

The sermon

READ PASSAGE

Introduction to Luke

Luke was a Gentile physician (Col 4:14; he wasn't a Jew per Col 4:10-11) who authored the Gospel of Luke and Acts. A traveling companion of Paul on Paul's 2nd and 3rd missionary journeys. He arrived with Paul at Rome and was there for Paul's execution (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16; 2 Tim 4:11).

This explains his access to private events like the ones we find in today's passage.

Israel is under foreign, Roman rule. King Herod was an Edomite. So they were a **humbled people**.

While in exile, the exiles were promised a number of things that hadn't happened yet.

Promises like they'll dwell securely in their land because they'll never again be under foreign rule, the nations will be judged, and they'll never again be without a descendant of David ruling over them (Jer 29:10; 30:8-11; 31:31-40; 32:36-44; 33:14-26; Ezek 34:11-16, 22-31; 36:22-36; 37: 21-28).

Promises given nearly 600 years ago hadn't happened. So they were a **confused people**.

God was silent after Malachi. For over 400 years God hadn't spoken. No prophets. No Scripture. God's silence only intensified the people's agony (see Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1.41).

Luke's account begins during a time of **defeat and discouragement!**

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

God breaks his silence. A prophet is coming.

Point 1: Strengthen your faith by reading your Bible (1:1-4)

"many have undertaken" (1:1)

Luke's not the first to compile an account of the events surrounding Jesus' coming. Matthew and Mark were written before Luke.

"things accomplished among us" (1:1)

Us = the church. Luke's going to tell us how the church started.

"eyewitnesses and ministers of the word of the word have delivered them to us" (1:2)

Luke isn't making things up. He's like a credible news reporter who documents his story with facts. Luke got his data from actual eyewitnesses of the events he's describing. How else would he know what Zechariah and Elizabeth said?

Luke also got his facts from ministers of the word. Luke was in touch with Paul. Paul was in touch with the Jerusalem church, Peter, James (brother of Jesus), Barnabas (see Acts 15). Paul had access to the information Luke records.

My point? Luke had access to the things he wrote about. He was an insider with exclusive access.

“having followed all things closely for some time past” (1:3)

Luke has been working on this for a long time. He had time to get his facts straight.

“an orderly account” (1:3)

Luke’s organization is intentional.

“most excellent Theophilus” (1:3)

“Most excellent” indicates someone of reputation and status.

“certainty” (1:4)

The purpose of the book of Luke is that Theophilus be certain about what he’s previously been taught. Perhaps he’s a Christian? Perhaps he’s on the fence? Whatever the case, Luke’s goal is certainty. Certainty about historical events, certainty about doctrine, certainty about the message of salvation.

Luke’s gospel isn’t just for Theophilus. It’s written so that all Christians will be certain about historical events, doctrine, the gospel.

Certainty comes through reading works composed by human authors.

Apologetics: eyewitness documents

How could we know what God said and did in Israel over 2,000 years ago? The only way is if eyewitnesses recorded these things in written form. So we have the gospel of Luke.

God could have ensured the resurrection was recorded with an iPhone. He could have ensured Jesus’ words were recorded with an iPhone. He chose another method. He chose to record his works and words with written documents.

As Christians, we don’t trust in a baseless faith.

- 1) God has testified to himself with creation.

“his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” – Romans 1:20

- 2) God has testified to himself with mighty deeds.

The preeminent example being the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the resurrection, God the Father vindicated the claims of God the Son.

Miracles are no problem for the Christian. If God can make us and our world, he can make virgins pregnant and raise dead people.

- 3) God testifies to himself in the Bible.

Certainty comes through written documents called Scripture. The books of the Bible.

John Piper’s *Baptist Catechism* asks the question:

How do we know that the Bible is the Word of God?

Answer: The Bible evidences itself to be God’s Word by the heavenliness of its doctrine, the unity of its parts, and its power to convert sinners and edify saints. But only the Spirit of God can make us willing to agree and submit to the Bible as the Word of God.

We read the word. We found ourselves drawn to what we read. Because the Spirit convinced us. That’s why we’re certain. It’s the Bible that stimulates certainty. If you want to strengthen your faith, read your Bible.

