

When waiting weighs on you

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, in these times where sometimes we don't know where to look, we don't know where to go to, we pray, Lord, that we will be driven to come to you.

We would want to come to your word, and in your word that we will recognize that you are the everlasting and ever faithful God, the God who is ever dependable.

And so we pray, Lord, that you would build our faith this morning and help us to live continually faithful and repentant lives before you. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Last week, we saw that Luke was writing to give us certainty. That's his purpose. And in his opening words, he began building our certainty by showing us his gospel is credible and significant. It's based on careful investigation. It's grounded in historical events. It's informed by eyewitness testimony. It's not simply ancient fiction.

[1 : 09] And that's important to establish because we certainly don't want to be believing lies. As the Apostle Peter says, we should have good reasons for the hope that we have.

Both the Apostle John in 1 John 1 and the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 do take time to establish the historical reality of our faith.

It's not unimportant. And yet, at the same time, it's probably true that this is not something that the average member of our congregation or the average non-Christian out there is busy worrying about.

If I were to interview a bunch of you today, it would be quite surprising if you told me that you are kept awake at night by the burning question of whether Luke is true or not.

It's simply not at the forefront of your minds. But here's a question I suspect might be more likely to keep you awake. Is God reliable?

[2 : 17] That's what I've been told. But is he? And now we're dealing not so much with intellectual doubts, but existential ones. We're asking a question that is not just academic, but concrete.

It's the difference between an oncologist who asks, I wonder if that's cancer, and a patient who asks, Do I have cancer?

Is God reliable? Does he care about the details of my life? Do my feeble attempts to trust him week after week make any difference?

Or do things still stay the same? Well, those are the kind of questions Luke also wants to address. He wants to give us certainty that God is reliable, that God cares, that God is interested in the details of our lives.

And so he begins, not as you might expect, with the beginning of Jesus' ministry, or even his birth. He begins with an ordinary couple, living an ordinary life.

[3 : 26] And as he tells us via story, he draws us in by asking us to feel the tension, see God's action, and finally, learn the lesson.

And so let's prepare our ears and our hearts to listen, so that God can help set our spiritual orientation. So, firstly, feel the tension as Luke immerses us in a life where no change ever seems to happen.

In verse 5, Luke brings us into the world of first century Palestine. In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah.

So straight away, he's laying down a historical time marker. But that's not all he's doing. By mentioning Herod, you see, Luke is beginning to open a window for us to understand what life was like then.

Herod, to put it maoli, was a nasty piece of work. He had used the Roman civil wars of the time to advance his political career and gain power.

[4 : 43] And he was well known for his paranoia and cruelty. He ruthlessly dispatched his opponents, even killing his wife, Marianne, because she happened to belong to a rival family.

Apparently, the word on the street was that it was safer to be Herod's pig than to be Herod's son. From Matthew's Gospel, we know he wasn't afraid to kill even babies if he perceived they were a threat as well.

In fact, he was such a tyrant that even this act of baby killing doesn't get mentioned by the Jewish historians because, you see, they had to document so many other evil acts as well.

After all, this was a king who burned teenagers alive. And so here is what Luke is subtly pointing out for us. This ordinary couple is living in a time when all is not well politically.

When we read in the time of Herod, we're meant to be thinking something like in the time of Hitler or in the time of Pol Pot or in the time of some other evil ruler.

[6 : 03] Indeed, if we are familiar with the Old Testament, we are meant to be thinking this is almost the equivalent of saying in the time when Babylon ruled over us.

In other words, although the Jews are living in their own homeland, their situation was almost as if they were still in exile. A righteous king from David's line is meant to be ruling over them, but they get a cruel Edomite king instead.

And it's been like this for years and years and years. Nothing has changed for a long time. But it's not just a political situation.

Not all is well from a religious point of view either. You see, we're not just told about kings, but priests. That's what Zechariah is.

