

Divine Disappointments

The Gospels

Luke 1

Introduction

In my studies in the Gospel of Luke this week, I discovered a man – a very obscure, old man – that I think is often overlooked and has been for centuries by those who have studied this gospel. Yet, he is a man who has become a dear friend in just a few short days and, I believe, will be very encouraging to you, as well.

Turn to Luke chapter 1. This careful record of Luke is given to his friend, who is introduced in Luke 1:3, by the name of Theophilus. This name means, “a pursuer of God”.

Luke 1:4 gives the purpose statement of Luke to Theophilus, to his readers of that day, and to all who read it today, saying,

so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

So Luke, the physician, carefully compiles the life of Jesus Christ in a way that no other gospel writer does. The event that we are going to study today is the next in line as we study the life of Jesus Christ.

The Difficult Times of Zacharias

We read in Luke 1:5a, the little phrase,

In the days of Herod, king of Judea . . .

Now, it would help to know something about this man Herod. You may remember that he was referred to as, “Herod the Great”.

One historian, Durant, refers to Herod as a man who had intellect without morals, courage without scruples, and every fortune except happiness.

We know from history that Herod was insanely jealous of anyone who would try to take the throne from him.

It was reported on one occasion that his wife, Mariamne, was planning to poison him. He brought her into the courtroom and in front of his council, condemned her and had her executed.

Soon after, Mariamne’s mother was accused of joining those who hated Herod and were plotting to

take his throne. So, he had his mother-in-law and the others put to death, as well.

A short time later, two sons by Mariamne were supposedly after his throne. Herod, who was so jealous of his power and his name, also had them executed.

This is the same man, by the way, who ordered the deaths of all the Jewish baby boys who were two years old and under because he had heard the story from the wise men that, “Someone has been born and we know Him to be the King of the Jews.”

This means a lot when we discover that Herod, on one occasion, had taken the title, “King of the Jews,” for himself. This was in one of his more humble moments. So we can imagine, when he heard that there was someone born “King of the Jews,” that this insanely jealous man ordered the deaths of all the young boys.

Herod’s life ended tragically. He supposedly, heard reports that his favored son was also plotting to overthrow him. He had him placed in jail. Then he learned that his son had tried to bribe the jailer in order to get out and flee. So he put his son to death. Five days later, Herod himself died, riddled with disease, and half insane.

His contemporaries wrote that Herod was a man who stole to the throne like a fox, ruled like a tiger, and died like a dog. So we are reading volumes when we read in Luke 1:5,

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias . . . and he had a wife . . . and her name was Elizabeth.

The Sterling Testimony of Zacharias

Now the text, in Luke 1:6, unveils two key phrases that explain this man, Zacharias, and also his wife, Elizabeth.

They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the

commandments and requirements of the Lord.

We see the phrase “righteous,” which you should underline in your text. This is an individual who lives and acts according to the will of God and, in that, finds a lifestyle that is acceptable to God.

This verse also says that Zacharias and his wife walked “blamelessly”. In other words, they were without reproach.

Zacharias and Elizabeth lived such a sterling life that no one, at any time could ever accuse them of not following God.

This was happening in the days of Herod! This man and his wife were living righteously, in the days when a monarch, half insane with jealousy for his throne and his power, would put to death anyone who would want another to be the king.

Now what was the righteous Jewish individual praying for? What was he hoping for? He was praying for the Messiah to come. And here is an old priest, in his later years, never missing a beat, living a blameless life for his God.

After reading this verse, I could not help but stop for a moment and take a good look at myself, and I want to present this mirror to you, for God’s word is a mirror. Zacharias was a man who, during the hey days of a pagan nation, was serving faithfully, blamelessly, righteously. How often do our circumstances determine our service? How often does our culture rewrite our character in such a way that it determines whether or not we will worship God?

I fear, ladies and gentlemen, that you and I worship God as if our worship were a paycheck. We serve God as if our service is a payment. If God does His work well in our lives, we will return a paycheck to Him; that is, we will worship Him. If God comes through in things that we pray about, we will turn around and honor Him.

Zacharias is a man who, for probably six or seven decades, lives in such a way that it never seems as if he is getting paid back.

The Painful Trial of Zacharias

Now let me tell the reason it appears Zacharias is not getting paid back for living righteously. Let us look at several passages.

Begin with Luke 1:7.

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

Skip to Luke 1:13.

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son . . .

This lets us know that Zacharias and his wife, at least at some point, and perhaps for years while it was physically possible, had prayed for a child. Yet, they had not previously been answered by God.

Luke 1:18 tells us that Zacharias had given up.

