

Zechariah's Unbelief: Is the good news too good to

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[0 : 00] Welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime talk, and particularly as we enter the Christmas season, and you're very welcome indeed. Well, these few weeks in the run-up to Christmas, we are going to be looking at the start of Luke's Gospel and his account of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this morning we're at the very start, so if you'd turn with me to Luke chapter 1, and we'll read there from verse 5, and you'll find that on page 855 in the blue church Bibles there.

So Luke chapter 1, and I will read for us from verse 5. In the days of Herod, king of Judah, 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. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Now, while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

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

And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 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. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 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. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am old, and my wife is advanced in years. And the angel said to him, I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time. And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them. And they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple, and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days, his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. And for five months, she kept herself hidden, saying, Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among the people.

[4 : 02] Well, there's the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us this afternoon. Well, we're well underway, aren't we, into the Christmas season. It's upon us. And I, for one, have succumbed. We bought our Christmas tree on Saturday, headed up to Ikea. I recommend it, £25, and you get a £20 voucher back to spend next year. So a £5 tree. And I have young children, and they are extremely excited. It's really ramped up this year. I think they know what's coming. So all the lights, all the excitement.

And of course, it's not just children that get excited and caught up with all the hype. For many folk, Christmas is a time of escapism, of pushing reality to the side and getting swept up with all the Christmas excitement. We spend more than we ought because, well, it's Christmas.

But January comes, and so do the bills. We spend time with people that we really ought not to spend so much time with. Family strains, difficult relationships. We tend to try and paper over the cracks, don't we? But the wrapping paper is barely off in the bin before old tensions begin to bubble again, and things are difficult. Perhaps it's in the routine and the traditions and the entertainment that we enjoy losing ourselves in. We look forward to our favourite films and foods.

And of course, there's nothing wrong with those things in themselves. But we tend to invest so much in them, so much hope we invest in all that comes around Christmas, that we lose ourselves in the revelry. And we wake up in January, and we find that reality meets us there unmoved. Christmas, in a sense, has changed nothing. And Christmas has, for many, become a means of escaping reality, of indulging in temporary hopes, hopes that we can never really lay hold of. But the true meaning of Christmas, far from being a matter of Christmas, is about as real and as hopeful as it can really get.

We will see in these Wednesdays, in the lead-up to Christmas, that with the promised coming of the long-awaited Saviour, a new day does dawn. The source of mankind's only real hope emerges into the world in the form of a child born to Mary, the God-man, Jesus Christ. And it is a certain hope.

[6 : 51] The historical account that we're reading here, it is compiled by a competent physician in order to give those who read it clarity and certainty. Just look at the very opening verses of chapter 1.

We didn't read these earlier, but just notice there, chapter 1, verse 3. And we see here, Dr. Luke's, the writer, we see his purpose. He says, It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things that you have been taught. So we see there Dr. Luke's purpose in writing this account.

He wants those who read it to have clarity and certainty. And certainty about the man at the very center of all of human history. The one at the very center of the whole cosmos. Jesus.

And that is what these opening pages of his gospel are all about. And in particular, in this opening chapter, Luke is showing us that God's promises, all those promises that we read about in the Old Testament scriptures, all those things now find their fulfillment in these opening pages. I've got a drip right next to me.

That's a bit off-putting. Sorry. We need to see to the roof. So here we see that the Old Testament scriptures are now being fulfilled with these opening pages of Luke's gospel.

[8 : 28] God's promises of salvation, of rescue, of redemption, of restoration have now come to fruition. So we'll look at this first section here in chapter 1, the one we read.

And it's not a matter of one birth, is it? It's actually two births that are in focus here in Luke's account. And he, much to our surprise, he spends almost as much time and space on the birth of John the Baptist as he does on the birth of Jesus.

And it is the birth of John the Baptist that fills the first of our stories here. Now that's a bit of a surprise, isn't it? You don't expect that. But actually, this first bit, it's all about John the Baptist. But more surprising still is that Luke's attention is focused not so much on the details of John's birth, but rather on the reaction of his parents, and in particular, his father.

And so we need to direct our attention on what Luke is telling us, what he's focusing on. And so hear his message to us today. And in this section, the angel Gabriel, he comes and he announces to Zechariah that he and his wife, though both of them are elderly, are going to have a son.

[9 : 49] And his name was to be John. So let's think then first about the implications of the angel's message. What was this all about?

And then second, we'll look at Zechariah's response to the angel's message. So first, we see here the real message of the angel, God's message of astonishing hope and good news.

Zechariah, we're told, is a priest there in verse 5. He's of the division of Abijah. And his wife is Elizabeth. And we're told that they were good and godly people, verse 6.

