

Sunday, November 27, 2022 | Go Tell It on the Mountain

Week 2 | Luke 1:5-25 | "Grace for the Disgraced"

Last week we started our Luke study by kicking off the series "Go Tell It on the Mountain." And during that message, we unpacked the four things Luke wanted his audience to know. Firstly, Luke was among *many* who had written about Jesus' life. Secondly, though he was not an eyewitness, he was *close friends* with those who were. Thirdly, he took all he had heard and placed the facts of Jesus' life in *order*. And, lastly, he wrote all that he wrote because he wanted to give his reader, Theophilus, *certainty* about the things he had been taught. And the takeaway for us was that we are to see ourselves as Theophilus. In other words, we are to imagine that Luke is writing to us and that, like Theophilus, we are to share the Gospel with others.

Today, we'll be covering quite a lot of ground compared to last week. And one would think that, after his preface, Luke would dive headfirst into the birth narrative of Jesus. Instead, rather than introducing us to a young couple who had only recently been engaged—i.e., Mary and Joseph, we find that Luke focuses on an elderly couple who had been married for many years—i.e., Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke does this because he is acutely aware that everything in his Gospel will be intimately connected to, and in full agreement with, the Old Testament. In short, Zechariah and Elizabeth are stand-ins for Israel's past. And while this does not discount all the newness that will come, the way God deals with this family shows us that the Lord is only making due on a promise he had made thousands of years before.

READ: Luke 1:5-25 (ESV)

⁵In 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](#). ⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷But they had [no child](#), because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

⁸Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹according to the custom of the priesthood, he was [chosen](#) by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³But 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**.¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,¹⁷ 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 disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I **know** this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."¹⁹ And the angel answered 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**."²⁰ 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."²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple.²² 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.²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying,²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

Notice **things** about God's promises:

i. God's promises are proclaimed (vs. 5-20).

Luke sets the scene by introducing us to two elderly individuals: Zechariah and Elizabeth. These are not your everyday Israelites, but they were both of priestly lines. And, from the get-go, we're supposed to think of them as being the best Israel offers. Luke tells us that they were "righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." Yet, despite their impressive pedigree, there was a problem: Elizabeth was barren. During this time, if a woman couldn't have children, she was thought to have been under God's judgment.

Luke quickly moved us to the Temple, where Zechariah performed his priestly duties. But, before we move on to the meat of the passage, we need a crash course on the priesthood in the first century. There were 24 divisions in the priestly line, and each division was represented

by an order, and each order served one week twice a year.¹ Zechariah was one of about 700 priests in the order of "Abijah," and within each order, there were anywhere between four to nine houses represented.² All told, we're looking at 18,000 priests.³ Understandably, not every priest could serve in the temple. There were too many. So, the casting of lots became how individuals were chosen to serve. Consequently, it was a special honor to be selected as not only were the odds against you but you'd only be allowed to serve once in your lifetime.⁴

In essence, here's the scene: Zechariah and Elizabeth, the crème of the crop, lived a lifetime without ever having children. The time came for Abijah, one of 24 and Zechariah's order, to serve in the Temple. And it just so happens that out of 700 other people, Zechariah gets chosen for the first and last time in his life to perform his priestly duties. And he was not picked to do just anything. Zechariah was selected to go into the temple proper alone and offer incense during the hour of prayer. And at this moment, an angel appeared to give Zechariah a message.

The message that Zechariah receives is three-fold. First, their prayers have been heard. Secondly, he and his wife, Elizabeth, will have a son, and they will name him "John." And, lastly, John will be used by God. Specifically, he will abstain from all forms of alcohol, and, rather than live a life of intoxication, he will be filled by the Holy Spirit from the womb (cf. Eph. 5:18-20). And so, going in the power of the Spirit, John 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 disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." In other words, John's ministry will be characterized by a call to repentance, not unlike the prophet Elijah 900 years before. And this call to repentance is so that the people of Israel are prepared.

ii. **God's promises are validated (vs. 18-20).**

The last word from God that the people of Israel received was from the prophet Malachi 400 years prior. Meaning that for four centuries, the Jews hadn't received so much as a syllable from God. Historically, we know that it was a period of great trial in which, ultimately, Israel came under Roman occupation. Suffice it to say Zechariah lived during a time of great discouragement and frustration. He himself, now an older man, had likely lost all of his youthful optimism. And while he was undoubtedly an upright, righteous, and devout Jew,

¹ Morris, Leon, *Luke*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 85.

² Bock, Darrell L., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 1994), p. 76.

³ Ibid, p. 79.

⁴ Morris (1988), p. 85.

