

Zechariah and Elizabeth: An Unanswered Prayer

December 3, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Luke 1:5-25

Session Outline

1. The Ordinary Couple (Luke 1:5-10)
2. The Unusual Announcement (Luke 1:11-17)
3. The Extraordinary Story (Luke 1:18-25)

Theological Theme

God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things that have a huge impact for His kingdom.

Call to Action

What prayer do you think God isn't answering? How could this be a part of a bigger, greater plan?





Leader Guide

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Introduction

Name some people you feel have done extraordinary things. Think about what characteristics these people have in common. Interestingly, there is no specific type of person that overachieves or succeeds, and success is not always predictable if you only gauge a person by the world's standards. Whether a farmer boy who became president or a shoe salesman who became one of the greatest evangelists of all time, throughout history there have been average people that achieved unusually great things.

The movie *Forest Gump* was a major motion picture that depicted a man born with various physical and cognitive handicaps that threatened to hold him back. His mother pushed him to resist the limitations and he was in the right place at the right time repeatedly to be a part of some of the biggest events in history. It was a wildly popular movie that reminds us to not settle in life and not to judge others by what might make them different. What about you? Would you describe yourself as extraordinary, above average, or just regular? Have you ever been part of incredible things and realized only God could have orchestrated all that you have experienced?

-  What examples do you know of people who have been used by God in unexpected ways?
-  When have you been surprised by something that God allowed you to be part of?

Session Summary


Sometimes it may seem like God isn't listening to your prayers or that He doesn't care about what is important to you. In those moments, you can choose to give up on your prayers or you can continue praying and trusting that God will do what He says and that His timing is perfect. We don't always understand why we get a no from God or have to wait and persist in praying about something. What we see in today's passage is God is always there and always at work in the lives of people just like you.

God is in the business of using ordinary people to do extraordinary things for the sake of the gospel. Just as He wants to use you, God chose to take an older couple who were childless and give them a miraculous son who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. When God speaks, the way that you respond is a big deal. Zechariah obeyed the Lord and trusted Him when the angel announced that he and his wife would finally have a son, but his initial disbelief caused him to suffer a consequence that lasted the entire pregnancy.

1. The Ordinary Couple (Luke 1:5-10)

In this passage, we get an introduction to some real people of the Bible who were key figures in the life and lineage of Jesus. John made note that Herod the Great was king of Judea at this time. Herod was well-known for his cruelty and paranoia that led him to have many people executed, including members of his own family. This gives the context for the time that John the Baptist and Jesus entered the world.

The main characters of today's study were regular, ordinary people just like us. Zechariah was a priest, and his wife Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron. They were good people who Scripture describes as righteous before God and blameless in His sight. These two were spiritual leaders in their community and had an excellent reputation, but they had one notable struggle that plagued them—they were unable to bear a child.


 Why is it important to remember that the people we read about in the Bible were regular people like us? What can happen if we fail to view them this way?

In that day, only the priests of certain lineage were allowed to minister in the temple. Of those who were qualified, the privilege of serving in the temple was chosen by lots. These details help us understand what a major moment this was for Zechariah. He was chosen for this once in a lifetime opportunity to be the one who burned the incense on the altar morning and night as prescribed by the Law of Moses. It was a huge responsibility and one that he likely looked forward to his entire life.


The people were gathered outside waiting for the priest to perform the incense burning ritual inside the temple. As they did, the people outside would lift their own prayers. As the priest was inside burning incense and praying for the nation at the altar where the presence of God resided, those outside would join in silent prayer simultaneously.

Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah

The goal of salvation is to free God's people to serve Him without fear and to enable them to walk in God's path of peace. In Luke 1, Mary pictures the one who trusts God, Elizabeth is the one who rejoices in God, while Zechariah learns to trust God.

-  What do we learn from this passage about doing things in the way God has prescribed, even if it's not the way we would naturally do them? What makes this hard in a season of expectation and waiting?


