

Luke

*The Sin of Unbelief
(Luke 1:18-25)*

With Study Questions

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And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. ²⁰ 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." ²¹ And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. ²² But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless. ²³ So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. ²⁴ Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on *me*, to take away my reproach among people" (Luke 1:18-25).

Introduction

Apparently, I am tied to an algorithm that leads my computer to conclude that I have an interest in certain types of conversations. One conversation surfaced this week that made me think of the interaction in this passage between Zacharias and the angel, Gabriel.

It was a brief clip of comedian, Ricky Gervais. He is a very funny, and intelligent man. He is also a very outspoken atheist. But he also serves as an example of how (as has been pointed out by many able writers) people can be very smart in some things but not so in others. In an attempt to legitimize his atheism, Gervais attempted to make atheism sound so obvious, so self-evident that there shouldn't even be a word for it.

He posits that the word 'atheism' "shouldn't exist." Not because atheism isn't legitimate, but because it is so incontrovertibly true, one shouldn't feel the need to create a term for it. He argues, "There's not a word for not believing in fairies." He may be an able comedian, but clearly not an able logician,

philosopher or theologian. That someone does not believe in something is highly significant.

I would not want any of my own children to marry someone who sought to use this type of rhetorical trickery. If a suitor said they didn't believe in justice, love, honesty, truth, courage, etc. one should not be surprised that I would want my children (and anyone else I cared about) to maintain a healthy distance. It would not help if they pled that they are merely telling me what they don't believe, not what they do believe.

One need merely observe the consequences of unbelief that turned the twentieth century into the horrifying Mao, Lenin, Stalin Communistic bloodbath that is still staining the mops of the twenty-first century. The atheist is quick to point out, as Gervais sought to once again trumpet, that atheism is not a system of thought. It is merely a word describing a privation, an absence-something that is not there. I pray we're all wise enough to grasp how such a privation yanks the spine from the body of humanity. Of the last century it's been said,

Communism, at its heart is dependent upon Marxist driven atheism. It was the surgical and intentional extraction of the acknowledgement of the Triune God from the affairs of men that left politically amoral monsters in charge of the 20th century. It is not what these atheists believed that made them the horrifying nightmares that they were; it was what they refused to believe.

All bitterly proving the quote attributed to Dostoyevsky, that "If there is no God, everything is permitted." I lead with this because unbelief *ouk episteusas* is at the heart of the encounter in the above passage.

Review

Up to this point in Luke he has conveyed his commitment, by the Spirit of God, to write "an orderly account" (Luke 1:3) of the events of Christ. Interestingly, the account doesn't begin with Christ. It begins with John the Baptist-actually his parents, Zacharias and Elizabeth.

They were a very righteous couple living in very dark times. The "days of Herod, the king of Judea" makes any discomfort we have with our current political environment pale in comparison. Herod was an evil and cruel king. And it wasn't as if Zacharias and Elizabeth could take great comfort in their religious

environment, which was dismal. The strength of their convictions had to transcend both their political and religious atmosphere. They were living very much in a **“Let God be true though every one a liar” (Romans 3:4)** generation.

Zacharias is in the process of performing his priestly duties of burning incense in the temple when he has a frightening encounter. An angel appears. But this frightening encounter rapidly transitions into the hearing of the best news Zacharias probably ever heard. Not only will the prayer normally prayed in the temple (that God would deliver His people) be answered, but a vital role in the answering of that prayer would include him and his wife having a child, even though Elizabeth was barren and they were **“well advanced in years” (Luke 1:7)**.

This angel has evangelized *evangelisasthai* (Luke 1:19) Zacharias. He has given him good news, **“glad tidings.”** But this is where the problems begin. This man, who is earlier described as **“righteous”** and **“blameless”** (Luke 1:6), will find himself under discipline. Why?

And Zacharias said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years” (Luke 1:18).

How?

I hope I don't sound irreverent in pointing out that this does not sound like an entirely unreasonable response. I was recently carded at the grocery store. I think it warranted some confusion on my part. The confusion or hesitancy on the part of Zacharias not only seems warranted, but it also seems to have good company.

Abraham **“fell on his face and laughed”** at the prospect of having a child in his old age (Genesis 17:17). Later in this very chapter, Mary will have her own **“How can this be” (Luke 1:34)** moment. We can also speak of Sarah and Gideon and others. There is a great deal of speculation as to why it is Zacharias who is stricken with this discipline.

Perhaps he should have known better. He was an older priest. He had read, and maybe even preached, on the story of Abraham and Sarah. Perhaps Mary is given a pass because she was likely a teen (although she seemed to know the Scriptures well). Perhaps God, as His prerogative allows, exercised mercy on Abraham and Mary but justice on Zacharias. Perhaps God, as His omniscience

allows, saw in Zacharias a deeper doubt than He saw in others. We don't know any of this for sure. But we do know some things.

We know Gabriel's answer to Zacharias' doubt.

And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings (Luke 1:19).

Self-Evident Truth

Zacharias' **"I am old"**¹ is answered by Gabriel's **"I am Gabriel"** sent by God. When we hear the term 'self-evident' we usually think of the Declaration of Independence.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

They seemed to have a different understanding of the separation of church and state so prevalent today. Be that as it may, there are very few things that carry the weight of being self-evident. Self-evident means it doesn't need something else to explain it or legitimize it.

