

Doubt and Unbelief

Luke 1:5–25 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: As you will remember last week, we looked at the context into which Luke's account of the life of Christ occurred.

- We looked at the Political Context and the 6 different authority structures that existed in the 400 years since the completion of the OT culminating in the rule of Rome and its puppet King Herod the Great.
- We looked at the Social Context, the unrest of the Jews under Roman occupation, the emergence of the Samaritan culture, and the linguistic shift from Hebrew to Aramaic and Greek.
- Finally we saw the Religious context with the emergence of the Synagogue system and the anticipation that Messiah's coming may be near.

Messianic Expectation - Daniel 9:25 tells us that from the issuing of the decree in 444BC, 483 years later you should expect Messiah the Prince to come and die as the atonement for the people.

They knew the time was very close, and we can read in even secular Literature from that people from all across the Roman Empire were anticipating a great leader to arise in Judea. Which explains the arrival of the magi we will look at in a few weeks.

Prophetic Expectation - Remember we said last week that there had been no authoritative prophetic voice in 4 centuries. The last thing God has said to His covenant people is recorded at the very end of the book of Malachi.

Malachi 4:5–6 (ESV)

⁵ "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 two figures that the people were anticipating - **Messiah**, and this Prophet like **Elijah** who would go before him and prepare the way. So imagine the sense of anticipation, religious fervor, and hope that existed as these story begins in verse 5.

TEXT: Luke 1:5–25 (ESV)

⁵ 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.

So right off the bat, we see evidence that was not to be read as some sort of *fairy tale*, this was not something that occurred, “long ago, and far away”. As a good historian, Luke tells us when these events occurred, “in the days of Herod, king of Judea”.

He then introduces us to **Zechariah** - a priest. To be a priest of Israel, you must be man of the tribe of Levi, *all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests*. Some of this was related to birth order, personal history, and choice.

So this husband Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, both of the Priestly lineage.

⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

I love how the KJV says it, “They were both, well stricken in years”. That’s why I have to were a CPAP... I’m well stricken in years. Some of you are well stricken in years.

Socially in that day it was considered a very bad omen if you had given birth to children. It was assumed that God was displeased with you in some way.

⁸ 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.

R.C. Sproul tells us that during this time, “there were **18,000** priests in Israel”. Those priests were divided into several divisions, each division served only two weeks out of a year. When they weren’t on call for Temple service, they served in the various towns and villages throughout the nation.

Of the **18,000** priests, only **14** were given the privilege of burning incense during the course of a single year. If you were chosen, your name was removed from future drawings, thus you could only have this opportunity once in a lifetime. The vast majority of Priests never had this opportunity”.

According to W.A. Criswell, “The serving Priests would gather in the hall of polished stone in the court of the priests and cast lots to determine who would go into the sanctuary, the Holy Place, to burn in incense”.

On this particular day, Zacharias’s name was called, he had hit the Lottery. You can imagine the joy, the excitement and the solemn preparation that would occur as Zacharias begins to prepare his soul and his mind for such a task. Then the day came.

- When the time came at the offering of the sacrifice, Zacharias and two assistant-priests walked up the long ramp to the great altar, the burnt offering altar.
- One of his assistant-priests took a silver spoon and scraped living, burning coals from off the altar into a silver fire pan. Then they walked back down the ramp.

- Zacharias and his two assistants, took a golden bowl full of sweet incense, and they walked up the twelve steps to the door of the sanctuary. Zacharias with an assistant on each side, entered into the Holy Place.
- On one side would be the **menorah**, on the other side would be the table of **showbread**. In front of them would be the veil that separated the **Holy of Holies**, that inner sanctum, from the Holy Place. And in front of the veil was the golden altar of incense.
- As the three priests approach the sacred veil, one of them took away the coals that had been burned at a former offering, and cleaned the golden altar. Then the other assistant carefully and evenly placed the coals, the burning live coals from off the burnt offering, spread them evenly over the golden altar.
- Then the two assistant priests bowed and went out, and Zacharias was now before the Lord alone, in a holy sacred moment, praying.
- As he placed the incense evenly, the perfume began to rise. And the smoke from the alter would spiral out the roof as a sign to the onlookers that prayer was being made.

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

ILLUSTRATION: You might envision the crowd of Roman Catholics gathered there at the Sistine Chapel as a new pope is being chosen. Awaiting that puff of white smoke assuring them that they have a leader. Well when the Jewish people saw the smoke of the incense, they knew that someone was praying to God on their behalf.

