

Sunday 3 December 2023

Life Group Leaders' Notes

Series: Living Without Fear

Title: How To Have A Hope Filled Christmas

Key Text: Luke 1:12-13

One of the greatest lessons that we can learn from the Christmas story is that God wants you to live without fear and to go through life with faith and confidence. Overcoming fear is one of the major themes of the Bible. The Scriptures teach us that God wants us to trust in Him and receive His peace and comfort even in the most uncertain of times.

Fear is a universal human experience. We may have fears about our health, our families, our finances and our future. We may fear failure, we may fear what others think of us. And of course, we may fear many things that we see happening in the world around us whether it is increasing antisemitism, the rise of artificial intelligence, or wars such as we are witnessing in Ukraine and in Israel and Gaza.

It is no wonder that in 2020, as the world faced into the fears, lockdowns and hardships of the global Covid-19 pandemic, that the most shared, bookmarked, and highlighted verse on the YouVersion Bible App was Isaiah 41:10. In this verse God encourages us, "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

As we reread the familiar Christmas story, we can see different individuals who are told not to fear. One of the very first scenes of the Christmas story found in Luke chapter 1 is about the dramatic encounter a priest named Zechariah had with the angel Gabriel in the temple in Jerusalem.

Zechariah was a religious and observant man. He was a priest who served regularly in the temple in Jerusalem. He was also from a respectable family line. Luke 1:6 says that Zechariah and Elizabeth, "Were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and

decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.”

Zechariah was routinely performing his regular priestly duties inside the temple when he had a supernatural encounter that resulted in him moving from being very fearful to living a life of faith. Can you imagine what a shock he had when the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared and announced that late in life he’s about to start a family?

Luke 1:12-13 tells us, “When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.”

Well, maybe you too are gripped with fears in life. But through this teaching, God wants to break all fear off you and speak his words of promise and hope to you. Zechariah's experience teaches us that we can encounter God in unexpected ways and when we least expect it! So, what can we learn from Zechariah’s encounter?:

1. You can live without fear even when you don’t understand everything that is going on in life
2. You can live without fear even when you feel you are too old
3. You can live without fear because God hears your prayers
4. You can live without fear because you have a greater future than you have imagined

## Apply

**1. You can live without fear even when you don’t understand everything that is going on in life.** Zechariah found himself in a disorientating situation and he immediately tried to make sense of what was going on (Luke 1:18). Instead of immediately being excited, he responds with a question focussed on His circumstances. This shows how strong our fears and doubts can be when we are challenged to live our lives with faith. Notice also, his language. He manages to make it about himself and not God, saying “How can I?”, “I am old.” His religious confidence had drained, and he had been reduced to the bare bones human reality of his

doubts. If we're honest, this is a question we ask a lot in life: How can I be sure of this? We ask a lot of questions that are often fear driven: Why is my life like this? How can I keep going? How can I see things change in my life? If you want to leave your fears behind you need to silence your doubts and be more comfortable in the uncomfortable life of faith. God's promises and plans are bigger and more powerful than your questions (Isaiah 55:8-9). Zechariah had to learn this lesson quickly to see the promise come to fruition. For Zechariah to see the miracle he had to stop speaking out his doubts and know God had already answered his prayers and start believing God's promise (Luke 1:19-20). Think about your life and your words. How quick are you to voice your questions and doubts? Questions are part of the journey of faith but if we want to move in faith and see the miracles, we need to stop speaking out our doubts and start trusting the Word of God. Once Zechariah stopped voicing his doubts and became obedient to the promise, the miracle happened (Luke 1:23-24). This Christmas is time to silence the doubts and live without fear even when you don't understand everything that is going on in your life. Zechariah had to be patient to see the miracle. He had to be still and trust God. Often it is in the time of waiting where we truly learn to trust God, it's where we come to a new level of humility and learn to rest in Him, His ways and His timing (Luke 1:57-58). Zechariah learned his lesson about the power of coming into agreement with God. Previously, when he had received God's word, he responded with questions. Now he responded with faith and lined up with the promise he had received (Luke 1:59-64). When we come into agreement with God, we come into a new season of freedom where we can witness God's miracles and can testify to the great things God can do and has done in our lives. So this is one very big lesson to learn that you can live without fear even when you don't need to understand everything in life. Just learn to trust God, believe His promise and see how God will move powerfully in your life.

**2. You can live without fear even when you feel you are too old.** Zechariah and Elizabeth were old. Actually, not just old, they were very old (Luke 1:6-7). Things in life hadn't worked out as they'd planned but God still wanted them to live by faith and not fear. Are you old or do you feel old? As David Cameron said in his final Prime Minister's questions "I was the future once." Maybe that's how you feel! Well in today's youth culture, people can feel old even in their 20s and 30s. Life goes by very quickly. But you are not too old. However old or young you are, God has a purpose for your life and every day is a gift to live and not fear (Psalms

92:14-15). Sometimes we set very clear expectations of what should happen when in life and when it doesn't work like that we get discouraged and think life has passed us by. But we cannot let circumstance or age be our cage. We need to live with faith and not fear! You may be just going about your business, going through the motions, feeling like things have passed you by but God still wants to do great miracles in your life. This Christmas whatever your age or stage of life, be encouraged by Zechariah's story and live a life of faith and not fear.

**3. You can live without fear because God hears your prayers.** This was the case with Zechariah. The Bible describes him as a righteous man and encourages him that God has heard his prayers (James 5:16). God hears us when we are broken, He hears us when we are lost in our sin and crying for help and He hears when we are doing our best trying to follow Him (Luke 1:13). Maybe you need to hear these same words this Christmas: "Do not be afraid; your prayer has been heard." This story speaks to us about God's faithfulness and how when God is with us, we do not to be full of fear and can rest in the knowledge that He hears and answers our prayers. This Christmas be encouraged that prayer is powerful. You may feel lost, intimidated or alone but when you open your heart to God and share from your heart, He hears you (Psalm 145:18; John 14:13-14). Make time to pray this Christmas. Spend time with God. Learn to cherish your prayer time and nourish yourself in the Word of God. Trust Him. He is with you, He is working. Rest in Him and know God is faithful. Be confident in God's promise. Be confident that He is listening to you when you prayerfully seek Him.

**4. You can live without fear because you have a greater future than you have imagined.** Zechariah never imagined what was coming when he stepped inside the temple (Luke 1 :11-13). He had no idea that not only was he going to have a son, but his son was going to be John the Baptist anointed to prepare the way for Jesus the promised Messiah. The account parallels and sets the stage for the subsequent announcement of Jesus' birth to Mary, also by the angel Gabriel. We then see how Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and a spirit of praise and thanksgiving (Luke 1:68-79). He thanks God that He is with them (v68); he thanks God for salvation (v69-71); he thanks God for His faithfulness (v72-73); he thanks God for protection (v74-75); he starts to look at his future with faith and realises great things are ahead (v76-79). God also wants you to experience his goodness, so you too can live full of praise and thanks in your life, your family, your finances, your health! You can live without

fear because it is true you can have a greater future than you have imagined! Today is your day to be free from fear and come into every blessing God has for you.