

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

Let Your Servant Go in Peace: Responding to God in Prayer

Scott Powell

Hey everybody, Scott Powell here, and I'm excited to talk to you today about 2 biblical figures, folks from the New Testament, who have been popping up a lot in my life, in my own spiritual life and my prayer life lately. And they've kind of been haunting me. So, I wanted to share those with you. They are Zechariah and Simeon. And they're probably 2 of those biblical figures that you might not know all that much about. Maybe you've heard the names before, but they have been teaching me a lot about my own prayer life. And maybe this can be helpful to you too. So, before we jump in today, let's open in a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord Jesus, thank You so much for the gift of this retreat. Thank You for the gift of all of the people listening on the recording, and watching, the people who have put this together. Please be in my words. Let me not say anything that's outside of your will. Help us understand what it means to be a people who know how to respond to You. Help open our minds, our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to what You have to teach us, and please form us into people after Your own heart. We thank You, Lord, for calling us here to this place and this time, and we pray that You would bless our time together. And we pray all these things through Christ, our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, the folks I'm bringing up today, I know it's a little bit Christmassy for a Lenten retreat, but I think it fits pretty well. Zechariah and Simeon show up in the beginning of the gospel of Luke, and it's the only gospel that they actually appear in. Zechariah, you might remember, was the father of John the Baptist. So he would have been Jesus' uncle, right. So they show up. A word about what they're kind of doing in the story though. I love the gospel of Luke, it's one of my favorite out of the gospels, one of my favorites. I love them all, but I do love the gospel of Luke, because I love the way that he sets up the story. I really dig literature, and part of the reason I like Luke so much is that the gospel of Luke begins sort of like a Shakespearian play.

And if you know anything about Shakespeare, Shakespeare loves, before he would introduce you to the main character, the protagonist, he would give you the background cast, and they would all sort of come up on stage and introduce, in their various ways, the main characters. And that's kind of what Luke does. So before you really get into Jesus and His ministry, there's this whole background chorus of characters who come and sort of prepare the way. And if you read it

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carefully, there's three couples, three sets of a man and a woman who sort of prepare the way for Jesus, and His ministry, and His gospel. So the very first people you meet in the gospel of Luke are Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth.

Zechariah and Elizabeth, they're a priestly couple, so Zechariah is a priest, he's a Levitical priest, which means it's his job to offer sacrifice and prayer on behalf of Israel and the temple. His wife, we're told, is also from the priestly line. She's of the family of Aaron, who's actually the family of the high priest, which is a big deal. So they both are... she's not an ordained priest in the same way, but they're a priestly family, which is kind of cool. So they show up there, of course the birth parents... the parents of John the Baptist. The second couple that we meet are Mary and Joseph themselves, right. We know a lot about Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus. They're a kingly, a royal couple. Joseph, of course, we know is from the bloodline of King David, and there's reason to believe, if you dig into some of the minutia of the genealogies of Jesus, that Mary actually shared some of that royal blood as well. So you have a kingly, a royal couple. And then lastly, after Jesus' birth, when His parents go up to the temple for the presentation, right, forty days after Jesus' birth, when He's presented in the temple, given back to God in a certain sense, there's 2 people: A man named Simeon and a woman named Anna, who are sort of waiting there to meet them. And they're both prophets. A prophet and a prophetess. They are the only ones who are not married.

But what do we have in this story? So, setting the scene for Jesus, who is the priest, prophet, and king, we have a couple who are priestly, a couple who are kingly, and a couple who are prophetic. Priests, prophets, and kings, setting the stage for the priest, prophet, and king. It's a really beautiful way to begin a gospel, so just a note on that. But I want to focus in on, again, probably the 2 that we know maybe the least about of those characters. Zechariah, he's the first one. Here's what we know about Zechariah: He's a priest again, he's serving God, and we're introduced to him in the beginning of Luke, in Luke chapter 1. Again, he's actually the first person we meet in the gospels. And we're told, this is chapter 1, verse 5 of Luke, that in the days of King Herod, the King of Judea, there was this priest named Zechariah. He was the division of Abijah.

The priests in Jesus' time, back all the way from the time of Leviticus, were divided into 24 divisions, because there were thousands of Levitical priests. They couldn't all fit in the temple at the same time doing their thing. So they would take shifts, and each of the divisions would come up for a two week shift, and they would do the priestly duties, and then they would go back home, and the next shift would come in. But we know that Zechariah and Elizabeth, remember, they live out in the hill country of Judea. They don't live in Jerusalem, because Mary goes and stays with them during her pregnancy. So anyway, it's the time when his

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division was on duty. He has a wife named Elizabeth of the daughters of Aaron, and they were righteous before God. They walked in the commandments, they walked in the ordinances of God. They were blameless.