But the religious situation wasn't much better. Now, Luke makes clear to us that we are to regard Zechariah and Elizabeth themselves favourably.

[7 : 12] In verse 5, we're told he belongs to the priestly division of Abijah. And his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

That is, from a priestly line as well. In other words, this is a family of purity. And Israelite priests didn't have to marry someone else from the same lineage, but those who did were considered especially pious.

And their moral integrity is not in doubt. Verse 6 stresses to us that both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

They are people who, although not sinless, were striving to live for God with all of their being. And so they are blameless. But they are in the minority.

You see, as we look back at Israel's history, what do we discover about them? Well, they're meant to be a kingdom of priests. That's the vocation God gave them all the way back in Exodus 19.

[8 : 28] Now, that means there are to be a walking advertisement for God on earth, showing others how wonderful it is to be in relationship with God and to invite others into His presence.

But of course, that's not what happened. Israel turned from God again and again. So in a famous scene in Ezekiel 11, God's glory departs the temple.

He turns His face away from them too. And you would have thought that such a history, man, God's people, in Herod's time, would all turn back to God.

But nope. We find money changes, happily charging exorbitant fees in the temple, only interested in making a quick profit. We find some groups, like the Sadducees, who were more interested in maintaining their grip on power than in being right with God.

And so this was no time of revival or religious zeal. In fact, times of intimacy with God were a long-forgotten memory.

[9 : 47] Sometimes when we read the Bible, it can seem to us as if God is performing miracle after miracle. Israel. But actually, at this moment in Israel's history, did you realize that Israel has not heard from God for 400 years?

There have been 40 decades of silence from God. God hasn't sent a prophet for four centuries. Even in the temple where Zechariah worships, there is no Ark of the covenant.

That is a stark reminder that God's presence is not with his people. That's the religious situation.

But perhaps most devastatingly, there's the personal situation too.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are blameless, but verse 7, they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive and they were both very old.

Just put yourself in their shoes. How would you have felt? You've served God all your life. You love him. But now you're approaching the twilight of your life and you've got no future to look forward to.

[11:14] In fact, all you have is shame since that's what childlessness meant. After all, to be barren was often regarded as divine punishment.

So no doubt the neighbours were whispering. Maybe Zechariah and Elizabeth are not as righteous as they seem. Maybe they're hiding some secret sin.

Now, Luke has already told us verses 5 and 6 that that cannot be the case. But that wouldn't have stopped others gossiping. Can you feel the tension?

In fact, perhaps right now, can you feel the tension? Not only in Zechariah and Elizabeth's story, but in your own.

Perhaps you've accepted and sincerely admitted before God you are a sinner. You've wronged him and you've turned from your old ways and put your trust in Jesus to rescue you from sin.

[12:19] You said to him, I'll let you run my life. I don't own it anymore. And yet, there is some trial in your life that has never been removed.

There's some disappointment in your life that has never left the room. If you haven't felt that tension yet, then quite likely one day you will.

As R.T. Kendall, the pastor who served for many years at Westminster Chapel in London once remarked, 100% of all believers will one day experience a period where it seems as if God is letting you down.

And it's got nothing to do with your sin. This story makes that clear. Suffering can come even when you've been faithful. And when you look around you, it doesn't seem as if things are very promising either.

When we look around, we have to admit that we don't see anything currently resembling the revivals we read about in history books. If anything, BEM Pusat is presently worried that many of our churches are actually heading in the opposite direction of apathy and lethargy.

[13:40] churches across the country are worried that very few people are stepping up to serve in full-time ministry. The conference I'm involved in, the Entrust Conference, was founded partly to challenge and encourage the next generation to do precisely that.

But there is no doubt it's an uphill task. And it's the same when we look at the national and even the global stage. Everything looks very messy.

And though we pray both for our churches and for our governing authorities, it often looks like nothing ever happens.

