

# Doubt in God's Hand

Luke 1:57-66 | Bryce Beale | Dec. 8, 2018

One of Israel's greatest military commanders was Benaiah.

Benaiah was numbered among David's mighty men, and stood loyal to the king before he was crowned, and again when his crown was threatened by the insurrection of Absalom. For his faithfulness and valor, Benaiah was appointed commander of the army under Solomon—you may remember, it was Benaiah whom Solomon sent to kill the crooked Joab as he clung to the horns of the altar.<sup>1</sup>

When Benaiah is listed as one of David's mighty men, you may again remember the story that is told of him. Once Benaiah found himself face to face with a fierce Egyptian warrior. The Egyptian towered over Benaiah, about seven or eight feet in height, with a spear in his hand thick as a weaver's beam. For his part, Benaiah only had a staff. The battle seemed decided before it began—except that Benaiah was a mighty man. He descended on the giant in a fiery courage, unlodged the massive spear from the Egyptian's hand, turned it round and thrust it through his enemy.

It would have been a mark of prowess if Benaiah had fought that handsome Egyptian, spear against spear, and triumphed. But because he snatched his foe's spear and turned it against him, the battle deserves a place in the record of the mighty men. The conflict is more remarkable, the warrior more commendable, because of it.

Benaiah managed this feat once, and we praise him for it; but God has flipped spears against their wielders more times than we can recount. Benaiah has killed his one, but God his tens of thousands, in this way.

What do I mean?

Consider that spear of a cross, which in the hand of the devil was meant to put away a preacher of righteousness, to expose the Son of God to shame and silence his truthful tongue. Yet, as soon as the deed was done and Jesus expired his final breath, God snatched that spear away and with it rent the temple's veil from top to bottom. God did not defeat the devil *despite* the devil's spear, but *with* the devil's spear. He used an instrument of untold evil to destroy that evil.

The spear of Saul hounds David through the wilderness, and yet God uses that very hunt, that very spear, to produce the precious Psalms of Scripture. Or again, Joseph's brothers hurl their spear against their own

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 2:28-35.

flesh and blood, selling him into Egypt—but God caught that spear and turned it against, if not them, at least their intention.

We could multiply the tales a thousand-fold in your life alone, instances in which the devil or some human foe meant your downfall by a scheme, and yet God snatched that scheme away and turned it against your enemies, and for your good.

Yes, we would regard God as a great warrior if he could simply extinguish all our foes and failures this very moment—you may wonder why he has not. One answer is certainly found in Benaiah's spear: when God takes those weapons fashioned against you, temptations and sufferings, and uses those very things to fulfill his good purposes, then we will not only marvel—then we will record and recount for future generations the prowess of our Almighty God.

I mention this turning of the spear because it illustrates the work of God in our passage today. Zechariah, the elderly priest, was told in the temple by an angelic messenger that his aged wife Elizabeth would bear a son, whose name would be John. Zechariah fails—he doubts this can be done, and asks for a sign. The sign he is given is muteness and deafness until the child is born. The spear point of doubt is pressed against his neck; it seems his little faith will be stamped out, or will stamp out the purposes of God.

But then God reaches out his hand to snag the spear.

#### **LUKE 1:57-66**

We spoke of Zechariah's doubt several weeks ago, and there began to see the good God brought from it. But now that good appears in all its color.

Zechariah has sinned against the Lord by doubting him, which is no small sin. It is a wrong we ourselves, as Christians, too often commit. And nothing I will say in the minutes that follow must be taken as a defense of doubting, as though it were ok for Christians to question one iota of all God has written.

Nevertheless, this passage appears in the word of God for good reason, namely, to show that our doubt does not foil the good purposes of God—no, rather God takes hold of every wrong and evil, even our own sin and doubt, and turns it on our enemies. Even our doubts must bow before the honor of God, and the good of his people.

This morning we will consider those two goods in order: how does God turn Zechariah's doubt on its wielder to get glory for himself, and how does he turn it to bless Zechariah? How does God use—not author, but us—sin to get glory, and how does he use it to bless his people? It is

incredible to state it that way, but I will show you these things from the text.

## To Get Glory

First, how does God use Zechariah's doubt to get glory for himself?

The answer begins in the very first verse: "Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son."<sup>2</sup> About nine months before, the angel Gabriel had said to Zechariah, in verse 13, "your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son." The priest could not believe it, and the specter of doubt arose, casting its ghastly shadow over the scene.

