

Series: Fear Not

“Overcoming Fear Through Faith”

Luke 1:5-25, 57-79

Today we are beginning a new series of sermons that focus on Christmas. Sometimes we need to be reminded that what happened 2,000 years ago still matters today. What God did in sending His Son to us as a gift radically changed our world and ultimately can even change our very lives. It is true that the details of this historical, life-changing event have never changed. Though we live in a culture that is constantly trying to redefine history, you can't undo or change the truth of what has already happened. The birth of Jesus is one such event. We can study it and examine it and we may discover new things, but we will never change it. So, over the next month as we study the unchanging truths of God becoming man and coming to this fallen world, I pray that we will get a fresh glimpse of what His coming meant then and what it means to us today. I pray that we will have a renewed perspective on how Jesus' life is still changing lives today.

As we study over the next four weeks, I want us to look at these passages a little differently. Specifically, I want us to realize that we have much in common with the people that we will read about. They aren't just characters with names and facts about them. They were people just like you and me. They had experiences just like you and me. They had feelings and emotions just like you and me. We are told by the so-called experts that there are four basic emotions that all humans experience – happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. I am not arguing whether or not there are more basic emotions, I am simply stating that, without question, the characters that we read about faced these various emotions. The emotion we will see clearly present in each of the accounts of Scripture is the feeling of fear. On each occasion we see that the sudden presence of an angel accompanied with the message that he shared brought fear. And on each occasion, the angel gave a specific word of instruction and encouragement – “Fear Not!” In other words, don't be afraid.

Can you relate to this today? Are you dealing with fear today? Do you find yourself worrying and fretting over things that you can't fix, change, or prevent? What fears are affecting you? There are many things that cause us fear. When studying statistics, it is obvious that we have many fears. We are afraid of flying, afraid of public speaking, afraid of spiders, afraid of snakes, afraid of heights, afraid of the dark, afraid of failure, afraid of death, afraid of rejection, afraid of loneliness, afraid of commitment, afraid of the future, etc. The list could go on and on.

The way fear affects us is crazy. It affects us biologically as our heart beats faster, our breathing speeds up, we begin to sweat, our muscles tense, our mouth gets dry, and our stomach is in knots. It affects us mentally as our mind races and seems to play games on us. The fear of a given situation can paralyze us mentally and place great barriers that hinder us from effective action. And ultimately, fear also affects us spiritually. It can prevent us from trusting God. It can prevent us from obeying Him. It can rob us of the blessings that come through obedience. It can prevent us from persevering through seasons of difficulty. It can cause us to even doubt God. But God doesn't want us to be a people of fear. In fact, over and over again in His Word we are told, “Do not be afraid.” We see this reminder in each of the passages that we will read through this month. We start today in Luke 1 with the story of Zacharias.

Read Text: Luke 1:5-25

While it is true that every single one of us faces certain fears, it is also true that our fears can be overcome. However, not everyone experiences victory in this area of their lives. Some choose, instead, to cower and retreat. What God wants us to see is that we don't have to be ruled by fear. When we look to Him, trust in Him, believe in Him, and live for Him we will find that we have nothing to fear. Listen to what God said to the Israelites in **Isaiah 44:6,8**, "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me... Do not tremble and do not be afraid; Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none.' " The point that God was making to the Israelites is that they didn't have to live in fear. They simply needed to live with faith in Him. The message of the angel to Zacharias was the same. He didn't have to be afraid. He simply needed to believe God. The same is true for us today. If we are going to overcome fear, we must have a sincere and active belief in the Lord. Unfortunately, Zacharias provides us with an example of what not to do. But, still we can learn several things from his life and how he worked through this experience. As we study this passage, there are three main things that we learn about believing in God.

