

Believe – Luke 1:5-25
Sermon by Pastor Joe Davis
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I. INTRODUCTION

When you read God's Word, how easy is it for you to believe that it's absolutely true, that it applies to your life right now, and that in living out it's truths by the power of the Spirit you will experience peace, joy, healthy relationships, and find strength to conquer fears, defeat sin, and walk into the good works God has prepared for you? Do you often come across biblical principles that just don't seem realistic or do-able? Do you usually talk yourself out of actually trying to put them into practice? Do you find it hard to believe what God says in his Word about who you now are in Christ...your new identity in him? Though God's description of you as a new creation filled with his very presence and power could be compared to a butterfly, do you still view yourself as a worm?

Your answers to these questions will tell you a lot about how you're doing at walking by faith. More than ever before in history we live in a world of skepticism and doubt...a world where a lot of people have concluded there's no absolute, trustworthy truth applicable to all people at all times by which we can guide our lives...postmodernism is what this worldview is often called. In this view, there's no real truth to believe in and the best we can do is just try to find something that works for us and then make sure we never interfere with what's working for someone else. And like it or not, this is the cultural thinking we're surrounded by and are that's being propagated in our schools, on television, and sadly, even in some churches...a culture whose very foundation is unbelief. And the sobering truth for each of us here today is that there's nothing more destructive and toxic to our walk with God than unbelief.

You may have noticed the verse I put on the welcome slide this morning from Isaiah 7, verse 9b. It says this:

If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.

What a true statement that is in our walk with God! Nothing will hinder our growth in the Lord more than a heart of unbelief. Over and over in Scripture this principle is abundantly clear: ***a heart attitude of belief and trust in God and his Word is the key to life in the kingdom of God.*** Do you want to please God and walk in his power? Then trust him, believe his Word and put it into practice by the power of his Spirit within you.

I love how God often ties together what we're learning in our Sunday morning messages and what we're learning in our Bible studies throughout the week. In our Relational Elder Training last Monday we were examining this very principle and spent time considering the difference between the focus of our lives being ***trying to please God*** versus ***trying to trust God***. What we found is that when our main focus is trying to please God, we tend to fall into human effort and trying to clean up our act so we can earn God's approval. But when our focus is on trying to trust God and his Word, we're giving up on self-reliance and turn our eyes to God. We have a continual conversation with him in prayer as we seek to trust his way in each choice we make. We learn to believe who he says we are in Christ and trust that the principles in his Word really do work and can be put into practice by the power of his Spirit. The heart of the battle, my friends, is for belief and trust and it's a very challenging battle in the postmodern age we live in.

Well, today, we're going to be looking at one man's struggle with a hidden unbelief that wasn't visible to other people, and what God taught him about the importance of believing what he says even when it defies what we think is humanly possible. Turn with me if you would to Luke chapter 1, verses 5 to 25. We're continuing on in our harmony of the gospels study that we began in December, and we'll be going back in time a little bit today from where we left off on Christmas day. The setting is the Jewish temple in the time of Herod, king of Judea, who ruled in Jerusalem from approximately 37 BC to 4 AD. The time frame is perhaps a year or so before Christ was born in Bethlehem.

II. OUR CHARACTERS AND THEIR CHARACTER (vs. 5 to 6)

Let's begin by meeting our main characters and learning some things about their character in verses 5 through 6:

5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

So we begin with a priest named Zacharias, who served in the division of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, who was also from Jewish tribe of Levi. A little cultural background on what a division was from the ESV Study Bible will be helpful here: In order to provide priestly service for the Jewish temple, the priests were split up into 24 divisions, and each division served for 1 week, twice each year. So if you were a priest, for 2 different weeks out of each year you were required to be at the temple and provide priestly service. Additionally, all the priests served during the major festivals like Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles.

