**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**GOD’S PLANS FOR A DOUBTING PRIEST**

**Luke 1:5-25**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to Luke 1. Last Sunday, we began a new series called “The Gospel of Luke: Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt”. Over the next two years or so, we will be devoting most of our time as a church studying the Gospel of Luke.

Last week, we saw that the Gospel of Luke was written to help people with their doubts about Jesus. Luke wrote this incredible biography of the life and teaching of Jesus to give certainty to those who doubt. He wanted to give two kinds of certainty: certainty of facts, and certainty of faith. He wanted those who struggle with doubt to be certain that what he wrote was factually accurate, and he wanted them to be certain that what he wrote was worthy of belief.

Of course, Luke wasn’t just writing as a historian. He was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Luke’s words are God’s words, and so Luke’s desire to give us certainty is God’s desire to give us certainty. God does not intend for us to remain in our doubt. He means to lead us to faith. How God does that is not through heady, philosophical argumentation. Instead, he gives us certainty by showing us Jesus. That’s what the Gospel of Luke is about: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God knows that it is in hearing Jesus’ words, reading about his miracles, being confronted by his claims about himself, and beholding his death and resurrection, that we will grow in the certainty of our faith.

Today we get to look at the beginning of Jesus’ story, and surprisingly enough, what we will find is that Jesus’ story doesn’t begin with Jesus. Instead, it begins with an elderly priest named Zechariah.

I wonder if you’ve ever felt small. By small, I don’t mean vertically challenged. I mean small in the context of the world. Insignificant. You feel like you’re just one pawn in God’s great chess game, or just one face in a sea of people who are all here today and gone tomorrow. You believe that God is working in the big picture. But you also fear that God is so busy with the big picture that he’s largely unconcerned with the little details of your life. God may know that you’re struggling with finding a job, but he’s too busy supporting the world’s economy to help you out. God may know that you want to get married, but he’s preoccupied with the legal definition of marriage. You feel small, too small for God to really care about your day to day struggles.

As we will see, Zechariah felt this way. He felt small. And because he felt so small, he doubted that God would ever answer the greatest prayer of his life: his prayer for a child. Luke introduces us to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth when they are an elderly couple. They were never able to conceive, and now they are at the stage in life when conception was biologically impossible. Zechariah had resigned himself to a childless existence and the end of his family line.

Our text today is going to show us the amazing truth that God doesn’t forget the little details of our lives. Indeed, it is often through the little details of our lives that he accomplishes his biggest plans. The big picture and the small picture are not at odds with one another. God is not too busy with the big to address the small. His eyes are equally on both, and in his incredible providence and wisdom, God’s greatest plans are actually fulfilled through our struggles and weaknesses, even the things that we feel are too insignificant for God to care about. In God’s eyes, none of our struggles are insignificant. All of them are meaningful, and all of them have a purpose.

I have titled this message **God’s Plans for a Doubting Priest**. My aim in this message is to show you that **The Fulfillment of God’s Plans comes through the Weakness of God’s People.** We will have three points today:

1. Zechariah’s Sorrow
2. Zechariah’s Joy
3. Zechariah’s Doubts

(1) **ZECHARIAH’S SORROW**

Our text today begins in verse 5, where Luke writes that the following events took place in the days of Herod, king of Judea. This Herod is also known in history as “Herod the Great”, who reigned over the Jewish people on behalf of Rome from 37-4 BC. This is one of those details that Luke includes in order to inform the reader that the following events occurred in history. Luke isn’t making this up. He’s writing about real people in a real place in a real time in history. Having set the time and place, he now introduces the main character of the chapter: a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah.

Scholars, referencing the Jewish historian Josephus and other 2nd century BC documents, estimate that there were 24 divisions of priests at the time. Each of these divisions was further divided into orders, with each order composed of four to nine priestly families. All in all, scholars estimate that there were about 750 priests per division, and if you multiply that by the 24 divisions, it totals 18,000 priests. Zechariah was one of 18,000 priests.

