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

¹³ 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.

A. We return now to the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth to whom the announcement of a coming son is made: John, the forerunner to the long anticipated Messiah, Jesus. I came to vv. 8-13 last week with 5 questions:

1. Why This Couple? (Zechariah and Elizabeth) (vv. 8-9a)
2. Why This Place? (The Temple in Jerusalem) (v. 9b)
3. Why This Hour? (The Hour of Incense) (v. 10)
4. Why This Angel? (Gabriel) (vv. 11-12)
5. Why This Way? (Through Prayer) (v. 13)

B. The first 4 occupied our time last week, and our answers we summed up in that phrase that became the title of the message: God with Us through Sacrifice Forever.

1. That leaves the fifth question, then, for our time this morning: Why This Way? Assuming God could have inaugurated the Messianic age, the age of fulfillment, in any way He pleased, why do it this way? Why make sure we see that the Messiah is coming, God's redemptive plan is advancing, in response to human prayer? Why is God, through Luke, so jealous that we see this connection? What is He communicating to us here?

(1) A Praying Priest & the Coming Christ

3 References to Prayer

A. Before we can answer this question, I want to make sure we all see the connection I'm referring to. Luke draws our attention in this scene specifically to prayer. And he does so in 3 different ways:

1. The first is with the mention of incense in vv. 9-10. We see in v. 9 that Zechariah "was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense." And this is because, as we see down in v. 10, it was the "hour of incense."

a. The offering of incense is symbolic of prayer. It would accompany both the morning and evening burnt offerings (where an unblemished lamb was sacrificed on the altar) and would signify the prayer of God's people for Him to accept the offering, look with mercy upon them, and act on their behalf.

i. That is why we have texts like the one from David in Psa 141:2a: "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you..."

b. The symbolism of this offering of incense is interesting at a number of points:

i. First, it is intriguing to consider that the altar of incense which stood inside the Holy Place got its fire from the altar of the burnt offering that stood in the outer court. The priest upon whom the lot fell would take coals from that altar into the Holy Place and put them in the altar of incense. In other words, our prayers are acceptable to God in light of the cross of Christ. It is by His blood that we have "confidence to enter the holy places" (Heb 10:19) and "find grace to help in time of need" (4:16).

ii. Secondly, as the priest would position the incense over the coals, the rising smoke from the burning incense pictured the rising of our prayers to God's throne room. There was this physical picture of an invisible reality. Our prayers are actually being heard by YHWH!

iii. Thirdly, the smell wasn't like that smell that rises out of my disposal at night or whatever, it was a pleasing aroma. Holiday time is coming up right? The time when homes start to smell like cinnamon, cookies, apple pie. Such a thing is a pleasing aroma to us. Stop for a moment and wonder with me: your prayers are like that to God! Your crying out to Him is not a stench, an annoyance, but a delight! Through the sacrifice of Christ, He hears, and He delights!

iv. Fourthly, this "hour of incense" that coincided with the hour of burnt offering is referred to back in Exodus as a continual or perpetual incense offering (Exo 30:8). It was to symbolize the ongoing prayer relationship that God's people were to have with

Him. It pictures for us the “pray[ing] without ceasing” (1Th 5:17) that Paul commands. So not only are our prayers reaching God and delighting Him, He never wants them to stop!