Zechariah had grown hardhearted and cynical like the rest of Israel. How do we know this? Because even though he stood in a place where God's presence was thought to reside and even though he was conversing with an actual angel, Zechariah refused to believe. In response to the revelation that he and his wife would have a son, this aging priest said, "[How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.](#)"

Upon reading Zechariah's question, it would seem like a perfectly reasonable response. But, considering how the angel responds, we can assume that Zechariah crossed some sort of line. And in looking at his words more closely, we find that the old priest wasn't asking for further explanation (cf. 1:34); he was asking for *proof*. You see, what is missed in our English translations is that Zechariah actually says something like "According to what..." or, "On what basis shall I know this?"⁵ In essence, the priest wanted assurances, through some sign, that what he had been told would come to pass. This is why some translations render Zechariah's question as "How can I be sure of this?"⁶

Even though the angel first quieted Zechariah's heart (cf. vs. 13), his response to Zechariah's disbelief no doubt quickened it once again. To prove the validity of his proclamation, the angel explains his identity: "[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.](#)" Little is known about the angelic domain compared to our own world. Outside of passages that deal with the end times, which are tricky to interpret literally, we know the names of three angels: Gabriel, Michael, and Lucifer. Obviously, Lucifer was the Devil's name before he fell. Michael is called the "archangel," and, given the few passages where he is mentioned, it seems like he engages in spiritual warfare (cf. Jude 1:9; Dan. 10:13). Gabriel, on the other hand, features prominently in Scripture as a divine messenger of the end times (cf. Dan. 8:15-16; 9:21-22). And, by his own admission, he says that he "stands in the presence of God," which is a pretty impressive flex as all who come in contact with God's presence seem to fall on their face (cf. Gen. 17:3; Josh. 5:14-15; Ezk. 1:28; 3:23; Dan. 8:17; 10:15; Mat. 17:6; Ac. 9:4; 26:14; Rev. 1:17). However, the real kicker here in Gabriel's words is that he says, emphatically, "[I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.](#)" In other words, I—Gabriel, the one who stands in the presence of God—came explicitly to *you* to bring *you* good news, and your response is to ask for more? Rather than your heart being filled with joy at the good news, it is filled with doubt?

⁵ Garland, David E., *Luke*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2011), p. 68.

⁶ NIV.

The irony here is that Zechariah's name means "God remembers." How ironic that he seems to have forgotten the Scriptures. God had already done what he promised to do with him and Elizabeth many times before.⁷ In essence, while not taking anything away from the miraculous nature of John's birth, it was, nevertheless, a repeat. Famously, Abraham and Sarah had a similar word from the Lord, and then Isaac was born (cf. Gen. 18). But, aside from them, Isaac and Rebekah were barren, and God gave them twins (cf. Gen. 25:21-28). Rachel, Jacob's wife, was also infertile, and she had Joseph and Benjamin (cf. Gen. 30:1-24; 35:16-21). Hannah, the mother of Samuel, was barren at one time (cf. 1 Sam. 1-2). Samson's mother was barren (cf. Judg. 13:2). In connection with Elisha, a barren Shunammite woman bore a son (cf. 2 Ki. 4:8-17). In total, there are six recorded instances in the OT where God gave a couple a child even though they had been barren for some time. Zechariah and Elizabeth would make the seventh.

Despite the OT standing as proof that God would give Zechariah a son, he still wanted more proof. He wanted confirmation that he and his wife would bear a son apart from having Gabriel come to him and telling him so. If such cynicism had taken root in the heart of such a righteous and upstanding man, what hope was there that the rest of Israel would be less distrusting?

So, since Zechariah wanted proof, Gabriel would give him proof. He would give him the sign of silence. "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."

iii. God's promises are fulfilled (vs. 21-25).

After Zechariah comes out of the Temple and the people realize something miraculous happens, the old priest goes home, and, not too long after, his wife gets pregnant. Within a few verses for us and likely weeks for Zechariah, God's promise that he and his wife would conceive came true.

Curiously, Elizabeth chooses to hide from the public for five months. No reason is given for this, and there is no end to theories. However, Luke simply doesn't tell us why she did this. And so those theories are purely speculative. Personally, I think it's nothing more than proof that Luke was a historian and wanted to relay the information he had given without altering it. But only Elizabeth knows why.

In response to her conceiving, Elizabeth praises God by saying: "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." Though John will impact a nation for God's glory, his first act was to lighten his mother's heart. For a lifetime, Elizabeth had born the disgrace of childlessness. Imagine how heartbreaking that was for her

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Garland (2011), p. 68.

when she and Zechariah were first married, and people would ask, "When are you going to have a baby?" And then for the years to drag on without ever conceiving, or, possibly, conceiving and then miscarrying. As the years passed, she would've grown old watching her friends, family, and neighbors all have children of her own. Their houses would be filled with the laughter of children, but hers would remain devoid of such joys. And then, by the time she should've been a grandmother, that old pain would surface again as she would witness for the second time in her life her friends, family, and neighbors having grandchildren of their own.

But it was at the point when all earthly hope was extinguished that God came and rescued Elizabeth from despair, giving her what she hadn't thought possible: a child.

So, what's the takeaway?

Despite our disbelief and disgrace, God **remembers** his promises and restores his people.

Video Description

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: <https://docdro.id/bWqJrL2>