I. Believe That God Hears Our Prayers (vs. 5-13a)

No matter what we go through and face in our lives, we can have complete assurance that the Almighty God of heaven is alive and well and attentive to the prayers of His people. It needs to be clearly stated that God hears. He is not like the false gods that so many worship. He is not like the idols that so many bow down to. I was reminded of that this week in Daniel 5 when Daniel confronted King Belshazzar and said, "The gods that you serve and worship do not see, hear, or understand. They are lifeless objects that you are praising. However, the God of heaven sees everything, hears every cry and understands every need." Friend, this should encourage us today. He hears our prayers. When the angel of God approached Zacharias this was the first thing he addressed. In verse 13 he said, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard." He is basically saying, "Don't be alarmed. Believe me, God has heard your prayers and has sent me with a message." Now at this point it is good for us to understand some background on this man named Zacharias. Who was he? What was he like? How could he be assured of God's listening ear?

Zacharias was Godly. Zacharias was a Jewish priest who was married to a Jewish lady named Elizabeth. Zacharias grew up in a line of priests and Elizabeth was from a long line of priests also. They grew up learning about God and worshiping God. They were raised to love Him and follow Him. They were married and continued their journey of loving and serving God. God summarized their lives in verse 6 saying "they were both righteous in the eyes of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord." This was a powerful statement. It tells us that they were a Godly couple who lived their lives to honor God. They lived their lives in the right way. The things that God said to do, they were faithful to do and the things that God said not to do, they were faithful to avoid. They believed in God and demonstrated it through obedience. As a result, they were righteous in the eyes of God. Additionally, they were blameless in the eyes of men. Because they pleased the Lord, there was nothing for the critics or skeptics to point at and

discredit. They were a powerful witness to others around them. Their Godly living impacted their prayer life. **Proverbs 15:29** declares, “The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.” This was certainly the Psalmist’s understanding as well. **Psalm 66:18-19** says, “If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear; But certainly God has heard; He has given heed to the voice of my prayer.”

Zacharias was faithful. He was faithful to the ways of the Lord even when the vast majority was not. They lived in a very dark time in Israel’s history. They hadn’t heard a word from God in a long time. ****ILL:** Often times kids get discouraged because they feel it will take forever to get to Christmas or their birthday. Can you imagine being the Jews at that point? They hadn’t received a single prophetic Word from God for 400 years. Many were discouraged and many were distracted. This was clearly seen by the way that spiritual leaders of the day were filled with corruption and self-righteous legalism. But, even still in that day Zacharias remained faithful to the Lord. This was seen clearly through his lifestyle and through his service. Verse 8 tells us that “he was performing his priestly service before God.” In other words, he was faithfully serving the Lord as he always did. There is nothing that could hinder him from fulfilling his calling from God. He was serving the Lord faithfully.

Zacharias was prayerful. I think it is important for us to realize that living a life of Godliness, faithfulness, and service doesn’t mean that everything in life will be easy or even desirable. There are some who suggest that if you will live for God then He will give you everything you’ve ever wanted. But, there’s one small problem with that. This isn’t found in the Bible. This isn’t what God says. He does promise to meet our needs, but this in no way guarantees our many wants. In the context of Zacharias and Elizabeth, they loved God, lived Godly lives, and served the Lord faithfully, but there was still a hurt in their life. They had a desire in their hearts and it led them to pray. Specifically, the Bible tells us that they were now up in age and they didn’t have a child because Elizabeth was barren. This burdened them. They longed to have a child and a family, so they petitioned the Lord and prayed faithfully for God to provide. This wasn’t a prayer that they just suddenly prayed once they got older. They had prayed and prayed over this for years. I’m sure there were many seasons of discouragement. I’m sure that there were many times that they wanted to give up. I’m sure that there were many times that they wondered if God was even hearing their prayers, but Zacharias continued to petition the Lord. Then to his amazement, in God’s time and in God’s ways, God gave Zacharias the assurance that his prayer had been heard. Friends, if we are going to overcome fear we must believe in God. Believing in Him that He is alive and well and hears our prayers is a good place to start. When we know God and live for Him, we can have full assurance that He hears and will answer. In fact, He wants us to believe in Him and bring our requests to Him. So, let’s heed the invitation of **Hebrews 4:16**, “Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

