

Unexpected Blessings

Luke 1:5-24

There's a common phrase about life that says we must "expect the unexpected." This is true. Life will throw us curve balls. You may have had expectations about a relationship or a job that did not go as planned. This may have caused you great disappointment. Besides unmet expectations, there are unexpected circumstances that have come or will come to our lives that can lead to great discouragement, disillusionment or even fear.

I want to suggest to you that we must do more than expect the unexpected, we must prepare for the unexpected. And the way to be prepared is to have a relationship with God that gives us faith to expect Him to bring unexpected blessings out of unexpected circumstances and unmet expectations.

As we learned last week, the content that is unique to Luke's gospel reveals a common thread, namely that Jesus brings about a complete reversal of societal values and expectations. He taught that the meek would inherit the earth, that the greatest among us are those who serve, and He spent time with people that the religious leaders despised.

The Kingdom teachings of Jesus were not only counterintuitive to the religious elite, they were scandalized by them. Remember, this common thread that in the kingdom of God worldly norms are inverted, which is a hallmark of Luke's gospel, has been called the "Great Reversal." The historic and detailed narratives that are unique to Luke's gospel, like the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus, provide distinct insight into the inverted kingdom of God.

One of those unique aspects of the upside down kingdom, which believers are called to represent, is that God works through unexpected people, in unexpected places and at unexpected periods to bring unexpected provision and blessings.

After presenting his reason for writing his gospel, namely for believers to have certainty about the person and work of Christ, Luke begins by giving a detailed account of the birth announcement of both John the Baptist and of Jesus. And as we will see, both these birth announcements, starting with John, came at unexpected times and were given to unexpected people in unexpected places which led to unexpected blessing.

This pattern that we will see vividly in Luke's gospel regarding the way of unexpected blessings, a pattern which is also woven throughout the scriptures, provide valuable lessons for believers today about dealing with unexpected circumstances.

Main idea: Unexpected blessings of God's kingdom are encountered on the long road of faithfulness and obedience.

To unfold this theme we are going to see 3 vital truths about God and how He relates to His people that we must embrace in order to deal with unexpected circumstances and prepare for unexpected blessings.

1. God blesses our perseverance

First, to deal with unexpected circumstances and prepare for unexpected blessings, we must cling to the truth that God blesses our perseverance. After presenting his reason for writing His gospel, namely for believers to have certainty about the person and work of Christ, Luke begins by giving a detailed account of events leading up to the birth announcement of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ—the one who would prepare the way for Him. Doctor Luke writes:

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

Luke 1:5-7

Right from the start of Luke's historic narrative of the upside down kingdom, we are presented with two important details about a married couple that can be viewed as almost contradictory. It is said of Zechariah and Elizabeth that although they were blameless before God, nevertheless they were childless because they were both past the age of childbearing.

It was to this couple that Gabriel, God's special divine messenger, announced that they would have a child. And as we will see in the coming weeks, this same messenger would appear to Mary with the greatest of all birth announcements, namely that she, a virgin, would give birth to Emmanuel. Both Elizabeth, because she was advanced in years and Mary, because she was a young virgin, would have unexpected pregnancies.

What can we learn from this? The most obvious application is that we will never be too old or too young for God to work in and through our lives in unexpected ways. What's more, God didn't choose these two women because He had no other way to fulfill His redemptive plans. This was intentional and it speaks to the heart of God and His preferred method and means of accomplishing His purposes.

Down through the ages God has chosen men and woman to accomplish his work who others would have not considered the best choice. Moreover, those that were chosen did not think they themselves had what it took. Moses, for example, who is the most notable figure in the Old Testament, felt inadequate, and even questioned God when he was called to lead his people out of the bondage in Egypt.

When putting together a team, the criteria that our society uses focuses on education, experience, and track record of success. But when it comes to the salvation of God and service in His kingdom, God does not require intelligence, ability, power, or status. "Those who come to Christ are on His "team" by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9)." Chris Ritter

In this context, the the Apostle Paul explained that “God chooses the foolish things to confound the wise.”