Zacharias said to the angel, “. . . I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

It is interesting to know that perhaps, Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth, were following the custom of the righteous Jew of that day. The righteous Jew thought it very improper to ask a miracle of God. Perhaps they had come to the point where they realized that for them to have a child would be a divine miracle, so they ceased praying.

When the angel Gabriel says, “Your prayer has been heard”; that is, “Your prayer that was prayed a long time ago has been heard,” it brings back for us perhaps, the thoughts and hopes of this man and his wife.

Ladies and gentlemen, I suggest that before you and I ever think of throwing in the towel; of pulling back the payment of worship or service, be it a paycheck, we take a good look, which we will today, at an old man and his wife, whose lives spelled one word, “disappointment”.

Zacharias and Elizabeth lived a life of unfulfilled expectations. This is a lot more than just the maternal instinct to have a child. This is a lot more than a father who simply wants a son. They were living under the Abrahamic covenant. If they lived for God, He would bless their seed. If they lived for God, they would prosper. This was the covenant promise.

The time is still in the Old Testament. Zacharias had lived for God; had served God. What was God doing in return? This is a man and his wife who are faithfully serving God, but who live with painful disappointment.

The Awesome Task of Zacharias

Zacharias' task is given in Luke 1:8-9.

Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division,

according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

Now at the time of Jesus Christ, there were about 20,000 priests serving in the temple. There were so many that they were divided into twenty-four divisions, with each division serving one week approximately every six months (I Chronicles 24:7-19). There were about fifty to sixty priests serving in the temple every day. They would know the job that they were supposed to do on the basis of four lots that were cast, called "the casting of the white lot," so that there would be no contention, jealousy, or fighting over who was to do certain tasks in the temple.

We know from history that a priest could only burn incense one time in their life. There were 20,000 priests, all of whom coveted this blessed privilege. This was when the priest went in and sacrificed incense representing communion with Yahweh. The entire nation would focus on this one priest and his relationship with God at that particular point in time.

Let me briefly interject that on top of his disappointment in having no son, it appears that the lot had never fallen on Zacharias – until now. He is coming to the end of his life, and he, like all of the other priests, desires that the lot be cast in his favor so that he can have this special privilege. However, it has never fallen on him.

If I were Zacharias, I would be thinking, "Wow, Lord, my life of faith is really paying off. Thanks a lot."

Now, at *this* particular time, the text tells us, the lot falls on Zacharias.

Let me draw a mental picture for you of what occurred on that day. At 9 a.m., the first sacrifice would take place on the huge seven-foot-high altar. The priest would walk up the ramps and sacrifice the animal for the forgiveness for that day and for the blood that would constantly be a reminder that, without the shedding of blood, there was no remission of sins. This was the basis for everything else that would happen in the temple.

First they shed blood and then, one priest, on whom the lot had fallen, took some coals and placed them in a golden bowl, and another priest took incense and placed it in a golden censer or container, and these two men would walk toward the holy place. At this time, Herod had rebuilt it so that it was a massive white structure with gold plated doors. They walked up the stairs to the holy place and, as they walked, they would strike a gong. This instrument could be heard throughout the city. All the people, who were not able to make it to the temple, knew the time was near to fall prostrate and worship God.

Then, three priests would walk into the holy place and one would clean the altar of incense, another would straighten the loaves of shewbread, and the other would trim the wicks on the seven candle stand. They would then leave.

The only priest that would be left in the holy place would be the priest that had the privileged position of sacrificing incense. Once the other priests were out, some kind of instrument that sounded something like an organ sounded. Upon that sound, the entire body of perhaps sixty priests would fall to the ground. All the people who had come to worship would also prostrate themselves and everyone in the city would pause as well, and the righteous ones would kneel. Silence would pervade the entire city. Why? Because this priest is about to sprinkle incense on the altar and the puffs of smoke going up would represent their worship and their communion with a God who has forgiven them. It was an awesome moment.

Gabriel's announcement to Zacharias

Now at that particular time, the Bible tells us that something rather interesting happens. Look at Luke 1:10.

And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

This lets us know that Zacharias is about to place the incense on the offering. Luke 1:11-12 tells us what happens.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.

Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him.

Zacharias was troubled and in fear because the priests believed that to the left of the altar of incense was the place reserved for the angels of God and to the right of the altar was the place reserved for God Himself. This angel, Gabriel, stands to the right of the altar and makes an announcement, Continue to Luke 1:13.

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.”

What an announcement! What timing! God is dramatic at times, is He not? He waits for just the right moment and “zap,” here is Gabriel from heaven announcing to this aged man that he and his wife, who is past childbearing years, are going to have a son.

This is probably one of the most exciting announcements I receive in my office from people. It is one of the most exciting announcements that I have ever received. You may remember a time you heard such an announcement.

