

## Duty, Devotion, Disbelief

### Luke 1:5-25

Two weeks ago we began with an introductory message on the book of Luke noticing its author, its authority and its audience. Luke was a Gentile writing to Gentiles under the direction of the Holy Spirit about Jesus. The task before us is to be like Luke and fully investigate the truths that are presented and in some way recognize the person and power of Jesus and the life changing impact that can take place for those who are fully devoted to Him.

Luke begins his gospel and our investigation with two miracles, two births. The first miraculous birth is that of John the Baptist. The second miraculous birth will be that of Jesus.

Turning our attention to the passage that is before us and the first miracle that will unfold, I want to offer three simple points this morning.

Duty  
Devotion  
Disbelief

Turn in your Bibles to **Luke 1:5-25** this morning.

#### I. DUTY— v. 5, 8-10, 23

Luke again identifies from a historical perspective a point in time to help us frame when this event took place. Notice **vs. 1: “In the time of Herod King of Judea.”**

There were several Herods so which one is he referring? When we compare the historical markers of chapter 2 that it was in the days of Caesar Augustus, during the time when Quirinius was governor in Syria when the first census was taken, we can then pinpoint which Herod. This Herod was Herod the Great who was king from 37-4B.C. His father was Antipater, the first of the Herodian clan who served Julius Caesar and rescued Caesar in

Alexandria. After the assassination of Caesar, through political posturing Antipater was able to gain a foothold in the Palestinian region. To further ensure the ascendancy of his family into political power, his son, known as Herod the Great married a princess in order to endear himself to Rome and inevitably be given an army to defeat insurgents against the Roman Empire in the Palestinian Region. He would then be given the title of King. He was not Jewish by ancestry; he was an Edomite or descendant of Esau. Whether it was by political maneuvering to gain acceptance by Jews or if in fact out of conviction the family followed Judaism. Whichever the case, history tells us the true nature of his character. **Unger’s dictionary describes him as “an Idumaeen (Edomite) in race and a Jew in religion, but he was a heathen in practice and a monster in character.”** He has been described as capable, crafty and cruel, ruthless and merciless. To appeal to the Jews that he had alienated by his cruelty, he built the Temple that would be destroyed in A.D.70. Of course he is most noted for the cruelty he displayed when he ordered the execution of babies in Bethlehem 2 years old and younger.

It was during his reign that ended in 4B.C. that the events to follow in the next chapters take place. But this opening gives more than just a historical marker to know of the time this occurred. The days of Herod also remind us that it was during this time that there was turmoil in the land. There was political unrest due to Roman occupation and there was religious disbelief and apostasy on the part of the nation toward God. It was a dark time in Israel’s history helping us to understand what will follow about the need for a Messiah.

During this time there was a priest by the name of Zachariah, who was part of the priestly division of Abijah. Now you might be asking what a priestly division is. I Chronicles 24 records the beginning of these divisions. Verse 3 tells us that with the help of Zadok a descendant of Eleazer, and Ahimelech a descendant of Ithamar, who were sons

of Aaron the first priest, David separated the priestly line into 24 divisions. After the Tabernacle was relocated to Jerusalem, these divisions were appointed to perform the religious duties of the priesthood. Because they were no longer required to take down and set up the Tabernacle, the Levites were given other responsibilities fitting for a priest. Since there were so many priests, each division served only two weeks in a year, one week at a time. They would serve from Sabbath to Sabbath.

### **I Chronicles 23:28-31**

Now we need to fast forward to the book of Nehemiah. Hundreds of years have come and gone, Israel as a nation had disobeyed God resulting in their deportation to the land of Babylon. Nehemiah was serving as the King's cupbearer and through much prayer he was given permission to return to Jerusalem and aid in the restoration of the city. But reconstruction wasn't the only reforms he initiated. Reading through the names of those who returned to Jerusalem with him we find that only 4 of the 24 priestly divisions returned. To continue the same kind of service in the Temple that was established under King David, Nehemiah divided those 4 divisions into 24 divisions.

Now, fast forward once more to our passage in Luke 1 where we read that Zachariah belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. When we read the account of the divisions established in I Chronicles we find out that according to verse 10, the eighth division was the division of Abijah, the division that Zachariah was assigned to.