II. Believe That God Has a Plan (vs. 13b-17)

Can you imagine being Zacharias? He has been married for years and they have been unable to have children. He has faithfully served the Lord for years and prayed for years that they would have a child. I imagine at this point he has probably come to accept that this was likely to never

happen. After all, it was nearly impossible for it to happen at this point. But, when he least expected it God sent an angel to give the message, “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.” In other words, “Zacharias, you may not understand it, you may question it, you may challenge it, and you may be astounded, but God has a plan. Go with it.” ****ILL:** Tim DeTellis and New Missions. God led his dad to “Go with it.” They didn’t know all that God’s plan would entail. They just were called to trust Him and obey. This was the same for Zacharias. This was the same for all of the saints listed in Hebrews 11 in the great hall of faith. In each case, they had to take God at His Word and believe His plan. It is the same for us. In Zacharias’ case, notice specifically what God planned to do. When God works in our lives to reveal His plans, He does so for three primary reasons.

A. To Extend Grace

God’s dealing with us as sinners is an act of grace. He does not leave us like sheep to wander around. He owes us absolutely nothing, yet He extends grace to us so that we have all that we need in Him. God certainly extended His grace to Zacharias and the Jewish people. Because He is gracious and good, we can be confident in His plans and trust Him. In this case, God was reminding Zacharias that he hadn’t been abandoned or forgotten. God knew his desire and was graciously about to work to extend great grace both for Zacharias and for all the Jews.

We see God’s grace in this plan through the name of the child. God specifically instructed that the child’s name would be John. This was directly against the Jewish tradition. In that culture, a baby boy would be named after his father or someone else in the family lineage. This is why we see so many biblical names repeated. God had a specific purpose for this. It was all a part of His divine plan. What does the name “John” mean? It means, “God is gracious.” Think of it for just a moment. To a world that was filled with darkness, who hadn’t heard from God in 400 years, to a people who had largely turned their backs on Him, God provided a child as a sign of His grace. This child, John, came with a unique mission and purpose. He was called to go ahead of and prepare the way for the long-awaited Messiah who would come shortly after him. The point in all of this is that when they least expected, God gave this child as a gift of His grace. Zacharias had prayed for a son, but he was soon to receive a son and shortly after a Savior. What a wonderful gift from God! This was all evidence of God’s grace towards them.

B. To Encourage Gladness

From heaven’s perspective, by giving Zacharias a child God was extending great grace, but from man’s perspective this was also a time of great gladness. The angel said, “You will have joy and gladness.” This was going to be a happy time. This was a time for celebration. Zacharias and Elizabeth had waited a long time and now God was blessing them with a child. If you have been there when you got the news, heard the first heartbeat, looked into that baby’s eyes for the first time, taught them to tie their shoes, helped them catch their first fish, make their first goal, etc. then you know this was reason for joy and celebration. But, this wasn’t only for the parents. The Scripture says, “Many will rejoice at

his birth.” In fact, this is one of the main themes of the book of Luke. He mentions “rejoicing” at least nineteen times in the book and it is used to refer to many or all who will rejoice. The reason this is important is because God is wanting us to see that this good news of a Savior wasn’t for a select few. It was good news for all. The people had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah and the birth of John signified that the Savior was soon to arrive. The people had been waiting and anticipating for a long time. ****ILL:** Waiting for snow in Alabama. As soon as we saw the clouds developing we rushed outside because we knew it was soon to come. Even greater was their gladness to welcome the Savior. The birth and ministry of John meant that the Messiah would soon come to save the people.

