

When Christmas Seems Unbelievable

A Study of Luke 1:5-25, 57-79

Characteristic of Completeness: Faith

Big Idea: Christmas is about His presence.

Related Scriptures: Proverbs 3:5-6; Psalm 139:1-10; Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; Matthew 1:23; 28:19-20; Hebrews 11:1-40; 2 Peter 3:9

Introduction:

1. I have wonderful memories of Christmas because, when I was growing up, it was the most exciting time of the year at our house.
 - a. I can remember the taste of the banana bread and cranberry bread my mom would make.
 - b. I can remember making ornaments and putting them on the tree.
 - c. I can remember the toy guns I got one year. They were the cowboy-style handguns with the holsters. I can even remember the smell of the holsters, and the sound of the guns sliding into them.
2. As I got older, I still really liked Christmas, but I didn't really buy the religious part of it. For one thing, a virgin getting pregnant, a baby being a Savior, and some magi guys being guided by a temporarily roving bright star sounded a little far-fetched to me. The story seemed far-fetched because I didn't see any of those kinds of things happening in my life. It seemed unbelievable to me.
3. Well, after my freshman year in college, I figured that if God was big enough to create the universe, He's big enough to orchestrate these miracles. I decided to place my faith in Jesus Christ. I trusted Him to save me from my sin. To this day, I continue to believe the truthfulness of the Christmas story.
4. But, I do have a confession to make. There have been times as a believer in Christ that I believed that God is the Lord of yesterday, and perhaps the Lord of tomorrow, but I had a hard time believing that He is the Lord of my life today.

You see, I looked back at the Christmas story and other miraculous events recorded in the Bible, and I thought to myself, "I believe those things happened, but I don't see God doing those kind of big things today in my life—not in my world. I don't see a lot of miracles. Maybe the Lord is taking a break. Maybe He's not too interested in my life today. Maybe He's adopted a hand's-off policy."

At the same time, I would also look ahead and think to myself, "I believe the Lord will come back and that I will go to heaven, at which time He'll be way more involved in my

life than He is today, because I just don't see too much of Him now.”

That's what I mean when I say that I believed God is the Lord of yesterday, and the Lord of tomorrow, but I struggled with believing He is the Lord of my life today. He is the Lord of my heritage. He is the Lord of my destiny. But is He the Lord of my day? This day. Today. Right now.

5. I suspect that many people feel this way, even though they're not willing to risk admitting it. Perhaps you believe what God has done in the past. Perhaps you believe what God will do in the future. But, in the meantime, you feel like you're not experiencing God much these days.

As such, the unbelievable part of Christmas is perhaps not so much the historical reality of it, but it's relevance to your life right now, beyond the tree, beyond the presents, beyond the egg nog.

This is a sermon about ► faith and our struggle with it. Faith is our Characteristic of Completeness in Christ.

6. I'd like to recount for you a Biblical story of a guy who can relate to what we're talking about. He's a guy who struggled with his faith, and learned some lessons along the way—lessons I hope we can begin to learn this morning.
 - a. The guy's name is Zacharias, and his story begins in the Bible book of ► Luke, Chapter 1, Verse 5:

^{NKJ} Luke 1:5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

This verse tells us a number of things about Zacharias and his circumstances.

- 1) Zacharias was married to ► Elizabeth, and they were both Jews. In fact, Zacharias was a Jewish priest, and his wife, Elizabeth was the descendant of a Jewish priest named ► Aaron. This is sort of like a pastor marrying a pastor's daughter. They were no strangers to religion and the things of God.
- 2) Jewish priests were divided into 24 divisions. Zacharias was in the ► division of Abijah—one of the 24.
- 3) The story is set in ► the days of Herod. Herod was a Roman king appointed by the Roman Emperor to rule over the land of ► Judea—which is located roughly where modern Israel is. Herod reigned from 37 to 4 B.C. Our story probably occurs around 6 B.C.

- b. Verse ► 6 of Luke Chapter 1 continues the story:

^{NKJ} Luke 1:6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

This indicates that both Zacharias and Elizabeth believed in God, and they were following God's laws contained in the Old Testament portion of the Bible. In fact, they were following God's laws so closely that no one could discredit their ministry or call them hypocrites. They were blameless. These were good people.

- c. Verse ► 7 continues:

^{NKJ} Luke 1:7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

- 1) They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to have children. She was barren.

