

Luke 1:5-25**The Lord Has Remembered**

We are turning to Luke chapter 1 today.

A couple of weeks ago, Cody led us through the first four verses of this book where Luke tells Theophilus that he is writing to lay out an orderly account of the life of Jesus.

And he did so knowing that this is the remedy for our unbelief and doubt. Our faith is built not by trying to build our faith directly, and not by trying to work up some faith, but by looking at the one we believe in. By seeing Jesus as trustworthy.

We never trust someone more by working on trust directly, we trust someone more when we see them as more trustworthy. Trust isn't a thing that can be worked on directly, and trust and faith are virtually the same thing.

I took my son, Hudson, up to climb a mountain in the Adirondacks last month, and along the trail up the mountain there were some places where we came to some rickety-looking bridges with questionable handrails. And you come up on the bridge wondering, "should I have faith in the bridge?" The only way to answer your doubts and build faith in the bridge is to walk up, step on it, feel how sturdy it is, shake the railing so you know you can lean on it.

Likewise, our faith in God isn't built by saying, "I just need to have faith." It is by seeing how trustworthy God is. And so Luke's account is here to tell us, "God can be trusted. Look at God's faithfulness, look at Jesus's trustworthiness."

And in today's passage, we'll see God proving himself trustworthy on a really big cosmic level - we can trust Him with the unfolding of history and to work out His good and loving purposes for humanity. And He'll also prove Himself trustworthy in one household out in the country in Israel - we can trust Him to care about our individual needs. We can trust God.

I. Days of Doubt (Luke 1:5-7)

Luke 1:5-7 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.

So Luke sets the stage for us here. First he tells us that this story takes place when Herod is the king. And these were dark days for Israel. These were the days of King Herod, days where Israel didn't have their freedom, they weren't a free nation under God as God had promised in the Old Testament, and they were being reigned over by a wicked governor they called King Herod.

Herod reigned as a Roman puppet king over Israel from 34BC until 4 BC.¹ He was cruel and paranoid, killing off even his own family members if he thought they posed a threat to him. To essentially bribe the Jews that he reigned over, he rebuilt the Jewish temple that had been destroyed. So while they were glad to have their temple back, even that felt a little bit dirty because they got it from this pagan king and the price of having to submit to Rome.

So everybody knew things weren't what they were supposed to be. God had promised a righteous king to rule over a free Israel, but here was a wicked king ruling over a subjugated Israel. And this arrangement where Rome ruled over Israel had been going on for about 60 years. So they had to wonder if God was trustworthy. They had to wonder, "Has God forgotten his promises?" God had promised things like this:

Jeremiah 23:5-6 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6 In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

It had been 600 years since Jeremiah had prophesied that a righteous king was coming to save. Herod hardly fit this bill. Could God be trusted? Did God remember His promise?

These were also dark days because it had been 400 years since God had sent Israel a prophet, since God had spoken any new word to Israel. It used to be that God revealed His word to them, that prophets would come to remind them of the covenant and call them to repentance, that prophets were sent to warn and to guide. But the last one was Malachi, 400 years ago.

¹ James R. Edwards, The Gospel According to Luke, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2015), 32.

And the last thing Malachi wrote at the end of his book, 400 years before, was this:

Malachi 4:5-6 “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

So God said that the land was headed toward utter destruction so he'd send a prophet like Elijah to turn things around. But 400 years is a long time. All of their previous history was shaped by prophets and their country was kept on track by the prophets. But now they had derailed for 400 years. A lot can change in 400 years. 400 years ago there was no USA. 400 years with no revealed word of God will radically shape a nation for the worse.

Had God forgotten his promise to send that prophet and keep them from destruction?

So on a big cosmic scale these are dark days, and people were surely wondering if God could be trusted. Had God forgotten his promises to Israel? Were all of the stories true? Will God ever speak to His people again.

But these are also dark days for one particular couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Zechariah was a priest and his wife was from a priestly family. And they are both righteous and blameless. Which doesn't mean they had perfection or the kind of perfect righteousness it takes to stand before God, but in comparison to most, they were examples of godliness and virtue. The apostle Paul later said he was like this too: he was blameless in his righteousness under the law (Philippians 3:6) but also the foremost of sinners next to God (1 Timothy 1:15).

So these are good and holy and godly people. But they had a deep struggle. They couldn't have a baby. And for those who desire children this is incredibly painful and difficult in our day. In their day, there was a social and theological stigma that got piled on top of that. Socially those without kids were looked down upon, and there was a belief that if you didn't have children it was because God was punishing you for a secret, hidden sin. And it was almost always blamed on the woman and rarely the man. So she is righteous but living in a world that is falsely accusing her. She feels daily the reproach of her culture.