And now God reaches out his hand, and smashes it.

I think Luke wants us to see this smashing very clearly. Gabriel in verse 13 says Elizabeth "will bear"—there's the verb, and "a son," there's the noun. The two, verb and noun, are held together on the angel's lips. But then we do not find them together again for many verses.

Gabriel tells Mary in verse 31 that she will bear a son, but Luke uses a different Greek verb for "bear." It's not the same pair of verb and noun there. Then Mary goes to the hill country to see Elizabeth, and the baby John leaps in Elizabeth's womb—but Luke has chosen to use a different noun for John, not "son," but "baby." He seems careful to reserve that word for later.

Why? I think, so that when we come to our present passage we will see, beyond the shadow of a spectral doubt, that the angel's promise has been exactly fulfilled: "she bore a son." Finally the verb and noun reunite!

Zechariah hears, "will bear a son," and supposes, "It cannot be." But then God enters the fray, snatches the spear and says, in effect, "Oh, is that what you think? Let me show you what I can do: she bore a son."

I tell you, it was not right for Zechariah to doubt—but, because he did, the battle is more worth recording. We would not read the Exodus with half the enthusiasm if Pharaoh's heart was not hardened against the Lord. The hardened heart was the spear God would use; it was not right, but it magnified the power of God by giving him something to crush.

And though Zechariah was at fault, his fault could not foil the Almighty's intention. God's intention took hold the fault and used it.

Notice at the end of our text in verse 66, as the whole countryside chatters about the events of our passage: "and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, 'What then will this child be?' For the

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<sup>2</sup> V. 57 (ESV).

hand of the Lord was with him.” No one would have given Elizabeth’s child a second thought, if God had not miraculously opened Zechariah’s mouth. And God would not have opened that mouth, if he had not closed it first. And God would not have closed it, if Zechariah had not doubted. How is the way prepared for this messenger, who will announce the Christ? How is it that hearts are tenderized in preparation for God’s purpose, that they lay up the significance of what is happening through John? By means of Zechariah’s doubt.

The people are correct to conclude that God’s hand was with the child—they beheld the hand of God’s power at work, but they would not have seen it without the priest’s doubt. When the doubt rears its lofty head, then God’s hand has opportunity to crush it.

So God gets glory with this spear of sin by, like Benaiah, showing his own power through it.

There is more though. How else does God get glory by Zechariah’s failure? The answer begins to bring us into our passage’s story itself.

See verse 58: “And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.” Luke takes the word which began marries Magnificat, *megaluno* in the Greek, “to exult” or “make big” or “make seem big,” and says that this is precisely what God did with his own mercy. He magnified his mercy.

We do not mean God’s mercy grew—it cannot grow, for it, like all his attributes, is held in a perfect degree. He is most merciful. But see our verse again—this is how Elizabeth’s neighbors and kin *perceive* the scenario: “her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her.” That is, God’s mercy became more visible to them. It appeared bigger, because they saw more of it.

And we know what they may not—yes, God is merciful to grant this good couple a child, but his mercy is bigger than that. He has granted them this child, *despite Zechariah’s doubt*.

You would never see how big God’s mercy is, if there were not sin in the world.

Ah, we wish there were not sin, on the one hand, for it is more foul and heinous than anything else! We crave its eradication in ourselves, we long for it to be purged from society. We ought to crave its absence.

*Yet*, God does not feel threatened by all the ragings of humanity against him. He does not watch the news and panic that his will may be undone by anyone in D.C. No—instead, he snatches that spear away from the corrupted culture, and forces it to serve his own ends. He makes it

magnify his mercy. The persecutor forwards God's ends like the persecuted, though he does not mean to.

This is Paul's argument in Romans 5. He sees how Israel failed, how she received the law from Sinai with enthusiasm but then, because of her wayward heart, broke every law she received. The law only made her sin more clear! It seems it would have been better if she never had the law. But Paul does not think so: "Now the law came in," he writes, "to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." Where there was more sin, there was more opportunity for God to display his grace, his mercy, in saving sinners.

Paul is careful to add: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? [That objection easily arises in a discussion like this, but Paul pushes it aside:] By no means!" We ought to hate and fight against sin all our days. If you are looking for an excuse to sin, you are not a believer—a true believer hates sin, has died to it, fights against it. He sins, but he does not love his sin. He is not looking for a way to justify it.