This would have been somewhat of a stigma for them. In their culture, barrenness was commonly viewed as a result of parental sin. It was viewed as God withholding His blessing. That was not an accurate view, but it was a prevailing one.

- 2) And, Zacharias and Elizabeth were both well advanced in years. That means that they were, in all likelihood, beyond their child-bearing years. They are probably over 60 years old.¹

- d. The story continues in ► Verses 8-10:

^{NKJ} Luke 1:8 So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10 And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.

- 1) When it says, ► "his lot fell to burn incense," that means that Zacharias was chosen to perform a very special priestly duty. You see, there were about 18,000 Jewish priests in that day², and a priest, if chosen at all, was chosen only once in his lifetime, and that, to offer incense in the temple on only one day.³

¹ Keener, 188.

² Nelson Study Bible.

³ Gaebelien, 826.

- 2) On that day, the chosen priest was ► to walk to the center of the sanctuary within the Jewish temple. There, before the altar of incense, he would bow to pray for the redemption of his people. That is, he would pray that God would come to save His people.
- 3) While the priest was inside the temple, the ► people would gather outside to pray also. The ► hour of incense came twice a day, at 9 A.M. and 3:30 P.M.⁴

- e. Now, ► Verses 11 and 12 record that something amazing happened while Zacharias was in the temple praying.

^{NKJ} Luke 1:11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

I like the fact that Zacharias was troubled and fearful. I would be, too, if an angel popped in on me!

- f. Verse ► 13 continues:

^{NKJ} Luke 1:13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”

- 1) When the angel says, ► “your prayer is heard,” we don’t know exactly which prayer the angel was referring to. Was it the prayer for redemption? Or, was it the earlier prayers of Zacharias for a child? Perhaps it was both. Indeed, both were answered.
- 2) Regardless, the angel says that, even though Elizabeth had been barren for over 60 years, ► she was going to have a child that was to be named John.

- g. And, in the following verses, the angel explains that John—many would come to know him as John the Baptist—he would grow up to turn people to God, and to be a forerunner who would prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. Zacharias and his son, John, would be the preface to the Christmas story. Beginning in ► Verse 14, the angel explains it this way:

^{NKJ} Luke 1:14 “And you [Zacharias] will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his [John’s] birth. 15 For he [John] will be great

⁴ Nelson Study Bible

in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ► 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 He [John] will also go before Him [Jesus] in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

- h. Now, ► put yourself in the sandals of Zacharias. You've been trying to have a child for many years, and you have pretty much given up because Elizabeth has already gone through menopause. How would you respond? Verse ► 18 says,

^{NKJ} Luke 1:18 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."

The statement of Zacharias reflects disbelief. In effect, he's saying to the angel, "Yeah, right. How's this going to happen? I think you arrived a little late!"

- i. Verses ► 19 and 20 continue:

^{NKJ} Luke 1:19 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."

- 1) The angel's description of himself is probably a rebuke of Zacharias's doubt.⁵
- 2) And, Zacharias's inability to speak is certainly a form of rebuke for his lack of belief. The angel said that Zacharias wouldn't be able to speak until after his son arrives.

- j. Verses ► 21-25 conclude this portion of our story, by saying,

^{NKJ} Luke 1:21 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 And 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

⁵ Robertson, Word Pictures.

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.”

- I. We ► are left with the question: Why didn’t Zacharias believe? He was a good man. He was a righteous man. He was a priest. So, why didn’t he believe? I think he struggled with some of the same things we do. I think a number of things tempted him—and a number of things tempt us—to believe that God is the Lord of yesterday, and perhaps the Lord of tomorrow, but not the Lord of our lives today.

Let me list ► a few things that I think tempted Zacharias and tempt us to disbelieve that God is the Lord of our lives today. Together, they constitute a kind of hardening of the heart. So, I’ve fashioned an ► acronym from the four factors that can harden our hearts if we let them. The first letter of each spells, “hard.”

- A. The first factor is ► hardship. When we experience difficulty or suffering in life, sometimes we begin to question whether or not God is really paying attention, or whether or not He really has our best interests at heart.

As I mentioned earlier, having no children would have been a real hardship for Zacharias and Elizabeth. Aside from the social stigma, they had no one to care for them in their old age.

We, too, suffer hardships that seem arbitrary and senseless. It may be some disease or disorder. It may be some intellectual or emotional handicap. It may be a down-sizing at work.