So imagine that - this is painful already. But they are righteous people, serving God with a clear conscience, but the people around them think “there's something in their lives they're not telling anyone.”

So she has to be wondering if God has forgotten them. Can God be trusted? He didn't answer her prayers. And who knows what she is wondering about herself. When the whole culture believes something, it is easy to believe it too. So she might be wondering if she is somehow defiled and cursed by God.

On a cosmic level there is reason for doubting God, and on a micro level there is reason for doubting God.

In a few verses, we'll read that John the Baptist was sent to turn the nation back to the Lord. And these are some of the consequences when a biblical worldview is lost - people like Elizabeth are hurt by false beliefs. The book of Job made clear that hardship in life was not all punishment from God, that God has ways we can't understand. But without a biblical frame of reference or worldview, false beliefs that wreck lives spread.

Sometimes we think it doesn't matter what people around us in the world believe. And it is true that we never use manipulation or violence to spread Christian belief. We are called to be kind to those who don't share our beliefs. But we are also called to spread Christianity. Beliefs do matter.

II. Supernatural Intervention (Luke 1:8-12)

Luke 1:8-10 "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.

So Zechariah is a priest, and every day, twice a day, they would cast lots to see which priest got to go into the inner room of the temple, called the holy place, to offer prayers on behalf of the nation and burn incense. There were about 24,000 priests², and they'd randomly choose one each morning and one each evening. And if you ever got a chance as a priest to go into the holy place, it only happened once in your lifetime.

And on this day, Zechariah gets a golden ticket. He gets the thrilling and sobering duty of going to the second most holy and sacred room in the temple to burn incense and offer prayers for the nation. This was as big as it could get for Zechariah. This was his superbowl.

So he goes into this holy room that is plated in gold, top to bottom. It's lit by the candles on a menorah, so the room looks other-worldly. And there, while the people pray out in the court, he says a traditional prayer for the nation.

² James R. Edwards, [The Gospel According to Luke](#), (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2015), 33.

And in the center of the room, there is a small table of incense, where the incense would burn and smoke would rise to symbolize the prayers of the people rising before God continually. This was, symbolically, the place where prayers rose to God.

So he's probably already nervous, he's seeing things he'll never see again, he knows he is near the presence of God, in a holy but probably fairly spooky room. And then, then...

11 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.

So there, standing at the right hand of the table of incense, where the prayers go up to God, is an angel.

And angels are beings created by God that worship God day and night (Revelation 5:11), they serve those who are becoming Christians or who are Christians (Hebrews 1:14). In the Old Testament they carried out God's judgment, they carried God's message to people. They have an important role in the way God gets things done.

And it's interesting that Luke doesn't hesitate to tell this part of the story. The supernatural stuff in the Bible is the stuff that is hardest to believe. Believing in angels can seem like believing in fairy tales. But in working to give us faith, Luke isn't trying to craft a believable story, he is telling a true story. And a true story with a true God involved will involve all kinds of supernatural elements that we don't usually see in day-to-day life.

Luke isn't trying to do God a favor by telling the most easy-to-believe version of the story, he isn't sanding down the message so Theophilus can easily embrace it. He is telling the truth. The Bible is a book that tells the true story of God and his supernatural dealings with mankind.

And this is far from a sure thing - but in their day, a number of the people in the priesthood were Sadducees, which was a Jewish sect that didn't believe in angels or the resurrection, they didn't believe in many of the supernatural elements of the faith. So, again it is by no means certain, but there's a chance Zechariah was one of them. So maybe God sends his angel to this guy who doesn't believe in angels. Which could be one reason he was so upset by the whole thing. God may have arranged it this way with a little bit of a chuckle. Maybe.

It's true that we can go a long time without seeing supernatural things, and many Christian lives will be lived without experiencing miracles and undoubtedly supernatural

occurrences, but that doesn't mean they aren't real. Luke, a doctor, who knows how to observe the world, tells the story of an angel because that's what happened.

So Luke tells us that an angel shows up to Zechariah because that's what happened.

So Zechariah is afraid. Probably for a number of reasons.

One, it has been 400 years since God had stirred things up in Israel. Angels always show up in the Bible at key turning points of redemptive history. When God is supernaturally, actively moving the story forward and intervening in supernatural ways, it is often angels that carry out His work. So maybe this fear is because Zechariah knows what this means - God is stirring and that means things will be changing soon.

