

# Teaching an Old Dog New Faith

Reflection on Luke 1

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The Big Idea: **God passionately wants you to know you are in His plans.**

You may have heard the supposedly true story about a man who looked out his window into his yard and saw a kitten that had climbed a young tree and was afraid to come down.

The man went out and talked and whistled, extended a branch, offered warm milk, all without results.

The tree was not big enough to climb, but the man got a brainstorm. If he tied a rope to the tree and pulled the other end behind his car, the tree might bend down just enough so he could reach the kitten.

He found an old length of rope and set to his plan, and at first this idea seemed to be working. He rolled the car forward a little at a time, constantly checking to make sure he wasn't damaging the tree, while watching to see if the cat was reachable.

All of a sudden the rope broke. The tree went "BOING!" and the miniature feline sailed through the air and out of sight.

The man felt terrible, and walked all over the neighborhood asking people if they had seen a little kitten. No one had. So he said, "Lord, that cat's in your hands," and he went back to his work.

A few days later he saw a friend in the grocery store. She had a big bag of cat food in her cart. This woman didn't like animals, and everyone knew it. So out of honest curiosity he asked, "Why are you buying cat food?"

She said, "You won't believe this," and told him how her daughter had been begging for a cat, and she had always refused her. "Then one day," she said, "during a begging episode, I finally said, 'If God gives you a cat, I'll let you keep it.'"

She said, "I watched my child go out in the yard, get on her knees and start praying. And I know you won't believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. A kitten came flying out of the blue sky, with its paws outspread, and landed right in front of her."

It's not every day that you get such an instant answer to prayer. Sometimes, in fact, we give up on praying about something because it doesn't happen when we want it to. And when God *does* answer the prayer, we may be surprised and even resistant to the idea, because God has his own purposes and timing.

But we need to know that God blesses us by drawing us into His plans. And often we are resistant, because we're only interested in our own plans.

That, I believe, is what is happening in **Luke chapter 1**. Before this time, people had been desperately waiting for God to send the Savior. "Advent" is a Latin word meaning the *coming* of someone important. Advent season is about preparing for the Savior's coming. But when the Savior came, most people didn't receive Him, as **John 1** says. But some did receive Him. And four people recorded the story in a way that impacted so many lives and brought together so many communities that people

recognized these four Gospels as God's truth, and they became central to the Bible. Luke's Gospel is the third of those four.

Most of the Bible, will not make sense unless you realize two truths:

- (1) **God passionately wants to share His goodness with us, and**
- (2) We aren't all that interested in God.

Generally we are interested in what God can do *for* us. But we would be just as interested in a genie to grant our wishes. We tend to be less interested in the Creator who has plans that involve us and shape our lives for something that lasts forever. The main obstacle to God unfolding His plans to us is that we are much more interested in other things than in God's plans.

So Luke begins the story with a good man who illustrates that very truth. Luke gives us two dramatic scenes separated by a 9-month pregnancy.

### **Scene One: Luke 1:5-25**

**Verse 5:** In the time of Herod king of Judea (between 40 and 4 B.C.) there was a priest named Zechariah of the tribe of Abijah, and his wife's name was Elizabeth.

Names had meaning in that culture. Zechariah means "God remembers." Abijah means "God is my Father." Elizabeth means "God is my promise." The names themselves are introducing us to the kind of God who is making Himself known through this story.

**God remembers:** He is the Lord who created us and made promises to us long before this.

**God is my Father:** He is in a *unique* relationship with the Savior who is central to the story. He is also in a Father relationship with all who are receptive to that Savior.

**God is my promise:** What He has promised is on the way. God was present and at work for our good in the past; He is present and at work for our good in the present; and He is on the way with the fulfillment of all this in the future. That is the kind of God He is.

**Verse 6:** Zechariah and Elizabeth were in good standing with God, faithful to His Word and His ways. And yet (**verse 7**) they had not been able to have a child, and now both of them were too old . . . which brings to mind Abraham and Sarah, the parents of the whole family of God's Chosen People.

