

Doubt

Luke 1:18-25 | Bryce Beale | November 10, 2018

There are two songs we sometimes sing on Sunday mornings which were written by a madman.

They are two of my favorite songs.

One is “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” and the other “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood.”

The English poet William Cowper penned them both well over two hundred years ago, in between his bouts of insanity and attempted suicide.

Cowper’s mother died when he was very young, which shook him deeply. Then in school he was cruelly bullied by an older child. He fell in love, but the girl’s father forbade the marriage; he was devastated, and remained single his whole life. Around this time a close friend of Cowper’s drowned.

When his cousin recommended him for a steady government job, things started looking up. But his appointment was challenged. The day for his public examination drew near, and Cowper became desperate with the weight of it; he lost his mind. He tried to take his own life three times, failed, and was sent away to an insane asylum.

There he met Jesus.

When he was released, he spent some time in the sunshine of God’s love. He joined hands with his pastor and friend, John Newton (the author of “Amazing Grace”), and composed a book of hymns, containing those songs we now sing Sunday mornings.

But, in 1773, Cowper had a terrible dream. We do not know what it was, but it convinced him he was cut off from God forever. He left his church, never to return. Over the next ten years, Cowper wrote some of history’s greatest English poetry, much of it explicitly Christian. He was *the* great poet of the evangelical revival—Whitefield and Wesley preached to the masses, and Cowper wrote poetry to the educated classes. At the end of that decade, however, he slumped back into despair and attempted suicide again, unsuccessfully.

Another decade passed, and more poetry came from his pen.

In 1799, he wrote his final poem, about a man who fell overboard during a storm. The poem ends,

No voice divine the storm allayed,
No light propitious shone,
When, snatched from all effectual aid,
We perished, each alone:
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.¹

The next year, he died.

William Cowper did not leave us a life to emulate, as many heroes of the faith have. His was not an ideal Christian life. But, he is in history for a reason. I believe he is there to show, not that we should live a doubt-filled life like his, but that even in our doubts, God is faithful.

We should not doubt God—but when we do, he does not cast us away.

That is the same lesson we learn now in Luke, as we continue to consider Zechariah the priest. Like Cowper, Zechariah believes in God and doubts him all at the same time. And as in the case of Cowper, with Zechariah God shows himself kind and faithful in our doubts.

The elderly Zechariah has been offering incense in the temple on behalf of the people, while many wait praying outside, and an angel has appeared to him to tell him that his wife, though barren and past the age when pregnancy is possible, will give birth to a son.

LUKE 1:18-25

We may summarize the subject of our present text in one word: doubt. God's message comes to Zechariah, and the priest doubts it. Even at the dawn of God's kingdom on earth, doubt exists. As this kingdom continues to dawn, we will continue to see doubt—in the crowds, in the disciples. The resurrected Jesus will stand before his followers just before flying up into the heavens, and still we read in Matthew's account that "some doubted."²

If the tale of Jesus were an invented fable, crafted by the apostles or the early Christians, we would expect them to portray their heroes as unshakable in their faith. But we are not dealing with a fable. Luke has investigated everything carefully; he is reporting on real life, on life as we know it.

And in life as we know it, there is such a thing as doubt. It is not a good thing, but it is a thing, and we have to deal with it.

¹ XX.

² Matt. 28:17 (ESV).

Therefore we are considering this text—for it portrays real life with its doubts, but it does not stop with doubts. It shows us something of the nature of doubt *so that* we may overcome it. The text points us past doubt into strong belief, while offering comfort along the way.

And so we shall consider both the cure to doubt this morning, in its simple form, and the more complex process that results in that cure. We shall see the end toward which we must strive, and also the path we must walk each day to get there.

Doubt

The cure to doubt appears quickly in our passage.

Right at the beginning we see set before us what we should not do—namely, doubt—and what we should do—believe. Here is the black and white of it. We will become more nuanced in a moment, but it is important, when dealing with doubt, that we speak strongly to it and allow it no quarter. Conviction comes first, caveats later.

See the nature of doubt, of what we must avoid, in verse 18: “And Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.’”

We begin with a question: “How shall I know this?”