Can you feel the tension? Well, Luke tells us, if you do, don't worry. That tension is nothing new. Right here at the beginning of his gospel, that tension is built in. It forms the backdrop for what happens next. For now, Luke invites us, secondly, to see God's action.

[14:54] See God's action. You see, God loves to work in such circumstances. Maybe you feel a sense of hopelessness as you look around.

maybe you feel like nothing much is happening. But Luke says, rather than seeing this as a dead end, see this as a starting point for God to do something.

Let's see that from the text. In Zechariah's day, there was more priests than was needed to keep the temple running. And so the various orders of the priesthood would rotate but even then, it's quite possible to go your entire lives without being selected to serve in the temple.

To do so was literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And in verse 9, Zechariah is selected precisely for such service.

Luke says he's chosen by lot, but I wonder if he's winking at us as he writes that since Proverbs 16 33 says that even lots are determined by God.

[16:08] So it's almost like Luke is grinning at us and telling us, hey guys, start paying attention. God is up to something here with Zechariah.

So what is God up to? Well, the clue, I think, lies in what else Luke draws our attention to in this paragraph. The prayers of God's people.

people. In verse 10, the people outside are praying and petitioning God as Zechariah enters the holy place. They would likely have been praying for the redemption of the nation.

That's what they usually pray for. And what is Zechariah doing? Luke makes sure we don't miss it. Twice, in verses 9 and 10, we're told his job is to burn incense.

Now, in temple life, incense burning symbolises people's prayers going up before God. And so Luke is showing us the prayers of God's people now going up and reaching God, readying us for what happens next.

[17:20] And indeed, Zechariah himself, as he burns incense, would almost certainly have been joining in with the prayers of those outside. He probably gave up praying for a son long ago, but as he performs his official duties, he would have prayed for God to hear their collective prayers.

But now something unexpected happens. In verse 11, an angel appears. Now, just imagine if earlier, as Dr.

Kenny led us in prayers, an angel suddenly descended on stage to bring us a message from God. Just imagine how you would feel. Well, that's how Zechariah feels.

He's terrified. Verse 12, Why would God now appear? Has he done something terribly wrong that God now feels obliged to send an angel to destroy him?

Well, as those thoughts run through his head, the angel says, verse 13, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard.

[18:30] What a relief. But wait a minute. Which prayer? Well, let's keep listening to the angel. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you are to call him John.

So, could it be that there are long-forgotten prayers for Elizabeth's barrenness to be no more has been answered? But the angel doesn't stop there.

Keep reading verse 14, many will rejoice at his birth. John's not just any baby boy, but someone, verse 15, who will be great in the sight of the Lord.

So, clearly, there is more going on than just another new life coming into this world. But what is the significance? let's keep reading verse 15.

He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. Now, we're starting to get a clearer picture.

[19:39] Why is John not allowed to drink? Is God against alcohol? Well, no, that's not the point. According to the Old Testament, that's a part of what taking a Nazarite vow involves.

People who took Nazarite vows in the Old Testament were dedicating themselves to God. Same goes for the priests serving in the temple, according to Leviticus 10 verse 9.

They are to abstain from such drink. And so, the implication is clear. John the Baptist is being set apart here for God's service.

So, if you are hearing this as someone familiar with the Old Testament, this is when a sense of excitement should be growing within you.

For this John sounds like the prophets of old. Furthermore, those prophets had the Holy Spirit come upon them only after they were born, but John will be filled with the Spirit even from within the womb.

[20:48] So, he sounds like he'll be especially significant. And as if to confirm this, we then get verses 16 and 17. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

The angel says, look, God is about to swing into action. And when he does, he doesn't just touch individuals, he touches whole families, he touches entire nations.

He doesn't just bring about change at the personal level, not even just at the religious level, but beyond that as well. He is going to do what he said all along.

You see, when was the last time Elijah was mentioned? It was in the very last words of the Old Testament. God had foretold a day when the wicked will fall and the arrogant will be judged.