But probably, because Zechariah was righteous, he knew that his own creaturely righteousness would be no defense against God's perfect holiness. And to be in the presence of God's servant, and angel, would certainly be frightening and he was probably very aware of his own sin and lack of holiness.

So the angel says what angels often say to people when they appear to them.

III. The promised Answer (Luke 1:13-17)

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.

Now this is amazing. Because remember what Zechariah is in there to do. He is offering prayers on behalf of the whole nation. And he is godly, dutiful, there's really only a small chance he is in there praying that he would have a son.

They're old - well past child-bearing years. It may have been decades since they prayed for a child. I'm sure they did in the past, I'm sure they cried out to God to make this possible. But probably not when he's 80, and almost certainly not when he's in the holy place.

He's praying for the nation, and the angel says, "Your prayer has been heard, you're going to have a son."

Notice the elegance of God's answer here. He has the perfect answer for the needs of the nation, for the big, cosmic darkness. But also for the desire in the heart of a barren woman who lives out in the country.

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.”

Look how the answer to their prayers decades ago and the answer to his prayers right get perfectly and simultaneously answered in giving them this son, John the Baptist.

Verse 14 he says, “You will have joy and gladness”, and “many will rejoice at his birth.”

God has worked out this plan perfectly.

And a theme all throughout Luke’s gospel is God perfectly working things out according to his plan, and doing it with love for his people as a whole, and the individuals who are waiting for him. He’s working out a big cosmic plan but also acting in love for the hurting individual.³

All throughout this book you’ll see the word “must” used - things “must” be this way. There’s a blueprint for all of this, so certain things *must* be done. Luke 2:49, Jesus says, I must be in my Father’s house. In Luke 9:22 He says “the Son of Man must suffer many things.” In Luke 19:5, Jesus tells Zaccheus, “I must go to your house today.”⁴

You get a sense in this whole gospel that there is a perfect plan being worked out, and things that have to happen. And that plan involves fulfilling prophesy, curing the darkness of the universe, but also caring for a wee little sinner like Zaccheus and restoring a frail woman who had been hunched over for 18 years.⁵

God cares for the big picture and the most insignificant need, He hears all the prayers, and He is working out a plan that is going to tie up all of it on the last day with no loose threads and nothing left over.

God can be trusted to work out His plan. God has not forgotten.

In fact, the name Zechariah means, “The Lord has remembered!”

³ Leon Morris, Luke, (Downer’s Grove, Intervarsity, 1988). 18.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

This whole story shouts, “God hears all of those prayers, the big ones for the nation, and the little ones you prayed in the countryside. God knows your desires, the desire for salvation and redemption and liberation, and the desire of a woman to swaddle her baby. He’s involved in the big stuff and the small stuff. Long periods where He seems absent or silent don’t mean that he has left us. And every promise God has spoken, no matter how long ago it was or how unlikely it seems, will be fulfilled. He remembers every promise and keeps every word. And He does it with love for His people.

So God hears those prayers you are praying in the darkness. He hears what you’re crying about that situation that is giving you all kinds of doubt about God and his goodness and whether He hears you at all. He is working a plan, supernaturally, to work all things together for the good of his people and for His ultimate glory.

And just because we don’t see how He is working it all out doesn’t mean He isn’t! He’s always doing a million unseen and unanticipated things, and when it all comes together in the end we will stand in eternal amazement at how He did that, all of that, together.

So John will be born. He will be a prophet. And many of the prophets practiced asceticism, giving up some of the pleasures of the world that aren’t forbidden to everyone, so he will not drink any alcohol. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb - whatever kind of faith a preborn baby can have, he will have it, and he will have a life that even in the womb is characterized by the power of God.

And he is going to fulfill that promise Malachi made the last time God spoke 400 years ago. He will come and turn a wayward nation to the Lord by calling for repentance, and this will bring restoration of relationships between fathers and sons. He’ll call people to obedience, restore to them wisdom, so that when Jesus comes on the scene, the nation will be anticipating Him.

We’ll talk more about John in a couple of weeks, he shows up a lot in Luke. But let’s follow along with Zechariah’s response. The angel says, “You’re going to have a baby boy,”

IV. The Faithless Response (Luke 1:18-25)

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.”

Zechariah responds with doubt. And we know he isn’t believing here because that’s how the angel assesses his response in a second.

But it's not surprising that in Luke's Gospel, written to overcome doubt, the first character we're introduced to is a man who is righteous but doesn't believe the word of the Lord.

Look at his particular form of doubt.