So thousands gathered outside praying... but in the temple only Zechariah.

¹¹ And there appeared to him **an angel of the Lord** standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

Several things stand out about Luke's Gospel, one being the frequent reference to angels. The Bible speaks of Angels **273 times in 34 different books**. ANGELS are referred to in the book of Luke more than LOVE and more than PRAYER.

This is one of those areas where the Gospel of Luke will stretch our thinking. You see in our western culture, we are quiet comfortable with the idea of God up in Heaven, and Science here on Earth. But Luke escorts us into the realm of Middle Theology, where Heaven and Earth overlap... here we find Angels and Demons of various types.

Luke gives very **specific details** about this encounter. The Angel was on the right side of the alter. Is that significant? Possibly, but it was likely just one of the comments that was mentioned in Luke's interview with Zechariah and his family.

This is the sort of question an attorney may ask a witness to verify that they actually had good recall of an event..."Which side was the angel on?" If the person recounting the story made up the account, he might have to process in order to give an answer. If this was a valid memory, it should come quickly.

Notice there reaction of Zechariah in verse 12...

¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

We must remember when we read the Bible that the information given represents the **highlights of God's interactions with humanity**. It causes great confusion if we read about this sort of encounter and assume that this was a normal, typical experience, for someone to run into an angel.

Parenthetically, remember - The normative experience of miracles only happened during 4 seasons of human history.

- Moses and the Exodus
- Elijah and the Prophets
- Jesus and the Early Church
- Tribulation and Second Coming

Most often, throughout history - God's **unseen hand of Providence** is at work rather than His **seen hand of miracles**.

But Zechariah, lived at the very beginning of one of those special times. So this was not normal for him.

Nothing like this had ever happened in the life of Zechariah, it is unlikely that anyone Zechariah knew had been visited by an angel. He was terrified...

Fear seems to be the instinctive response of most everyone who saw an angel in scripture. Why is that? One might expect a person to be terrified of one of the wilderness goat demons mentioned in **Lev. 17:7**. ¹ But why terror over an angel?

- First of all, It's terrifying when the normal experiences of life are interrupted.
- Secondly, there is something about a sinner being in the presence of that which is Holy. Now Zechariah and Elizabeth were godly people, they are described as walking blamelessly in the commandments and statutes of the Lord. That did not mean they were sinless, but rather, when they sinned they followed the commands of God to seek atonement for their sins. All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

Like you and me, Zechariah had sinned in his heart, in his deeds, in his attitude. And in spite of being forgiven we are still aware of our sin. So when Zechariah encounters a holy angel, he is very uncomfortable.

BY THE WAY, the most terrifying thing in all the Universe is to be in manifest presence of God, with no mediator.

¹ <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/55419/what-are-goat-demons>

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.

Notice the singular, “Your PRAYER” rather than, “Your PRAYERS”. What was it that Zechariah had been praying?

Some have assumed he was praying for a son, since the answer involves a child being given in his old age.

But remember, Zechariah was serving on behalf of his Nation. He was their representative in this moment, it’s highly doubtful that he would have muddled that role with a personal request.

ILLUSTRATION: We received word recently, that our very own Congressman Aaron Bean would be selecting me to stand before the Congress of the United States to offer a prayer before the session begins. Now that is huge honor that I do not take lightly. When I stand before the lawmakers of the nation to offer prayer on their behalf, I will choose my words very carefully. Don’t expect that I’ll ask the Lord to help me catch more fish. I won’t likely pray for the Florida gators to have a better season this year.

What do we expect Zechariah was praying for? **Messiah to come!** His nation to be set free from Roman oppression. And to that prayer, the angel says - “you’ve been heard and I come in response”. You will have a son....

Now, isn’t it interesting that in answering a selfless prayer, God also met the deep desires of Zechariah and Elizabeth? God is good!

¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord.

Later, Jesus would say of John, “Of man born of woman, none has arisen greater than John the Baptist”.

15b. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.

Nazarite vows were typically taken for a period of time, then normal life would continue. This is not the case with John, he would be born into his calling. Even in his mother’s womb the Holy Spirit would saturate and penetrate his soul.

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.**”

Does that sound familiar? Where have we heard that before? It was the last thing God said to his people in **Malachi** before the 400 years of silence. Now, the silence is broken by the word that the son of Zechariah would be the fulfillment of that promise. He would go before the Messiah to prepare the way.

