

*A wife woke up one morning and said, “I just had a dream that you bought me a new gold necklace. **What do you think it means?**”*

*“I don’t know” he replied, “but Christmas is just around the corner.”*

*A few nights later, she again woke up after having a dream, “This time, I dreamed you gave me a pearl necklace. **What do you think it means?**”*

*He answered, “Dear, I think you’ll find out soon enough.”*

*The night before Christmas, she again woke up telling him about her dream, “This time I dreamed that you brought me a diamond necklace. **What do you think it means?**”*

*“Honey, be patient. “You’ll know tomorrow,” he said.*

*The following morning, the husband pulled out a package from under the Christmas tree and gave it to his wife. Overwhelmed with excitement, she opened it – to find a book entitled, “The Meaning of Dreams.”*

I’m going to go out on a limb here, but I don’t think she was expecting that. **Have you ever had an experience where things didn’t turn out as you had expected?** Maybe you ordered something at a restaurant that didn’t live up to its name. For example, I ordered a “*hotter than hell*” burger at a restaurant and didn’t even break a sweat. Maybe you went on a vacation that turned out to be more exhausting than relaxing. Maybe it’s your job – maybe it’s a relationship. Whatever it is – for whatever reason – it’s not what you expected.

We all have expectations – expectations of people, expectations involving certain circumstances, and even expectations for ourselves, and when those expectations are not met – whether they be reasonable or not, in some way we feel cheated and disappointed. Now, adding to that, we also have expectations of God, and when life doesn’t turn out as we expected – when things don’t happen in the way we think they should happen – if we’re being honest, we can also feel cheated and disappointed with God.

Maybe you had your heart set on something – you asked God for it – it seemed to be in His will – it was something that God could have easily provided if He wanted to – but as far as you could tell, nothing happened. Yes, you still have faith in God, but you feel cheated – as if He actually owed you something, and you’re disappointed with Him because things did not turn out as you had expected.

I think we've all been there to some degree, and this morning I want to introduce you to a couple who would certainly understand. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Luke 1** and we are going to start with **verse 5**. This is one of my favorite Bible stories – a story I consider it to be part of the Christmas story. Luke begins and tells us,

**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.**

Have you ever read a story or watched a movie that began with the words...*It was a dark and stormy night?* In some respects, Luke takes that same approach here with the words "**In the days of Herod**". Yes, it gives us a time frame to work with as Herod the Great ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC, but this opening also provides us with a grim and dreary setting to the story, and let me explain.

Herod – who was not of Jewish blood, was the **king of Judea** – a puppet king of the Roman Empire. Herod was a paranoid and a brutal ruler who held onto his throne at all costs, even executing a father-in-law, several of his ten wives, and two of his own sons – and just as a reminder, this is the same Herod who ordered the slaughter of all boys in Bethlehem under the age of two in an attempt to kill Jesus who Herod believed was a threat to the throne.

Under his rule, the land was filled with immorality, even the priesthood had become corrupt – so, these truly were grim and dreary days, and to some it may have seemed that God had abandoned His people, but in the midst of all of this – Luke focuses on two faithful people named **Zacharias** and his wife **Elizabeth** who were living in a little town, out in the hill country of Judea, outside the city of Jerusalem.

Luke tells us that Zacharias was a Levite **priest** of the division of **Abijah** and Elizabeth was the daughter of a priest – which was a special blessing for Zacharias. A priest was required to marry an Israelite virgin, but not necessarily a virgin from a priestly family, so for Zacharias to marry Elizabeth was a huge blessing.

And speaking of priests, in those days there were a lot of them. Priests had become so numerous, approximately 20,000 of them, that they could not all minister at the temple in Jerusalem at once. As a result, the priests were arranged into 24 divisions, and these divisions served on a rotational basis – each division of priests would serve a full week. The division of Abijah, where Zacharias was assigned, was the 8<sup>th</sup> division in rotation out of the 24.

So, both Zacharias and Elizabeth had come from priestly families, but that's not all. Luke says in **verse 6**,

**They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.**

Notice that both Zacharias and Elizabeth were described as **righteous in the sight of God**. God had graciously declared them righteous because they trusted Him, and because they trusted Him, Luke states they walked **blamelessly**. Now, that does not mean they were sinless – that was not true of them nor is it true of us, but rather, the desire of their hearts was directed towards God and it showed in their lives.