C. To Evoke Glory

What was God’s plan for John? Before Elizabeth had even conceived, God tells Zacharias what to name his son and what he will do in life. That’s amazing! This is a reminder that God knows all things and sovereignly works all things together to accomplish His plans and purposes. Verses 15-17 tell us God’s plan for John. **First, we learn that John would take a Nazarite vow.** The Nazarite vow was taken voluntarily by individuals who wanted to devote themselves completely to the Lord. In fact, the Hebrew word that gives us the word “Nazirite” means “to be separated or consecrated.” John would abstain from numerous things so that he would be completely devoted to the Lord and ready for His use. **Second, we learn that he would turn many back to the Lord.** This is exactly what was needed. The Jewish people had hardened their hearts against God. Even those who were leaders of the day were filled with pride. They had become focused on a rigid religion, not a real relationship with God. So, God was sending John to turn people back to Him. We see later that this is exactly what happened. John the Baptist became a preacher, but he didn’t preach religion, rules, or regulations. He didn’t demand the letter of the Law. **Mark 1:4-5** summarizes his message, “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.” **Third, we learn that John was going ahead of the Savior to prepare the way for the Lord.** This was the primary purpose of his calling. John himself said this in **Mark 1:7b-8 saying**, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The primary point I want us to understand here is that God gave John as a gift to extend grace to mankind, to encourage gladness among mankind, but also to evoke glory for Himself. Who is glorified when the rebellious turn back to God? God is! Who is glorified when the hard hearted are humbled and softened? God is! Who is glorified when people turn from their sins and repent? God is! Who is glorified when relationships between fathers and sons are restored? God is! The point is that John’s life’s purpose was to give glory to God. Isn’t this the same for all of us? I exist for God’s glory. My life is to be lived for His glory. My actions should be performed for His glory. My voice should speak for His glory. My feet should take me places for His glory. My hands should work for His

glory. Friends, we don't have to live our lives in fear. We can believe in God that He hears our prayers and that He has a plan for our lives and His plans will always stand. **Psalm 33:10-11** says, "The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation."

III. Believe That God Honors His Promises (vs. 18-20, 57-79)

Can you imagine being Zacharias in this moment? He is having an amazing encounter with this heavenly messenger. The angel declares that God has heard his prayer and has promised him a child. How would you respond? Because he was a faithful, prayerful, righteous man we would easily assume that he would believe the message of the angel. After all, this wasn't the first time this had happened in Scripture. But notice how he responded in verses 18-20. Zacharias, knowing that the angel was from the Lord, should have believed in that moment. He should've had faith that God would do as He said he would do. But instead, he tried to logically figure it all out. Sometimes we, too, are like that. He said, "How will I know this for certain?" IOW: How can I be sure? If I just had a sign I could know. He acted as if the presence of an angel wasn't enough of a sign. Then he said, "For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years." Can't you hear the questions of his heart? Can't you hear the doubts in his mind? It seems that Zacharias had already forgotten about Abraham and Sarah. How could he forget that Sarah was so old when she conceived that when she heard the news that she would have a child she literally laughed out loud? But what is impossible with man is always possible with God. God fulfilled His word just as He said. Had Zacharias already forgotten Hannah who was unable to conceive? She went to the temple where she prayed and wept bitterly and asked God for a child. And, of course, she also found that what is impossible with man is possible with God. Just as God planned, He gave her a child also. Zacharias was a priest. Of all people he knew what God could do, but in this moment he chose to respond by sight and not by faith.

It is important for us to remember the truth of **Hebrews 11:1,6**, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." God is pleased by our response of faith, but He is also displeased by our lack of faith. As a result, Zacharias experienced a consequence. The angel relayed the message, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent directly by God to give you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you didn't believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time." At that very moment God silenced his mouth. He couldn't say a single thing. The crowd of people waiting outside the holy place were waiting for his blessing and benediction, but when he came out he couldn't talk. They knew something had happened, they knew something was going on, but they would have to wait to find out.