Many centuries before Zechariah, God had said to Abraham, "Through your family I will bless all nations." But when God first said this, Abraham and Sarah were barren. God's salvation story began with a man and a woman who had not been able to have a child, and were now hopelessly too old. And the story of the Savior would begin also with a man and a woman who had not been able to bear a child and were now hopelessly too old. Both times, God would do what only God could do.

That reality is central to the whole story. For us to be saved, we depend on God to do what only God can do. None of this makes sense if you push God into a minor role. To understand the story, you have to see that it is about God revealing himself as Savior.

So Zechariah and Elizabeth were barren. And even though they were faithful to God, in the eyes of their culture barrenness was a sign of God's displeasure. To be childless meant that you had failed somehow, so God had withheld blessing. Being childless was a burden they had born their entire married lives. At some time they had pleaded with the Lord to give them a child. But by this time it was evident that the Lord's answer was NO, for His own mysterious reasons. So Luke says the culture was

wrong. Their barrenness was not because they had failed; it was because God had plans they hadn't imagined. And that is true today. We make false assumptions and judgments, because we don't trust the God who works in unexpected ways.

**Verse 8** goes on to tell that Zechariah, as priest, was serving his shift in the Temple which had been built 450 years earlier when the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon. The Temple was the symbol of God's presence among His people. It was the central gathering place for all the Jews, especially on their various annual festivals. They served a lot of people, so they needed a lot of Levites—probably about 20,000 of them at this time. Every day one of them was chosen randomly to burn incense and pray within the temple itself.

That makes one priest's chance less than 1 in 50 of being chosen in any given year. A priest might go his entire life and never be chosen to go inside the Temple. So Zechariah was surprised and honored, maybe fulfilling a life-long dream when he entered and lit the incense that evening.

Thousands were praying outside in the Temple court as Zechariah carried out the ritual alone in the Temple, soaking in every second of the experience. This was as close to the Holy of Holies as a Jew would imagine getting.

But Zechariah was in for more wonder and honor than he could have dreamed.

**Verse 11:** The Lord spoke to Zechariah by means of a messenger from heaven. Suddenly Zechariah saw this awesome being standing alongside the altar of incense, and he did what people nearly always do when they see one of these powerful messengers of God: He froze in terror (**verse 12**).

That is the typical reaction for two very good reasons: (1) The person meeting the angel has never seen anything so powerful in his life. And (2) in the presence of something so holy, the person knows he is unworthy. But the messenger's first words (**verse 13**) were: "Stop fearing, Zechariah." This is the common thing for one of God's messengers to say not only because the person is terrified, but also because God is not speaking a message of condemnation, but rather a message of grace and good news.

God is all good, and God passionately wants you with Him in his plans.

Through the messenger, God says, "Your prayer has been heard." Perhaps Zechariah leafed through the pages of his mind wondering what prayer. The messenger told him, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John."

How many here are named John, or Juan, Sean, Ian, Johann, or Hannah, Ann, or Joanna? All of these names derive from the same Hebrew word--JAHANNAH--meaning "The Lord is gracious." That name is central to God's message.

But the news got more amazing. In God's eyes this child would be a great man (**verse 15**). He would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth (**verse 16**). He would guide many people back to the Lord and (**verse 17**) like a more modern Elijah, he would make God known, so that the devotion of their ancestors would be poured upon a new generation, and apathetic minds would be fascinated with God's ways, in order to get a community ready for the Lord.

Zechariah is experiencing something maybe no one else for 2000 years has experienced, since a similar promise was made to Abraham and Sarah in their old age (Genesis 18). As God's good plans involved Abraham and Sarah, they involve you, Zechariah and Elizabeth. That was the angel's message.

Zechariah responded (**verse 18**) by saying, "I don't know if that's possible. I am too old, and my wife is too old. How can I believe you?"

We are tempted to get moralistic about Zechariah's response, but before we do, let's consider three factors:

- (1) Luke already told us that Zechariah was faithful before the Lord;
- (2) The messenger is bringing good news, not punishment; and
- (3) Imagine how much pain is behind what Zechariah says. He has been disappointed for decades, and has the scars on his soul to prove it. Life has not gone as any Hebrew would have hoped. And now, when he should be counting his grandchildren, now is when he will begin a family? He has to be dizzy at the thought.