Wives, you walked in, looked your husband in the eye, and said, “Hello,” and then added the word, “Dad” – and he fainted. I remember my wife saying this to me. It was so exciting. Seven months later, she had a sonogram that the doctor wanted to do. The nurse came in the room to do it. Until this time, we thought everything was standard stuff. Then, after about five minutes of looking, the nurse looked at us and said, “There are two of them in there.”

I began to laugh, which is what I do when I’m terrified – and my wife cries. We have been crying ever since!

In that holy place, the angel gives Zacharias an incredible announcement. He then continues on to talk about the ministry of this boy, John the Baptist. We are going to look at that in detail at a later time.

Thoughts on the unborn

I have to stop at this point, because this passage, as it talks about the birth of John and the life of John, is probably some of the greatest text in defense of the unborn that I have ever found in scripture. Let me give three thoughts from this. If anyone ever asks a question of you concerning the unborn, take them to Luke chapter 1.

1. The first thought is that conception is the act of God.

God is involved in conception. In fact, we can turn back to the Old Testament and find many passages that support this thought. The classic passage is Ruth chapter 4, in which it talks about Ruth and Boaz. Look at Ruth 4:13.

... the Lord gave her conception ...

Conception is the act of God.

2. Secondly, this passage refers to the unborn in living human terms.

Look at Luke 1:36a, when the angel is speaking to Mary.

And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son ...

This is in the womb; this is the conception – and this conception is being referred to, not as a mass of tissue, not as some unliving thing, but as a “brephos”. The same word appears in Luke 2:12, when the angels said to the shepherds,

This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby [“brephos”] wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

The scriptures do not delineate. This is a living person.

3. Thirdly, and probably the most startling of these three thoughts, is that the unborn can experience emotion.

We discover in Luke 1:44 that a baby, or “brephos,” in the womb can experience emotion. Elizabeth is speaking when Mary visits.

For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy.

This is strong evidence, is it not? It is probably the strongest we will find in scripture.

Zacharias’ response to Gabriel

Now Zacharias responds to Gabriel as we would should this angel come to us. At seventy or eighty years of age, I love his response in Luke 1:18.

Zacharias said to the angel, “How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

It is as if Zacharias is going to correct Gabriel; as if he thinks Gabriel has spent too much time in heaven

and does not understand how it works down here. He says, “Gabriel, I’m an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

I stumbled across the Navaho translation of this phrase, which is not so polite, but says,

. . . her days are just about up.

In other words, “Gabriel, don’t come down from heaven and tell us this unless you’ve got some pretty solid proof that we’re going to have a little baby.”

Gabriel responds to this in the next few verses.

Before we look at Gabriel’s response, however, let me give two warnings from the life of a man who has lived a great life of faith, although a man who has served under disappointing, oppressive circumstances. These are two warnings about faith.

1. First, it is possible to evidence a lack of faith after years of serving God.

You and I will never get to the point in our lives in which we can corner this market and say, “Well, I’ve lived for God 15 or 20 or 30 or 40 years. Let’s just assume I’m going to act by faith now.”

No. This is a man who had a difficult time believing the representative of God after years of serving.

2. Secondly, it is possible to evidence unbelief in the midst of serving God.

We can be in the middle of serving God, yet it is possible, even then, to evidence unbelief.

Gabriel’s response to Zacharias

Let us look at the way the angel responds to Zacharias. Look at Luke 1:19.

The angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”

I like this. Gabriel kind of sticks out his chest and says, “Wake up! I’ve just come from heaven and I am the angel who stands in the very presence of Yahweh.”

Gabriel continues in Luke 1:20, as if to say, “Do you want proof? Well, here it is.”

And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.

Now look at Luke 1:21-22.

The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple.

But 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.

This was probably a hilarious episode, had we been there. Zacharias could not talk, but he was trying to explain, “I’ve seen an angel.”

The most difficult time of his entire life, in fact, probably came next. Look at Luke 1:23.

When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home.

This is a man who is making his mule go as fast as he possibly can. He has the most exciting news to tell his wife – and she is not going to believe him – but he cannot talk.

Imagine this scene with me. Zacharias arrives home and rushes in the door. He finds his wife and is trying to explain with signs – playing charades. Elizabeth kind of pats him on the head and gets him to sit down and says, “It’s been a long trip. You’re an old man. Now explain.”

Zacharias probably gets a piece of parchment and looks for a quill and writes, “You’re going to have a baby.”

Now I think Elizabeth is a little feisty. We read in Luke 1:60, when all the relatives want to name this child something other than John, that she now believes and says,

. . . “No indeed . . .”

This is a very strong statement; a double negative. She says, “Absolutely not!”