But they were, verse 7, without children. Elizabeth was barren. That's the key background information for what's about to unfold. And at this point in the story, Zechariah, a priest, he is serving in the temple.

So he's packed up his bags, headed to Jerusalem, and he's serving for a period of time in the temple. And a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity comes his way. He was drawn by lot, and it was his turn to go in on his own and burn incense.

[10 : 58] And it is there that this astonishing encounter takes place. Look at verse 11. The angel appears to him and speaks. And he says, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.

And your wife, Elizabeth, will bear your son. And you shall call his name John. Now this, on a personal level, for Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, this is extraordinary.

This is wonderful news. Their prayers have been answered. Long years of heartache and childlessness were coming to an end. The angel of the Lord had promised, had informed Zechariah that he and his wife were to have a child.

But it wasn't merely good news for them. It wasn't just good news for this elderly couple. This was far more significant than that. This wasn't just a message of hope and good news for one couple. This was news of hope and good news for all mankind. And of the people of God in particular. Read on to verse 14. Look what the angel goes on to say. He says, You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

[12:12] 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. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

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 disobedience of the wisdom to the just. To make ready for the Lord.

A people to be prepared. This wasn't just a private matter between two elderly people. This had huge implications. It's perhaps hard for us to make sense of the full magnitude of what the angel is saying here.

Hard to fully grasp the realities, the significance of his words. But these words would not have been lost on Zachariah. He was a man steeped in the Old Testament scriptures.

A man who would have known intimately and teach the promises of God. So what is the significance of these words? Why was what the angel says here so significant?

[13:22] Well, if you read on in chapter 1. And you read the birth of Jesus Christ. You see that his birth is described as being the sunrise visiting us from on high.

And with the birth of Jesus comes the dawning of a new day. After a long, dark night for the people of God. And indeed for all humanity. The night had been long and hard for God's people.

Full of ups and downs. Exile, return from exile. And hope had persisted that the night would not last forever.

It would come to an end. And the prophet Malachi puts it this way. The sun of righteousness would rise with healing in its wings. And that was a day that the people of God were longing for and waiting for.

The day that Malachi promised. They were waiting for it. Another prophet Isaiah had said that before the glory of the Lord should be revealed. Before his coming.

[14:27] Before the coming of the Lord Jesus. A forerunner would be sent to prepare the way of the Lord. And Malachi again adds that before the day of the Lord comes.

The prophet Elijah would be sent. To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. And the hearts of children to the fathers. Now look here at the words of Zachariah.

Or the words to Zachariah. More than 400 years after those prophecies from Malachi and Isaiah. The angel is saying to Zachariah that the time has now come.

The great day of the Lord that they were waiting for is imminent. Because you, Zachariah. You are going to be the father to that forerunner. To the one like Elijah.

To turn the hearts of fathers to their children. The long night. It was now coming to an end. The dawn. That they were waiting for is about to break over the horizon.

[15:29] All that Malachi spoke of. It's now about to happen. It's coming. This is what Israel was waiting for. The full fulfillment of all that was promised. Redemption.

Rescue. Forgiveness of sin. And the angel Gabriel is absolutely right, isn't he? In verse 19 when he says this is good news.

This is news of astonishing hope. All that God had promised down through the years is now. It's about to happen. The one who would bring salvation to all peoples.

A light. A revelation to the Gentiles. And the glory of God's people. Israel. That promised one's coming is now, says Gabriel. The forerunner is about to come.

And that is why we still mark these events 2,000 years later. This wasn't just a private thing between Zachariah and his wife. No. The coming of this child was the fulfillment of many, many promises through the Old Testament.

[16:36] God's words were now being fulfilled. And the implications of these two births, of John and then Jesus, the implications, well, they ripple out across all of history.

For every person, in every place, they still have significance for us now. For it is in Jesus Christ alone that men and women, boys and girls, find true hope.

Find true forgiveness for sin. Find the certainty of everlasting life and acceptance from the one who made them. It is a great message.

A message of hope. Of good news. It is. But it is a message that must be believed. It must be taken hold of. Trusted.

And it is now Zachariah's response that Luke focuses on. And this is our second point. We've seen the great message of astonishing hope and good news. But we see, secondly, that God's message is met with culpable rejection.

[17 : 44] What was Zachariah going to make of all this? It's extraordinary. What does he make of it? Well, he refused to believe the angel. Look at verse 18. And Zachariah said to the angel, How shall I know this?

For I am an old man. My wife is advanced in years. He didn't believe it. He's just heard the words from an angel sent by God.

He's heard these remarkable words of promises about to be fulfilled. And then he says to the angel, Prove it. Prove it. How shall I know this? We're old. How can this be?

For his wife to bear a child, well, that would require, wouldn't it, divine intervention. And Zachariah seemed to consider such a miracle so unlikely that even if an angel of the Lord announced it to him, he was not prepared to believe it.