I speak then to true believers: sin must, like all else in our universe, serve God's ends. Zechariah's doubt should not have happened; but it did, and so it must serve God's plan. It must be made to magnify his power and mercy.

What then of your doubts, Christian? More than that, what of your sin?

The devil holds that spear within his grip and has it aimed at you and at God. He sets temptations before you like mines along the road; he hopes you will surrender to one or the other of them, so that God may be dishonored. When you do sin, the devil casts the error in your face: "Are you even a Christian? God cannot approve of this, cannot approve of you. All the others who gather here on Sunday morning, they deserve to be here—but you, you will never measure up to the name of Christian."

On and on that devil goes, swinging his spear around. Believer, do not believe him. Yes, he towers overhead, he looms and leers. His accusations find the spot between your armor and aim to dig deeply. He wishes to blow upon the embers of your doubt, and increase them with gusts of guilt. He wishes you to think that, whatever you have done, it is too much and has spoiled the purposes of God, and sentenced you to hell.

Ah, but why then is Zechariah in our Bibles? Here is a man who failed, who doubted, who sinned. If God were a harsh taskmaster, Zechariah would die childless. The privilege of begetting John the Baptist would have been stripped from him. The Messiah's way would not be cleared of stones and prepared for his arrival, and God's plan would suffer harm.

No, when the devil dogs you for past sins, you must take the counsel Martin Luther offered in a letter:

When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: 'I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also.'<sup>3</sup>

God never approves of sin; no Christian can live long and happily in sin, without putting up a fight. But sin, even your sin, will not cause the smallest rock in the wall around God's kingdom to chip. God will get glory for himself, will knock the devil's spear out of his hand and use it against him. Therefore, though we grieve our sins, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. God will use even Zechariah's doubt to accomplish what he means to accomplish.

## To Bless Us

We behold the Lord getting glory for himself by means of Zechariah's doubt, but our passage goes further. For tied to his own glory is God's commitment to our good, the welfare of his people.

How then does God bless his people through Zechariah's doubt?

Now we are in the thick of the narrative, beginning in verse 59: "And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child." The Greeks did not name their children until the seventh or the tenth day, the Romans until the ninth—here, the Jews name theirs on the eighth, when the little one is circumcised. And witnesses gather, the neighbors and the relatives, to be present for the event.

"And," the verse continues, "they would have called him Zechariah after his father." This was not too unusual in that day, as it is not entirely uncommon in our own. We have no example of it in the Bible, but we have several examples from other writings of the time. The bystanders thought to do Zechariah this honor, to name his child after him, and you think his parents would be eager to do it. But they are not.

Verses 60-61: "but his mother answered, 'No; he shall be called John.' And they said to her, 'None of your relatives is called by this name.'"

"If you will not call him after his dad, at least name him after an uncle. Why John?" So they reason.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Ray Ortlund, "Happy warfare," The Gospel Coalition, *The Gospel Coalition Website* (Sept. 24, 2014; accessed Dec. 8, 2014).

Now, we do not know why Elizabeth asserted his name as John. Did Zechariah write for her the angel's words from earlier: "you shall call his name John"?<sup>4</sup> Or did God somehow intervene so that she knew what name to call him without Zechariah's aid? We do not and cannot know.

But in either case, Elizabeth opposes the pressure of her peers.

So her peers turn to Zechariah, beginning in verse 62:

And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet [probably a flat piece of wood with wax on its surface, on which impressions could be made with a stylus] and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered.<sup>5</sup>

Wait a second. Is this Zechariah, doubting Zechariah? Remember him less than a year before, standing by the altar of incense, trembling at the sight of the angel and asking, "How shall I know this?" How can my wife be pregnant, she is too old—how can I be sure that God can do this? Are we seeing the same Zechariah now?

"His name is John," he etches into the wax. Not, "We ought to call him John, perhaps." Not, "I'm sorry, but maybe could we call him by another name, John"? Simply, "His name is John." Of course, he knows that they will want an explanation, and is he prepared to tell them he has seen an angel? What will they think of Zechariah? And has he really seen an angel, or is it that he just so desperately wanted a child that he imagined one?

You see, this is the way that doubt would speak. But Zechariah is not "doubting Zechariah" anymore. "His name is John." No apology, no qualification, no uncertainty.