We also learn in these first 2 verses that Zacharias and Elizabeth were very godly people who were seeking to follow God and doing very well at following the requirements of the Jewish Law. Were they sinless? Absolutely not. The Bible makes it absolutely clear that no person has ever been sinless but Christ. Yet clearly they were looking to God and making every effort to walk in his ways and God was pleased. So at this point in our passage, it's sounding like life's pretty good for our friends Zacharias and Elizabeth. They're following God and walking in his ways, he's pleased, and we might easily assume that God's rewarding them with blessing upon blessing right?

III. THE UNEXPECTED BUT (v. 7)

Well, let's read on in verse 7:

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

It appears there's an unexpected "but" in this story, isn't there? Have you ever had one of those? Lots of unexpected "buts" come our way in life, don't they? Elizabeth's "but" had brought her disgrace and shame in the culture she lived in...a culture which viewed a woman's inability to have children as a judgment from God. Though Elizabeth had walked with God and done everything to follow

his ways, most people around her suspected otherwise. They probably concluded she had some deep dark secret that only God knew about. Clearly life had not been easy for Elizabeth and she'd experienced disgrace and the constant judgment of others throughout her lifetime.

But a beautiful observation we can make here is that in spite of the disgrace and humiliation, Elizabeth resisted bitterness against God, refused to wallow in self-pity, and continued to trust and follow God through it all. How else could her character be described as righteous in the sight of God and walking blamelessly in his ways? When you think about it, Elizabeth's life experience had some significant points of commonality with the Savior whose imminent arrival was closely tied in with a miracle that was about to happen within Elizabeth herself.

So we've been introduced to our main characters. We've learned a little about Zacharias and Elizabeth, their character, and one of the big challenges they faced in life. And it appeared that, in their lifetime at least, the disgrace and humiliation was going to continue, since Zacharias and Elizabeth were both old and well past the child-bearing years. And yet, they continued to follow God and walk in obedience.

IV. ON AN ORDINARY DAY IN AN OBEDIENT LIFE

And this brings us to what was probably just another ordinary day in the obedient life of Zacharias and Elizabeth. Well, perhaps a little more than ordinary since we find Zacharias carrying out his twice-a-year priestly service at the temple in Jerusalem. Let's read verses 8 to 10:

8 Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, 9 according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

This was actually turning out to be quite an extraordinary day for Zacharias since he ended up being chosen by lot to enter the temple and burn incense. And to put this in perspective: because of the large number of priests serving in the temple, each priest could only be chosen by lot once in his entire lifetime.

The *Expositor's Bible Commentary* points out that "this was likely the climactic moment of [Zacharias'] priestly career, perhaps the most dramatic moment possible for...[what was about to take place]."

So you can imagine the excitement and probably fear Zacharias' was experiencing as he realized he was the chosen one today. His once-in-a-lifetime moment had come and now it was time to go alone into the Holy Place of the temple of the living God, to offer incense before him at the altar. He knew that the one true God who sees into our hearts had selected this very moment for him to fulfill this duty, and I can't imagine that it wouldn't have been very intimidating to carry out such a responsibility. After all, just like you and me, Zacharias knew what was in his own heart and that he wasn't perfect or sinless on the inside. And now it was time to go into the place where all was laid bare before the One who sees all and knows all. Do we have any volunteers here today who think you could carry out this duty without a few butterflies in your stomach?

So as Zacharias opened the imposing doors and entered the temple, the whole multitude of people gathered outside and began to pray. All eyes were turned toward God as the incense symbolizing the prayers of God's people was ready to be offered at the altar. Can't you just imagine the silence inside the temple and the sound of every footstep as Zacharias closed the doors and walked alone over the stone floor to the altar of incense, which was placed just outside the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place? Do you think he may have been wondering if God would accept his incense offering?

V. AN ANGEL AND AN ANSWER TO PRAYER (vs. 11 to 16)

And then something caught his eye. Perhaps just as this question was running through his mind, Zacharias saw something to the right of the altar, or more accurately, SOMEONE. And what he saw caused great fear to come over him. Was this the end? Had he been judged and found wanting? Let's read verses 11 through 17:

11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. 12 Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will

bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. 14 "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. 16 "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. 17 "It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Similar to our recent studies of Joseph and Mary, we have here another angel and another terrified human being, feeling completely inadequate and earthly in the presence of heavenly glory...a reminder that there is so much more out there than what usually meets the eye during our brief lives on this earth. Whenever the veil is lifted and people come face to face with the heavenly reality that exists right now all around us, great fear, a feeling of inadequacy, and a massive adjustment of worldviews always takes place. And Zacharias was no exception. He was terrified and troubled and desperately trying to figure out what this all meant for him.