Luke kind of goes out of his way to show how holy and righteous Zechariah and Elizabeth are. Why does he do that? Well, he does it because of what he's about to tell you next, and the next thing that Luke tells you is that they were barren. They had no children, and they were both advanced in years. This is not a biblical understanding, but the cultural idea was that if you were barren, if you didn't have kids, then surely you must have done something wrong. You must have committed some sin to deserve it. Something was up. And Luke wants to go out of his way to show that "Yeah, they're barren, they haven't had children, and they are getting older. But they've done nothing wrong. They are blameless. They walk with God in the commandments. They are righteous."

So there's a bit of a conflict immediately in the text. Here's what happens: While he was serving as priest before God, while his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priests did it fall to him, by lot, to enter the temple of the Lord and to offer incense, to burn the incense. Burning incense, it might not be one of those things that we think about very often because, depending on where you go to church, you might see incense all the time, or maybe you see it once in a while. But in the Jerusalem temple in Jesus' time, to burn incense was the most important thing that a priest could do, outside of the high priest. The high priest, he was the only person who was allowed to go into the holy of holies, which was where they believed God's presence literally dwelt in the tabernacle.

But if you weren't the high priest, and he could only go in once a year, on the feast of Yom Kippur, but if you weren't the high priest, then if you get to offer the incense, that meant that you got to go as close to the holy of holies as any other human being could ever go. As close to the presence of God that you could get. And if you got to offer the incense, you could only do it once in your lifetime. It was a big deal, because what he was doing in the moment of offering incense, yes he had the proximity to the presence of God, but it meant that he stood on behalf of the whole of the people of Israel, and offered their prayer. Biblically, incense always represents the prayers of God's people rising up before Him, and they're a sweet odor to God, we're told.

So Zechariah is standing on behalf of God's people, offering prayer, offering the incense, right next to the presence of God. The throne room on earth, so to speak, of God. Outside the temple, while he's doing this, the whole multitude is gathered, and they're praying as well. And what are they praying? Well, in Jesus' time, we know it's one of the darkest times in Israel's history. Things are a mess. They are

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not the people that God called them to be. They've fallen into profound sin. The whole Old Testament story, they lost Jerusalem, they lost their kingdom. They have this guy, Luke pointed out there's a guy named Herod who's reigning over them as king. He's not really king, he was a puppet, you know, a dictator put there by Caesar. He's not even Jewish. He's not Davidic. They don't have a Davidic king, he's gone. And as far as anybody knows, the bloodline has been wiped out. They don't even own their land, it's controlled by Rome and by Caesar, and they're just tenants there, and they're oppressed, and they're over-taxed, and they're abused, and it's horrible.

And the whole of the people, I guarantee, is praying this prayer "How long, O Lord, how long are we going to dwell in this darkness? How long until You set things right? How long until You step in and fix things?" That's the prayer that Zechariah is offering that day, because he's not standing on his own behalf, he's standing on behalf of the people. And as he's there, offering the incense, offering this prayer, what happens? Well, on the most important day of his life, when he's burning the incense, big deal, the angel appears. And an angel appears in glory, right beside him, which is a huge thing, and he says "Zechariah, your prayer has been answered. Your prayer has been answered. And your wife, Elizabeth, is going to bear you a son, and you're going to call his name John." It goes on to describe what John's going to be like. "Your prayer is answered, and you're going to have a son."

So here's the question: What's the prayer that Zechariah is offering at that moment? Well, yeah, he wants a son, I'm sure that's his personal prayer, and that's his intention. But at that moment, he's doing something far greater: He's offering the prayer of the whole people of Israel, and that prayer is "How long, O Lord, until You step in and You set things right?" That's the prayer that the angel, who will introduce himself in a minute as Gabriel, says is answered. "God has heard it. Now is the time that God is going to step into human history and set things right. Now is the time that He's going to lift the veil of darkness and sin. He's going to bring in forgiveness. And you're going to have a son named John, who's actually going to be a big part of this." It's never the way I heard this. I always thought the prayer that's answered is John. But the angel is clear: "Your prayer is answered, and you're going to have a son."