Nevertheless, God often has a plan for hardship that we cannot see. In retrospect, it is clear to see that Elizabeth’s life-long barrenness was not attributable some kind of divine punishment or neglect. On the contrary, it was divinely ordained to confirm that John was no ordinary child. He was to be the forerunner of the Messiah.

In addition, the public reproach of Zacharias and Elizabeth was replaced with the extraordinary honor of being chosen as the parents of such a child.

But to Zacharias and Elizabeth, these purposes were completely unknown—unknown for decades. They only experienced the necessary hardship—hardship that tempts us to disbelieve that God is the Lord of our lives today.

- B. The second factor that tempts us to disbelieve is ► analysis. By analysis I mean human reasoning that leaves out God.

When Zacharias heard the angel say that Elizabeth was going to have a child, he analyzed the situation. They had tried to have a child since the day they were married. It didn’t work. They prayed for decades to have a child. None came. Now Elizabeth

was beyond her child-bearing years. So, empirically and biologically, pregnancy seemed impossible.

Zacharias forgot, however, that God is not constrained by our logic. Nothing is impossible for Him. God calls the shots.

My point is that when our analysis of things leaves out the fact that God can do anything He wants, whenever He wants, and that He is sovereignly in control of all His creation, we are tempted to disbelieve that God is the Lord of our lives today.

- C. The third factor that tempts us to disbelieve is ► ritual. Christianity is not about religious rituals; it's about a personal relationship with the living Lord.

As a priest, Zacharias would have been involved in many religious rituals. Rituals are not necessarily bad. In fact, some rituals are prescribed by God. But rituals were never intended to replace a personal relationship with God. In fact, ritual without relationship is lifeless and empty.

Unfortunately, it is human nature to maintain religious ritual and let the relationship slide, or to substitute ritual for relationship. Millions of people are involved in the ritual of church services on Sunday, especially at Christmas, but are never involved in building a personal relationship with God during the week. The Bible is rarely opened. Prayers are few and perfunctory. There is no life change. There is no active relationship.

When religious ritual is substituted for a personal relationship, we are tempted to disbelieve that God is the Lord of our lives today.

- D. The fourth and final factor I want to mention is ► delay. By delay, I mean that God can sometimes seem slow to do what He has promised—so slow, in fact, that we begin to doubt Him.

As a Jewish priest, there is no doubt that Zacharias believed that God had spoken to his ancestor, Abraham, over 2,000 years in the past, telling him that, through him, all the world would be blessed.⁶ No doubt, Zacharias believed that God had spoken through the prophet Isaiah 700 years in the past when he spoke of the coming Messiah.⁷ No doubt, he believed that God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah some 600 years before, when he spoke of forgiveness that would be made available to all people.⁸ It was all recorded in the Bible.

But, these things occurred many hundreds of years before. For many years it had seemed that God was silent.

⁶ Genesis 12:1-5.

⁷ Isaiah 9:6-7.

⁸ Jeremiah 31:33-34.

And, when Zacharias prayed for a child, God seemed to delay. In fact, it seemed that God delayed so long that He seemed to miss the deadline.

But the truth is, God timing is perfect, and God's timing is His own. The words of the angel to Zacharias in ► Verse 20 are telling:

^{NKJ} Luke 1:20 . . . you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.

The words of the Lord are fulfilled ► in their own time—in God's time, not ours. God does not operate according to our schedule. When we lose sight of this we are tempted to disbelieve that God is the Lord of our lives today.

So we, ► along with Zacharias, face a number of things that tempt us to disbelieve God's involvement in our lives today: hardship, analysis, ritual, delay.

- II. Now ► I want to draw a number of things from our text that help us to believe that God is indeed the Lord of our lives today. And all of them can be wrapped up in one big idea. And ► here it is: Christmas is about His presence. And for those of you listening to this for the first time on your iPod, "presence" is spelled with a "ce" at the end, not "ts." Christmas is about His presence. Christmas is not just a celebration of the past: Jesus showing up a couple of thousand years ago. Nor is Christmas just a celebration of the future: Jesus coming to earth so that we can go to heaven someday. Christmas is about Immanuel: God with us. Right now. Today.

Let me unwrap this idea.

Zacharias has a nine-month lesson in the reality of God's presence in his life. God mutes Zacharias daily. Moment by moment.