I want here to dispel a common misconception about faith and doubt. It is sometimes thought that to have a strong faith means never to question anything—never to question anything God does or why he does it. Never to attempt to make sense of the difficult deeds of God or the difficult passages of the Bible, but just to say, “I believe, and that’s the end of it.”

It is good to believe, of course, and there are many times when our questions must stop and bow before the Sovereign Lord who will permit them to go no further. But other times, we ought to heed Jesus’ counsel: “Ask, and it will be given to you.”

The problem lies not in our asking, but in how we ask. Zechariah asks in our text, “How shall I know this?” And he is rebuffed by the angel. But the priest’s problem is not that he asked. For very soon Gabriel will make his way to Mary and tell her news just as unbelievable. “[B]ehold,” he says in verse 31, “you will conceive in your womb.” Mary knows this is a physical impossibility, and she wonders about it. So she asks, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”³ And the angel offers no rebuke, only an answer.

³ V. 34.

How similar the questions of Zechariah and Mary are! Zechariah says “How shall I know this?” and gives his reason for asking: “For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” In other words, it cannot physically be. He is rebuked. Mary asks, “How will this be?” And she gives her reason: “since I am a virgin?” It cannot physically be. She is not rebuked, but answered. Clearly, the error is not in the asking, but in the manner of asking.

Look again at our text, in verse 20: “And behold,” the angel says, “you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because *you did not believe* my words...”⁴ Zechariah doubted. This doubt might be seen even in the question—he is not curious as to how God will give him a son, as to the physical manner of it. Rather, he wants a sign to confirm *that* God will do as he has said. He does not ask Mary’s “How will this be?” but, “How shall I *know* this?” Zechariah is not scolded for asking, but for asking in unbelief. His problem is his doubt.

That is why Mary receives no rebuke, because even as she asks, she believes. Elizabeth confirms this in verse 45: “And blessed is she who *believed* that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”⁵ Some questions are bad and spring from an evil heart; but not all questions do.

There is no coincidence in the fact that the scientific revolution occurred alongside the Protestant Reformation. Five hundred years ago, Luther asked questions about the Bible, about the meaning of what Paul wrote, about the authority of the Catholic Church—and when he asked those questions, in an attitude of humility and faith, he found answers. About the same time others were asking, in humility and faith, questions about the world we live in. The sun rises, yes—but why? We become sick—but how?

Humble questions were asked, and thousands were freed from the valley of death and darkness. The Bible was printed in a language the common man could understand. Truth triumphed. Again, humble questions were asked, and medicines developed that have saved millions from an early disability or death.

As Christians, we must be careful not to crush the questions of our lost friends, nor of other believers, especially young believers, when they are asked in sincerity. God never crushes such questions when we ask them, no matter how silly they may seem to him. Maybe a fresh Christian is wondering in all honesty why he cannot live with his girlfriend. To you it is as clear as day that cohabiting before marriage is ridiculous; you understand the Scriptures, you know it is obviously

⁴ Emphasis mine.

⁵ Emphasis mine.

forbidden. But he doesn't know. He is still learning, and here you have the opportunity to be God's instrument in his education—if you will not dismiss his question, but answer it.

So the first point to observe in our consideration of doubt is that to ask is not the same as to doubt. Honest questions are welcome; Mary's inquiry receives an answer.

But Zechariah doubts, and that is his problem.

If we were to practice now what I am preaching and ask an honest question of the text, we might ask, "Why does Zechariah doubt?" And the answer shows us why any person doubts.

Look again to Zechariah's question in verse 18: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." Let me read the verse again with a different emphasis, and see if you can find the flaw in Zechariah's thought: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

If you have not caught the problem yet, let me set before you the angel's answer, for the angel sees the problem and fights against it in verse 19: "And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. [Well, why does that matter? Because] I stand in the presence of God."

At the very center of spiritual doubt is not an honest concern for the truth, or a bright and reasonable intellect, or a striking objection—at the very center is something much smaller than all of that. At the very center of doubt is *me*.

Zechariah says, "Ah, you promise me a child, but I cannot fathom how this could ever be. When I think about the facts—my wife is barren, she is old, and those who are old and barren never give birth to children—when I think about my observations in nature, when I work through my understanding of how the world works, when I remember what I myself have always experienced in my life, then I cannot think of any way God's promise could be fulfilled. And if I cannot think of a way, there cannot be one."

