

## The Disruption of Grace

### Luke Series #2

Luke1:5-25

David Sunday

November 25, 2012

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Almighty Lord, we see Your voice as powerful; Your voice is full of majesty. The grass withers, the flowers fade but Your Word abides forever. Every word of Yours proves true. Like silver refined in a furnace, purified seven times, Your words are pure. So Lord, speak, we pray. Help us grasp the heights of Your plans for us. Help us see Your purposes. Speak Lord until Your church is built and the whole earth is filled with Your glory, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The days are bleak,  
The darkness is deep,  
The future looms forlorn—  
But *get ready*....  
Get ready for the disruption of grace.

A monster is reigning,  
the godly are straining,  
faith is waning in the land—  
but *get ready*...  
Get ready for the disruption of grace.

The people are praying,  
But Heaven seems silent—  
It's been four hundred years since a prophet has spoken—  
*Get ready*...  
Get ready for the disruption of grace.

Your ways are blameless,  
But your wife is barren—  
Your steps are faithful,  
But your strength is feeble—  
Though darkness is thickening,  
Salvation is quickening—  
*Get ready, Zechariah*...  
Get ready for the disruption of grace.

Have you ever prayed a prayer you didn't really expect God to answer? Have you ever doubted that God could really do what you were asking of Him? Maybe I should ask how often have you prayed such a prayer? How many times have you doubted God could or would really do what you were asking of Him? Would you be surprised if the God we worship actually intervened in your life this week?

Remember why Luke is writing his Gospel. He writes this orderly account to dispel our doubts about Christ, the gospel and the purposes of God. He writes in verse four, *"that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."* So you can know for certain the things of Christ and His gospel that He has set forth in His Word. So, what have we been taught? What are the things we're to be certain of?

We've been taught about how the eternal, almighty God Who created the universe out of nothing, came down into our fallen planet in the person of His Son. He became a man named Jesus in order to redeem us from our slavery to sin and Satan. He died for our sins and rose from the dead so we can be made a new creation and live in a world that is freed forever from its bondage to death and decay. We've been taught that God has disrupted our fallen, rebellious world with His grace. That's what we've been taught. Are you certain of these things?

It's not just men like Theophilus who have their doubts about this God. Skepticism is a contagion that can attack anyone. Godly people, exemplars of piety, leaders of the faith—men like Zechariah—they too can fall prey to doubt. Even the best of men can stumble in the fog of unbelief. There's no question that as Luke introduces this man and his wife to us, he intends for us to look up to them with great respect.

We read in verse five that they lived in horrible times—in the days of Herod, king of Judea. Just the mention of that tyrant's name would send chills up the spine of a godly Israelite. From a commentary by Michael Card we read,

"He came to power amid a bloodbath with the help of two Roman legions in 37 B.C. He murdered both of his brothers-in-law and his beloved wife, Miramme, as well as her mother. Just before his own death he ordered that prominent citizens in Israel be gathered together into the Hippodrome. The decree was that upon his death they would be executed, so that there would be mourning in Israel."

Horrible times. But Psalm 2 tells us there is a King in Heaven Who laughs at the ragings of the kings of this earth. Zechariah and Elizabeth belonged to the remnant who faithfully worshiped His Sovereign Majesty. Both of them came from priestly families (1:5)

and both were marked by lives of remarkable piety and godliness (1:6). Luke tells us they were both *“righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”* In God’s sight, He saw the righteousness of their lives. And they had been living this way for a considerable period of time—they were both advanced in years according to Luke 1:7.

Think of a seasoned pastor and his wife who have served now for decades in some obscure country church, nearing the age of retirement. But they have walked so faithfully before the Lord that they have earned the respect, not only of their congregation, but of the community and the surrounding region. That’s the kind of people Zechariah and Elizabeth were. If they came to New Covenant Bible Church, we would stand up and pay attention when they came in the door. We’d esteem them for their faith and hold them up as role models for all to follow. I’m thankful we have a number of older couples in our church just like that—walking blamelessly and righteously before the Lord.