Oswald Chambers explained, “God can achieve His purpose either through the absence of human power and resources, or abandonment of reliance on them. All through history God has chosen and used nobodies, because their unusual dependence on Him made possible the unique display of His power and grace. He chose and used somebodies only when they renounced dependence on their natural abilities and resources.”

Now the fact that God specializes in using unexpected people to bring unexpected blessings does not mean that there aren't qualities that He favors. Luke points out that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous and blameless. This doesn't mean that they were sinless, but that they had demonstrated a consistent life of devotion to God in their public and private life.

In light of this, it's important to note that although they were no doubt disappointed about never having a child, they remained faithful to God. Additionally, being childless in the Jewish culture in their day was viewed as a sign of God's judgment or displeasure. The thought was that if you are childless, there must be something wrong with you that perhaps only God knew about.

But despite their disappointment and heartache, despite the sneers and scorn of others, they persevered through it all and remained faithful to the Lord. And God saw Zechariah and Elizabeth's faithfulness, as they continued to serve the Lord and walk in obedience to His word long after they gave up on the dream of having a child.

Even though others in their community believed them to be unfaithful, they remained faithful to God and ready to serve. And on that steady road of faithfulness, they bore a fruitfulness that would bless them and bless many after them.

We live in a hurried society where many want quick results and instant success. We hate to wait. And we have little patience with people, especially when they are not meeting our expectations. We are quick to abandon ship, abandon our marriages, abandon our churches, and abandon our friendships when things don't go our way. But the promise of scripture is *"And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up."* Galatians 6:9

Beloved, God meets us on the road of faithfulness. As we will see, the vision that Zechariah would receive about an unexpected blessing came as he was faithfully doing what he was called to do. It would have been easy for this couple to give up along the way through all the disappointments and heartbreak. But they persevered and continued being faithful.

Likewise, we must continue serving, continue witnessing and continue praying. I'm not saying if you do, the Angel Gabriel is going to appear to you, but I am saying that "the road of faithfulness is where your answers are going to come." Chris Ritter

2. God works through prayer

In light of this, notice that God not only blesses faithfulness and perseverance, God works through prayer. After highlighting the faithfulness of Zechariah and Elizabeth despite their barrenness, Luke continues:

"Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. Luke 1:8-10

Again, it was while Zechariah was dutifully serving in his assigned division of priest, that unexpected things began to take place. Under the rule of King David, the priests were divided and reconstituted into 24 divisions after the Babylonian captivity. There were three hundred priests in each division that served for two one week periods a year.

Each day 52 priests were chosen by lot to serve in the temple. It was during the two week period that Zechariah's division was standing by for service, that he was selected by lot to offer incense in the temple.

Concerning the priestly service in the temple, one bible teacher elaborates: "There were many jobs to be done... all overseen by the high priest. Some jobs were quite lowly and mundane. One, however, carried with it a certain amount of prestige. A single priest was selected daily by lot to offer the incense at the hour of prayer. [At this time], the faithful would gather at the time of prayer in the temple courts. The chosen priest, representing all the people, would enter the Holy Place and burn the fragrant blend of spices prescribed in the law of Moses. As the smoke of the incense rose to heaven, so did the prayers of the people. Once you had the opportunity to do this duty, your name was never included in the selection process again. It was a once-in-a-lifetime event. Some priests went their whole lives without being selected." Chris Ritter

Now, it was while the aged Zechariah was faithfully doing what he was providentially and surprisingly chosen to do at the hour of prayer, that an Angel appeared to him with news that exceeded all his expectations. Luke continues:

"And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ 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." Luke 1:11-13

Notice that the most extraordinary thing that ever happened to Zechariah and which would prepare the way for the most extraordinary event in history, came not only as he was faithfully serving but in answer to prayer. After being filled with fear by the sight of the Angel of the Lord, the Angel, who encouraged Zechariah not to be afraid, revealed that his prayer was answered.