Zacharias and Elizabeth loved God, and as a couple, their lives were devoted to Him. They were faithfully serving God from their hearts, and by God's grace, they were upright before Him. Their marriage seemed to be a marriage made in heaven – both from a priestly family line, so given all of this – surely, Zacharias and Elizabeth could expect that blessings would flow from God. Look at **verse 7**.

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

Here, Luke tells us that this godly, devoted couple could not have children, and this was a very big deal in the Jewish culture, and let me explain.

From a Jewish perspective – God loves the righteous, and according to their interpretation of the Old Testament, God showed His love, God showed His favor to the righteous by granting blessings, and among those blessings was children.

This was the Jewish hope – this was their expectation from God, living under the idea that you get what you deserve – when you are good, you are entitled to receive blessings from God and when you are not so good, you deserve divine punishment.

So, from a Jewish perspective, a couple who did not have children suggested that they were being punished by God. That's how they saw it. It was a tragedy for a Jewish couple because of this stigma of God's displeasure upon them.

But that's not all. From a practical sense, children served as the social security net – meaning, as their parents got older, the more children you had, the better off you would be with their support in the later years. So, for Zacharias and Elizabeth, their inability to have children was terrible on many levels, and at the very least – it was disgraceful amongst the people. Yes, they may have been righteous in the eyes of God, but in the eyes of everyone else – they were being punished by Him.

**Can you imagine how Zacharias and Elizabeth felt?** Like everyone else, they wanted children – they had expected children. Other family members and friends had children, and grandchildren, and maybe even great grandchildren. And undoubtedly, Zacharias and Elizabeth knew of people who did not serve God and had children – but they were childless and disgraced.

And just so you know, Zacharias could have divorced Elizabeth to add to her disgrace. In their culture, barrenness was an acceptable reason for a divorce. Zacharias could have gotten rid of Elizabeth, married another, and possibly had children by his new wife – but this couple stayed together no matter what.

Together, they remained faithful servants of God, but they were given no children by Him – and now they were both beyond the age to have children. Some have suggested they were in their 80's, maybe 90's, so at this point in their lives, they fully expected to endure this disgrace and disappointment of being childless for the rest of their lives.

Luke continues with the story. Look at **verses 8-10**.

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

As I said earlier, there were too many priests to serve in the daily rituals at the temple in Jerusalem, so they organized into 24 divisions, rotating each week with a new division. Within these divisions, they cast lots to determine who was assigned each task for the service – in this case the *Service of Incense*.

The Jews tell us that there were three priests involved in the *Service of Incense* – one priest who collected the ashes left on the altar from the preceding service and then he backed out; another who brought in a pan of burning coals and placed it on the altar, and then he backed out; and a third priest who went in with the incense, sprinkled it on the burning coals, and, while the smoke ascended, he offered prayer for the redemption of Israel and for the Messiah to come.

He alone would be at the altar, and by lot, this task fell on Zacharias – the most honorable task in the whole service because it was as close as a non-high priest could get to the Holy of Holies which was just behind a curtain. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a priest.

Now it's so easy to focus on the details of his priestly task that we overlook the simple fact that Zacharias continued to serve God, and I assume fully supported by Elizabeth. Their circumstances, although difficult, had not made them sour and bitter. They did not give up, they did not leave the ministry, nor did they turn their hearts from God. Instead, they continued to persevere and serve Him despite their disgrace and their disappointment.

So, Zacharias is in the temple alone and something happens. Let's continue beginning with **verse 11**.

**<sup>11</sup>And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. <sup>13</sup>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."**

This was the greatest day in Zacharias' life as a priest – the one time when he got to offer incense. He's performing his assigned task, he's all alone in the temple or so he thought – and then poof, out of nowhere, the angel Gabriel shows up standing next to the altar, and he has message from God.

Now bear in mind, nothing like this has happened in 400 years. Between the last book in the Old Testament – **Malachi**, up to this appearance by Gabriel – heaven has been silent. That does not mean that God was not working in the lives of people because He was, but for 400 years – no angels were appearing, no prophets were preaching, and no word was being written. Nothing but silence from God until this very moment.

