

Doubt In the Face of the Unbelievable

Good tidings. Good news. Whether it's in our world or in our own personal life, we yearn for good news. In the midst of broken relationships, unmet expectations, sin's consequences, and unrest and instability, we long for good tidings of great joy. Yet when we receive good news there are a number of different ways we can respond. Surprisingly, a very common response is doubt. Consider this for a moment: When was the last time you received unexpectedly wonderful news? How did you respond? Likely it was with **"I can't believe it!"** It's not just a flippant expression. We have a tendency to doubt in the face of unbelievably good news! As a matter of fact, while believers may be noble in character and faithful to God, they may nevertheless struggle with accepting God's unceasing goodness and grand generosity. A perfect example of this is an aged couple in the nativity story - Zachariah and Elizabeth. They beautifully reflect the following truth: **the Gospel (good news) is greater than our doubt and disappointments.**

Zachariah and Elizabeth are introduced with a dark cloud hanging over them. They were weighed down by the hardships of life. Under the heel of a pagan military power, they likely experienced physical oppression, religious persecution, and financial burdens. Even more heartbreaking is that Luke tells us that they were unable to have children (Lk 1:6-7). Although their lives had demonstrated righteousness and faithfulness into their old age, they remained childless. It is a powerful reminder that our righteousness cannot remove sin's curse nor free us from heartache. However, the Bible's notification of a woman's barrenness often serves as a harbinger of a miraculous birth. The foundational mothers of ancient Israel - Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel - were all barren, and each became pregnant through divine intervention. So, Luke foreshadows what is about to take place. God is about to answer prayer with a message of good tidings and a gift of powerful grace!

As Zechariah was fulfilling his once-in-a-lifetime duty of entering the temple to burn incense and a multitude of people were praying outside, an angel appeared to him. The sight of the terrifying angel frightened Zechariah to the core and the divine message made his head spin.

"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. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." (Lk 1:13-14)

What a declaration! In two short verses, God's messenger reminds the faithful old priest that God is on his side, that God answers prayer, and that God brings joy. He further reveals that this child would be supernaturally empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, ignite a revival among God's people, and function as the forerunner to the long-awaited Messiah (Lk 1:15-17). This truly is "good news" (Lk 1:19)! You would think Zechariah's reply would have been, "Praise the gracious and mighty God of the universe! He answers prayer and keeps His promises." But that is not Zechariah's reaction. Rather, in response to the angel's good news, he blurts out, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (Lk 1:18, NIV). In other words, "I can't believe it!" Doubt is not is not obstinacy or contentment with darkness, but it is honesty and a seeking of light. Zechariah expressed the honesty of a weak and weary heart that had grown tired of waiting. In His book, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality*, theologian and author, Iain Duguid explains the importance of being open with God about our doubts:

Even doubting thoughts and feelings that border on sin are better laid out before the gracious eyes of the Lord than nursed in our hearts. God will not be shocked! He knows our inmost thoughts anyway!

God is a fantastic God, who provides a glorious and gracious gospel. As the LORD silences Zechariah for his doubt, He is purposeful in His message: "Be quiet and watch Me work!" It is as much a time for Zechariah to think and meditate as it is for God to show that He is faithful to His promises. He will provide a son for the doubting priest and a Savior for a disobedient nation.

Two names are helpful in reminding us of God's reason for silencing Zechariah. Gabriel means "God is my strength" and John means "the Lord is gracious." Our problems may be great, but our God is greater (Eph 3:20). Our doubts may linger, but God remains true (2 Tim 2:13). Our sin may abound, but God's grace abounds all the more (Rom 5:20). What God promises, He will perform! God's good tidings may at first seem unbelievable, but rest assured, there is no need to doubt His faithfulness.

Psalm 113:1-9 (ESV) - "Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord! Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and forevermore! From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised! The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens! Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to

make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!"