But in view of the obvious look of terror that was written all over Zacharias' face, the angel immediately worked to set his mind at ease and reassure him that he had good news and had not come for the purpose of judgment. "Do not be afraid, Zacharias." What a relief it must have been to hear those words! He could breathe again. And the angel went on to say that Zacharias didn't need to be afraid because God had heard a prayer request Zacharias had been praying. What had Zacharias been praying for? He'd been praying that his wife would no longer be barren and that she would have a child...that God would remove her disgrace.

Think about what this must mean. Clearly, Zacharias and Elizabeth were old...VERY old...and had long given up hope and I would surmise, based on later events in this story, they'd even given up the prayer of being able to have children. This is what we would label serious unanswered prayer. Zacharias for likely much of his marriage had pleaded with God to remove the barrenness of Elizabeth, but to no avail. The only response he had received to that prayer request was silence, which he undoubtedly had long concluded was a big N-O

from God. Perhaps for many years he hoped it was just a NOT-YET. But at this stage in his life the NOT-YET possibility was long off the table.

But now, suddenly, at a completely unexpected moment, an angel, appearing out of thin air, is putting a prayer request that had long been abandoned back on the table. And in fact, he's doing more than just putting it back on the table. He's telling Zacharias that it's an absolute certainty that his elderly wife is soon going to have a son...and guess what, he even has a name... "You will give him the name John." Do you know what the name, John, means? It means, "Jehovah [or YAHWEH] is a gracious giver." Now that's what I call a name with some meaning! This child was going to be a miracle-baby given personally to Zacharias and Elizabeth, by the most gracious giver in the universe in answer to a persistent prayer request. Do you think prayer just might make a difference and that God does hear and respond to it in his timing? Do you have unanswered prayer that you're convinced is in line with God's will? Are you praying for something that God would desire in your life? Be persistent, persevere, and trust that God hears and will respond in his timing, unlimited whatsoever by what we may think is humanly possible.

Well, as you can imagine, this was already a lot for Zacharias to process and wrap his mind around, but the angel went on. He went on to describe exactly who this miracle baby would be and even the mission God was giving him. This baby named John would bring joy and gladness to Zacharias and many would rejoice at his birth because he would be great in the sight of the Lord. This wasn't just going to be an ordinary son. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit, not just when he was old enough and mature enough, but even while he was in his mother's womb. This boy, from the moment of his conception, would be on a mission from God.

And notice the significance of that phrase "great in the sight of the Lord." To much of the world, John would come to be viewed as a homeless weird-o, hardly what the world would label as "great." But God doesn't see as the world sees, but looks on the heart, and in the kingdom of God John the Baptist was truly great...a man who walked with God by the power of the Spirit and fulfilled the vital and essential mission of preparing hearts for the Savior of the world.

Listen again to his mission statement given by the angel:

16 "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. 17 "It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

John's mission would be to get people ready for the arrival of their Savior, and he would do this by preaching repentance and a turning back to the Lord. By the power of the Spirit he would bring repentance and reconciliation to God's people and turn attitudes of rebellious self-seeking into attitudes of humble trust in God. This repentance and looking to God would prepare them to receive the life-giving message of the Savior.

No doubt Zacharias was very familiar with two prophecies from Malachi that spoke of Elijah the prophet coming to prepare the way for Messiah and using the exact language used here by the angel. Listen to Malachi 4, verses 5 to 6 and see if it sounds slightly familiar:

5 "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. 6 "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse."

And Malachi 3:1 says this:

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts.