As a priest, Zechariah would have had a number of daily duties, but the greatest ministry of his priestly career would have been offering incense before the evening sacrifice in the Temple. Only one priest would be chosen to do this per day, and since there were 18,000 priests, each priest would only do it once in their lifetime after they were selected by the casting of lots. Verse 9 tells us that this is exactly what had happened for Zechariah as Luke begins the story of Jesus’ life: Zechariah had been “chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.”

The stage is set for something significant to happen in Zechariah’s life. But before we get to that, we need a little bit more background about this elderly priest. Verse 5 tells us that Zechariah was married to Elizabeth, who being a descendant of the first priest Aaron, was also from a priestly family. Together, this priestly couple had the pedigree to be a highly respected part of Jewish society.

Luke, however, is more interested in their hearts than in their heritage. This is why he wrote in verse 6, “And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” Both Zechariah and Elizabeth followed God’s laws. They weren’t just a respected couple. They were a pious couple. God looked into their hearts and found them both to be “righteous”. That doesn’t mean they were perfect. Being “righteous” meant that they followed God’s laws, which would have included regular dependence on the Old Testament sacrificial system for the forgiveness of their sins.

Despite their righteousness, however, they were not protected from deep sorrow. Immediately after verse 6 tells us about their righteousness, verse 7 tells us, “But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.”

Sometimes we assume that, as long as we are seeking God, doing our best to obey him, and generally growing in our spiritual lives, everything in life is going to work out. We’ll marry the person of our dreams. We’ll work at a high-paying job with good hours. We’ll raise a happy and healthy family. When those things don’t work out, we assume that it’s because we have hidden sin, or that we’re not “living in the will of God”, or that we’re not working hard enough to grow spiritually. We assume that pious living leads to a life of ease and happiness, and if we don’t experience ease and happiness, it’s because we’re being punished or disciplined.

Verse 7 reminds us just how wrong that kind of thinking is. Sorrow isn’t just for the sinful. Sorrow is also for the righteous. Of course, none of us are righteous. We are all sinners. But verse 7 tells us that we don’t always suffer because of our sin. Sin isn’t always the cause of our suffering. Sometimes, we get suffering simply because it is God’s will for us to experience it. God can and does ordain innocent suffering.

So how are we to respond to innocent suffering, whether it be childlessness, or physical pain, or others treating us unjustly, or anything else? One of the most important things we can do is follow Zechariah’s example and pray. We will see that as we continue with our story.

Verse 11 tells us that “there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.” This would have been a terrifying experience, not just for our generation, which has never seen such a thing, but for Zechariah as well. Zechariah lived in a time when angels hadn’t appeared for centuries. By the time of these events, it had been 400 years since the last prophets walked the earth. The prophetic age was the age of miracles, of divine revelation, and of angelic appearances. From Zechariah’s perspective, angel visitations happened hundreds of years ago. They were the stuff of legends. Therefore, seeing an angel would have been an extraordinary event. That helps us get a sense of what he must have experienced in verse 12, which says that “Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.”

Then, the angel speaks. Not words of terror, but words of comfort. Look at verse 13: “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.” The angel reveals something very important to us about Zechariah: he had been praying for a child. Now we know that Zechariah didn’t resign himself to his innocent suffering. Instead, he asked God to take his innocent suffering away by giving him the gift of a child.

Here’s the amazing thing: God didn’t answer Zechariah’s prayer until decades had gone by. Zechariah prayed for a child when he and Elizabeth were much younger. How do we know this? We know this because of Zechariah’s response to the angel’s good news. He doesn’t respond by saying, “Hallelujah! God has answered my prayers!” He responds with unbelief. Look at verse 18, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” Even after hearing this promise from the lips of a heavenly angel, he didn’t believe. When we stop believing, one of the first things that happens in our spiritual lives is that we stop praying. Prayer takes faith. Those who don’t have faith don’t pray. That’s what happened to Zechariah. He may have prayed for a child as a younger man, but as the years went by, and he and his wife got older, this godly couple gradually resigned themselves to the fact that they would never have children, and they stopped praying about it. But God had other plans. He heard Zechariah’s prayers for a child, and decades later, he would answer.