- v. Finally, it seems to me that we might ascribe some significance to the method of this offering. For the ingredients that compose the incense all had to be crushed and beaten very small (Exo 30:36). Then this already crushed mixture was taken to the fire. Here perhaps, among other things, we have pictured for us the reality that our prayers are often most fervent, most effective when we find ourselves in the trials of life. We ought not to be afraid of such times but press in closer to God in prayer with anticipation of even greater intimacy with Him!
2. The next thing that Luke brings to our attention in this scene is this praying multitude. “And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside...” (v. 10a).
 - a. Prayer comes to us not only in the symbolism of incense or in the prayers of one priest, as we shall see, but in the activity of a great multitude. This detail makes many scholars believe we are witnessing the evening sacrifice here, as the hour of the evening sacrifice and incense coincided also with the hour of prayer (3:00 PM). Here the faithful remnant of Israel are pictured—pleading, longing, waiting for the intervention of God in accordance with His plan and promises of old.
 3. The final piece brought to our attention is also the climax. For as Zechariah moved into the Holy Place to offer the incense, he would also give himself in a special way to interceding for the nation. This is why the grand announcement from Gabriel begins with a reference to Zechariah’s prayer: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard...” (v. 13a).
 - a. God chooses to connect the arrival of His long-awaited for Messiah with the humble petitions of His people. His Christ is coming on the basis of our prayers! That’s significant!

Thesis & Outline

- A. So now we return to the question: Why This Way? Here’s my attempt, and it will serve as the thesis for this sermon as we proceed:
 1. God incorporates man’s prayer because He desires man’s partnership. God connects the advancement of His plan with the humble petitions of His people to show us that He wants us not only in the family house (dwelling with Him), but also in the family business (partnering with Him in advancing His plan, fulfilling His mission, turning the world to glory)!!! He includes us in what He’s doing. He wants to bring our hearts and minds in line with it. He wants us to be a part of it!

B. Some of you might be nervous by this language of partnership. “Wait a minute! I thought God could raise up children from Abraham from stones. He doesn’t need me or anyone to accomplish His plan?! Are making God beholden to man?!” No! I’m not saying He needs us to advance His plan. I’m saying He wants us to be a part of advancing His plan. There’s a huge difference!

1. And this has been the case from the very beginning. He has always sought to advance and accomplish His plan through the mediation of His human creatures.
 - a. Why set up a little garden paradise in Eden and then tell Adam, now, by faith in and obedience to Me, expand its boundaries to the ends of the earth? Why not just create the whole earth as a garden paradise from the beginning?
 - b. Why start with one couple and tell them to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth? Why not fill the earth from the beginning? Do it yourself God? You would be so much more efficient at this?
 - c. Why create these animals and ask Adam to name them? God had just gotten done naming the things He’d created in the 6 days. Why not just finish the job? He wants Adam to exercise kingly authority under Him. He wants him to “[have dominion...over all the earth](#)” ([Gen 1:26](#)). He was always after man reigning with Him in glory.
2. So, why include us in the accomplishing of His plan? Answer: relationship, partnership; family house, family business! This is what Christ came to regain and it is what He calls the church into now by His Spirit.
 - a. And this is what is anticipated with Zechariah. God doesn’t need man—that’s the point of choosing a couple “[barren and...advanced in years](#)” ([Luk 1:7](#)); but He does want man—that’s the point of “[Your prayer has been heard!](#)” (v. 13).
3. Prayer, then, becomes the chief activity of man in this partnership. This is precisely because it holds these 2 realities together: I pray because I can’t do it, only God can. But I pray because, even though I can’t do it, God wants to do it in and through me!
 - a. Again, God incorporates man’s prayer because He desires man’s partnership.

C. Now, at this point we could’ve stopped the message or moved on to the next vv. in [Luk 1](#). But I opted to linger here for a couple of reasons:

1. Our prayer and the advancement of God’s plan is a huge focus for Luke in both his gospel and in Acts. When you see something once in the Scriptures, you know it’s important. When you see something again and again and again, you realize you are looking at something of monumental importance. It’s worth more of our time.
2. But there is another, more personal, reason I wanted to linger here. And that is because of the situation we find ourselves in at Mercy Hill. Anyone here want to

see this church advance into a new season of life, growth, fruitfulness?! How are we going to do this? Read the latest book, follow the latest trend, work on our branding, get the right kind of programs? Some of this might help but none of it is as fundamental as prayer. This is why the first official thing I did as your pastor was start a prayer meeting. And I am so encouraged by this meeting. You guys know how to pray! That is how God will advance this church forward. You just watch!