But why?

You might never, on your own, based upon the small sphere of knowledge you possess, have imagined a fish with a transparent head, whose eyes are two green tubes inside that head, looking around like a pair of pilots in a cockpit. You could not have conceived of such a fish on your own. And yet, there is such a fish as the Barreleye. You cannot imagine what exists at the furthest border of outer space, where there is no space left ahead of you; so far as we can tell, there is such a place, but can you imagine it?

Whether I can imagine a matter or not says much about me—the limits of my imagination—but nothing at all about the reality outside. Yet often we imprison reality in the small box of our minds. We fix our focus on ourselves, and doubt begins to build: “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and *my* wife is advanced in years.”

The cure for such a mind, as G. K. Chesterton once pointed out, is to open a window and let in some air. The sick mind says, “I have only ever seen women give birth who are within a certain range of ages, I cannot imagine a woman giving birth beyond that range.” How stuffy and small a space you live in!

Zechariah had need of opening a window, much like we do in our day, to get out of himself. That is what the angel is aiming at with his reply, verses 19 onward: “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”

In its simplest terms, the cure to doubt is to get outside of ourselves.

This is why, for example, if you have ever sunken into doubting despair, looping over and over again in your mind on an uncertainty, and then have by chance encountered a friend, have talked for a time about trivial matters maybe—afterward, you may have found your doubts diminished. They were not lessened by closely reasoned arguments, but by the fresh wind of someone outside yourself getting in.

Zechariah is fixated on the natural circumstance: *I* am old, *my* wife is old. He needs to break out of himself and see that God is involved, and has been all along planning good for Zechariah and the world. If this is a merely human affair, there is uncertainty: “How shall I know this?” But when the solid external fact of God breaks in, certainty prevails: verse 20, “until the day that these things take place,” and then, “my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”

Perhaps you hear these words and are yourself, right now, an atheist. Or maybe you believe in God, but not in the absolute truth of the Bible, which seems a book behind the times.

The problem with your worldview will not be its internal logic. I’m sure the world you have conceived of in your mind, the consequence of genetic mutations over billions of years, is a very sound and detailed world. As a system of thought, evolution has explanations for its ideas that all seem to cohere into one grand explanation of everything.

The problem is not so much in the grand explanation, but in the fact that it is not grand enough of an explanation. Evolution will never win the hearts of all, because it is too small a thing. In scientific terms, it is

reductionistic. “[W]e have,” as Chesterton said, “at once the sense of it covering everything and the sense of it leaving everything out.”⁶

Your worldview says that honor is an invented thing, a social construct, or a biological development that has helped us survive, but no more than that. And as long as we stay in our stuffy little box of self, that explanation will seem big enough. Yet, when we look out and see a soldier fall on the field of battle in defense of the innocent, in support of freedom, the view suddenly looks far too small. I think people recognize that, and that is why, despite the peer pressure coming from scientists and academics, most still believe in God and the supernatural. They are torn—they want to go along with the intellectual elite. But facts are stubborn things; the lives we live are so much bigger than what the scientists are saying.

I have spent a good amount of time on these few verses, 18 through 20, because I want to show the simple cure to doubt first. And that simple cure is, we must get outside of ourselves. Doubt looks inward; faith looks out.

Help

But even in saying this, I know that some will quickly look inward again. A Christian here will say, “He is right! I have so many doubts, I so often am looking within myself—it’s always me, me, me, I, I, I. Oh, how selfish! I have been looking too much at *me*, and now I must stop! Why do I fixate so much on *me*! I must not do that anymore. I am committing *myself* right now to stop doubting. I must believe.” And on and on.

No, that smells too much of self still.

The best way to open up a window is to dwell a moment on the love God has for us, his people. Fear fuels our doubts, has us always looking to ourselves to see if we are measuring up; but if we want to look away, we must be convinced that God is gracious and is kind. We must believe that he will do as he has promised in the gospel—that is, not count our trespasses against us, even if we struggle with doubt. We must affirm that the bloodful death of Jesus on Calvary was sufficient, not for stubborn unbelief, but for Christian doubt.

This brings us to the final part of our passage and of this sermon.