Well, Zacharias sees Gabriel – he's never seen an angel before, he's only read about them in the Old Testament, but he has no doubt that he is looking at one right now, and go figure – he's terrified, but Gabriel says 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."**

Your prayer has been heard. Let's talk about that for a moment. As you know, Zacharias is currently in the temple, at the altar, offering incense to the Lord and praying for the redemption of Israel and the coming Messiah. That's why he's there. That was the honor given to him. That's what he's supposed to be praying about, but the angel Gabriel tells Zacharias that God is answering his prayer for a child. I like what one writer had said about this, suggesting what Zacharias may have been thinking at that very moment:

*I don't know what you are talking about angel. My wife and I prayed for a child day after day, and year after year, but we gave up on that prayer for a child a long, long time ago.*

*I'm now praying for the redemption of Israel. I'm now praying that God will send the promised Messiah – but I haven't been praying for a child for many, many years now. I gave up on the idea of ever being a dad long ago, and just so you know angel, we are both well past our golden years.*

Here's what's so awesome about this. Zacharias had been praying for the redemption of Israel and the coming Messiah, but in order to bring that about, it was God's will to also answer a long-forgotten personal prayer for a child. God would answer two prayers for a single purpose and use this miracle son named **John** to usher in the promised Messiah named *Jesus*.

You see, even though Zacharias and Elizabeth were living in disappointment – their disappointment did not change what God thought about them, nor did it change His plans for them.

Then Gabriel goes on to tell Zacharias about his unborn son. He says beginning with **verse 14**,

**<sup>14</sup> You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice over his birth. <sup>15</sup> 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 still in his mother's womb.**

**<sup>16</sup> And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.**

**<sup>17</sup> And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”**

Well, it's clear their son is not going to be an ordinary son. We are told that John will bring joy and gladness to his parents, and his birth would bring joy into the world. John would be **great in the sight of God**, but he would not follow in the footsteps of Zacharias and serve as a priest in the temple – instead John was given another mission at birth. John would be set apart for a special mission and filled with the **Holy Spirit** in his mother's womb, which was unheard of.

Throughout the Old Testament, God anointed special people with His Spirit to perform specific tasks for a limited time. For example, Moses was filled with the Spirit to carry out the Exodus from Egypt. Gideon was filled with the Spirit to lead

the Israelites into battle, but never before had someone been filled with the Spirit from birth. John was the first as the forerunner to the Messiah and in some respects, the forerunner for all believers who live by the Spirit.

So, that's some birth announcement for John, but it's not the first time it was announced. The first announcement occurred 700 years prior in **Isaiah 40:1-3**, where we read,

*<sup>1</sup>“Comfort, comfort My people,” says your God. <sup>2</sup>“Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her guilt has been removed, that she has received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” <sup>3</sup>The voice of one calling out, “Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”*

Some 300 years after that, we read another birth announcement in **Malachi 3:1**.

*“Behold, I am sending My messenger, and he will clear a way before Me. And the Lord, whom you are seeking, will suddenly come to His temple.”*

I suspect that Zacharias and Elizabeth knew the Scriptures – they may have even known these specific passages, but there is no way they could have expected that these passages were talking about the son they thought they couldn't have.

You see, God had a plan all along, and He waited for the proper time to set His plan into motion. For Zacharias and Elizabeth, it was a long time to wait in disappointment. God knew that they had desperately wanted a child. He knew they suffered from disgrace in their culture, but in God's time, at the right time, they got much more than a son – they got a prophet of God – they got the one who would clear the way for the Savior of the world – Jesus Christ.

As I said at the start of my message, I love this story – it is a hopeful story, it is God's story, but living in this story wasn't easy back then – and it's not easy now.

As we live out our lives, as we take part in God's story, disappointments are sure to come because we don't always get what we expect. Just like Zacharias and Elizabeth, we get disappointed when we have our hearts set on one thing, but get another thing – or nothing at all.

Zacharias and Elizabeth thought they would never have children – they were well past child-bearing years, stricken with age, but in their disappointment, Zacharias and Elizabeth continued to serve God, and they continued to turn their hearts toward Him, instead of walking away from Him in bitterness.

So, don't shut down when it does not go your way, for if you do, that suggests you are more concerned with what you want than with what God wants. Instead, set your heart on the things above, remember that God is working in your life, He's faithful, His timing is perfect, His purposes are much greater and farther reaching than you could ever know, and in the end it will all work out just like He has promised.

Now, there's something else I want to say. God's *delays* are not necessarily His *denials* – in other words, don't think that if something hasn't happened in the time you expect that God has said “*no*.” His timing and His ways are different from ours. God chooses to act or not to act according to His perfect plan in order to bring about His purposes – just like He did with Zacharias and Elizabeth. So, don't give up.

God is writing a story – a story from eternity past to eternity future, and in this story are the names of Zacharias, and Elizabeth, and John – and as believers in Jesus Christ, our names have also been included in this everlasting story. In spite of us, by God's grace, we are fortunate just to be in it – blessed beyond measure – and it's much more than we could ever expect.

Source Material:

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