What would you think? When someone else tells of an extraordinary encounter with the God, do you consider them over-emotional or unstable? When someone else believes God for great things, do you assume they're irresponsible or naive?

The messenger says (**verse 19**), "I am Gabriel." To be called Gabriel was like being called God's right-hand man. He was saying, "I am not a mere hallucination. I come directly from the presence of God. I was sent to tell you this important good news.

"So look. You are mute, and you're going to stay that way until the day this happens, because you don't trust what I say. And it is going to happen."

Zechariah has waited for decades without a child. Now he is going to wait for nine months before this story will have a fulfillment.

Notice what happens at the end of this episode:

**Verses 21-22:** Zechariah stayed longer than normal in the Temple, and when he came out and couldn't speak, the crowd of people knew he had seen some kind of vision in the Temple. They probably had no idea what, but they knew something was up. What seemed like an affliction to Zechariah was a sign to the whole community that God was doing something. Without the so-called affliction, who would have believed the story?

**Verse 23:** Even unable to speak and hear, Zechariah, completed his duties before returning home—showing, perhaps, how reliable Zechariah was. I say that Zechariah was unable to hear, because in verse 62 they had to make signs to him to communicate with him.

**Verse 24:** Once Elizabeth was pregnant, she herself lived in seclusion for five months. Both Zechariah *and* Elizabeth were going to spend some unexpected time in silence, doing more listening than speaking, more reflecting than acting. Sometimes we simply need time to get our minds around God's surprising plans, and—like it or not—God gives us those seasons of silent waiting.

**Verse 25:** Elizabeth says, "This is the Lord's doing, that at this point in my life He focused on me and freed me from the social shame of having no children." Elizabeth's thought is dominated by the awareness that God cares about her individually, and that he has finally disproven that she was somehow unworthy to have children. Imagine it! She must have felt so loved and affirmed by God!

Now, before we go on to Scene Two, let's recognize what Zechariah had to think about during his months of silence. What had Gabriel told him?

**1. God’s good plans for you personally fit into His glorious plans.**

(verse 13) “YOUR prayer has been heard.”

Zechariah had been praying for something--the birth of a son, and Zechariah’s prayer was in agreement with God’s will.

But even then, God’s plans are much bigger than Zechariah’s plans.

God’s plan involves Zechariah and Elizabeth in His eternal purposes.

God blesses you by involving you in something that will matter forever.

(verse 16) “He will bring back many . . . to the Lord.”

Specifically, God will work through this son John

to bring many people back into a trust relationship with God. Why does that matter?

Because only in a trust relationship with God can you have eternal life.

So this is about far more than parents getting their wish fulfilled late.

It is about many people having eternal life with God.

The parents may want a child for their own reasons.

But ultimately it is God’s purposes for that child that matter.

God may give you what you want, but not in the way you want it,

because He has a larger purpose in what He gives.

Can you see how big that is? God’s story defines your story.

And your story makes more sense as you see it in the context of God’s bigger story.

Disconnected from the big story, our stories are disappointing and hopeless.

But if God has greater purposes—eternal purposes—that changes how we see the details.

**2. God wants to build up a people that is prepared for the coming of the Lord.**

What is a people prepared for the Lord? Look at **verses 16-17**.

**a. People will be brought back to the Lord.**

They’re no longer ignoring Him. They’re eager to see Him.

**b. The hearts of the fathers are turned to their children.**

This could be translated as *fathers* or as *forefathers*—parents or ancestors.

Either way, it means God cares about the next generation. He has plans for them.

Part of being ready for the Lord’s coming

is caring about God’s good plans for the next generation.

This doesn’t begin and end with me. God’s story involves me,

but I do not limit God’s story. It started long before me, and it goes forward forever.

**c. The disobedient are turned to the wisdom of the righteous.**

Another way to say that is that apathetic minds will become fascinated with God’s ways.

People who don’t care will wake up to the reality of God’s presence and plans.

You can choose ignorance, but that is not God’s desire. His plans involve you.

We have a long history of ignoring God, but it doesn’t mean God has stopped working.

We just stop paying attention because our imaginations are too small.

