

The Heights Baptist Church

Christmas at Luke's * The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold * Luke 1:5-25 * 11/14/2021

MAIN POINT: We need to be careful that disappointment in our lives does not create a hinderance to our trust in God.

INTRODUCTION

There are many examples in the Bible of times godly people had to trust God while going through difficult times; times that probably didn't make sense to them. Yet in the end, God's plan became clear.

Can you think of an example of the Bible where godly people had to trust God while going through difficult times?

Why do you think difficult circumstances can make it harder to trust God?

Why do you think God's perfect timing is often so different from ours?

UNDERSTANDING

Have a volunteer read Luke 1:5-10.

Background information:

Verse 5: The "Herod" mentioned here is known outside the Bible as "Herod the Great". He was a puppet king under Rome and was known for having carried out a significant upgrade project for the Temple in Jerusalem. In the Bible, he is known for trying to trick the wise men into giving away the Messiah's location in order to kill him. He is also known as the king who ordered the killing of the babies in Bethlehem. He died shortly after the birth of Christ.

Verse 8: There were about 18,000 priests in Israel at the time of Christ, grouped into 24 divisions. Each division served two weeklong shifts per year in Jerusalem. It was a great honor to be selected by lot to enter the holy place in the temple to burn incense to God. This would have been a highlight in Zechariah's life.

Verses 9-10: Zechariah entered the "Holy Place" in the temple. To the right was the golden Table of Shewbread, on the left was the golden Menorah lampstand, and in the center, in front of the curtain that blocked the entrance to the Most Holy Place, was the golden Alter of Incense, where Zechariah was to burn incense to the LORD (Exodus 30:1, 6-7). The "Most Holy Place", on the other hand, was entered only once per year, and only by the high priest (Hebrews 9: 6-10).

What is your reaction to the two thoughts separated by the word "but" mentioned in verses 8 and 9?

How do you think Zechariah and Elizabeth remained faithful even though their prayers for a child had not been answered?

Why do you think God had waited so long to answer their prayers?

Waiting faithfully on God during difficult times is not easy. Believers must resist the temptation to give up on God and give in to despair or disappointment. We as Christians need to ensure our circumstances drive us toward God, not away from God. God is never overwhelmed by the size of our problem. Let What appears impossible to us is always possible with God. Let us choose to faithfully walk with God in spite of disappointments or unfulfilled dreams.

Have a volunteer read Luke 1:11-25.

When we read of angels appearing to people in the Bible, the people are often described as being gripped with fear, followed by the angel settling them down by assuring them they don't need to be afraid.

What message did the angel bring to Zechariah?

For what purposes did the angel say John would be born?

- It was an answer to prayer (verse 13). It is likely that Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up on the prayer to have a child a decade or more ago. And yet he was told, "...your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son..."
- John would be great in the sight of the Lord, bringing back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God (verses 15-16). Contrast this description of "great" with the world's view of "great", as seen by Herod being given the title "Herod the Great".

Looking at Luke 3: 2-6, what other reasons are there for John's coming?

- Fulfilled prophecy (Isaiah 40: 3-5).
- Prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah. Note that this wasn't a message of "Great news everyone, Jesus is coming!" But rather "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3: 1-2)

There was another reason John was born at this time. It provided a test of Zechariah's faith.

There were three strikes against Zechariah and Elizabeth being able to have a son (verses 7 and 18). Elizabeth had never been able to have a child, even when she was young. She was now old (long past menopause), and Zechariah described one issue was that he was "an old man", probably indicating that at this stage in life, he was impotent. Another difficulty could have been the fact that that Israel had not heard from a prophet in about 400 years, which is about how long it's been since the Pilgrims arrived in America.

Considering all this, why do you think Zechariah doubted the angel's word that Elizabeth would bear him a son (verse 13)?

How did the angel respond to Zechariah's request for a sign (verses 18-20)?

Jewish people held angels in high esteem. And out of all God's angels, only two, Gabriel (Daniel 8:16 and 9:21) and Michael (Daniel 10:13-21 and 12:1), are mentioned by name in the

Old Testament. So it appears that Gabriel's reply, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to you to tell you this good news." may be more of a rebuke than just information. Sort of like, "I am Gabriel, who was sent specifically to you to relay this message from the very presence of God. How much more of a sign do you want? You want a sign, okay, you're going to be mute until the baby is born."