As the one chosen to pray before the altar of the Lord, Zechariah would have carefully prepared for this moment. He would have been familiar with this ritual and known how much time he had for the prayers, because this happened every morning and every evening. Think about what a significant experience this was for this ordinary man and for his wife. Whatever preparation was required, both would have been cognizant of the special moment they were involved in.

-  Application: When have you been invited into a special moment with the Lord? How did you respond? What makes this exciting? What makes it fearful?

2. The Unusual Announcement (Luke 1:11-17)

God often shows up in the routine moments of life. As Zechariah was praying, he saw an angel of the Lord standing to the right of the altar of incense. That was an incredible and even scary moment. This angel was not the cute little cherub sitting on a cloud that many imagine today but was a strong, powerful, glorious being that struck fear into Zechariah's heart. Angels often begin their conversations with humans with "fear not" for a reason.

We are told that Zechariah was overcome with fear. Nothing can prepare us to be face-to-face with the power and majesty of the Lord. There was no mistaking that this being was from God, and Zechariah's mind likely raced with thoughts of what to do next and what he might have done to bring this about. Zechariah was described as terrified.

-  Why might someone feel fear when confronted with the presence of God or an angel of the Lord? How does this compare to many modern ideas about God or His angels?

The angel spoke to Zechariah and told the priest some very unusual news. The angel told Zechariah that the lifelong prayer of he and Elizabeth had been heard and God would give them a son. What would it mean to the faithful servant of God to hear that the prayers he had prayed for years had been heard and recognized by God?

Although Zechariah and Elizabeth may have given up on that prayer, God had not given up on it. His plans were greater than theirs ever could have been and all that was left was for this ordinary couple to follow the

Lord's instructions and receive His gracious answer. Their hope had been resurrected and the future suddenly looked very different.

- ❓ What is a prayer you have given up on? How might God still be working in that situation? Why is He trustworthy no matter what?

The angel didn't just tell Zechariah they would have a son, but also gave instructions on what to name the child and how to raise him. They would have a son who was to be named John and was going to be consecrated to the Lord his whole life. Further, John was going to be unique in that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb. John was given the great work of preparing the way for the Messiah by turning hearts toward God. God would begin to prepare Him for this task even before he was born.

- ❓ Application: Where do you need to ask the Holy Spirit to empower you as He did John to do His work in the world?

3. The Extraordinary Story (Luke 1:18-25)


Zechariah's head was likely spinning with the information from the angel battling with his hope and emotions that had been resurrected. He struggled to accept the incredible news and spoke honestly to the angel. Again, we are reminded that Zechariah was just a regular person like us. He felt the hope and joy from hearing the angel, but he was also painfully aware of he and Elizabeth's age. He asked the angel for reassurance as he weighed the word from the Lord with the circumstances he knew to be reality for so long.

Notice how the angel responded. He did not give Zechariah the sign he sought. Instead, Gabriel reminded Zechariah who he was talking to, namely one sent directly from God. This is a common thread throughout Scripture when people ask God for assurances. He reminds them of who He is instead of building their confidence in their circumstances. This is a great lesson for us today. When we have opportunity to be used by God, it is not about us but about His power at work in us through the Holy Spirit.


- ❓ When have you been tempted to doubt what God said because of your circumstances? How can you seek to grow in faith regarding what He has said over what you can see?

Due to his unbelief, Zechariah would be unable to speak until the child was born. His lack of belief did not cause God to take back the promise, but it did cause him to not be able to enjoy and celebrate the news through announcing and conversing with others. Zechariah had to store up all the things he wanted to say about the whole situation and find other ways to

communicate during this time. His lack of ability to speak likely gave him more time to consider the ways that he needed to raise this special son in line with the commands of the Lord.

-  When can it be helpful to not talk about something but instead to pray and think about it? Are there examples you know of this practice from Scripture? (See Luke 2:19.)