He foretold a day when he would once again visit his temple, the temple he had left. But right before that day, God says, he will send Elijah to turn the hearts of people.

[22:16] That's Malachi 4 verse 5 and 6. And the angel is now telling Zechariah, guess what? That day has come.

It is your very son John who will wear the mantle of Elijah. So can you see God's action?

God is saying, I want you to know that this 400 years of silence is just a pause, not the ending of the story. It's a bit like the waiting in between the second and third movies of a trilogy in between The Last Jedi and The Rise of Skywalker.

And as you wait, you know that the movie director, the film editors and so on are not inactive. They are piecing together the last installments of the story for you.

And that's what God has been doing. No prayer has ever gone unheard by him. And he's been patiently putting together the pieces, asking you to wait patiently for the next installment of the story.

[23 : 32] That's what is going on here. All of Israel's hopes are finally coming to fruition as a prophet emerges for the first time in centuries.

But here's the encouragement I want you to especially hear today. Earlier, I asked which prayer was God answering?

was it the prayers for the redemption of his people? Or was it the long forgotten prayers for a son? And it might have sounded like I was saying the former.

But actually, I think the answer is both. God for even as he shows John's significance in redemption history, for how he is the fulfillment of all those Old Testament promises, notice what else the angel says.

Verse 14 again. He will be a joy and delight to you. Here is your long awaited son. Here is the moment when your disgrace is taken away.

[24 : 43] Here is the boy whom you can just enjoy. As God is saying, I am not just working in salvation history, I am working in you personally.

You see, this is what God loves to do. Sometimes we think, oh, I know God is really interested in all this big picture stuff, the salvation of nations, the edification of churches, the fulfillment of covenant promises, but he is not really interested in little old me.

He is not really interested in my little prayers, he is not really that interested in the circumstances of nobody important. But my brothers and sisters, that is not true.

He cares. And what is even more amazing is not just that he cares, but that he is able to connect our little stories and weave them into his great big story.

He works at the micro level at the same time he is working at the macro level. How do we know this is what God loves to do?

[25 : 52] Well, listen carefully again to how Luke tells this story and notice how it's full of Old Testament echoes. Consider, for instance, what we are meant to remember when we hear about barren women.

Our minds are meant to go back to Genesis to the story of Abraham and Sarah, another couple who are old and childless. And we are meant to remember, look what God does there.

He brings forth Isaac and puts into motion his intended purpose to make Abraham the father of a multitude. God swings into action.

When we hear Elizabeth exclaim later in verse 25, God has taken away my disgrace. Our minds are meant to go back to Rachel in Genesis 30 who said the same thing when God took away her barrenness.

And through Rachel, we get Joseph who will preserve his family through a famine and advance God's purposes. God swings into action. And when we see the temple setting, we are meant to recall Hannah back in 1 Samuel 1 who also prayed in the house of the Lord who was also barren but got a child who would also be dedicated to the Lord and who would prepare the way for King David.

[27 : 26] All this to say, Luke 1 verse 5 to 25 is not a one-off. This is what God loves to do. This is what God always does as he directs history to achieve his purposes.

And he does this in and through the personal circumstances of his people. He weaves together our little stories into his big story to bring about his blessing and goodness.

Do you believe that, my friends? And so thirdly, Luke wants us to learn the lesson. Let his word give us assurance.

Let his word give us assurance. Let's come back to Zechariah. Don't forget what we've been told about him. He's righteous, he strives to obey God's commands, he's tried to be faithful.

But all this waiting for things to change probably weighed on him. As he served, year after year, it must have been tough to keep going.

[28 : 42] And most likely, without realizing it, his heart was slowly hardening. He was beginning to drift just a little further away from God, but he couldn't discern it until now.

Because, as the angel brings this divine word from the Lord, as the angel proclaims what he calls good news, how does Zechariah respond?