Yet, says Phil Ryken, “there was a cloud that cast its dark shadow over their happiness.” There was a history of heartache concealed just under the surface of their joy. They carried a wound of unresolved disappointment that had never been healed. Luke tells us in verse seven, *“But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.”*

Godly people in Elizabeth’s generation would’ve been loath to put these two words together in the same sentence—*blameless* and *barren*. According to the mindset of that society, barrenness was thought to be a sign of God’s displeasure. It was a reproach. And Elizabeth makes clear in verse 25 that she felt it deeply. People would have silently wondered (sometimes they’d rudely break the silence with their impertinent remarks), “Even though Elizabeth seems so godly to us, must there not be some hidden sin? Some scandal from the past? Something between her and the Lord to cause this disgrace?”

Even today, though the stigma has thankfully softened, many who have struggled with infertility will admit they too have been subject to unfair judgments. Sadly, many have had to wrestle with the same sense of reproach that afflicted dear and righteous Elizabeth.

But whenever the Scriptures bring a childless couple into the spotlight, it’s a signal to get ready. Get ready for the disruption of grace! Think of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 11), Jacob and Rachel (Genesis 29), Hannah and Elkanah (1 Samuel 1), Manoah and his wife (the parents of Samson in Judges 13). Whenever we see a childless couple like this brought into center stage God is saying, “Watch out, I’m about to do something great in your midst.”

And for Zechariah this great work of God all comes together at the high points of his career as a priest.

Let's read beginning at verse eight:

*Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.*

Now this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for any priest. At that time there were 24 divisions in the priesthood and each division would serve in the temple twice a year for a two-week period and then they would all serve together for the great festivals. At this time, we read in verse eight, Zechariah's division was engaged in their sacred ministry. That was honor enough for this country priest. But during this time, every day two priests would be chosen by lot to offer incense in the Holy Place, that most-sacred place in the temple just outside the curtain that set apart the Holy of Holies into which only the high priest was allowed access and then only once a year.

Now there were a lot of priests—somewhere around 18,000 at the time—so some priests would never be given the honor of offering incense in the Holy Place. And once a man was chosen, he was ineligible ever to be chosen again. He had one chance and this was it. So this was the climactic moment of Zechariah's life. In the kind providence of God, this man from the hill country was chosen by lot to go as near to the presence of God as any mortal could and still survive, except for the High Priest. Can you imagine the thrill and the awe that captivated Zechariah that day as he walked in his priestly robes; as he went through the crowds that had gathered to pray in the temple courts and into the Holy Place where God's presence dwelt? As he stands there to offer prayers on behalf of God's people—prayers that would have been prescribed. Prayers that were to be offered briefly—you were to get in there and get out. He would pray for the salvation of Israel, for the consolation of Israel, for a Deliverer to come Who would rescue God's people from their sins and from their sorrows.

But I wonder as Zechariah stood there as priest, performing his priestly duties, might Zechariah also have whispered a prayer—a personal request—that he had almost abandoned? While he stood as close to God's presence as he had ever been in his lifetime—or would ever be this side of heaven—might he have added to his priestly prayers a fleeting, personal request. Might he have thought, "Here I am, Holy God, at the high point of my

career, but there at home sits my dear wife Elizabeth who is as faithful and blameless as any woman could be in Your sight and she is barren.”

I wonder, had Zechariah offered that prayer in the temple or had he long since resigned himself to stop asking for a gift he no longer believed was possible for God to give. Had his hopes been extinguished? We do not know whether Zechariah prayed for a son right then and there in the Temple—or whether he and Elizabeth had stopped praying for that particular gift years ago—but we do know they had prayed for a son. And whether it was that day or many years past, God had most certainly heard their prayers. Even if Zechariah had long since forgotten his prayers for a son, God had not forgotten.

Nor has God forgotten the cries of your heart that you have offered in faith, even if you have forgotten. If you offered those prayers in faith, they have been heard and they are remembered at the throne of grace. From that majestic throne comes a messenger of grace named Gabriel, whose presence at the altar of incense startles Zechariah with terror. *“And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense”* (1:11). Not what he was expecting to find when he went into that holy place. No other priest he knew had come out of there saying, “Do you know who I saw? I met Gabriel in there.”