After the time of incense prayer, the priest would stand before the people so they could see that he was still alive (and had not been consumed by God's glory). The priest would then bless the people. This day however, Zechariah came out after taking longer than normal and could not utter a word. He attempted to convey what had happened in the temple and the people realized something unusual had occurred. Once he was finished with his duties, Zechariah headed home to be with Elizabeth. The end of this passage confirms God's promise, that Elizabeth was given the promised child.

-  Application: What does this text say to you about listening to God's plans and trusting Him even in unlikely circumstances?

Conclusion

Throughout Scripture we see examples of ordinary people who lived extraordinary lives of great impact for the kingdom of God. These people vary from those who struggled to trust the Lord to those who consistently lived righteous lives. The common factor in every one of their stories was God. When God speaks and people listen, the extraordinary happens.

We should follow the example of people like Zechariah and Elizabeth, who lived a righteous life even in the face of great disappointment and obeyed when God spoke to them. Although their circumstances looked vastly different than what the Lord said through the angel, they trusted, and God did a miraculous work in giving them a son in their old age.

To experience extraordinary things in your own story, you must be willing to listen and trust God even if what He says contradicts what you see with your eyes. God has never been limited or defined by situations and He often chooses to defy limitations by picking ordinary people to do incredible things.

- ① How can you seek to live righteously before the Lord so that you might better hear Him?
- ① How do you need to be more like Zechariah and Elizabeth in listening to the Lord with obedience, even when it doesn't make sense? What circumstance is holding you back from trusting God?
- ① How might trusting God in this way give us opportunity for gospel conversations with others?

Prayer of Response

Thank the Lord for using the ordinary to do the extraordinary. Ask Him to use you to do His work in a mighty way.

Memory Verse

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." - Luke 1:13

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Luke* by Thabiti Anyabwile
- *Be Compassionate* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Luke* by Charles Swindoll

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Luke

Purpose

The Gospel of Luke is a carefully researched (1:3), selective presentation of the person and life of Jesus Christ, designed to strengthen the faith of believers (1:3–4) and to challenge the misconceptions of unbelievers, especially those from a Greek background. Its portrait of Jesus is well balanced, skillfully emphasizing his divinity and perfect humanity.

Author

The author of the Third Gospel is not named. Considerable evidence points to Luke as its author. Much of that proof is found in the book of Acts, which identifies itself as a sequel to Luke (Ac 1:1–3). A major line of evidence has to do with the so-called “we” sections of the book (Ac 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–37; 28:1–16). Most of Acts is narrated in third-person plural (“they,” “them”), but some later sections having to do with the ministry of the apostle Paul unexpectedly shift to first-person plural (“we,” “us”). This indicates that the author had joined the apostle Paul for the events recorded in those passages. Since there are no “we” passages in the Gospel of Luke, that fits with the author stating that he used eyewitness testimony to the life of Jesus (1:2), indicating he was not such an eyewitness himself.

Setting

Since Luke wrote both the Third Gospel and the book of Acts (Ac 1:1–3), it is relevant to consider the dating of both books together. The events at the end of Acts occurred around AD 62–63. That is the earliest point at which Acts could have been written. If Acts was written in the early AD 60s from Rome, where Paul was imprisoned for two years (Ac 28:30), the Third Gospel could date from an earlier stage of that period of imprisonment. The other reasonable possibility is during Paul’s earlier two-year imprisonment in Caesarea (Ac 24:27). From that location, Luke would have been able to travel and interview the eyewitnesses to Jesus’s life and ministry who were still alive.

Special Features

The Gospel of Luke is the longest book in the New Testament. Focusing on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, this Gospel is part one of a two-part history, the book of Acts being part two. Both were dedicated to “most honorable Theophilus” (Lk 1:3; Ac 1:1).

Extended Commentary

Luke 1:5-25

1:5 King Herod the Great was an Idumean appointed by the Roman emperor who ruled from 37–4 BC. His realm covered not only Judea, but also Samaria, Galilee, and parts of Perea and Syria. In the days of indicates that the events that immediately follow probably occurred in 7–6 BC. The priesthood of Israel was made up of twenty-four divisions, including the house of Abijah (1Ch 24:10). Daughters of Aaron reveals that Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were from priestly families. It is also the first instance of Luke's regular emphasis on the vital role that women played throughout Jesus's life.