Can't you just imagine what must have been going through Zacharias' mind? This can't be happening. What are the chances that I would be chosen as the father of the promised Elijah who would turn the hearts of the fathers to their children? I'm not that special. And how could it be that Elijah himself is going to be put into my wife's womb? How's that going to work? And not to mention she's way too

old to even think about having a baby anyway. If I told this to someone they'd think I'd lost my mind. Have I lost my mind? The deeply buried and hidden seeds of unbelief lurking within Zacharias were starting to sprout and the skeptical tendencies of the human mind were trying to reassert themselves even in the face of a glorious angel standing right in front of him.

VI. A STRUGGLE WITH UNBELIEF (v. 18)

Let's see how Zacharias responds to the angel's message and prophecies in verse 18:

18 Zacharias said to the angel, "How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."

Despite the fact that Zacharias was in the very temple of God, face to face with a glorious angel speaking intelligible prophecies consistent with the Holy Scriptures, the creeping cords of unbelief that had been quietly taking root over the years of unanswered prayer and going through the motions of the Jewish law began wrapping themselves around his mind. And he, in essence, says to the angel of God standing in front of him, "If you expect me to believe that my very old wife and I can have a baby, I'm going to need a sign." Can you imagine the awkward silence that must have followed such a bold demand in the face of the glory of heaven right in front of him?

Now you might wonder: How is the request of Zacharias different from Mary's question to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Well, Mary's question was not a question of unbelief that demanded a sign before she would believe. Hers was a question of how the process of getting pregnant without a man was going to work and she in no way demanded a sign in order to believe it was going to happen. In contrast, Zacharias' question was full of doubt that even God could accomplish such a miracle and he demanded a sign in order to know for certain that this was really going to happen.

VII. A REPROOF FOR UNBELIEF AND AN UNPLEASANT SIGN (vs. 19-20)

So after the awkward moment of silence that likely followed the unbelieving demand of Zacharias, the angel responds in verses 19 to 20. And I imagine it

much like a scene from the Lord of the Rings when Gandalf gets serious with Bilbo about the ring and seems to grow at least a foot in size and volume, as well as putting off a blinding light from his whole body, and speaking in a bold, commanding tone that would cause anyone to wither in fear.

And this is what the angel says:

19... "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."

A loose paraphrase could be: Did you happen to notice that I'm not a human being. You are speaking to Gabriel (remember me from the book of Daniel). I'm an angel who stands in the very presence of God and I've been sent by God himself on a personal mission to deliver this good news to you. And still you doubt?!

And then Gabriel provides the sign Zacharias had requested, but most certainly not the sign Zacharias had in mind. This sign was very unpleasant, humiliating, inconvenient, and absolutely perfect for teaching Zacharias the importance of believing in God and his Word and never putting limits on what he can accomplish by his power.

Gabriel announces in verse 20:

20 "And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."

It's pretty clear what Zacharias' mistake was, isn't it?...a mistake that you and I could often be accused of. He refused to believe God's Word in spite of the obvious evidence and truth right in front of him. Unbelief took over and brought with it very negative consequences that dampened the joy and celebration that could have taken place had he chosen to simply trust...to take the very real evidence God had already given him and trust God to fill in the blanks and bring about what he said he was going to accomplish. But guess what? The unbelief of Zacharias did not keep God from accomplishing his purposes and bringing about the miracle he had promised in its proper time.

Zacharias experienced consequences for his unbelief, but God's purposes were not thwarted!

VIII. THE FULFILLMENT OF A PROMISE

Well by now the praying people outside the temple were starting to get worried because Zacharias should have come back out from the temple some time ago. And when he finally came out, they noticed by his game of charades, that something significant had happened while he was in there. Let's read verses 21 to 22:

21 The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. 22 But 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.

As promised by Gabriel, Zacharias was instantly unable to speak and he remained so until the birth of John. By trying to act things out he was at least able to communicate that he had seen a vision in the temple, but it seems the specifics of what had happened were not communicated. And this brings us to the final 3 verses of our passage today. Let's read verses 23 to 25:

23 When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home. 24 After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, 25 "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men."