- D. So, in an effort to defend and display my thesis that God incorporates man's prayer because He desires man's partnership, I want to show how prayer plays a critical role in advancing the plan of God through Luke's gospel with Jesus and into the book of Acts with the church.
1. We've already looked at (1) A Praying Priest & the Coming Christ; now we shall follow the unfolding story from (2) A Praying Christ & the Coming Church; to (3) A Praying Church & the Coming End.

(2) A Praying Christ & the Coming Church

- A. In answer to Zechariah's prayer for his nation, God sets in motion the course of events that would lead to the Christ's arrival.

It is, of course, a massive understatement to say that Jesus is a unique Man. After all, He is both God and Man. But we must not, in our Christology, forget the latter part of this balance. For though He shares essential unity with the divine, He is also an ultimate expression of the human—all that man was created to be from the first, He is. This being the case, His life as man becomes the quintessential template for our lives.

And, intriguingly, in His life, what do we find occupies a most central place but...prayer! If ever it was right for prayer to be neglected or unnecessary, surely it would be with the God-man Jesus Christ. But, quite the opposite, prayer was His breath! As fully God "He upholds the universe by the word of His power" (Heb 1:3). As fully man He never stops praying, pouring words from His heart into the ears of His Father (Heb 5:7). And Luke, more than any gospel writer, draws our attention to the prayer life of our Lord and the way it engaged and advanced the plan of God.

1. We see Him praying at His baptism before the heavens open and the Spirit descends upon Him: "²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luk 3:21–22). This event stands as His anointing as the final Prophet, Priest, and King, and it marks the beginning of His public ministry (v. 23).
2. Before Christ would choose from His disciples 12 who would become His apostles, we are told that "He went out to the mountain to pray, and all night He continued in prayer to God" (Luk 6:12). The 12 probably represent a new Israel, a new humanity that the Christ would be constituting around Himself. The plan advances!

3. In [Luk 9:18](#), we're told Christ is "praying alone" and He moves that prayer to give first disclosure to the disciples of His coming suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection ([v. 22](#)). It is in prayer that He would receive the strength from His Father to face this dreaded aspect of the plan.
4. And we see Him again in Gethsemane, contemplating what it would cost Him to create this new humanity, praying, in agony, with His sweat like blood: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" ([Luk 22:42](#)). Here is the critical moment. The cup of wrath planned from all eternity for Him to drink for the salvation of the world. If the Christ falters at this point, the plan fails. So He prays! And here's the interesting thing about prayer: it does work, even when we don't get what we want. Luke is the only one who records that in response to Jesus' pleas, "there appeared to Him and angel from heaven, strengthening Him" ([v. 43](#)). I can't take the cup, but I can give You the strength You need to drink it! So the plan advances!
5. And He goes to the cross for your sake, and my sake. He takes our sins on His back, drinks down the cup of wrath that was ours alone to drink, and like a merciful and faithful High Priest, He takes His own blood into the Most Holy Place and intercedes for us there with a prayer: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" ([Luk 23:34a](#)). With a prayer, He seals our pardon. And advances God's plan!

(3) A Praying Church & the Coming End

- A. As Zechariah's prayers, in a sense, bring in the Christ, so Christ's prayers, in a sense, that bring in the church! Jesus, the second Adam, regains the Divine-human partnership and by His Spirit brings us back into it!

And as we follow the story from Luke's gospel to the book of Acts—from the life of Christ to the life of His church—It is not surprising, then, that prayer becomes as central to the church as it was to Christ. It was prayer that prepared the way for the Messiah, prayer that fueled the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah, now it is by means of prayer in the church that God will advance His plan of salvation from Jerusalem, to all Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth...until the end of the world as we know it!