How would you respond? You are on the Mountain of God, in the Holy place, an angel appears and says you are going to be the father of Messiah's forerunner. What would you say?

18 And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this?"

We get the idea that ancient people were so gullible, they would believe anything. Friend that's just not the case. Zechariah is very skeptical. **Perhaps he had a bad falafel**, maybe he inhaled too much of the smoke from the alter. Was this even happening?

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 is one of only three angels named in scripture. The others are **Michael**, and **Lucifer** who became Satan. Those three were the commanders of Heaven's Legions.

So this is not just some second class Angel like, the one that visited Jimmy Stewart. This is one of the top three.

Now, it was common for angels to **give a corresponding sign** to ensure the validity of the promise they brought. So we see several in the OT asking for a sign.

- **Gideon** asked for a sign of the fleece and it was granted.
- **Hezekiah** was told to ask for a sign of confirmation.
- King **Ahaz** was commanded to ask for a sign.

But Zechariah didn't ask for a sign, **the words he spoke seem to indicate a decided unbelief.**

Now, that's another thing we will see throughout Luke - **honest expressions of doubt.** John the Baptist himself will express doubt later when in prison.

What was the source of his doubt? Science... look at the last part of 19.

19b. For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

Zechariah knew how things were supposed to work. This sort of thing just doesn't happen. So you have the promise of God in seeming contradiction to the laws of Science. Does that ever happen to you? What should we do? I'll answer that in a moment.

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.”

So, the silent Zechariah was intimate with Elizabeth, and in spite of all scientific reason to the contrary... she gets pregnant.

What does she do? She gets out of town for 5 months. Why? Nobody would believe it. When she returns 5 months later, it is obvious that Gabriel’s word had been fulfilled.

Let’s wrap this time up by looking at what exactly Zechariah did that caused the Angel to strike him with Muteness.

Faith is the standard operation procedure, the modus operandi for God’s People.

Romans 14:23 (ESV)

²³ ...For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)

⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him...

Doubts will inevitably arise, FAITH determines what you do with your doubts when they come. **Let me contrast the difference between Unbelieving Doubt and Believing Doubt in three ways...**

1. Unbelieving Doubt asks questions in order to challenge. Believing Doubt asks questions in order to learn.

ILLUSTRATION: Think about a prosecutor asking questions of a witness. He isn’t asking questions to learn something but rather to disprove something, to make a point. He has the answers already and is challenging the witness. This is the attitude of unbelieving doubt. It puts God on the witness stand and treats Him as if He owes us answers and as if we are the authority.

ILLUSTRATION: Now think about a young child asking her parents questions. She has total trust in their ability to answer and is simply seeking to learn and understand. This is what the Bible calls “**childlike**” **faith** and is a good example of believing doubt. It isn’t sure. It doesn’t know. But it asks with trust in the one who has authority and power.

We all have questions... what do your questions sound like? An attorney or a child?

2. Unbelieving Doubt takes questions to everyone but Jesus. Believing Doubt takes questions to Jesus.

Later, in the book of Luke we will see that John the Baptist has a real bout with Doubt and he sends his messengers to Jesus. Jesus then answers his doubt.

ILLUSTRATION: Consider the father from **Mark 9** who brought his demon possessed son to Jesus, the father who uttered that simple, profound prayer— “I believe; help my unbelief.”

Do your questions serve as justification for you to stay out of church, away from the Lord? Perhaps even to justify your own sinful desires? Or do they drive you to scripture? To chasing down those questions and getting solid answers?

3. Unbelieving Doubt says, “Not Your will, but mine be done”. Believing Doubt says, “Not my will, but thine be done”.

It’s it good to know that even Jesus Himself had questions... is there another way?

Father, let this cup pass from me... but in faith He said, “not my will... but thine be done”.

Belief says to Doubt, “when I cannot trace the hand of God, I will trust the heart of God”.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION: You may not experience the physical manifestation of an Angel that will bring you a message from God. But what you do have is Luke’s account. Theophilus funded his effort, Luke went to great lengths to write down the account as the Holy Spirit inspired every word.

Through the blood of the Martyrs God has preserved this text for over 2000 years, he called me, and trained me, to deliver it to you today.

Why? Because He wants you to know with certainty the message that this miracle child will grow up to proclaim is for you... to make you ready for... NOT HIS FIRST ADVENT, but for His Second.