Zachariah was a priest and we learn in verse 5 that his wife, Elizabeth, also came from the priestly line of Aaron. To be a priest was a sacred and respected position, but to marry the daughter of a priest was considered a double honor. The priest was responsible to teach the people about God and to bring them into the presence of God. They offered counsel and at times gave judgment. They offered the daily sacrifices and were the earthly

representatives of God.

Now jumping down to verse 8 we note that the eighth division was again on duty. I want you to notice something that is of importance even for us. The verse says that he was **“serving as priest before God”**. Then it continues by telling us that he had been chosen by lot to go into the Temple of the Lord and burn incense. To be chosen by lot for this task was a special honor. There were so many priests that this was a once in a life time opportunity. You only go to do it once.

**Proverbs 16:33 “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”**

It wasn't by chance that Zachariah was chosen by lot. This was the sovereign will of God. Because we'll see in a moment he had a special message for Zechariah. Three priests would enter the Temple, into the holy place. They would pass the various pieces of furniture – the table of showbread and the golden lampstand. There in front of the doorway leading into the Holy of Holies was the altar of incense. The first priest carried a fire pan that held burning coals extracted from the altar of burnt offering out in the courtyard. He would spread the coals on the altar of incense, then he would leave. The other priest held the golden censer filled with incense. The instructions given to Moses in **Exodus 30:9** was that no strange incense was to be offered to God, yet we read in **Leviticus 10:1ff** that two of Aaron's sons did and they died as a result.

The priest would bring the incense and put it on the altar. He would then exit leaving just one priest before the altar of incense. At a given cue, he would take the incense and offer it on the coals. At that time the smoke from the burning incense would rise and the people outside would pray. Then he would go out and offer a benediction over the people. This was the remnant of religious people, zealous for the law, attentive to the rites and rituals that would bring them to God.

John MacArthur notes that the incense symbolized the prayers of repentance, confession and thanksgiving. They were a prayer for the Messiah to come, prayers for the nation, prayers for the family, and for the coming kingdom. It represented their dependence on God, submission to Him, and His sovereignty over them.

This practice was done twice a day. It followed the morning sacrifice and then once again after the evening sacrifice. Verse 23 states that he completed his work before he returned home.

Now before we move on let's keep something very important in mind. Zachariah was fulfilling his duty **"serving as priest before God"**. He was committed as a faithful servant to complete His assigned responsibilities.

Here's what I want you to take away from this. Never forget that no matter what your occupation is you are serving God not people. Keep that in perspective as you drive into the office or shop. Everything we do should be done as if we are serving the Lord. Tomorrow when you sit down behind your desk to write up reports, or stand at the sink to do dishes, or fasten bolts to some widget even doing your homework, never forget that in the end it is service to the Lord. Knowing that, will it change how you do your work?

Mark this down and meditate on it the next time you begin a task at work or home or school. It comes plainly and simply from the pen of the beloved Apostle Paul: **"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."** (Colossians 3:17)

It's a compelling verse to challenge our thinking about what we do and how we do it. We think of duty somehow as an obligation, a cross that we have to bear, or a drudgery to endure. It is more than just an action, task or obligation that is required.

Duty also conveys the idea of the conduct and attitude that we exhibit in that task.

Whether or not it's the ideal job.

Whether or not it's the ideal boss.

Even if the hours are lousy and the benefits poor.

Remember to serve the Lord with gladness.

We need to perform our service with the utmost care and concern that what we do is for Him and do it to its completion. Zachariah fulfilled his responsibilities. It was for the Lord. Go and do the same. It is our duty.

## II. DEVOTION – v. 6-7

If there was a verse that I would want to have written about Robyn and me, I suppose it would be verse 6. **"Both were upright (righteous) in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly."**

This couple is described by Luke as righteous or upright, and blameless when it came to obeying the commandments of God.

With all the godlessness around them, they chose to remain faithful to God, to be obedient to His commands, not just because that is how he made his living, but because it was his life.

Righteous means that they lived right, they lived a morally upright life. It wasn't just in the performance of their daily duties, they acted right. The practical nature of God's Word became the fabric of how they lived. Obedience to God's Word was more than just religious compliance or conformity. They didn't just observe religious rituals, they understood the meaning behind those rituals impacting their daily lives choosing to live them out. When the Old Testament taught them to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, it wasn't just done each Sabbath as they went to the synagogue or offered their sacrifices. They understood that it meant so much more. It meant not having any other gods in their

life, it meant not taking God's name in vain, it meant honoring the Sabbath and keeping it holy. They understood that it meant how they were to treat others and they shouldn't covet the possessions of others and so on.