*“And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him”* (1:12)...as it always does when people meet angels. Angels are not like those sweet little harmless ornaments you hand on your Christmas trees. They are messengers who stand in the glorious presence of Almighty God, Whose glory is so resplendent the naked human eye cannot bear to look upon it. And when they come into the presence of a human being, the response of mere mortals is always the same: terror and fear seize humanity whenever we encounter the messengers from God’s glorious presence.

When God’s grace disrupts our lives, it can be a fearful thing at first. How easily we drift into the naturalistic assumptions of the world around us. I hope you notice this passage is all about the supernatural breaking through. The entire nativity story we’ll be looking at is exotic—from another world. Heaven is breaking through into earth. God is communicating to us through Luke that the supernatural permeates the world in which we live but we usually don’t have eyes to see so worship becomes predictable. We start to walk by sight, not by faith, until God startles us with His supernatural presence. We encounter the living power of His Word and it lays us bare. We experience the dynamic presence of His Holy Spirit. And we say with the hymn writer,

O how I fear you, living God,  
With deep and tender fear;  
And worship you with trembling hope,  
And penitential tears!

(My God, How Wonderful You Are by Frederick William Faber)

It's only when we've truly experienced the fear of God, when we've known what it is like to tremble in His holy presence that we can appreciate the calming power of these gracious words, "*Fear not.*"

Look at verses 13-17,

*But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him 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 for the Lord a people prepared."*

What a message from the angel to this righteous and blameless old man. Glorious things are spoken here by the angel Gabriel. Let me name a few:

1. Remarkably, a personal request that had been offered in pain many times over and many years ago—though long-delayed in its answer—is now being granted.

God hears your sighs and counts your tears  
God will lift up, God will lift up, lift up your head

(God Will Lift Up Your Head by Jars of Clay)

2. Another remarkable thing we see is that when we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness—which had been the steady course of Zechariah's and Elizabeth's lives and was certainly the main thrust of Zechariah's prayer—when we seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, God is able and committed to adding to His faithful saints everything else we could possibly need. I see this word from the angel as an encouraging confirmation of Psalm 37:4, "*Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*" Make Him the object of your desires; make His Kingdom the object of your pursuits and even in years of disappointment and pain you can be confident that God has not forgotten the longings of your heart and ultimately He will

give them to you. *“Delight yourself in Him and He’s able to take care of your every need.”*

3. Another remarkable thing that stands out from these words of the angels is the joy that God brings to our lives through His gift is not only for our personal benefit but for the lives of countless others. Look at verse 14, *“And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth...”* Did you know that every gift God has given you, He intends to use not only for your joy but for the joy of many others who are associated with you?
4. Zechariah is called to raise his son not just for himself but to be devoted completely to the Lord. That’s what’s indicated in these words in verse 15: *“And he must not drink wine or strong drink...”* God does not completely prohibit the moderate consumption of alcohol in the Scriptures but He does prohibit the immoderate consumption of alcohol at all times. But what this is indicating is the Nazarite vow that Sampson and others took in the Old Testament. What God is saying to Zechariah is that his son was to be set apart, consecrated to God. Then he goes on to quote passages from the prophet Malachi declaring that before God sends the Messiah into the world, He is going to send a forerunner.

Just like no president of the United States would ever just walk into this room, stand up and start speaking like I did this morning. Whenever someone great comes, their presence needs to be announced by someone. So whenever the president speaks, someone comes to the platform and says, “Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States of America.” And then he speaks.

John was going to be that forerunner for the Messiah. He was going to be the one of whom Malachi spoke who would prepare for God a people who were ready to receive the Messiah.