There are (at least) two things the Bible speaks of that would fall into this category. One is that God is. There is a general, and universal, knowledge all people have that God is (Romans 1:19, 20). Second, that the words of Scripture are true. Jesus taught that His words are sufficient to **"judge" us "on the last day" (John 12:48).**

All to say that when Gabriel answers Zacharias with the words that he is Gabriel, who **"stands in the presence of God, and was sent to you"** that is the meatiest meal anyone can put on the plate in terms of a credible statement. Zacharias, like many of us, might find it easy to believe in God. It is not always as easy to believe God. And there are consequences for both.

Before we get to the aftermath of Zacharias' doubt, I think it is pretty marvelous to note that it was Gabriel (the same angel) who, about five hundred years earlier, gave Daniel the **"insight and understanding"** (Daniel 9:22) of the

¹ In Greek, I am a presbyterian.

visions he encountered. He explained to Daniel the prophecy of the “**Seventy weeks**” (Daniel 9:24).

That highly debated prophecy is too much to dig into at this time. Suffice it to say, that the clearest and most obvious reading of Scripture tells us that Christ fulfilled the seventy weeks of Daniel in His first advent. Gabriel gave the prophecy. And now Gabriel is declaring the beginning of its fulfillment.

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 (Luke 1:20).

The Sin of Unbelief

Unbelief should not be understood as a morally neutral position. In our unbelief, we are in active denial of something we know to be true.

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Hebrews 3:12).

I am not suggesting that belief is always easy. We have a man in this narrative who is given beaming accolades in the Scriptures themselves (righteous and blameless), but his faithfulness came to a screeching halt when he heard something so extreme. And there were consequences.

Again, there is a great deal of speculation regarding the consequences of being mute (and likely deaf-Luke 1:62). Some suggest that he didn't believe with his ears so was made deaf, or he didn't respond appropriately with his mouth so was made mute. That God restricted him from excitedly sharing the good news with others, etc. These explanations all seem a bit fanciful to me.

I will say this, the consequences for a believer, having a hard time believing is quite different than the consequences for an unbeliever who has grown hardened in their unbelief.

What Zacharias would experience for the next nine or ten months was a discipline. But it was a loving, fatherly discipline.

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he

loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:5-11).

Nine or ten months of deaf and dumb produced something in Zacharias. Perhaps such a state created almost a year of deep reflection. I don't think it would be far-fetched to conclude that if one asked Zacharias many years later, what period in his life was the most sanctifying, what stretch of time did he become the richest in soul and mind. He would answer, “Those ten months of silence.”

Growth can be painful. For the Christian, for the believer, all the trials, pain and difficulty have, as their chief end, a growth that leads to the glory of God. I pray we would all desire to obtain that which is expressed by those beautiful words, “**the peaceful fruit of righteousness.**” Of this phrase, I found Calvin's words ministerial.

And by the *fruit of righteousness* he means the fear of the Lord and a godly and holy life, of which the cross is the teacher. He calls it *peaceable*, because in adversities we are alarmed and disquieted, being tempted by impatience, which is always noisy and restless; but being chastened, we acknowledge with a resigned mind how profitable did that become to us which before seemed bitter and grievous.²

For the believer struggling with unbelief, they have a Father who is at work in us (sometimes in ways very uncomfortable), bolstering our faith. He wants us to believe that He will feed us, deliver us from dangers, vindicate our

² Calvin, J., & Owen, J. (2010). [Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews](#) (p. 320). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

reputations, protect our lives and bring us home to heaven escorted by the angels when He determines (Luke 16:22). Our Father would have us, with Paul, to utter the words,

...for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content (Philippians 4:11).

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, disturbed by a host of concerns. Wondering if things will work out. Doubting perhaps that they will. Perhaps we have our Zacharias moments, doubting the wonderfully good news, that...

...my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).

But for those who are hardened in their unbelief, the consequences of catering to this rebellion are quite different. As this passage informs us, God's faithfulness will not be held at bay because Zacharias doubted. The things of which Gabriel spoke, will **"take place."** All the people waited and witnessed Zacharias' inability to speak. They could tell he had seen a vision. Elizabeth would conceive and (for reasons not disclosed) hide herself, while rejoicing. God's faithfulness can be a source of joy and peace. It can also be a source of fear.

This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him.*¹² *If we endure, We shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us.*¹³ *If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:11-13).

But let the unbeliever tremble. If a good, saved man was struck dumb, what will become of you who have no faith at all? A destroying angel, not Gabriel will be your fearful visitor. And he will not utter the words, "fear not." Unbelief will destroy the best of us, belief will save the worst of us. Our confession rightly states,

As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent (WCF, 15, 4).

Questions for Study

1. Should the word 'atheism' even exist since it merely describes something people don't believe? Explain (pages 2, 3).
2. How did Zacharias respond to the good news from Gabriel? How do you think you would have responded (page 4)?
3. How did Gabriel respond to Zacharias' doubt? Why was that sufficient (page 5)?
4. Is unbelief morally neutral? Why or why not (pages 5, 6)?
5. What were the consequences of Zacharias' unbelief? What do these types of consequences produce in Christians (pages 6-8)?
6. How can God's faithfulness be a source of joy? How can it be a source of fear (page 8)?