What a challenge this is to us to pray with perseverance. It’s so easy for us to give up in prayer. We stop believing that God will help us. We stop expecting him to answer. In our best moments, we pray for a few days. In our worst moments, we do not pray at all. Our text today shows us just how small our faith can be when we fail to persevere in prayer. Don’t we know that, from God’s perspective, a thousand years is as one day? He doesn’t count in days like we do. He counts in millennia. God hears our prayers, and God answers our prayers, not always the way we want, and not always when we want, but he does answer our prayers, whether it takes days, or whether it takes decades.

(2) **ZECHARIAH’S JOY**

The angel goes on to tell Zechariah about how Zechariah would respond to the birth of his son. Look at verse 14: “And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord.” This leads to our second point: Zechariah’s joy. This is where we push the pause button on Zechariah’s story, and we turn our attention to how God will work through Zechariah’s sorrow to accomplish his great plans of salvation.

The angel tells Zechariah that he, along with many others, will rejoice at this baby’s birth, for “he will be great before the Lord.” I cannot imagine a greater compliment to give to someone. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both “righteous before God”, but their long-awaited son would be “great before God”. Compared to God, all people are small. Weak. Fragile. For God to call a mere man great is like a human being calling an ant great. We may admire the ingenuity of ants, their industriousness, their teamwork, but no one would ever point to an ant and say, “Behold its greatness!” That’s what the angel is saying about this child. He will be great before God.

But why would he be great before God? What distinguishes him in God’s eyes from others? Two things: the power of the Holy Spirit in him, and the work that God prepared for him to do.

Verse 15 tells us about the power that John would have: “And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.” The first part regarding abstinence from alcohol showed that John was set apart for service to the Lord. Priests would abstain from alcohol when they were performing their duties, and others would take vows of abstinence from several things, including alcohol, to show their absolute devotion to God.

Among those who took vows was a special group. This group didn’t create their own vows. They received their vows from God. This is what happened to Israel’s first prophet, Samuel. His mother Hannah, who was barren and unable to conceive, vowed that if God gave her a son, she would devote him to the service of the Lord, and she told the Lord that this devotion would be symbolized by the fact that “no razor shall touch his head.” (1 Samuel 1:11). God found this acceptable and gave Hannah the gift of her son Samuel.

Like Samuel, John also received his vows directly from God, which shows that he was meant to join the line of the greatest prophets of old. John would be like the prophets who walked the earth hundreds of years before he was born. Through the Spirit of God working through him, he would do amazing things to turn Israel away from their sin and back to their God.

But that’s not all the angel says about John’s power. He was like the prophets of old, but he was also very different. John would be “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.” Never before in all of history had a prophet been filled with the Spirit from his mother’s womb. The prophets of old would be filled with the Spirit to accomplish certain tasks, and the Spirit could be taken away from them if they sinned. King David, for example, was filled with the Spirit to rule over Israel as its king, but when he committed adultery with Bathsheba, he cried out to God in Psalm 51, “Take not your Holy Spirit from me!” In contrast, John didn’t have to do anything to be filled with the Spirit. He was simply filled. If he didn’t have to do anything to be filled with the Spirit, then he couldn’t do anything for the Spirit to be taken from him. John was great before the Lord, because the Lord had chosen him to have an unprecedented portion of his Spirit.

What about John’s work? What was distinct about what God had called him to do? Verse 16 tells us, “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.” This is really what the Old Testament prophets were called to do. From Isaiah to Hosea, the main message of the prophets to the people of Israel was to turn from their idols and turn back to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. John was called to do the same. Again, we see some overlap between the Old Testament prophets and John.

But there wasn’t just overlap. John would exceed the Old Testament prophets yet again. Look at verse 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.”

What does this mean, that John would go before the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elijah?” It means that Zechariah’s long-awaited son was in fact a long-awaited prophet, a prophet who had been prophesied about. The last living prophet, Malachi, prophesied about a new Elijah 400 years before John’s birth in Malachi 4:5-6. Notice the similarities between Luke 1:17 and this prophecy from Malachi:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 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.”