## Scene Two: Luke 1:57-80

Nine months have gone by--months of silence for Zechariah, learning to live without sound, without speech, months to reflect and realize the awesome thing the Lord was doing, living in the days preceding his coming, having an important part in His plans.

For Elizabeth these were months of discomfort and joy, learning in her later years what it feels like to bear a child, and to be the recipient of God's amazing grace. They've had to learn to live together differently, communicating through signs, living in silence. It wasn't easy, but they knew God had good purposes.

The single event that breaks this long period of waiting is the visit from a relative on Elizabeth's side: a young woman named Mary who was, herself, bearing a new creation in her womb. And the Spirit reveals to Elizabeth that Mary's child is the Savior. So the Savior's arrival also happens in a way Zechariah and Elizabeth had not imagined.

Elizabeth gives birth to a son. You get the picture, from **verses 57-58**, that Elizabeth had friends and relatives that had sympathized with her plight at being childless all these years, and were truly thrilled for her. This is an obvious sign of the Lord's mercy.

I say "thrilled for *her*," because Elizabeth was the one blessed. Zechariah was clearly smitten--the neighbors might think--with some kind of divine judgment, and he almost seems an afterthought at the beginning of Scene Two, except, of course, that the child must be named (**verse 59**). When the eighth day rolls around for the child's circumcision and the bestowal of his name, everyone says, "He'll be given a great name from your family line."

But the well-meaning relatives and neighbors don't know all that Zechariah and Elizabeth know about these events. This isn't merely about Elizabeth's happiness. This is about God's plan--a plan for the salvation of the world.

One of the common discouragements for God's people is when God does something profound in your life, and the people you expect to share it with you don't see the significance of it.

As Zechariah and Elizabeth had learned through the months of silence, it's all about God--always was and always will be. Each of us, on his own, gets to thinking it's all about me. When we assume it's the same for others, we ignore God's purposes altogether.

Elizabeth remembers God's plan (**verse 60**), and the name that recalls God's amazing grace, and she clearly disrupts the conversation and declares: "No, he will be called John."

(**Verse 61**): The relatives and neighbors are humorously predictable at this point, saying in effect: "We've never done it that way before! You don't have any Johanns in the family."

Elizabeth is thinking, "It's not about our way; it's about God's plans." But nobody has time to listen to this crazy woman, because they've already turned to the forgotten old father, Zechariah, and are furiously making gestures in his face (**verse 62**), demanding that he set the record straight.

Zechariah signed that he needed something to write on. Someone fetched a tablet and thrust it before him, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote (**verse 63**), "His name is John."

John, as it would have been pronounced in Hebrew, is YA-HANNAH, *the Lord is gracious*. This little misunderstanding sets the stage for the next 33 years, during which people will be telling young John and young Jesus, “This is the way we do it,” and they will be telling them, “But here is how God does it.” Many people never do stop to listen to the message of grace. We would rather do what’s familiar than receive God’s unexpected grace.

But the minute Zechariah announces the name, his silence is broken. His speech returns with praise to God.

What would you say if you had been shut up for nine months and suddenly could speak? Zechariah spoke the words that had been building up all that time, the kind of words you speak when you have time to listen to God, time to see the big picture, time to realize God has a great plan and to be filled with His Spirit.

Listen to Zechariah’s words, as I have translated them from verses **68-79**:

"The Lord, the God of Israel, is praised  
because he showed up and paid the price to free his people.  
He showed us the power of salvation in the family of his servant David—  
just as he said through the mouths of his good prophets in the old days.  
He showed us salvation from our enemies, from the hand of those who hate us;  
salvation that gives us mercy along with our ancestors;  
salvation that remembers his holy covenant with them,  
the promise he gave to our father Abraham;  
salvation that rescues us from the hand of our enemies  
to be with him without fear, in devotion and justice always.

"You, my child, will be called *prophet of the Highest*.  
You will precede the Lord to make the way ready for him:  
You will give his people the knowledge of salvation,  
the release from their sins through the affectionate mercy of our Father.  
In that mercy he will come, like a sunrise from heaven,  
to shine on those in the dark, those who live in the shadow of death.  
He will shine to guide our feet in the peaceful way."