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” – Romans 10:17

Pastoral

As a pastor, I want you to be confident in your Bibles so that:

- 1) You don’t give up biblical doctrine.
- 2) You don’t give up biblical morality.
- 3) You don’t give up gospel hope.

Point 2: Obey when faithfulness doesn’t achieve desired results (1:5-7)

“In the days of Herod, king of Judea”

- reigned as king of Judea from 37 BC until his death in 4 BC.
- an Idumaeen by birth (located south of Judea and occupied by Edomites).
- a bad guy noted for paranoia and jealousy: had ten wives, changed his will five times, and executed family members: his second wife, two sons, a mother-in-law, and his second wife’s uncle.
- his most notable achievement was enlarging and reconstructing the temple in Jerusalem.
- since Herod died in the spring of 4 BC, the majority view of scholars is that Jesus was born in 5 or 4 BC. Mistakes were made when the Christian calendar was instituted in 525 AD!

Zechariah and Elizabeth

Note *“they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”* (This is the assessment of Luke’s sources. When Luke wrote he was moved/influenced by the Holy Spirit [2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21], so this was God’s assessment too.)

Despite their righteousness, they found themselves up in age without children.

This was a “reproach” (1:25) because, in the Old Covenant, blessings were promised for obedience. Including children.

You shall be blessed above all peoples. There shall not be male or female barren among you or among your livestock. – Deuteronomy 7:14

Neighbors and family concluded they must be sinners. They lived under God’s favorable assessment, but their neighbors viewed them as cursed.

Application

My point is **Obey when faithfulness doesn’t achieve desired results**. As they prayed for years, God didn’t give them what they wanted, but they served him anyways! Serving God during ongoing disappointment. That’s real devotion.

In his commentary on Luke, **Thabiti Anyabwile** issues a pointed warning:

“If you serve God for what you can get, then you actually serve yourself.”

Surely doubt and confusion crept in. Why am I childless? I think we’re obeying God, but what about Deuteronomy 7:14? If Deuteronomy 7:14 is true, are we being disciplined by God? Are we deluded fools who don’t know God and are under his curse?

Can you identify? Have circumstances ever left you confused? I’m obeying God, but things aren’t working out well for me.

This episode teaches us the righteous can experience hardship. You can be a faithful, obedient Christian and experience things like barrenness, the death of a child, premature death of a spouse, cancer.

Discipline or providence?

Last week we learned about David receiving discipline from God. Maybe you’re asking something like, how can I tell whether it’s God’s discipline or his wise providence? Ask yourself, am I living in willful rebellion against God’s commands? Do I have unconfessed sin that needs to be addressed? If the answers are no, you’re not experiencing God’s discipline. You’re experiencing God’s wise providence. For reasons unknown to Zechariah and Elizabeth, she experienced barrenness despite their faithfulness.

Point 3: Pray expectantly because God answers prayer (1:8-17)

Once in a lifetime opportunity (see Exod 29:38-42; 40:22-28; Heb 9:2-7)

Because there were approximately 18,000 temple priests and they officiated only twice year for periods of one week, priests were only able to enter the Holy Place (“*altar of incense*”) once in a lifetime. This was the greatest responsibility he could ever have.

Prayer answered (1:13)

Then an angel of the Lord appears to Zechariah. Bearing news of answered prayer. You’ll have a son. Name him John. Like elsewhere in Scripture, the angel’s presence arouses fear.

John’s purpose (1:14-17)

John would be unique.

- 1) Many will rejoice over this child (1:14).
- 2) No wine or strong drink (1:15) = set apart for unique purpose.
- 3) Filled with the Spirit in the womb (1:15).

God will guarantee the success of John’s mission by directing him before he’s born. He’s empowered for mission before he’s born. That’s born again, regenerated before he was born.

- 4) His preaching will bring Israelites to repentance because he’s filled by the Spirit = empowered by God (1:16-17).

John’s impact (1:17)

John’s ministry will correct two problems:

- 1) Fathers will repent of neglecting their children.

This is an interesting focus and highlights the critical importance of Christian fathers. When the hearts of the fathers are changed, the nation is changed! Applied to us as a church, when the hearts of fathers are changed, the church is changed.