Surely, Zechariah knew some Old Testament stories that were just like this one. Abraham and Sarah were old, well past child-bearing years, and they were told by an angel they would have a baby. Sarah laughed at that far-fetched promise and was gently rebuked by the angel. Then she, tongue-in-cheek, named her baby Isaac, which means "laughter."

And there were similar stories with Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah, with Samson's mother. Any place in scripture that God says a woman is barren, he follows that up by giving them a child. Zechariah knows that. He knows God does stuff like that.

But when the angel says it will happen to him, he says, "that's impossible." There's a form of doubt that acknowledges all of the facts about God and His goodness, but doesn't believe they could ever apply to me. We can have very orthodox doubts.

We can believe that God answers prayer, but not believe He would ever answer mine.

We believe that God is kind, but don't believe that He would ever be kind to me.

We believe God puts real kindness into people around us, but don't believe we will ever run into it. (Cynicism.)

We believe God is working all things together for good, but we don't believe that is what He is doing in my particular situation. Pessimism is this form of unbelief.

We can believe that God saves people from the worst of their sins, but not believe that He would ever save me from mine.

We can believe that all of God's commands are good, but believe that I should disobey in my particular situation.

Zechariah knows God gives life, God has given people children in their old age. And now an angel has given him specific revelation: this will happen to you. But he didn't believe.

And, as Cody said a couple of weeks ago, acknowledging and confessing and working through doubts is good, but doubt is not. So there's a punishment handed out.

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.

Gabriel says, “I’m an angel, one of the ones who is in the presence of God. I work for God directly. I’m a pretty big deal. You should believe this because I’m telling you God said it. And I’m his right hand angel. You have what you need to believe - you basically heard it straight from God.

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.”

He says, “I was sent to tell you this stuff that you’re now not believing, so you won’t be able to speak until this is all fulfilled.” You don’t contend with god and leave unchanged,⁶ so Zechariah is rendered mute.

There’s discipline for doubt handed out. This isn’t a final judgment on Zechariah, what God is doing here is not punish him forever but to give a remedy with his doubt. It is a severe mercy.⁷

Why? Why is doubt a sin? Especially when the promise is this far-fetched. Betty White is not gonna have a baby, and you could understand someone not believing that was going to happen.

We believe or disbelieve things based on the reliability of the one who says it.

If you say about someone, “I don’t believe a thing he says,” you are seriously insulting him.

If you say, “There’s no doubt about this because she said it,” you are saying she is totally trustworthy.

And when God speaks and we say, “I don’t know about that,” we are saying something about God’s character. That He can’t be trusted. So that’s why it isn’t good for us to read His word, know what it says, but then doubt it or disbelieve it.

So Zechariah is disciplined. He is rendered mute, which would have disqualified him as a priest according to the law of the temple.⁸

⁶ James R. Edwards, The Gospel According to Luke, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2015), 39.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

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.

So God wants us to see that remaining in unbelief is not a neutral thing. “The just shall live by faith,” Romans tells us, so confronting our doubts, finding our answers, and trusting in God is the place He wants us to live. We’ll see how it all goes for Zechariah in a couple weeks.

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.”

So Elizabeth hides herself for five months. This may just mean she didn’t tell anyone she was pregnant.

And notice what she says in verse 25. She says same thing Rachel does in Genesis 30:23 - the Lord has taken away my reproach.

So the beginning of the Gospel shows that God is breaking in to keep his long-standing promises. Which means He can be relied upon. The Lord is loving enough to take away reproach.

Scriptures Referenced:

Luke 1:5-7

Jeremiah 23:5-6

Malachi 4:5-6

Luke 1:8-10

Luke 1:11-12

Luke 1:13

Luke 1:14-17

Luke 1:18

Luke 1:19

Luke 1:20

Luke 1:21-23

Luke 1:24-25

Notes:

Luke 1:5-25

The Lord Has Remembered

- I. Days of Doubt (Luke 1:5-7)
- II. Supernatural Intervention (Luke 1:8-12)
- III. The Promised Answer (Luke 1:13-17)
- IV. The Faithless Response (Luke 1:18-25)

Sermon Questions for Discussion in Small Groups:

- 1) What “big picture” questions are a challenge to your faith? (Example: Why does God allow suffering?) How is the Gospel an answer to those questions?
- 2) What “close to home” questions are a challenge to your faith? (Example: How can I trust God when my child is straying like this?) How is the Gospel an answer to those questions?
- 3) What aspects of the supernatural as described in the Bible are sometimes difficult to believe?
- 4) How does disbelief dishonor God?
- 5) How do we strengthen faith?