Let's fast-forward nine months in our story to the birth of the child to Zacharias and Elizabeth. Luke ► Chapter 1, beginning in Verse 57 records,

^{NKJ} Luke 1:57 Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. 58 When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her. ► 59 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. 60 His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John." ► 61 But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name." 62 So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called. 63 And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marveled. ► 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God. 65 Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. ► 66 And all those who heard them

kept them in their hearts, saying, “What kind of child will this be?” And the hand of the Lord was with him.

This ► must have been a puzzling time for Zacharias, at least initially. The angel Gabriel had indicated that Zacharias would not be able to speak until after his son was born. But, on Day One of his son’s birth, Zacharias could not speak. On Day Two, he could not speak. Neither could he speak on Day Three or Four or Five or Six or Seven.

A. Why was his speech restored on ► the eighth day—the day of his son’s circumcision—the day on which it was customary to name the child? It was no coincidence. I believe God used the circumcision and the names as a reminder that a number of things can help us believe that God is the Lord of our lives today, not just the Lord of yesterday or of tomorrow. Let me explain. Let me introduce ► several pieces to a puzzle, then we’ll stand back and take a look at it.

1. First, it was the day of ► circumcision. Circumcision commemorates the promise God made to Abraham—the promise that through Abraham, all peoples of the earth will be blessed—a Messiah will be provided. A Savior will be born.

At the time of Zacharias, it had been over 2,000 years since God made the promise, but He did make the promise. Circumcision commemorates that ► God promised.

2. Second, the relatives wanted to name the boy, ► Zacharias, after his father. Names were a much bigger deal back then than they are today. Names had significant meaning attached to them.

The name, “Zacharias” seemed so appropriate in this case because it literally means, ► “God remembers.”

3. Third, Zacharias insists on what the angel had directed: that the boy be ► named John.

The name, “John” literally means ► “God is gracious.” To be gracious means that He gives us good things that we don’t deserve.

When you put these three symbols together—the circumcision; the name, “Zacharias;” and the name, “John”—it’s an exclamation point to the nine-month lesson that Zacharias got: God promised a Messiah. God remembers His promise. And, after all these years, God is gracious to provide one. A Savior. Today. Right now.

And, after all these years, God remembers Zacharias and graciously provides a child and restores his honor in spite of his doubts. God is present. Indeed Christmas is about God’s presence.

B. How do we apply this?

Well, are ► you faced with some hardship or analysis or ritual or delay that tempts you to disbelieve God's gracious involvement in your life today?

Maybe it's the specter of a physical condition or illness that won't go away and there's no good end in sight.

Maybe it's a deep financial hole from which there seems to be no escape—no getting out.

Maybe it's a painful, gnawing relational conflict that doesn't seem like it will ever get resolved.

Maybe it's the feeling that you're just going through the religious motions, marking yet another Christmas.

Maybe it's the feeling that God is not interested in using you for anything very important.

In the midst of the hardship and analysis and ritual and delays of life, we ► need to remember truth.

1. Remember that ► God promised. God promised a Savior—not just to die for our sins, but to be the Lord of our today.

a. The Lord promised to his followers in ► Matthew 28:20:

^{NKJ} Matthew 28:20 . . . I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

b. The Lord promised to His followers in ► Hebrews 13:5:

^{NKJ} Hebrews 13:5 . . . I will never leave you nor forsake you.

c. Indeed, Jesus is the ► true Immanuel, which means, “God is with us.”⁹ With *us*. Today. Now.

2. Also, ► we would do well to keep in mind that God remembers. He hasn't forgotten His promises. He hasn't forgotten you. He hasn't checked out. He is at work all around you.

⁹ Matthew 1:23.

3. And, we would do well to remember that ► God is gracious. He is working all things together for our good. He loves us. He's there for us.
- C. These ► truths broke through the hardness of Zacharias's heart. God promised. God remembers. God is gracious. And when these truths came together in sharp focus, Zacharias' speech was restored, and so was his faith. The first words out of his mouth were ► these:

^{NJ} Luke 1:68 "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people, ► 69 and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, 70 as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who have been since the world began, ► 71 that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, 72 to perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, ► 73 the oath which He swore to our father Abraham: 74 to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, ► 75 in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. ► 76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, ► 77 to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, 78 through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; ► 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The Lord is here today, with us, to guide our feet. Immanuel. God is indeed with us. And Christmas is about His presence.