They chose not to offend God in any way and that included how they treated others. They were devoted to following the Lord with all their heart out of love for Him. I also believe that this devotion went beyond the here and now everyday aspect of their lives to include the anticipation of rewards that awaited them for the salvation they expected would come through the Messiah.

Being righteous and blameless also meant they both recognized the need to turn to a merciful and loving God in faith. They knew that God granted forgiveness through repentance. These two Old Testament saints looked forward to the Messiah's sacrificial death. Yes, they were Old Testament saints because Messiah had not yet come and had not yet died on the cross, but they understood that the sacrificial system was a picture of the Messiah's work of redemption not charging their sins to them, but taking them on Himself. This they knew by faith, because they understood that the just live by faith.

In addition to being seen by God as righteous, they were blameless. This does not mean that they were without sin, but rather that they were faithful and sincere in keeping God's laws. The same word is said about Joseph to show the kind of character he had when he contemplated what to do once he found out about Mary's pregnancy. It was also used to describe Simeon who met the baby Jesus in the Temple when He was brought by Mary and Joseph in fulfillment of the law concerning a newborn boy.

### **Job 2:3**

Here's what Paul says:

**I Thessalonians 2:10 "You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed."**

**I Thessalonians 3:13 "May He strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all His holy ones."**

**I Thessalonians 5:23 "May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."**

In a recent interview with Piers Morgan from CNN, Pastor Rick Warren was asked about his view on gay marriage and whether or not in time his view on traditional marriage would change in favor of gay marriage as so many other churches and pastors have done. Warren responded with this simple but direct statement: "I fear the disapproval of God more than I fear your disapproval or the disapproval of society."

That's what it means to be blameless before God. We do what pleases God. Our devotion to Him and His approval of us means more to us than the approval of others just so we fit in. Verse 7 gives us a clue into this. It says they had no children and they were both well along in years. In that culture and we can go back to Job to substantiate this, if something bad happened to you it was believed you had sinned in some way and carried a curse from God.

If your business didn't do well, you must have sinned.

If your crops failed, you must have sinned.

If you were sick or had some disability, you must have sinned. **"Who sinned Lord, that this man should be born blind?"**

If you couldn't have children, you must have sinned.

People looked at you with reproach. Lacking children deprived you of happiness (some of you are shaking your head at that one). They believed that not having children meant you incurred the disfavor of God.

But remember what Luke wrote under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit: **“Both of them were upright in the sight of God.”** You see, it doesn’t matter what others think about you, what matters is what the Lord thinks about you. He’s the one who looks on the heart. His opinion of you is the only one that matters. So let them talk. What matters most is whether or not you are blameless before God. In our society, being blameless is relative, it’s a changing standard, but God is the only and final measuring stick. They were righteous and blameless

**How about it folks? Can that be said of you and me? Do we seek to live a life of devotion to the Lord by obeying His Word? Would He say we were blameless?**

### III. DISBELIEF – v. 11-25

Here’s what Paul Harvey calls the rest of the story. During the performance of his duties in the Temple burning incense, Zachariah had an unexpected meeting. From the very presence of God an angel came to speak with the priest. Keep in mind that it had been 400 years of silence since God last spoke. The closing of Malachi were the final words given to Israel before this visit by the angel. Now God is choosing to step back in and speak. Remember *God’s silence does not mean God’s absence.*

Zachariah was frightened by the appearance of the angel. He told the priest that his prayer had been heard. Now we don’t know to which prayer he was referring. Was it the prayer generally given by the priest presiding over the burning of incense or was it his own personal prayer that somehow someday they might have children? Maybe their prayer was like that of Abram and Sarai or Elkanah and Hannah. If God could perform a miracle for them why not for he and Elizabeth? Maybe they still had hope. Maybe they still prayed. We don’t know if that was still something they prayed for or if they had ceased quite a while ago since both are described as well along in years.

The Jews believed that at the age of 65 you were commencing into old age. At 70 you had reached the gray haired age. At 80 you were considered well stricken in years. That’s where we believe this couple was in terms of age. They were beyond the age of any natural conception and hope for a child.

The words of the angel are good ones for us to keep in mind dear friends: **“Your prayer has been heard.”** So the lesson is to keep praying when God hasn’t answered. Keep praying when God is silent. This verse reminds us that God is listening, He does hear our prayers and He will answer.