Malachi prophesied that the new Elijah would “turn the hearts of fathers to their children”, and the angel told Zechariah that John would do the same. John was the new Elijah who was prophesied to come 400 years earlier.

There’s two things we need to notice here: this prophet would be like Elijah, and this prophet would come “before the great and awesome day of the LORD.” Elijah was perhaps the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. He brought a drought that lasted three and a half years. He called down fire from heaven that consumed a sacrifice on a water-drenched altar. He raised a widow’s son and gave her inexhaustible jars of oil and flour. Elijah was great before the Lord, so great that the Lord took him home to heaven in a whirlwind.

This is the prophet John was modelled after. John was the “new Elijah”, with a power and ministry like the first Elijah. But unlike the first Elijah, his power would not be manifested in miracles. Nowhere in the Bible will you read of John performing miracles. Instead, John’s power was manifested in his message.

There was something about the message that he preached, and the work that he accomplished in his preaching, that put his ministry on par with Elijah’s. But what was that message, and what did it accomplish? Verse 17 tells us that John came “to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

What was John to prepare Israel for? Malachi told us that the new Elijah would come “before the great and awesome day of the Lord.” That’s what the new Elijah came to prepare Israel for. Malachi tells us more about the “great and awesome day of the Lord” in 4:1-2:

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”

This is what John came to do: to prepare Israel for the great and awesome day of the Lord when judgment would come on the wicked, and healing would come to those who fear God. In other words, he came to prepare the way for Jesus. Jesus would be the sun of righteousness who would reveal all the darkness of our hearts and all the hidden things in our lives. All of us have darkness. All of us have sinned. God knows all of it. The only difference is what we do with it. If we would turn to Christ to save us, he will heal us, reconcile us to himself, and bring reconciliation in our relationships with one another. But if we would turn away from Christ, he will set us ablaze, so that the fire of his wrath will leave neither root nor branch.

John’s role was to prepare for the coming of Jesus. This is what set him apart for the honour of being called “great before the Lord”. The old prophets may have foreseen future judgment, but John would warn of its imminence. The old prophets may have promised future grace, but John would proclaim that it is here. The old prophets may have spoken on God’s behalf, but John would point to the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who would speak on his own behalf.

Now we see how God answered Zechariah’s prayers for a son. God wouldn’t just have Zechariah raise a son. God would have him raise the greatest prophet who ever lived. It doesn’t always work out this way, that God gives us exactly what we asked for and more. The moral of this story is not that, if we pray for a million dollars for 30 years, God will eventually give us a billion dollars. But Zechariah’s story does show us that God knows our needs, that he cares about them, and that he will meet them in ways that may surprise us. God is not too busy with his grand plans to help us with whatever we’re struggling with. In fact, it is through our struggles that he accomplishes his greatest plans. That ought to make us worship God for the goodness of his divine providence, and to trust that God will wield his providence for our greatest good.

(3) **ZECHARIAH’S DOUBT**

But have you ever believed that God is good, yet doubted that God was good towards you? That’s how Zechariah felt. He righteously obeyed God’s laws, trusting that God in his goodness had given the law to his people to protect them and bless them. But when it came to believing whether God would answer his prayers for a child, he doubted. This leads to our last point: Zechariah’s doubt.

Verse 18 says, “And Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.’” When Zechariah asks, “How shall I know this?” he’s asking for a sign. “How will I know that this will happen? What sign can you give me to confirm that this will take place?” Zechariah was asking for a sign because he didn’t believe that the angel’s words were true.

This is why the angel replied with this rebuke 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. 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.” The angel introduces himself as Gabriel, who is one of the few named angels from the Old Testament. This wasn’t the first time God sent Gabriel to deliver a message. About 600 years before the events in Luke 1, God sent Gabriel to speak to the prophet Daniel to explain the meaning of some of Daniel’s visions.

This angel is not to be trifled with. He is a legend from ancient days who has once again broken into history. He is worthy of trust. But that’s not ultimately the reason Gabriel gives to Zechariah to persuade him to believe the good news he was bringing to him. The real reason why Zechariah should believe him is that Gabriel stands in the presence of God. Gabriel does not speak on his own behalf. He listens to what his master tells him to say, and he goes and delivers the message. He is merely the messenger. To doubt the messenger is to doubt the one who sent the messenger. By doubting Gabriel, Zechariah doubted God.