This is Elizabeth, so I can see her saying to Zacharias, “I’m going to have a baby. You must have sunstroke or something. How do you know this, Honey?”

He writes, “An angel told me.”

I think one of the greatest acts of faith is for Elizabeth to buy this. In fact, I think if she had not conceived and gotten pregnant, she probably would never have believed it.

However, it happened. The text tells us that Elizabeth conceived and was away for a period of

time until she finally made herself public. She says, and I love Luke 1:25,

This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace . . .

Understand that this is Old Testament economy, not New Testament. It is not a disgrace today for a woman not to have a child, but it was then. Children were the promise of God, and if someone did not have a child, it meant they were probably living in disobedience to God. This is not the case now.

So for Zacharias and Elizabeth, there would be the disgrace; there would be the subtle insinuation that, “Oh, if you get behind the closed doors of Elizabeth and Zacharias’ home, you would see that they’re not living for God; they’re just putting on a face one or two weeks of the year.”

When this happened, Elizabeth was obviously vindicated in a beautiful way.

Comments on prayer

Let me make two comments in response to what happened to Zacharias.

1. First, prayers made before God may be heard by Him long before He will send the answer.

You and I are so impatient that if we miss one panel on a revolving door, it really kind of bothers us because we could have gotten there a second faster. We pray in the same way.

We lift up a prayer and expect the answer. If the answer does not come, whether it is “yes,” “no,” “wait,” or “maybe,” we are very impatient with a God who does not seem to be coming through – especially if we are serving Him; especially if we are worshiping Him.

2. Secondly, prayers are not necessarily rejected because the answer is long delayed.

It is quite true that God’s timing is always unexplainable. It is always on time, but frequently, it is unexplainable. His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are past our knowing. (Isaiah 55:9)

The Joyful Trust of Zacharias

Let us look at Luke 1:57-58.

Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son.

Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her.

In that day, when a baby was going to be born, the family usually hired local musicians who came and surrounded the house, along with all the friends and relatives. If a boy was born, there was double rejoicing because they had been given a son to carry on the family name. So when a boy is born and it is announced, the celebration begins.

The next thing that happens is the same thing that happens in our homes today. If a name has not been decided beforehand, then the first thing that must be done is to figure out what to call that baby boy or girl. Today we buy the books with the lists of names and look through them. They probably did not have any books then. However, the time came to name him, in Luke 1:59.

And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father.

This is a typical name – Zacharias, Jr. However, Elizabeth says, “Absolutely not!”

Look at Luke 1:60.

But his mother answered and said, “No indeed; but he shall be called John.”

Continue to Luke 1:61.

And they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name.”

These friends and relatives were thinking, “I can’t believe what she is thinking of doing. Have you ever seen anything like that before in your life?”

This is in-between the lines, of course.

Then we read in Luke 1:62-63,

And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called.

And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, “His name is John.” And they were all astonished.

The name John means, “the grace of God”.

Continue Luke 1:64. This is after nine months.

And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God.

Application

Now we have taken a look at the life of Zacharias today. Let us mirror his life in ours. By way of application, let me ask two questions of you.

1. First, when disappointments come into your life, do they restrict your service for God?

There are a many people hearing this today, who are living under great disappointment; great pain. When the black cloud is overhead, what happens to the way you and I serve our God?

2. Secondly, and even more importantly, when disappointments come, do they repress your worship of God?

This is like Jacob. In the Old Testament, God, as you may remember, tells him to do some things that will require a lot of faith. Classic Jacob says, “Oh God, if You will feed me and clothe me and return me safely to my father’s house, *then* You will be my God.” (Genesis 28:20-21)

Now we would not want what we say written in scripture for generations to know, but we have thought this, have we not? Do we worship this way? Do we say, “God, if You will clothe me and feed me and bring me to safety; if You will work everything out for me, *then* You can bank on it – You will get Your paycheck. I’ll let You be my God and I’ll serve You.”

Take it from an individual and his wife who lived for years without ever receiving, without ever seeing, without ever hearing, that it is possible to serve and to worship, even though under great disappointment.

I am going to close with a message about the two names of this man and his wife because this is so beautiful and I do not think it is coincidental.

Zacharias means, “God remembers”.

Elizabeth means, “the covenant of God”.

When the names of these two individuals are combined, the meaning is, “God remembers His covenant with man.”

I love this because it tells us that in this covenant, God remembers us. God has not become so busy that He has overlooked our disappointments. He has not gotten so overworked that we have in some way, slipped through the cracks of His understanding. God knows.

Disappointments, as in the life of this individual, are *divine* disappointments. God’s plan; God’s way

has yet to be revealed. Can we view them this way and keep serving and worshiping, knowing that we serve a God who will never forget us; who will always love us?