Verse 18, how can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years. Now, how are we to take this?

The angel's reply leaves us in no doubt. We are to interpret his response as a sign of unbelief.

Verse 20, indeed, in the New Testament, the request for a sign often goes hand in hand with a lack

of faith.

And Zechariah's heart has grown cold enough that he's become just a little more suspicious and just a little less trusting of God. And I wonder if that is us too.

[29 : 55] I don't think at this moment there will be too many of us in this hall who are on the verge of abandoning the faith. But perhaps there are quite a number of us who have let our hearts grow cold towards the Lord.

We still go through the motions of serving him, but we no longer trust what his word says so easily. We show up to do the refreshments or operate the sound system, but we refuse to go to Bible study to listen to him.

We are a little readier to talk back to him. We want to put him to the test. We've let our circumstances overwhelm our faith. And so we're invited to examine our hearts this morning. Is this what we're in danger of? If so, then don't keep going down that path. And if you are already there, then turn back, for God's disciplining hand might soon be upon you as it will be upon Zechariah.

Cry out to God that as you hear his word even right now, he will lead you to the word made flesh, the Lord Jesus, who is full of grace and truth, who can melt our hearts all over again.

[31 : 14] And let his word bring you assurance. You see, even here, there are so many ways in which God reassures his people. Do you know what Zechariah means?

God remembers. Do you know what John means? It means God is gracious. And even his rebukes are assurances.

In verse 20, the angel announces that Zechariah will be struck mute until the angel's words come true. And that's exactly what happens.

When Zechariah comes out, he can't even pronounce the usual priestly benediction. So it is discipline. But it is not just discipline, but a sign, just as Zechariah requested.

You see, if the angel Gabriel told him that he would be mute, and it was so, then it gives us more confidence that Gabriel's other word that John will be conceived will also come to pass.

[32 : 26] And it was so, verse 24, Elizabeth becomes pregnant. So this is the lesson Luke wants us to learn this morning.

Let his word bring you assurance that his redemptive purposes will come to pass. But I want to acknowledge there might be some of you for whom this would not be easy to hear this morning. Perhaps there are one or two of you this morning who bear the unseen burden of infertility. Perhaps it's not that, but something that is just as difficult to bear.

And a text like this can actually stir in us deep pain and deeper yearnings. It's nice that Elizabeth gets a happy ending, but where is mine?

you wonder. And it is true. I don't know how God is choosing to write your particular story. I don't know how or why he might or might not choose to do a particular thing in your life.

[33 : 37] But I can say this. While I can't give assurance, he will answer you in the exact way you hope he does, I can say his word does bring assurance that he cares very much about your personal circumstances.

And more than that, he will never waste your suffering. For God can bring his redemptive purposes to pass even in your situation.

And for all of us, this story reminds us to keep going. Sometimes we grow bored and weary by the seeming unchangeability and routines of our lives.

It seems as if our everyday faithfulness counts for little. But this text reminds us that it is precisely in the ordinary moments that God shows up.

So let's stay prepared. Let's keep praying those prayers week after week for God to help us to be more like Jesus, for God to bring our loved ones to himself, for God to work in our nation.

[34 : 46] Let's keep praying your kingdom come, your will be done. For we can be sure that those prayers are never out of place. And you never know when God will choose to answer that prayer through you personally.

So let's pray that now that we will let him connect our story with his big story to the praise of his glorious name. Let's pray. Father, thank you that you never fail.

You are never absent from this world, even when we don't see it. And Father, we come before you now recognizing that for many of us, we could possibly be weary as we serve you week after week, as we try to follow you month after month.

and sometimes things never seem to change. But Father, help us to keep trusting you that you are always orchestrating everything for the good of your people, for the glory of your name, for the redemptive purposes of all of creation.

And help us to keep persevering so that day by day, week after week, we can keep going and look forward to that day when we will see Jesus face to face.

[36 : 09] All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.