If church life hinders parent-child relationships (e.g., busyness), something needs to change.

2) The disobedient will become wise = people will change the way they do life because of John's preaching.

The purpose of preaching is always changed lives. That disobedience and ignorance will be replaced with wisdom. A pastor's goal is a wise people. A people that think like the Scriptures and do life biblically. That's why my goal is a healthy church. A church is only healthy if its people are healthy.

As a result, the people of Israel will be prepared for Jesus' coming.

Expectant prayer

God did what was biologically impossible. An old woman gave birth. God saw Elizabeth's reproach and he acted for her in response to their prayers. Though not in the timeframe they desired or expected.

Tangible proof that God does what is impossible through prayer.

Are we expectant?

Do we believe that God actually answers? Are we calling on God to do what's humanly impossible? Or are we just going through the motions out of duty? Are we praying without expectation?

Kind of like the early church in Acts 12 when Peter was imprisoned. While the church was praying, Peter came to the door. When the servant girl reported the news, those praying said she was out of her mind. They were praying, but they didn't think God could release Peter from prison.

Yes we pray we submission to God's good and wise hidden will. But balanced by the Bible, we pray with expectation.

1) Pray specifically.

Would I know if this prayer was answered?

2) Pray expectantly.

Do I trust God to do the impossible?

3) Pray through doubt

Am I not praying because I think God isn't going to answer so why bother?

Keep praying for that lost friend or child. Keep praying for that spouse you want. Keep praying for God's help to overcome a specific sin.

I have no passage or promise that if you pray barrenness will end, but I do have Matthew 7:7-11 (God gives unspecified good things to his children when they ask) and James 4:2 ("*You do not have, because you do not ask*") and Mark 11:23-24 (God does impossible things for us when we ask expectantly). God gives promises to encourage prayer. And to give us confidence in prayer.

Point 4: Trust God when he speaks (1:18-25)

Zechariah was afraid, but Gabriel's presence wasn't enough to convince him. So he asked for a sign. Wasn't the angel enough of a sign? Asking for a sign resulted in a disciplinary sign. You'll be mute until John is born because of your unbelief ("*because you did not believe my words*" - 1:20).

How could Zechariah doubt an angel's words?

- 1) An anti-supernatural mindset.

He only saw biological norms. He didn't see God's ability to overrule "natural" law. He ruled out the possibility.

- 2) Years of unanswered prayer.

Maybe at some point they concluded we can't have children and we won't have children. Long waits can give way to discouragement and doubt. Does God really care? Does he really act for me? God hasn't answered yet so he never will.

The process was anguish to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Longing for a child while others who weren't righteous, like they were, had children.

Proverbs 13:12 speaks to this reality:

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.

When legitimate longings are delayed or denied, it does a work on our soul.

A mix of faith and unbelief

Zechariah was a mix of devotion and unbelief. He maintained commitment to God by living righteously. Yet when Gabriel spoke, doubt ruled: *"For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years"* (1:18).

Illustration

A pastor can preach without believing it will produce maturity in believers. A pastor can preach to lost people without believing they can actually be converted.

We can maintain devotion and righteousness while trusting God on some points and failing to trust him at other points.

For example, I might have full assurance of salvation, full confidence in the Holy Spirit's ability to change my heart and behavior patterns, full confidence that God's ways are right and true, while not really being sure that *"steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD"* (Ps 32:11) or *"for those who love God all things work together for good"* (Rom 8:28).

There's some promises we need to trust even when our circumstances cry out "not true."

Conclusion/Non-Christian

John will prepare the people for Jesus' coming. Jesus came to create a new community (the church) and die for the sins of the world. He taught a lot about faith and repentance. Turning from rebellion to trust. And the Father confirmed his teachings by raising him from the dead.

What have you learned today?

- 1) If you want to know about Jesus, read the Bible.

There's no other way to find the one true God.

- 2) Faith doesn't guarantee all will be easy and pleasant.
- 3) But God is pleased to do the impossible by answering the prayers of his people.
- 4) Trust what God says in the Bible.

Open up the Bible, trust it, and see where God leads.