

**Luke 1: 5-25 and 57-66; “The Faith of Zacharias Tested” A Christmas Sermon
delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on December 27th, 2020,
in the Afternoon Worship Service.**

The people whose lives we are to examine this afternoon are Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, the forerunner of our Lord. They are described for us here as both being righteous before God. They knew the Lord, and it was a saving faith that they had, because it was a walking faith which they lived out. These two went about their lives “walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord – blameless.” A saving faith will always be a walking faith in this sense. A living and saving faith will always evidence itself in the pursuit of holiness by keeping the commandments of God. This was not only an imputed righteousness that they had, but it was an imparted righteousness as well.

This is an important truth for all Christians to think about; that when you become a Christian, it is not simply that the guilt of your sins is forgiven, but it is that Christ by His Spirit is imparting grace to you to become holy and righteous in your understanding and your behavior. The truth that I am trying to bring to your attention at this hour is, that Zacharias and Elizabeth, even though they were walking in a blameless way, they still had things to learn from God. Let us understand this, that until the day of our death we will still be learning the lessons of faith. Your faith in God, if it is a true and saving faith, will be tested at many points. Your faith in what God intends to do through you will be tested. And so, I would like us to look together now at 4 crucial areas where your faith will be tested and perfected.

1st of all – Your faith will be tested in relation to your prayers. (verses 5-13)

The truth is; that even though this couple was righteous, it didn't mean that they had never experienced disappointment in relation to answered prayer. Sometimes disappointment leads to unbelief. And unfortunately this is not always seen by Christians as a sinful mindset. Elizabeth was barren; she could not have children. They had tried many times, for many years, but still no children. Now they were becoming advanced in years and they feared that they would have to bear this reproach all their lives. To be barren was looked upon in that day, as not having God's blessing, by many people. To be barren would often mean that the woman, and the man as well, might be looked down upon or despised or even shunned by others. What a disgrace, some people thought, when God had promised the blessing of children to those who would obey him, as it is related in Deuteronomy 7: 14. “You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be a male or female barren among you.”

Well sometimes we might misapply the scripture to ourselves, or others, don't we? We do not see that it is the Lord who has shut the womb in order that He might be more glorified, in the delay of the opening it. But this couple did not know this, at the time. Here we see Zacharias going to do his service, of burning incense in the temple. He had been chosen by lot to this privileged and holy task. All the multitude of people were praying outside in the court. This was probably the one and only time in his life that Zacharias would get to do this. He would go into the holy place with incense, he would place it on the altar, and he would pray for the peace of Jerusalem. He would also pray for salvation to come by the birth of the Messiah. This was prayer in the highest and most glorious sense.

And so, he sometimes thought – Why not pray that somehow Elizabeth might have a child? No, it is impossible he thinks. He is afraid that things could never change in that realm. Perhaps you are like Zacharias. There is something which God has not granted to you; something which you have greatly longed for. But, so far, it has never materialized. And you fear that it never will. Is it having children? Is it finding a godly spouse? Is it having children come to know the Lord? Is it some position of usefulness in God's service? Is it to see God's

kingdom come with power in your heart, or in the church? God will oftentimes put some crook in your lot; some disturbing, bothersome circumstance in your life; something which seems to hinder your Christian life greatly. You have prayed about it many times, but you do not see how that answer that we are looking for could ever come about. You are afraid that things will never change. You think that they will never be resolved favorably. This is how it was with Zacharias. However, just as he placed the incense on the altar and had finished his prayer, an angel suddenly appears. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But even though he did not know it; his prayers, the prayers of many years, are about to be answered.

2nd - Your faith in God's Word will be tested at the point of your hopes.

(verses 14-20)

Zacharias, when he saw the angel Gabriel, he was troubled and afraid, the text says. The Lord, when He tests your faith, He will focus on the point of your reception of His Word. He wants to see how you will receive it. But then, He already knows that, doesn't He. The Lord brings the test to your faith in order to build your faith, when you truly know Him. He knows your hopes and your fears, and He lines up your hopes with the reception of His Word, and He evaluates it. The angel saw that Zacharias was troubled and afraid. And he said to him – "Do not be afraid Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you shall call his name John."

Sometimes when God is ready to answer your prayers, prayers which you have prayed for, for many years, you might fall into a sinful skepticism. Your hope of seeing the desire of your heart realized in respect to having children, or having godly children, has fallen to the ground. And it leads inevitably to unbelief if it is not checked. Our God is a God who thinks about us, and He would sometimes surprise us with giving us the answers to our prayers. We should be willing to have God surprise us. We should be willing for Him to bring answers to our prayers in His own way. But instead we often want it our way. The angel goes farther, here, and he actually tells Zacharias that he will have joy and gladness, and that many would rejoice at John's birth, because John was to be great in the sight of the Lord.

What could be more heartening, more encouraging, or more conducive to praise than words like these? This was going to be the answer to all of Zacharias' dreams, and the fulfillment of all of the desires of his heart. He is not only to be a father, but he is to have a son who will be great in the sight of the Lord. The Lord was going to do "exceedingly abundantly beyond all that he could ask or think". His son was to be a man who would turn the hearts of the fathers to care for their children; to care for their spiritual welfare, and to seek their salvation. John the Baptist would be a man who would preach in such a way, by the power of God's Spirit, that he would turn disobedient people to the wisdom of the just. He would teach them in such a way that he would make ready a people prepared to follow and serve the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ.