As we will see later, because of Zechariah's unbelieving response to the Angel's revelation that he would have a son in their old age, some commentators suggest that he may not have been praying specifically about a son at that moment. It's possible that he and his wife had prayed fervently for a son in the past but there came a point at which they assumed God was not going to answer that prayer. They forgot that God does the unexpected.

But the verb tense used to describe the prayer of Zechariah does suggest that the unexpected blessing was in answer to the prayer he had just uttered as he offered incense. Therefore, some think that he had been praying for a son. "But, as one commentator suggest, "given his incomprehension and unbelief at being told he would have a son, it is more probable that he was praying for the redemption of Israel. He would never have dreamed that his having a son would be the beginning of the answer. Whatever the case, Gabriel spoke, and prophecy, which had ceased at the close of Old Testament times, occurred for the first time in four hundred year." Kent Hughes

Notice that after explaining that God answered His prayer, the Angel continues: *"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."* Luke 1:14-17

This is just incredible. The Old Testament closes with a prophecy concerning John the Baptist who would prepare the way for Jesus in the spirit and power of Elijah. Elijah was one of the most well known and influential prophets in the Old Testament. Interestingly, James uses Elijah as an example of the power of a praying man (James 5:17-18).

This close out prophecy of the ministry of John in Malachi 4:5-6, was followed by four hundred years of silence. And when God's speaks

again to Zechariah through His Angel in fulfillment of prophecy, He emphasizes that it was in answer to prayer.

Beloved, there are several great lessons that we can learn about prayer from the Angel's revelation. One lesson is that we must not allow the disappointment of unmet expectations to keep us from believing that God answers prayer. When you read about the prayer lives of men like Jeremiah, Job, and David, whose prayers are recorded for us in the Bible, you'll find that even though they were greatly disappointed at life's circumstances, and momentarily disappointed with God, they didn't cease praying.

And because they kept coming to God and did not forsake Him, even when they were seemingly disappointed, they demonstrated that their devotion to God was not based on God meeting their expectations, but on who God is.

What motivates you to pray? "The most enduring motivation for prayer is that God is worthy to be sought" (Daniel Henderson). And as we wait on the Lord and encounter His awesome presence, we are reminded that we can trust God's character even when we can't understand our circumstances.

Another great lesson to learn about prayer from the life of Zechariah is that prayer is not ultimately about seeking God to meet our earthly expectations, but about looking for God's unexpected blessing to fulfill His plans. I really appreciate one Bible teacher's insights here:

"Prayer is most powerful when we marry our needs to God's divine purpose. Jesus teaches us to pray, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

So weave your needs in with God's kingdom as you pray. Always keep the Kingdom of God in mind. If you need finances, frame that in the context of the Kingdom. 'God, I want to take care of my needs and also be a blessing to your Kingdom and to others.' Get a Kingdom vision.

If you are praying for health, weave that to God's Kingdom. 'God, I am asking for new health and strength so that I can use that strength to glorify your name, to serve your people, and praise your name.'

Jesus said when you put God's kingdom first, God will take care of your needs. Just look at how God is meeting the needs of Zechariah and Elizabeth, even as he is preparing to bring salvation into the world." Christ Ritter

Now notice that although Zechariah was still praying and although the Angel appeared to Him and revealed that God answered his prayer in a way that exceeded his expectations, Zechariah responded in disbelief:

"And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." Luke 1:8-18

Zechariah's response here reveals that although he was a praying man, and although he was still faithfully serving the Lord in his latter years, he had a limited view about how God would work out His redemptive plan. As he offered up the incense at the hour of prayer on behalf of his people as they also prayed in the temple court, Zechariah was likely praying for God's kingdom to come. However, because he and his wife were advanced in years, and because God didn't answer their prayers on their time table, he questioned the Angel's revelation.