God's promise was kept as always and a long unanswered prayer of both Zacharias and Elizabeth was finally answered in a very surprising way. Elizabeth in her old age had her disgrace taken away and she knew without a doubt that it was a gift from Yahweh, the gracious giver. She poured out thanksgiving to God and gave him all the glory. And during those many months of being mute, Zacharias learned the importance of believing God and never limiting his power to accomplish things that aren't humanly possible!

IX. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

There are so many truths we can take away from this account of Zacharias' encounter with the angel, Gabriel. As we've gone through it, I hope that you've already made some applications to your own life. Some things that jump out to me:

- 1) God's sovereignty in choosing Zacharias by lot at just the right time to accomplish his will in his timing.
- 2) God hears and answers our prayers according to his will, in his timing and in ways beyond what we even expect.
- 3) There are consequences for persisting in unbelief and allowing it take root in our lives.

But I want to wrap up today by pointing out the key application that I believe is central to what God's communicating to us today through this little bit of true history. And that application is this: ***a heart attitude of belief and trust in God and his Word is the key to living effectively in his kingdom.*** God has given us so many evidences that he is real and active in our lives today and that his Son, Jesus Christ, is a true historical person, fully man and fully God, who lived a sinless life, died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin, and rose from the dead. He's given those of us who've trusted in Christ his Spirit to live inside us and testify to our spirits that we really are God's children. And he's given us the Bible, tested and true and consistent throughout, to tell us all about him and his plan of salvation and how to live with him and by his power. In many ways we have even more reasons to believe and trust in God and his Word than Zacharias did when he came face to face with the angel Gabriel.

The battle is to believe, my friends. To read God's Word and believe what it says about God, what it says about us, what it says about how to live life, and then to act on it by the power of the Spirit. What we believe to be true forms the basis for how we live our lives and the choices we make. If we consistently think the Bible sounds good, but isn't practical or realistic, the seeds of unbelief have sprouted in our lives and we need to ask God to pull them up by the roots and plant his mustard seeds in their place.

Zacharias and Elizabeth were people who were trying to follow God and doing very well at it. They were keeping the requirements of the Law and doing everything they were supposed to be doing. And yet, in Zacharias at least, there was a subtle unbelief underneath the surface, perhaps the result of the monotony of going through religious motions but seeing very little power at work...perhaps because it seemed God hadn't answered his prayers. And, my friends, we can easily be much the same...just going through the motions of reading the Bible, going to church, and doing other things that Christians do...perhaps reading the Bible but not really believing we can actually put it into practice...maybe living with little expectation that we can defeat sin or see God accomplish miraculous things as we call out to him in prayer. If unbelief is our heart attitude, it should be no surprise that we're not experiencing much transformation or seeing God's Word bring about real fruit in our lives.

Thankfully, I see much evidence that there are many of you in our body who are living believing lives and who are experiencing real change and power as you read God's Word, believe it and put into practice. But let's challenge ourselves to believe more and more and ask God to build our faith and pull up any roots of unbelief and doubt that remain! And if God has shown you today that unbelief has deep roots in your life and that it has deeply damaged your growth in him, confess it to him right now and begin persistently asking him to root it out of your life...to give you the ability to read his Word, believe it and put it into practice by the power of His Spirit inside you.

And finally, if you're out there today and haven't trusted Christ as your Savior...in other words you're living in complete unbelief...today is the day to get right with him. To do that, you need that repentance that John the Baptist was sent to bring about in people's lives to prepare them for the Savior. Ask God to give a heart of repentance...a heart that sees the sin in your life for what it is and how it has separated you from relationship with God and is so serious that it required the death of God's son on the cross to take care of it. When you've reached that point and know that you need a Savior, tell Jesus you believe he died on the cross for your sins and rose from the dead. Ask him to be your Lord and Savior. If you mean it and believe it in your heart, he'll bring you to new life right here and now. Come visit with me afterwards if you've made that decision today or if you'd like me to walk you through it!

Let's be true believers in a world of unbelief, my friends, and watch what God will do in and through us as we learn to trust him and walk in his power!