And so, the angel Gabriel reveals that he did not only have authority to deliver God’s message. He also had authority to deliver God’s discipline. Zechariah would be unable to speak until the birth of his son, because he did not believe God’s promise.

This is a sobering reminder of the reality that unbelief attracts God’s discipline, because unbelief is sinful. At the heart of sin is the failure to show that God is perfect in his divine attributes.

* We sin when we break his commands because we’re saying that God is not perfect in his wisdom and holiness, which are reflected in his commands.
* We sin when we look to something other than God to satisfy our deepest longings, because we’re saying that God is not perfect in his all-satisfying love.
* And we sin when we respond to God’s promises with unbelief, because we’re saying either that he is unable to keep his promises and therefore imperfect in power, or that he is unwilling to keep his promises, and therefore imperfect in faithfulness.

This is what Zechariah’s unbelief communicated to God, and this is why Zechariah was disciplined. He who doubted God’s words would no longer have words of his own.

But the good news here is that God only disciplines those he loves. Our doubts do not disqualify us from his love. Instead, our doubts qualify us for his loving discipline. As our loving father, God’s discipline always has a benevolent purpose: to free us from sin, to lead us closer to him, and to help us find our joy in him through our trust in him. For Zechariah, the purpose of God’s discipline was not just to tell him his unbelief was wrong. The purpose of the discipline was to lead him to faith.

Zechariah lacked faith because he needed a sign in order to believe God’s promise. And though God disciplined him for his lack of faith, the discipline itself would serve as the sign that Zechariah needed! God’s discipline was not meant to discourage him. It was meant to encourage him! It was through his discipline that Zechariah saw that God does what he says he will do. Verse 22 shows us that when God says we won’t be able to speak, we won’t be able to speak. Zechariah left the temple and was unable to speak to the people gathered there. Therefore, if God fulfilled that word, then surely he would fulfill his word that promised a child.

God’s discipline helped Zechariah move from doubt to faith, and as we will see in a few weeks, it worked. In 1:64, Luke writes that following John’s birth, “immediately [Zechariah’s] mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.” Zechariah’s discipline moved him away from doubt and into faith, and his movement into faith led him into worship.

Do you have doubts? Do you struggle with believing that God is good, and that he will fulfill his promises? God may bring his discipline on you, not because he has abandoned you, but because he loves you too much to leave you with your doubts. Doubt leaves us in darkness. It leads to despair, to hopelessness, to restlessness. God wants to take that doubt away and replace it with faith: the faith that God is good, that he is faithful to keep his promises, and that he will work even your deepest struggles to accomplish his greatest plans. That is when you will finally move away from the darkness of doubt and into the freedom of worship, trusting that God is good, that he is faithful, and that he loves you with an everlasting love.

**CONCLUSION**

It has been said that “Doubt hangs in a dangerous canyon between faith and unbelief” (Darrell Bock). Doubt will never remain for long. It will either resolve itself into the peace of faith or the darkness of unbelief. Zechariah’s story tells us that, if we find ourselves in the canyon of doubt, the journey towards faith can be painful. But we don’t have to be afraid of that pain, because it is a pain that will save us from the darkness of unbelief and lead us to the joy, freedom, and peace of faith.

And when we finally stand before God in eternity, our journey of faith complete, we will look upon the broad vistas of history and see how the Lord used our doubt to accomplish his greatest plans. That is what God does. He fulfills his plans through our weaknesses. Indeed, his greatest plans are always fulfilled through the greatest of weaknesses, shown most powerfully in the gospel. Jesus came in the weakness of a manger, lived in the weakness of human nature, and died in the weakness of the cross, and it was through the weakness of Christ that God triumphed once and for all over sin and Satan.

May the Lord himself, the Father of all mercy, take all our doubts through the fire of his loving discipline, and lead us into the certainty and joy of faith.