5. Another thing that is remarkable about the angel’s words is what it says about the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit even in the life of an unborn infant. I think this is remarkable! Look at verse 15: *“...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.”* Now have you ever doubted that unborn life is full-fledged humanity? Our culture calls this into question all the time. Our culture seems to think that unborn

life in the womb is not fully human. But God the Holy Spirit comes upon this infant—this fetus—in the womb and fills Him with His very presence indicating He is fully human. This also shows the sovereignty of God’s grace because regeneration—God making alive that which is spiritually dead—is a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. There’s no minimum age requirement for regeneration. Maybe it’s not normal for an infant to be regenerated in the womb but certainly it’s not out of the question. God the Holy Spirit is free to work and to give new life whenever and however He chooses. And of course if He does grant that regeneration, it will be demonstrated through the evidences of faith and repentance as that child grows.

J.C. Ryle is right when he says,

“Children are never too young to receive the grace of God... Of course we must be reasonable in our expectations. We must not look for evidences of grace unsuitable to their age and capacities. But we must never forget that the heart which is not too young to sin is also not too young to be filled with the grace of God.”

How we ought to stand in awe of the sovereign grace of God, even as He works in our little children. We need to respect and fan into flame that gracious work wherever it is evidenced.

6. Another thing we see from the words of this angel is that God’s intention for Zechariah’s son is the same intention he has for our sons and daughters. God was raising up Zechariah’s son—John the Baptist—to get people ready to meet Jesus Christ. He was to be the forerunner for the Messiah—the one who announced His arrival. So God gave Zechariah and Elizabeth a son so that they could give that son back to God.

Likewise, the sons and daughters He has blessed us with are entrusted to us to be cultivated for and consecrated to His service. It is the role of godly parents to continually hold your children in your hands, wide open and say, “God they are Yours. Completely Yours to do with as You please, where you please, when you please. And I plead with You for grace that I would be able to prepare my sons and daughters to do exactly what You’ve called John the Baptist to do—get ready to meet Jesus Christ.” My children exist to make much of Christ. Your children exist to make much of Christ. So think of your family as a road construction crew—creating pathways for Jesus all over the Fox Valley region and throughout the world, wherever God may send them. May

they be used to do exactly what John was going to do—turn many people to the Lord their God, to go before people and make ready a people who are prepared to meet Him.

7. The object of true gospel ministry is to turn hearts—from ignorance to knowledge, from carelessness to thoughtfulness, from disobedience to the wisdom of the just. For such ministers let us pray—and to such a ministry may we devote ourselves and our children.

God's grace disrupted Zechariah's life in a powerful way through the presence of this angel, Gabriel. But Zechariah wasn't ready for this disruption of grace. After he hears these stunning words from this startling presence in this sacred place, look at what Zechariah says. It was not a good idea. John Piper gave a sermon once called "How Not to Talk to an Angel" based on this text. Look at 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.'"*

The early church preacher John Chrysostom said, "Zechariah looked at his age, his gray hair, his body that had lost its strength. He looked at his wife's sterility and he refused to accept on faith what the angel revealed would soon come to pass." And that unbelief in the presence of this man who is blameless—but not yet sinless—is very troubling to God.

Look at verse 19: *"And the angel answered him, '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.'"* Gabriel was saying, "This doesn't happen every day, Zechariah. I'm the one who shows up in the most momentous of occasions to deliver God's word, the gospel—*euaggelion*—the evangel." This is the first time the word "gospel" is used in Luke. Gabriel went on to say, "God sent me to you to bring you the gospel. And you're telling me you need something stronger than the gospel of God before you will believe it. You're telling me you will only believe when God gives you something stronger than His own promise? You're telling me that His Word is not enough? What could God possibly give you that is stronger than His own Word? His own promise?"

Gabriel is confronting Zechariah here with the sinfulness of his unbelief because the unbelief of believers is one of the most provocative sins in the sight of God. It is a denial of God's almighty power when we doubt whether He can do something He has promised to do. When we ask for further confirmation of the word that He has spoken, it is questioning God's integrity and is a soul-destroying sin.

The irony of it all is that God is promising to do the very things that Zechariah had been praying He would do! He had been asking God for a son and he had been praying for a

Savior Who would come to deliver His people. He's been asking for these things and now Gabriel comes to him and says, "Your prayer has been answered! Good news!" And Zechariah doesn't believe it. It seems he didn't really expect God to answer his prayers. So God sends a severe mercy into Zechariah's life. In the words of Sinclair Ferguson, "God mars him in order to mend him."