What an astounding revelation of the Lord's mercy and kindness, to grant this privilege to Zacharias. And yet, how does he respond to it? He responds with sinful skepticism. "How shall I know this?" You and I need to learn a most important lesson from this. We need to see that faith and hope are essential graces to keep in exercise in our minds and hearts. We need to understand that there are many great and wonderful things which God does, to answer our deepest longings, and to fulfill all our greatest hopes. In Zacharias' case it was not only that he didn't understand how God could bring this great thing about. He was not sure that he could believe that this thing could be done at all.

His response was like slapping God in the face. God tells him this great news through the message of the angel; that this thing that He would do would bring Zacharias joy and gladness, and he is skeptical! Oh how dishonoring it was to God, for him to respond in this way! It was no wonder that Zacharias got into such trouble over this response. God's Word is to be received for

what it really is; the Word of God which performs its work in you. But how much more in this case, when it was Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, who stood in the very presence of God; an angel who was sent to him to tell him these good tidings. If Zacharias would not speak in thanksgiving and praise, then he will not speak at all, because he must feel and own his guilt in this matter. Will you not see that your faith will also be tested? And it will be tested at the point of your hopes, and whether you will receive God's words to you, through his servants? Whether it is an angel, or whether it is a pastor, it is extremely important to God, and it will be extremely important to you. Your response to His testing your faith is important to this church and the progress of the gospel in this place. God is looking at your response.

3rd – Your faith in God's Word will be tested at the point of timing.

(verses 20-25)

In verse 20 Gabriel says – “But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.” What do you do when God's timing of fulfilling His words is not what you would like to see? We should remember that God's words will be fulfilled their own time, but that He will have your faith tested concerning this point. What God is looking for, from us as his child, in relation to this, is to see the importance of patience and waiting. The best things that God will bless you with, often you will have to wait for them. Many things in your life, are going to require waiting. Zacharias and Elizabeth had waited many years for children and none had come. What were they to do? Should they conclude against God's power and against His love or his favor?

“I am an old man,” says Zacharias. “And my wife is advanced in years.” Why is it that we think that becoming old will prevent God from doing many things with us, and in us, and through us, if He so wills it? No, He is concerned that our faith will be tested at this point. God would show Zacharias that the fulfillment of these things never did lie with him; even when he was young. The people were waiting outside the sanctuary for Zacharias. They were marveling that he lingered so long. But they did wait for him to come out. When will we learn that God's intervention and His revelation of Himself, to do great things, will always involve delay? It will be a delay in regard to what you ourselves have conceived or scheduled. You should remember and take it to heart; that God's timing will always be perfect. But will you learn to wait?

Will you think that you have seen it all, when it is only just begun? It seems that Elizabeth learned the lesson well. When she conceived, it says, in verse 34, she hid herself for five months. She was concerned with the grace of humility. She was not interested in boasting to other people. At the right time her pregnancy would be made known, and God would get the glory. She says in verse 25 – “Thus the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.” This is good. We should take this to heart. There will be days; there will be times; when God will look upon the faithful Christian man or woman, to do great things for them. Will you be praying and looking for this, even if you have to wait? Or will you allow your heart to become cold and indifferent to Him?

Listen to a few verses that commend waiting on the Lord. Psalm 25: 4 and 5 – “Show me Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths.” “Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; on You I wait all the day.” Psalm 27: 13 and 14 – “I would have lost heart unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” “Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the Lord!” Psalm 130: 3-6 – “If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” “But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.” “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I do hope.” “My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchman for the morning – yes, more than those who watch for the morning.”

Let us ask ourselves now, if we are interested in God's answer? Are we interested in God's coming to us personally? Are we interested in God's timing of things? Or are we only interested in getting what we want as soon as possible? God is interested in building faith. He is interested what you hope for. But He is also interested in your Christian character; the proven character of your life. This is so that when He does great things for you, that you will respond in a way that will bring glory to Him.

And 4th – Your faith in God's Word will be tested at the point of fulfillment.

(verses 57-66)

“Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son.” “When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.” “So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias.” “His mother answered and said, ‘No; he shall be called John.’” “But they said to her, ‘There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.’” “So they made signs to his father – what he would have him called.” “And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, ‘His name is John.’” “So they all marveled.” “Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God.”

So now we see that the words of the angel Gabriel were coming to fulfillment. The child is born and God's testing of Zacharias' faith was coming to an end. Faith had been perfected in Zacharias, and God's glory was established. What will the child's name be, Elizabeth? Will he be called after your husband? No, he shall be called John. But none of your relatives is called by that name. The people make signs to Zacharias. Zacharias, what would you have him to be called? He writes on the tablet, “His name is John”. And now the discipline is lifted. Now he praises God. Now people all around the hill country of Judea wonder – What kind of child will this be? Zacharias and Elizabeth have had their faith tested and in spite of the discipline, which was needed in Zacharias' case, they have passed the test. What about you? True faith will always be tested at the point of your prayers, your hope, the timing, and the fulfillment of what God will do for you. If you will trust in the Lord Jesus you will pass the test.