APPLICATION

Zechariah's lack of faith led to him having to appear publicly without the ability to speak for several months. Consider how our witness about Christ could be tarnished with our neighbors and coworkers if we as Christians demonstrate a lack of faith in God.

Have a volunteer read Hebrews 11, verses 1 and 6.

How does Hebrews 11:1 define faith?

What are the two elements of faith mentioned in verse 6?

What area of my life do I need to commit to God, trusting that whatever the circumstances, if I am serving him faithfully, he will reward me?

PRAYER

Close by thanking God for His wisdom and plan. Praise Him that He made a way back to him for us, through the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. Ask God to help you trust Him even when things aren't going according to our timetable.

COMMENTARY

Luke 1:5-25

1:5-7. Zechariah was of the line of Aaron, Israel's first high priest. Elizabeth, too, was a descendent of Aaron. Luke pointed out that they were upright in the sight of God and not just in outward appearance. Luke underscored Zechariah's and Elizabeth's dedication by declaring that this couple blamelessly followed both God's commandments and His regulations. This couple had committed themselves to faithfully follow God's will. Luke indicated that they had no children. Zechariah and Elizabeth's childlessness likely caused them great sorrow and perhaps even produced in them a sense of inferiority. The reference to Zechariah and Elizabeth's childlessness along with their advanced ages points to the human impossibility of the birth of a son and emphasizes the miraculous nature of God's intervention in their lives with the birth of John the Baptist.

1:11-13. Zechariah encountered an angel of the Lord in the holy place. The term translated "appeared" often denotes divine manifestation. Of course, the elderly priest was startled at the angel's sudden arrival. Zechariah also was gripped with fear. The angel, seeing Zechariah's discomfort, quickly told him not to be afraid. Then the angel revealed his reason for being there. The angel told Zechariah that his prayer had been heard and was about to be answered. Both the prayer for a child and the prayer for the Messiah would receive an answer in the same event, for their son would prepare the way for the Messiah. The angel instructed Zechariah to name that

son John. John means “the LORD has been gracious.” Probably this name underscored God’s grace as it was being extended either to Zechariah in giving him a son or, more likely, to Israel in sending the Messiah.

1:14-16. Then the angel informed Zechariah of the effect of his son’s ministry. John would be a joy and delight to his father and mother. Further, many others would rejoice because of his birth. The people of Israel longed for a prophetic voice for they had not heard one for centuries. John would be that voice. The Savior about whom John would witness would bring and still is bringing joy to people throughout the world. The angel then stated certain characteristics that would lie behind John’s effective ministry. John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth.

1:17. “And he (John) will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah...”. This also refers to fulfilled prophecy. Malachi 4:5 prophesies that “...I will send the prophet Elijah before to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.” This likely refers to Elijah actually coming just prior to the glorious second coming of Christ during the tribulation period, but based on Luke, we see that John the Baptist pictures the fulfillment of this prophecy at Jesus’ first coming. Matthew 17:10-13 says “The disciples asked him, ‘Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?’ Jesus replied, ‘To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.”

1:18-20. Zechariah asked for some assurance regarding the truth of the angel’s message. He protested that he and his wife were too old to produce a child. This expression of unbelief strongly displeased the heavenly messenger. The angel insisted he, Gabriel, had come to the temple from the presence of God to tell Zechariah the “good news.” Gabriel announced that Zechariah would be unable to speak until the day when the imparted prophecy had been fulfilled.

1:21-22. The people waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary were surprised because he did not emerge when expected. Since Gabriel had rendered him speechless (v. 20), Zechariah was unable to pronounce the traditional Aaronic blessing (Num 6:24-26) upon the crowd. They realized he had seen a vision, likely because they noted his facial expressions and the excited signs he made with his hands.

1:23. Since each priest was only on duty for a week at a time, Zechariah would have been able to go home soon after his encounter with Gabriel (vv. 10-20). His home was located in the Judean hill country, not far from Jerusalem (v. 39).

1:24-25. Elizabeth withdrew and kept herself in seclusion for five months after she miraculously conceived. Perhaps she recognized that her unusual pregnancy would draw quite a bit of attention if it became widely known. Better to have a restful start to a pregnancy that came so late in life. Adam Clarke mentioned another possibility “That she might have the fullest proof of the accomplishment of God's promise before she appeared in public.”