So, the question is this: What's his response? The most important day of his life probably, he's offering the incense, he's on duty, he's right next to where they believe God dwells. The angel appears, "Your prayer is answered." Oh my gosh! And what's his response? "Yeah, right." His response is one of skepticism, and he basically says "I don't know about that, Lord. I don't know about that Mr. Angel, Mr. Gabriel." He said "I don't know. My wife is really advanced in years, she's

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old. I don't know if I buy it." And he responds with skepticism. And as a result of that response, he's struck mute, and he can't speak for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy. It would be interesting, I know some of you are probably parents out there. Imagine, wives, if your husband wasn't allowed to speak throughout your whole pregnancy. He just had to do whatever you said. Anyway.

It's a fascinating scene, and I've always sort of read this story and given Zechariah and a really hard time, and thought "What a bonehead." I mean, he's right there. He's in the temple. He's praying this prayer, he's doing his job, and the angel says "Your prayer is answered." And he responds with skepticism? What's wrong with you? Yeah, you were right to be struck mute, right. I've always sort of given him a really hard time, until recently. And the more I've thought about Zechariah, the more I've been a little bit more sympathetic to where he's coming from. Because Israel at the time really was living in profound darkness. Things were hard, sin was rampant, and this question of "How long, O Lord" was a pretty acute one.

I don't know about you guys, but the world we live in, the times that we dwell in are pretty dark. We're pretty ravaged by sin. Every day I listen to the news and I feel like it's getting worse and worse every day. Every natural disaster, or war, or whatever, I feel like it's always the worst one of whatever it is that we've ever had before. Times are dark, and I bet there's a lot of us that are similarly asking that question: "How long, O Lord. How long until You lift us out of this darkness?" Which is a great reflection during Lent, because Lent is the time that we're supposed to reflect on that and be like "Wow, Jesus took on all of that darkness. But I still feel it." Because He hasn't come again. The second coming hasn't come, the veil hasn't been fully lifted. He has freed us from our sin, He has forgiven us, He has lifted the darkness, but we still feel it, right, until He comes again.

And I ask the question: "How long, O Lord." And I've got my own problems, some personal struggles, some family things. We carry a lot of weight, and I wonder what would I say? What would my response be if God appeared or sent an angel to me and said "Scott, your burdens are all lifted. It's done. Case closed. Everything is going to be great now." And I wonder if I would have the faith to say "Praise be to God, thank you. Your will be done." Or if I'd be like Zechariah and be like "I don't know, it's been a long time Lord. It's been pretty hard. Things are pretty difficult. I don't know if I buy it." And that's my fear in my own prayer. If God were to answer me today and say it's all done, would I have the faith to believe Him?

On the other end of the story, after Zechariah, after Jesus' birth, when Jesus is taken up to the temple to be presented by Mary and Joseph, you have another figure named Simeon. Simeon is an interesting character because we're told he's

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an old man who's standing on the steps of the temple, basically saying the same prayer that Zechariah was praying. Asking "How long, O Lord? Waiting for the revelation of God, for God to say "Now is the time. He's been waiting, he's been standing, he goes day after day after day.

But here's the thing about Simeon: He doesn't have an angel appear to him in glory and give him the answer. No, he doesn't get a gift like that. Rather, he's standing on the steps of the temple, as he does every single day, probably fatigued, probably tired, asking "How long?" And what does he see? He sees a peasant couple with their little baby maybe wrapped in stained, dirty, old cloths, coming up the steps, because they've had a long journey. And he sees the most humble of families, and he says. "That. It's here. I recognize it. God has answered my prayer. I see it. Now," he says to God "You can let Your servant go on in peace, because my eyes have seen the salvation which You have promised in the sight of every nation. Now I have seen it, finally."

He doesn't have the gift of this angel in glory telling him the answer. He has, rather, the eyes of faith to see what is Him. So here's the moral: I am a Zechariah, but I want to be a Simeon. I have the prayer life of a Zechariah, or I try to do my thing, I try to do my prayer. But I wonder how much faith I actually have, and I wonder how I would respond if God said "Now is the moment." But I want to be a Simeon. I want to have the eyes of faith that sees even when it's not faith, even when there's a veil over it. Because that's how God likes to act.

He doesn't come to us in lightning bolts and thunder cracks from the sky, and speaking to us from the clouds saying "Hey, Scott." No, He comes to us veiled, He comes to us in the hidden ways. And we need to develop the eyes of Simeon to see Him when He comes. That's my prayer, that's my prayer for you. Those of us that are Zechariahs, those of us who have got a little bit of a chip on our prayer shoulder, that we could have the eyes of faith and be like Simeon, even though we've been waiting for a long time, even though we might be tired and fatigued, when we see the presence of God at work in the world, that we have the courage and the grace to say "Yes, there. Thank You, Lord. Now my eyes have seen." May we all be people with eyes who can see.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, it is now and ever shall be. World without end. Amen. Thank you all so much.