Marvel at the wisdom of God! Zechariah sinned, and the Lord permitted this consequence: silence for month after month. "Poor Zechariah," we think, "to be mute and deaf so long. This is a hard consequence to bear for his doubt." See him sitting in his home evening after evening, cut off from the joys of family; he continues in his occupation, we imagine, but as a man torn away from the rest of the world, an island all alone.

You too, I will guess, know what it means to endure the consequences for your sins, even as a believer. The greatest consequence we will not taste, for Christ has drained the cup of God's wrath on our behalf. Yet, lesser and earthly consequences we must often bear up under. Sometimes this is our great fear, and that which fixes our mind upon our own sin: "Yes, I know my past sins have been forgiven, but they still

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<sup>4</sup> V. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Vv. 62-63.

weigh upon me because of their consequences which I now endure, or anticipate I will endure.” But this is to misunderstand the heart of God.

Zechariah’s yoke seemed heavy, but it was light. How can you explain Zechariah’s transformation, from doubting priest, to firm in the faith? What accounts for the wonderful change? I will tell you: the consequence of his sin. No doubt the long days of silence offered him the opportunity to reflect, to repent.

And so, when his tongue is finally loosed, he speaks much better than he did with Gabriel before. See verse 64: “And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.”

Zechariah’s silence seemed a threat to his wellbeing. The Egyptian loomed over the poor priest, massive spear in hand. But when the dust of battle clears, that spear is in the Egyptian, not in Zechariah. God has taken and turned this curse into a blessing. The Lord has taken hold the unpleasant consequence of Zechariah’s sin, and has forced it to serve Zechariah!

As is often the case, the consequence for the sin has vanquished the sin. So many months of muteness is not wrath; it is discipline which, though unpleasant for the moment, afterward yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Now Zechariah can utter honestly the words of David before him: “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.”<sup>6</sup>

Believer, has God attached some consequence to your sin? Then mimic Zechariah and bless him for it! Here is a thorn that, though it stings in the flesh, also kills the flesh. You may pray that God remove the thorn—three times even, as Paul did. But if God is content to keep the consequence in your life, do not despair, it only means the thorn is meant to do so much good that to remove it would be a tragedy.

Do you remember that moment when Jesus told his apostles they would all abandon him? In Matthew 26, proud Peter looks around at his fellow disciples and says, “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” Ah, Peter, how will you ever lead the people of God with so much self-confidence? He will not. Either he must lose his role as a shepherd of the early church, or he must lose his pride.

But how can you humble this fiery fisherman? What book or seminar can pry away that primitive sin of pride? Jesus knows what Peter needs—he needs to feel the consequence of his own sin, even if it cuts him to the very heart.

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<sup>6</sup> Psalm 119:67.

And so, on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, Peter flees like the rest. He hides in the high priest's courtyard as he watches Jesus' trial, and utters his third denial of the Lord. Then, as Luke will tell us in chapter 22:

And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.<sup>7</sup>

None of us envy this consequence, this cutting sorrow. His weeping was bitter indeed. But notice how Peter's pride was squeezed out of his soul through his tears. When he sees Jesus again, resurrected from the dead, and stands along the Galilean shore with him, his attitude is quite different. Jesus asks, "Do you really, really love me?" And this once proud apostle no longer replies, "Even if no one else loves you, I really, really love you." No, we hear instead the simple statement, "You know that I love you."<sup>8</sup>

The best preparation Peter could have had for his immense ministry to follow was not seminary, and was not to be found in some great exploit, or in this book or that. He just needed to endure the painful consequence of his own sin, to feel the fallout of his pride. Then he was humble.

## Conclusion

I speak to you who know Christ, who hate sin, who love God, who hate godlessness: everything, even our sin and doubts, must serve the Lord's purposes. Do not sin—God forbid that we should sin! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

But if you do sin, you have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he himself is the propitiation for your sin. Because the wrath of God is gone, his love will guide even the outcome of our faults.

I do not care how broad the beam of that spear which has been fashioned against you, or how many shekels the tip of it weighs. It is irrelevant if your current trial towers as high as that handsome Egyptian of old. If Benaiah could take and turn the spear, then so can God. And so will God.

May our response be that of Zechariah, who—lips loosed—blessed God; and that of the bystanders, who feared him.

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<sup>7</sup> Vv. 61-62.

<sup>8</sup> John 21:15-17.