**Verse 80** says, “The child began to grow. He grew strong in spirit. He lived in the wilderness until the day he was introduced to Israel.”

What is significant about that--living in the desert? The parents, who had grown so close to the Lord and His purposes in their silence, took their son out of the city so he could prepare for his great mission through solitude and silence.

Don’t miss the point: John was sent for an important mission. Silence was not to be his ultimate way of life. But it was vital to his preparation for the mission.

You may go through times when you are taken out of the action,  
when you have been shut up, or you feel banished to the desert.  
Times like that don’t mean God has abandoned you.  
They usually mean you are being prepared for something  
that is important in God’s eternal plan.

That having been said, it's interesting that only two verses of Zechariah's speech are about his son's mission (**verses 76-77**):

You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,  
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him,  
to give His people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins.

So for Zechariah, the important thing for everybody to know about his boy is that his mission will be to prepare people for the Lord's coming how? By letting them know salvation is by grace. The good news is NOT that you had better prove yourself. The good news is that forgiveness and new life are a gift. The only way to miss out is to choose to. Ignorance of God's goodness and grace is a choice you don't have to make.

The rest of the prophecy is about the Lord Himself.

What difference does the Lord make? Notice two things:

**1. His salvation is as good as done. (verses 68-70)**

Zechariah's song refers to God's work in the present tense.

"He HAS come. He HAS redeemed His people.

He HAS raised a horn of salvation for us as He promised."

Even though Zechariah is speaking before the historical events, He speaks with the assurance of someone who knows that what God plans is as good as done. What God promises is sure.

**2. His salvation is from something and to something. (71-79)**

God's people are saved FROM those who hate us.

When other people devalue you and despise you, that is never the end of the story.

Evil will not ultimately triumph over us. God will ultimately save us from that.

But that is not the *only* thing salvation is about.

We are also saved TO something (**verse 74**):

"TO be with him without fear, in devotion and justice always."

and **verse 79**: "TO guide our feet in the path of peace."

We are saved to be with Him without fear, and to follow Him in the way of peace.

There is no salvation in ignoring the Lord.

Salvation is about going with Him in the way of peace.

Jesus would come to show us the way, to guide those willing to follow Him,

to die for them and be the first to rise from death into a resurrection life.

God has good plans for those who are willing to trust and follow Him.

**God passionately wants you to know you are included in His plans.**

The neighbors are happy merely to see Elizabeth have a baby. They notice that God is doing something unusual. But they are largely oblivious to what this is all about.

In his months of silence, Zechariah noticed what God had been saying all along. God is at work to deliver his people out of hate, out of fear, out of sin. God works in grace to deliver his people into justice, and love, and peace. And to do that, he works in the lives



of an aging couple, and in the birth of their child. Precisely because the purpose is so all-important, the bigness of the purpose will not overlook the smallness and needs of the people involved. God cares about the ideals for the world, so he cares about overlooked nations, longsuffering people, and intimate moments. He cares about more than we imagine.

The question is *not* whether God is doing something wonderful.  
The question is whether we're even interested.

**Teaching an Old Dog New Faith**  
Reflection on Luke 1 by Dave Shelley  
**God passionately wants you to know you are in His plans.**

Why does God answer our prayer in unexpected ways?

- (1) God passionately wants to share His goodness with us, and
- (2) We aren't very interested in God.

**Scene One: Luke 1:5-25**

The names are significant. (verse 5)

Zechariah & Elizabeth are faithful and "afflicted." (verses 6-7)

We are dependent on God for what only God can do.

"John" means, "The Lord is gracious." (verse 13)

Gabriel's message:

1. God's good plans for you personally fit into His glorious plans. (verses 13, 16)
2. God is preparing people for his Advent. (verses 16-17).
  - a. People will be brought back to the Lord.
  - b. People will care about the next generation.
  - c. Apathetic minds will become fascinated with God.

**Scene Two: Luke 1:57-80**

God prepares his people through seasons of silence. (verses 24-25; verse 80)

Zechariah's prophecy:

1. The Lord's salvation is as good as done. (verses 68-70)
2. The Lord's salvation is *from* evil, and *to* following Him in peace. (71-79)