So, here is Zacharias. He has been given a promise that he initially doubted. He didn't know how to take it. He didn't respond well. He goes home. He spends time with his wife, but he can't tell her what has occurred because he can't talk. And guess what occurs? She became pregnant just as God had planned. Can you imagine the wonder and the amazement of Zacharias? Can you imagine

the pain of not being able to tell about it? For nine months he took it all in. Guess what happens when you stop talking as much? You start listening better. You start thinking deeply. You start examining things. For nine months while he sat mute he began to understand what was going on. He reflected on the Old Testament Scriptures. He hosted Mary as she came to visit Elizabeth. He heard their conversations. He weighed what was going on and compared it to the prophecies that he had heard and studied his whole life. Zacharias, more observant than ever before, was now convinced that God honors His promises. Zacharias now understood this personally, as God had promised to give him a child and now with every passing day Elizabeth was closer and closer to the birth. But much more than this, Zacharias understood this corporately. He understood that all of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Savior were about to be fulfilled. He knew the prophecy of Malachi 3 which described the role of the forerunner of the Savior. He recognized that was his son. Then as Mary visited with Elizabeth and shared, he knew that Mary was a virgin which fulfilled the prophecy from Isaiah 7:14 stating that the Savior would be born of a virgin. He knew the prophecy from Micah 5 that the baby would be born in Bethlehem, and he had likely already asked Mary, “So where is this Joseph from?” I believe he was putting together the pieces of the puzzle. He was initially looking at all the loose ends of the threads, but as he quietly studied and examined he began to see how each strand all fit together making a beautiful tapestry of God’s majestic plan. He was beginning to realize that God always honors His promises.

Let’s pick up the story in **verse 57**. I will read verses 57-66. Can you imagine the scene? The old priest Zacharias had been silent, not speaking a word for nine months. But, when the Holy Spirit loosened his mouth he compensated for his silence by immediately giving praise to God. He was joyful about the Savior and about the purpose to which his son had been called. He was filled with such joy that this whole passage was actually a song of praise. Zacharias praised God for His fulfillment of many promises. I will focus only on three of them.

A. God Redeems Us (vs. 67-69)

The word “redeem” means “to set free by paying a price.” It often refers to the releasing of a prisoner or the liberating of a slave. God paid the ultimate price. He gave Himself! Hosea in the Old Testament told the story about the love of his life being put on the auction block, and when she had deserted him, had forsaken him for other lovers, had gotten so low that she was being sold into slavery, there in that humiliating moment Hosea went and bought her back for himself. It’s a beautiful picture of the love God has for us. When we could do nothing to save ourselves and were at our lowest point, God came for us through God the Son who came to this earth to give His life as a payment for sins so that we might be set free. **1 Peter 1:18-19** says it well, “Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.” Zacharias praised God because He had redeemed His people. He purchased mankind with the precious blood of Christ.

B. God Forgives Us (vs. 77-78)

Do you think Zacharias understood this? He had been silenced for 9 months because of his unbelief, but now God has shown grace and opened his mouth again to give praise. It is only through belief in Jesus that we can be forgiven. In fact, this became the very same message of Zacharias' son, John the Baptist. **John 1:29** tells us, "The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'"

C. God Guides Us (vs. 79)

Notice it isn't just that He guides us. Specifically, He guides us into the way of peace. Zacharias knew that the coming Savior would lead us into the way of peace. This would've brought great comfort to the war-torn world that he lived in. They knew of war, trials, heartlessness, pride, etc. They knew nothing of peace. They certainly knew nothing of peace with God. But this is exactly what Jesus came to do. Remember, Isaiah prophesied that He is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace.

Isn't it interesting that this whole encounter began with fear? The angel had to literally say, "Don't be afraid." But the passage ends with peace. How do we go from fear to peace? By believing in God! My prayer is that we will each do this today. **Isaiah 26:3-4** says it well, "The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the Lord forever, for in God the Lord, we have an everlasting Rock."