We have seen the simple cure, but now let’s be a bit more nuanced. All of us live somewhere between raw unbelief, and mighty faith. How does God move us, day by day, closer to the side of mighty faith?

⁶ *Orthodoxy*, (Public Domain Books, 1994), Kindle ed., 15.

Well, consider his dealings with Zechariah.

Begin in verse 20:

“And behold, [says Gabriel,] you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute.

That word for mute can mean either unspeaking or unhearing. Clearly Zechariah cannot speak: “he was unable to speak to them...And he kept making signs to them...” But in verse 62 we read, “And they made signs to [Zechariah], inquiring what he wanted [his son] to be called.” If they must make signs to him, it seems he cannot hear.

So Zechariah continues on both deaf and mute, locked up within himself—a fitting judgment I suppose—until his son is born.

Now, you should see in this the evidence of God’s displeasure—Zechariah should have believed and he didn’t, so he receives this discipline. The gospels all sing together of the virtue of belief, which is definitely the Christian’s ideal.

But it is important, when we speak of Christian doubt, to notice also the kindness in God’s judgment.

The Lord could rightly have ended Zechariah’s life—he is the Lord, he deserves our confidence. To disbelieve what he says is to make him a liar, it is a kind of outrage.

But the Lord does not strike him dead, but only with a temporary impairment. And notice this: the impairment is itself the answer to Zechariah’s prayer!

The priest doubts, he wants a sign by which he may be sure that God will do what he has said. And so God gives him a sign—his deafness and muteness, those are the ongoing proofs for Zechariah that God will fulfill his promise. His delay in the temple and his muteness are enough to convince the crowds that God is involved: verse 22, “they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple.”

But the sign is for Zechariah first, it seems. He wanted a sign, and he has gotten one, even if it is not the kind of sign he was wishing for.

Again, we might imagine, “Oh, Zechariah has done God a great dishonor by disbelieving him. Now God will take away his promise of a son.” The family is driving somewhere fun, but the kids keep fighting in the backseat, so dad finally says, “Enough! I’m turning this car around.” We expect God to do the same to Zechariah.

But look, starting in verse 23:

And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”⁷

It was a blessing to Zechariah and Elizabeth to have a child. Of course, it did not commend them to God—no one is better off in God’s eyes for having children than for not. But as Elizabeth said, in her day to have a child was to remove “my reproach *among people*.”⁸ Those who thought Elizabeth was barren because of disobedience are now proven wrong. Or those who troubled her, like Peninnah troubled Hannah long before, are now humbled. We do not know why Elizabeth hid herself five months—maybe it was to avoid the unkindness of her neighbors, who would have mocked her had she told. Whatever the case, to have a child was a blessing.

And most importantly, this was a blessing God did not revoke when Zechariah doubted. Why? Because God cannot revoke any of his promises. This is the very thing Zechariah will proclaim when he regains his voice later in the chapter.

Believer, you may be in a rather dark place right now. Winter has begun, and this is the time when many begin to have bleaker thoughts about the world and God and themselves. You should not have those bleaker thoughts—you should radiate with hope-filled joy. But, perhaps you don’t. You have those bleak thoughts instead. Now what?

Now, I say, you must cling desperately to the promises of God. When your world begins to shrink down into the world of the atheist, and you cannot imagine how God might be involved, then you must say, “Yes, it seems that way to me, but, looking out the window, I see that God has made a promise. And since I have to choose between my own little world and the promise of God out there, I choose to believe that promise.”

⁷ Vv. 23-25.

⁸ Emphasis mine.

What has God promised you? Not a child, as he did to Zechariah, but much better things.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”⁹ God says that to you through an apostle no differently than he said things to Zechariah through an angel. He kept his word to Zechariah, though he doubted; he will keep his word to you.

“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”¹⁰

“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”¹¹

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”¹²

“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”¹³

“For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”¹⁴

“Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”¹⁵

Conclusion

These are God’s promises, and not one of these good promises will fall to the ground, even if like Zechariah we do doubt them.

As William Cowper put it:

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

⁹ Rom. 8:1.

¹⁰ Heb. 13:5.

¹¹ Matt. 28:20b.

¹² Rom. 8:28.

¹³ Phil. 1:6.

¹⁴ Rom. 6:14.

¹⁵ John 11:25.