God was answering his prayer, whether a recent prayer or a distant memory – they would have a child. The angel reveals six things that will come true of this child that they will raise.

1. He will be a joy and delight to you.
2. He will be great in the sight of God. Jesus would later say about John that among those born there wasn’t anyone greater. That includes some great people.

I get a little weary of sports announcers claiming that some athlete in some sport is the best to ever play the game. Baloney. Just because someone surpasses a record doesn’t mean they’re the greatest. Conditions are different. Teams are different. It’s just the opinion of man.

When it comes to spiritual matters what counts is God’s opinion. But think for a moment about some of the spiritual giants of the Bible. Melchizadek. Enoch. Moses. Abraham. David. Daniel. Elijah. Elisha. Jesus said John the Baptist was the greatest born. This doesn’t mean that John would be the most spiritual person ever, but rather that the task he was given would be the greatest – to be the forerunner of the Messiah.

3. He would be a Nazarite from birth.
4. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and Luke shows how the Holy Spirit empowered

and enabled John's ministry. Paul tells us that our desire is to be filled with the Spirit.

5. He would bring Israel back to God.
6. He would be a forerunner of the Messiah announcing His coming.

That is how this child would be raised, that would be his legacy. Like the prophets of old he would warn of sin and preach repentance. But He would be the first prophet to proclaim **"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."** I have to believe that from birth Zachariah and Elizabeth would tell him how special he was and about the task he had been assigned by God to announce the coming Messiah. They were instrumental in helping prepare him for that role. They would demonstrate to this child what it is to live righteous and blameless before God.

Zachariah heard the news from the angel and was afraid. Let me take a moment and tell you what their names mean.

Zachariah means God remembers.

Elizabeth means His oath or God is my oath or God is the faithful one.

Yet how uncharacteristic of Zachariah then to ask in disbelief **"How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."** He wanted a sign. "Can I really be sure you're telling me the truth?" During His ministry, Jesus would denounce this generation for always wanting a sign and then He called them an unbelieving generation.

Here is a man with a name that means God remembers with a wife whose name means God is the faithful one so that together God is the faithful one who remembers His oath.

As a priest he would have known about the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah concerning the Messiah.

As a priest he would have known about the prophecies of Malachi concerning the forerunner of the Messiah would come in the power of Elijah.

The angel said, "Hey, you're going to have a son, and he's going to be the one prophesied who would announce the coming of the Messiah. Rather than live up to his name he chose to not believe.

The sign the angel gave him for his unbelief that it would happen just as he said was to strike Zachariah with the inability to speak until the baby was born. It would become a daily reminder of his unbelief, a reminder to take God at His Word, a reminder that all things are possible with God.

**What if that happened to us? Why are we so quick to disbelieve God's promises?** We are reminded throughout Scripture that God keeps His Word, that His faithfulness is great and that He never lies. **"God is not a man, that He should lie, neither the son of man, that He should repent. Hath He said, and shall He not do it? Or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19)**

We are told throughout Scripture that His power is great and nothing is impossible with Him.

**Jeremiah 32:17 "Ah, Lord God! Behold, Thou hast made the heaven and earth by Thy great power and outstretched arm, and there is nothing too hard for Thee."**

Let that be a reminder to us as well. Whether God speaks directly to us, or through one of His messengers or through His Word giving some promise, never doubt it, believe that God will keep His Word that He has the power to fulfill His promise.

Now imagine if you were in the crowd waiting outside. It was past the normal time it took to perform the duties of offering incense and I'm sure they were getting antsy. Normally priests went in, did their thing and got out as soon as possible in order not to do something that would offend God. When he finally came out, they could tell something unique had happened to him. Our text tells us that

after his time was completed for his division he returned home. He didn't claim disability or illness. He fulfilled his responsibilities. He had a duty to perform and he saw it through to the end. Keep this in mind, in spite of his disbelief he was still considered blameless before God and God still answered his prayer.

This story of Zachariah shows us that in spite of our disbelief, God will still work and perform what He promised. He does not work according to our degree of belief, but works in spite of it. When it is His time table, He won't delay even because of our apparent disbelief. He will do what He has said because nothing is impossible with Him.

Are you performing your daily duties in a way that pleases God? Are you living a life that is blameless before God? Are you taking God at His Word diligently praying and believing His promises?