1:6–7 The words righteous ... living without blame refers to consistent obedience to God's commands and requirements, but more foundationally to living by faith. This is how Abraham was justified in God's sight (Gn 15:6; Gl 3:6–7, 9). Like Abraham and Sarah, despite their godliness, Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children and were well along in years (past the age of child-bearing). It was considered a curse from God for a woman to be unable to bear children (see note at vv. 24–25).

1:8–9 Twice a year the priestly division of Abijah (see note at v. 5) was on duty at the Jerusalem temple for a week. Out of hundreds of priests in his division, Zechariah was chosen by the casting of a lot (see notes at Pr 16:33; Ac 1:24–26) to burn incense on the altar in front of the most holy place (the sanctuary), a privileged duty that a priest could perform only once in his life. In fact, many never enjoyed this privilege because the lot never fell to them.

1:10 The hour of incense occurred at 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. daily. The presence of a sizable assembly of the people makes it more likely that this incident took place in the afternoon.

1:11–12 On an angel of the Lord, see note at v. 19. To be overcome with fear upon seeing an angel is common in Luke (v. 29; 2:9) and elsewhere in Scripture (Jdg 6:22–23; Dn 8:16–17).

1:13 Your prayer may refer to Zechariah and Elizabeth praying to have a child (your wife ... will bear you a son), or it could have been the prayer a priest was to offer at the altar for the redemption of Israel. John means "the Lord is gracious."

1:14–15 Joy is the prevailing mood of the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel (vv. 44, 47, 58; 2:10). As great in the sight of the Lord as John would be, he was still only the forerunner for the coming Messiah. Never drink wine or beer indicates that John the Baptist was under a lifelong Nazirite vow (Nm 6:1–21). On filled with the Holy Spirit ... in his mother's womb, see note at v. 41–45. On the meaning of being filled with the Holy Spirit, see Eph 5:18.

1:16–17 Turn ... to the Lord their God speaks of conversion, the result of repentance, which John the Baptist preached forcefully (3:3). Go before him ... to make ready for the Lord a prepared people echoes the essence of the prophecy in Is 40:3–5 (see Lk 3:4–6). Malachi 4:5–6

prophesied that an Elijah-like figure would come and turn the hearts of fathers to their children. That new “Elijah” would be John the Baptist.

1:18 Like Abraham (Gn 15:8) and Sarah (Gn 18:10–15), Zechariah had a difficult time believing God would fulfill his promise in his old age.

1:19 Gabriel means “(mighty) man of God.” He is one of only two angels named in Scripture. The other is Michael (Dn 12:1; Rv 12:7).

1:20 As punishment for doubting the angel’s pronouncement, Zechariah was rendered mute (silent and unable to speak) and possibly deaf as well (v. 62). The day these things take place was the time that began at John’s birth and culminated at his circumcision (vv. 57–64).

1:21–22 The people . . . waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary were surprised because he did not emerge when expected. Since Gabriel had rendered him speechless (v. 20), Zechariah was unable to pronounce the traditional Aaronic blessing (Nm 6:24–26) upon the crowd. They realized he had seen a vision, likely because they noted his facial expressions and the excited signs he made with his hands.

1:23 Since each priest was on duty only for a week at a time, Zechariah would have been able to go home soon after his encounter with Gabriel (vv. 10–20). His home was in the Judean hill country, not far from Jerusalem (v. 39).

1:24–25 Elizabeth withdrew and kept herself in seclusion for five months after she miraculously conceived. Why did she do this? Some speculate that she feared miscarrying during the early months of pregnancy. More likely she recognized that her unusual pregnancy would draw unwelcome attention if it became widely known. Better to have a restful start to a pregnancy that came so late in life.¹

References

1. *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).