He wanted stronger grounds to believe it than the ones he was given. Now, in one sense, we are tempted, aren't we, to sympathize with Zachariah. He's an old man.

[18 : 52] His wife's old. We kind of want to sympathize. But I don't think Dr. Luke lets us get away with that sympathy. We're told that Zachariah was a priest.

And as a priest, not only would he know intimately the scriptures, scriptures which not only promised exactly what the angel said here, but scriptures that at some key points related stories of elderly couples having children all through the Old Testament.

Zachariah not only knew the scriptures, but he taught them. He would teach them. But when he was confronted with the word of God, when presented with answers to those prayers, he refused to believe.

When told that the very things he taught of were now coming to pass, he responded with unbelief. That's what the angel says, isn't it?

Look at verse 20. He says that you did not believe my words. Zachariah rejects the message of hope, of good news.

[20 : 04] And his rejection, it is a culpable one. And the judgment is a very public one. He silenced. Very embarrassing for a priest.

It was his job not only to go in and burn incense, but to teach. And that was taken away from him. He was silenced. You see, he wasn't just a private individual.

He was at this moment operating in a very public way. He was in his priestly role. He was there as a representative of the people of God. And there in the temple, he refused to believe the very word of God to him.

And he was refusing to believe this message on grounds that would deny the very basis of the gospel in its entirety. If God couldn't follow through on this promise, if he couldn't do this for Zachariah, then what chance could he raise Jesus from the dead?

If God cannot intervene divinely, then he's not really a God at all, is he? That he should disbelieve the angel on these grounds, that miraculous intervention was unbelievable.

[21 : 13] Well, it made a very nonsense of the faith he was supposed to represent and teach, didn't it? If God couldn't do that, then what sort of God was he?

You see, God, he is God. And Zachariah, more than anyone, should have known through reading and teaching the scriptures that all things are possible with him.

Just read through the Old Testament. Extraordinary things happen. The very first words of the Bible, in the beginning, God created. That is an extraordinary claim, isn't it?

If that's not true, then it's all falling apart. And Zachariah, he refuses to believe. He probably did know, at least in theory, that these things were true.

He taught them after all. But when faced with the reality, when faced with the promises of God coming to fruition, when faced with the promise of answer prayer, well, he responded with unbelief.

[22 : 21] It seems that he didn't really believe that God was capable of acting. His God was small. His God was domesticated.

Not really at work in the world. And I wonder if that's your view of God. I know so often it's mine. Yes, you may believe and confess great things about God, great truths.

But do we actually believe God is capable of doing great things? And Zachariah, at this moment, didn't. And he was silenced.

But despite his unbelief, following his public shame and being unable to speak, he returns home. And there, extraordinarily, his wife conceives.

And in the months of silence that follow, Zachariah reflects on all that happens. And he does genuinely repent. If you look on to the end of chapter 1, verse 67, we see that Zachariah has, in fact, repented of his unbelief.

[23 : 36] He bursts forth in song at the birth of his son. You can read it later when you get home from verse 67. By this stage, he has realized that God is God.

That he is able to keep his promises. That he is bringing about the promised salvation of his people. He has learned, the hard way, to trust God. To take him at his word.

And that surely is the point of our passage this afternoon. Luke means us to learn from Zachariah's example, to learn from his rejection, to learn from a man who really ought to have known better, to learn from a man who, despite all his orthodoxy, refused to believe when confronted with the real gospel.

Don't be like Zachariah, is Luke's message to us this afternoon. Don't be like him. God is God. He can do extraordinary things.

And he has promised to bring salvation for all the peoples of the earth. And with the births of John, and then Jesus, he begins to bring to fulfillment all of those promises.

[24 : 51] All that he promised in the Old Testament is now coming to fruition. So will you, will you believe it? Will you take God at his word when he says that all who come in repentance will not be turned away, but rather they will know the forgiveness of sins and the certainty of life everlasting?

That is the implications of the birth of Jesus Christ. That is the real hope that we are reminded of at Christmastime. And Luke says to you, don't reject the good news.

Don't be like Zachariah at the start of chapter one. Rather, be like the Zachariah here at the end of chapter one, who is able to say of his new son, he's able to say of John, that you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the way of peace.

That was what Zachariah came to realize. And it's my prayer that you would come to realize that to you here this afternoon. Well, let's pray, shall we, before we finish.

Father, we thank you for Luke's account of these early days with the promised comings of John and Jesus.

[26 : 42] And we thank you that through this account we can have clarity and certainty. And so would you help us to take you at your word to believe and not respond as Zachariah does here with disbelief, but rather to take you at your word and to know that you are God.

So help us, we ask. In Jesus' name. Amen.