1. It's prayer that defined the church as she waited for the outpouring of Christ's Spirit on the day of Pentecost: "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer..." ([Acts 1:14](#)). And just as Christ was praying when the Spirit fell and empowered Him for ministry, so too, it is in connection to prayer that the Spirit anoints the church and empowers her for ministry. The plan advances!
2. And at the outset of this gospel mission was a massive threat to its expansion. "The ones who have authority over us are commanding us not to speak of the Christ." Imagine the fear and anxiety that would strangle at your neck at that point. In the face of persecution and the threat of death, much like Christ in Gethsemane, what were they going to do? Pray! "And when they had prayed, the place in which they

were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31)!

3. Their boldness in Jerusalem leads to a great persecution that causes the people to scatter and the gospel to spread. It reaches Samaria, and the key moment at this point of advance is when “Peter and John...came down and prayed for [the Samaritans]”, and they watch as the same Spirit that fell on the Jews, falls now on them (8:15-17).
 4. And then it’s a prayer meeting that officially launches the global missions movement. At the church in Antioch, “²While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:2–3). And the gospel advances from here, to the ends of the earth. This is how the gospel reached us!
- B. A Praying Priest & the Coming Christ. A Praying Christ & the Coming Church. A Praying Church & the Coming End. This is amazing! We leave Luke’s material at this point but we return to the imagery of incense from [Luk 1](#). For incense, interestingly enough, will be featured at the end of the world. There’s this powerful scene in [Rev 8:1-5a](#). Let’s read it and I’ll make a few comments:

¹When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ²Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. ³And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth...

1. Note first that it is “the Lamb” who opened the 7th seal. Back in ch. 5 there was this dramatic search for someone worthy to break the seals on this scroll. And only the Lamb could do it, because of His life, death, and resurrection. We must never forget that though we are invited into this plan, the plan is always His!
2. Note next, this “silence” in v. 1. We’re on the 7th seal. When the previous 6 seals were opened by the Lamb, things happened immediately—judgment is unleashed seal by seal in an escalating fashion. And all of this sets us up for this pregnant silence of v. 1. The 7th seal is broken, and “there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”
 - a. Up until now it seemed to be only God’s work, God’s timing, God’s activity. Now, suddenly after such jarring silence, we see our place in all of this. And what comes into view: prayer! One commentator puts it this way: “The saints appear insignificant to men at large. But in the sight of God they matter. Even great cataclysms are held back while they pray. And the praises of angels give way to silence so that the saints may be heard.” What

is it that breaks the silence? The offering of incense with “the prayers of all the saints” (v. 3). You don’t think God is listening? O He is!

3. The final thing we must note is that It is from this altar upon which the incense of our prayers are being offered that the angel takes fire and hurls it on the earth, setting in motion the course of events that culminates in: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever” (11:15b). The implication is this: the end of the world as we know it, the beginning of a new heavens and new earth, the accomplishing of all God’s plan, occurs in connection with, dare I even say as a result of, our prayers. Not a single prayer is lost on God. He will answer in His time!
 - a. And then, what is the final consummation of this plan? As we come to the last chapter of Revelation, John is describing the new heavens and new earth, and we read that the saints of the most high “will reign [with Him] forever and ever” (22:5). He is reigning forever and ever, and we are reigning with Him forever and ever. The divine-human partnership has been reforged and eternalized!
- C. Prayer at the inauguration of this final age (Zechariah), prayer through the middle (Jesus & the church), and prayer here at its end and consummation!

Conclusion

- A. So let me close then with a question: If God has so ordained the prayers of His saints to advance His plan from beginning to end, are we praying? Don’t we often need that encouragement like we find in [Luk 18:1](#): that we “ought always to pray and not lose heart.”
 1. Have you lost your heart in your prayers? Does it feel like your old and advanced in years? Does it feel like you are in exile in your own land? Does it feel like there’s silence in heaven, not because God’s leaning in to listen, but because it seems He’s not responding. The saints of every age have been there. But there will come a day, maybe sooner, maybe later, when God will draw you near and say: “Do not be afraid...for your prayer has been heard!” Let’s not lose heart but avail ourselves of the wonderful privilege of partnering with God through prayer in bringing the world to glory!