Let's look at verse 20: *"And behold, 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."* Since Zechariah did not believe the good news when God sent one of his chief angels to declare it to him, now Zechariah will not be able to speak. Verse 62 seems to indicate that Zechariah was unable to hear as well because when the people came to him, they had to use hand signals to communicate to him.

So the people wait and wait. "Where is Zechariah? Is he okay? Has he died in there?" When he finally comes out to offer the standard priestly blessing, he could not speak. They responded, "He must have seen a vision."

For nine months, he could not speak. You might have someone in your life whom you wish would be struck for nine months but imagine if it was you. Nine months ago was February—imagine if you had not been able to speak or hear since February.

Unlike Zechariah's response of unbelief, Elizabeth—that righteous, blameless exemplar of faith—rested and rejoiced in the disruption of God's grace in her life. For five months her heart was fixed on God's goodness as she waited for the proper time to reveal the promise of what she was carrying in her womb at the time of visitation with Mary.

There's an important lesson for us in Zechariah's discipline: **We cannot speak of a gospel we don't really believe. If my heart is resistant to God's Word, my lips will be restrained from speaking God's Word. God's Word will go forward, His purposes will advance—but I may be set aside for a season until I really believe.**

Zechariah has just heard the greatest news of his lifetime—the greatest news anyone has heard for four hundred years! But he was unable to tell anyone about it because at first he did not believe it.

Think about how that applies to us. I realize this is a sign—a unique sign but an application to you is that maybe you've done a lot of talking over the last nine months but very little of it has been talk that brings glory to Jesus. You rarely speak of Him to others. His Word rarely penetrates your heart these days. You're not really hearing. If you find yourself muted in your witness for Jesus, could it be due to a hidden root of unbelief in

your heart? Could it be that the real reason you speak so little of the Savior is because you are harboring a resistance to His Word and His grace in your own life? You will not speak of a gospel that you do not deeply believe and are not personally experiencing in your life.

As we marvel at the disruption of God's grace into the lives of this older couple who had been walking blamelessly before the Lord for many years, let me challenge the faithful saints of New Covenant Bible Church:

- Do you believe God's Word—God's gospel of grace—is still powerfully working in the world today?
- Do you believe God hears your prayers and knows the hidden longings of your soul?
- Do you believe that through all the disappointment and pain of your life, He still delights unreservedly to do you good with all His heart and with all His soul?
- Do you believe He hears your sighs and counts your tears and in due time He will lift up your head? His grace will not fail you.
- Are you trusting in a God Who says, "Delight yourself in Me and I will give you the desires of your heart"?
- Are you still looking for God to do great and amazing things in your life, even as you are getting along in years? Instead of settling into a familiar routine, are you open to God's grace disrupting your plans and agenda? Maybe you won't have a baby in your sixties or seventies but could God do something in and through you that demonstrates His glory? Are you open to those kinds of disruptions of grace in your life?
- Do you believe that greater things are yet to come in God's plans and purposes for this broken world? Are you eagerly looking forward to that great disruption of grace that will rock our world at the Return of our King? Are you lifting up your eyes and your heart to the Lord, knowing your redemption draws near? Are you *"eagerly waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise [are you, church] waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells"* (2 Peter 3:12-13)?

Get ready, Zechariah, a Savior is coming. Get ready for the disruption of grace in your life. **The way to get ready is to hear God's Word and believe it.** Believe that God is on

the move in our world today, ready to save you if you will turn away from trusting in yourself and put your trust and hope in Jesus. Soon He will return and for those who are ready, His return will bring salvation. But for those who are resistant, His return will bring desolation.

Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in a momentous time. They lived to see the dawn of the Messiah's coming. We live in a more momentous time. We live in a world that is pregnant and writhing with birth pangs for the Messiah's return. That's the world we live in. That's the next event on God's calendar. Are you ready? Are you ready for that disruption of God's grace?

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