And how did the Angel respond to his disbelief? This question brings us to our final point:

3. God's timing is perfect

After responding to the Angel with what appears to be doubt and unbelief, we read beginning in verse: 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.” Luke 1:19-20

Interestingly, if you compare Zechariah’s response to Gabriel’s revelations that his wife would have a son in her old age, and Mary’s response to the revelation that she would conceive a son having not yet known a man, they both responded with questions. But Mary didn’t get rebuked by the Angel nor did she lose her ability to speak. What was the difference? Mary response sought an explanation, whereas Zechariah’s response seems to be asking for more evidence.

Mary asked, “*How will this be, since I am a virgin?*” (Luke 1:34). Mary’s question wasn’t one of doubting God’s word, rather she’s seems to be seeking clarity. It’s perfectly reasonable for her to think that there was something that she needed to do, like talk to Joseph about changing their wedding plans to coincide with God’s plans.

But Zechariah’s question, *How shall I know this*, seems to be asking for proof, and according to the Angel, was rooted in disbelief. He wanted more evidence. But he already had all the proof he needed. He already had God’s word. He had plenty of evidence from scripture concerning God supernaturally opening the womb of the barren like Sarah, Abraham’s wife. And Abraham was the father of Faith.

Additionally, he knew he was standing in the presence of a supernatural being, which is why Luke recorded that when he first saw the Angel, fear fell upon him. In fact, verses 21-22 record that when Zechariah came out to the people who had been praying, even they knew that he had seen a vision in the temple.

What’s more, he didn’t question what the Angel said about the prophecies concerning John the Baptist who would prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. Rather, he wanted more proof that God could do for him and his wife what the Angel said he would do. He didn’t have an intellectual problem, he had a heart problem. And because his heart problem caused him to ask for more proof than what he already had, the Angel pronounced that he would be unable to speak until what he said came to pass.

John Piper elaborates: “This is a warning to us, lest we like Zechariah demand too much evidence before we will believe God's promises. How many of us, when we are laid low by dark and distressing circumstances, cannot believe that God is working it all out for our infinite good until some ray of light, some extra evidence, shows us that it is all going to be OK? O, how often we fail to take God at his word! And if Gabriel has a right to become indignant, how much more the absolutely trustworthy God whom he serves!”

What exactly caused Zechariah's heart to disbelieve, we don't know for sure. But keep in mind that when Gabriel pronounced that he would not be able to speak, he added this explanation: “*because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their **time**.*” Luke 1:20

There's something about waiting long for our expectations to be met that can cause our hearts to grow cold and indifferent. But during these times, we must hold on to the trustworthiness of God who fulfills His best plan for our lives in His perfect time.

God wanted to so drive this point home that the next time Zechariah was able to speak was more than 9 months later after Zechariah confirmed on a writing tablet that his son was to be called John, as the Angel had said.

Now after Zechariah encountered the Angel, and the people also realized that he had seen a vision, Luke concludes: “*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.”*” Luke 1:19-24

How much Zechariah was able to communicate to Elizabeth about his encounter with the Angel, we don't know for sure. But when she

conceived, she knew that her unexpected pregnancy was a blessing from God. But she didn't know the half of it.

One commentator suggests, "I am not sure why Elizabeth hides herself for five months. She had experienced so much private pain over the years, perhaps she wanted to treasure up the private joy that God had given her before she shared the news with the world." Chris Ritter

Again, she didn't know the half of it, but what she did discover is that God's delays are not always His denials. And let me add that God is working while we are waiting. He's working on us and He's working around us to prepare us for unexpected blessings. And the greatest blessing of all is the arrival and return of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

When unexpected circumstances come, and they will, let us cling to the truths that God blesses our perseverance, that God answers our prayers, and that God's timing is always perfect.

Beloved, God's unexpected blessing falls on the faithful. "The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth shows us that when we consistently [do what God calls us to do, He will do what only He can] in His perfect timing." Chris Ritter