Extra

- A. And if we are praying? How are we praying? I'm going to rifle off a few categories for us to consider in hopes that God might help us discern our own temptations and tendencies and move us into the fullness of partnership with Him in prayer.
1. Do I pray like a Deist?—In other words, I don't pray, because it feels like there's no point. A Deist believes that a God created the world but then left it. There's no plan. There's no relationship with the divine. It's just up to us to make our lives work. I started seeing this in my own life as I was evaluating how I was doing at the beginning of ministry here. I would never say this. I believe that God is closer than my skin, I believe that the living God dwells inside of me by the Holy Spirit, and yet, do I talk with Him throughout the day? Am I engaging with Him moment by moment, praying always as Paul would call us to. I'm living like it's on my shoulders, like if I don't do it no one will, like I don't have time to pray to God because I'm too busy doing His work. I'm living like an orphan, like a widow, like a I don't have a heavenly Father or Bridegroom. He's calling me into partnership with Him in prayer.
 2. Do I pray like a Fatalist?—In other words, I struggle to pray, but for different reasons than the Deist. I believe there's a plan, that God is sovereign, and I believe that regardless of whether I pray or not, the same things are going to happen. His will is going to be done. I struggle with this, but somehow God holds both together. Jesus says God knows what we need before we ask, but James says we have not because we ask not ([Jam 4:2](#)). He is sovereign but He invites us into that plan and wants us to play a part in it. He's calling me into partnership with Him in prayer.
 3. Do I pray like a Materialist?—Matter is ultimate, it's all there is. We might not believe this, but we can live like it. Here we neglect prayer again, but now it's because we're too busy for prayer. I have too many conversations going down on my phone to have a conversation with God. I've got work and relationships and hobbies, too much. I can't unplug. But we forget that the unseen realities are more ultimate than what we see. Our battle is not against flesh and blood but in the spiritual realm. God is calling me into partnership with Him in prayer.
 4. Do I pray like an Executive?—Everyone exists to serve me, including God. It's not God's plan that matters, but mine. Prayer is my chance to give God his orders for the day. So I pray, but like an executive. But we are called into His plan, partnership with Him in advancing His plan. He's calling me into partnership with Him in prayer.
 5. Do I pray like a Barterer?—You scratch my back I'll scratch yours. Prayer is a way of getting something from God. If I do this with you, you have to do that for me. But God doesn't need our services, He wants our hearts. He's calling me into partnership with Him in prayer.
 6. Do I pray like a Traditionalist?—A Traditionalist does things not necessarily because they see any real substance in them but because they've always done it this way. A traditionalist goes through the motions with prayer because it's what Christians do but when they step back they really don't have much expectation that anything will

happen in it. Like when Peter was in prison and the church is gathered to pray for his release, but when he shows up at the door, no one believes its him! Do we realize who we are talking to?! The God of the universe is inviting us: “Come, speak!” He’s calling me into partnership with Him in prayer.

7. I’m not a Deist—God has a plan; I’m not a Fatalist—God wants to hear from me and moves in response to my prayers; I’m not a Materialist—I know that behind all that is seen is an eternal unseen reality, and I live there; I’m not an Executive—I want His will to be done; I’m not a Barterer—I want Him more than His stuff; I’m not a Traditionalist—I pray and expect to see Him move. When I pray, I want to pray like a Christian—I’m like Christ in my prayers. I’m a partner with almighty God in advancing His plan on this earth! O the Christian is such a strange breed! He knows he is nothing and yet he has audience with the Almighty. His world is full of wonder. Everything is a conversation, a dialogue, a partnership between the divine and human. O what a priceless privilege we have! The King of Kings invites us to converse with Him about His plan and promises. He wants to incorporate us into what He’s doing, to let us partner with Him in turning the world to glory.