

On November 28, 2010, the Buffalo Bills football team faced off against one of their rivals – the Pittsburgh Steelers. The Bills ultimately lost the game when wide receiver Steve Johnson dropped a pass in the end zone during overtime. After the game, via Twitter, he publicly blamed God for dropping the ball. Johnson wrote: “I praise you 24/7 and this is how you do me. You expect me to learn from this? How? I’ll never forget this! Ever!”

Here this professional football player, this very entitled man, blames God for dropping the ball. He speaks to God as if God actually owed him in exchange for his worship, and when things did not go his way, when things did not go as he had expected – he was left disappointed with God.

Being honest, chances are you have been disappointed by God at some time or another. Life didn’t turn out as you had expected – it seemed that God had dropped the ball, so to speak. I’m not being disrespectful towards God here – I’m just being real with our feelings. You asked God for something – something that seemed to be in His will, a request that God could have easily answered if He wanted to – but nothing seemed to happen. Maybe you asked God to intervene on your behalf, maybe you asked for healing, maybe you asked for a relationship to be restored, a job to come through, or people you love to be saved – but here you are, left wondering what God is doing in your life. Yes, you still have faith in God, but you’re disappointed with Him because things did not turn out as you had hoped.

Again, I think we have all been there, and this morning I want to introduce you to a couple in the Bible who could certainly relate to these feelings of disappointment.

Turn with me to the very first chapter of **Luke** beginning with **verse 5**. This is one of my most favorite stories in the whole Bible, and I consider it to be part of the Christmas story – more importantly, it’s part of His story. So, to begin this part of His story, Luke tells us,

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

Have you ever read a story or watched a movie that began with the words...**It was a dark and stormy night?** In some respects, Luke takes the same approach here with the words “**In the days of Herod**” to begin this story. Yes, it does provide an actual time frame as Herod the Great ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC – and he is near the end of his reign, but this opening also tells us that it was a dark and stormy time in Judea.

Herod was an evil ruler, a puppet king of Rome, who chose the favor of Rome over his own people. Herod was a brutal man who held on to his throne at all costs, even executing his father-in-law, several of his ten wives, and two of his own sons. It had been said that it was better to be Herod's dog than to be his son. And just as a reminder, this is the same Herod who would later slaughter all the young boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus. Herod was murderous, and under his rule, the land was rampant with immorality as he ignored the laws of God to suit himself. Even the priesthood had become corrupt under Herod's reign. So, these truly were dark and stormy times for God's people in Israel.

But in the midst of this darkness and corruption, in the middle of these stormy times, Luke introduces us to a goodhearted, faithful couple named Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth. We might say they were just good simple country folk, living in a little town out in the hill country of Judea outside of city of Jerusalem.

We are told that Zacharias was a Levite priest of the division of Abijah and Elizabeth was the daughter of a priest – which was a special blessing for Zacharias. A priest was required to marry an Israelite virgin, but not necessarily a virgin from a priestly family, so for Zacharias to marry Elizabeth was a huge honor. We might say “*he scored*” when he married Elizabeth.

And speaking of priests, in those days there were a lot of them. Priests had become so numerous, approximately 20,000 of them, that they could not all minister at the temple in Jerusalem at once. Way back in **1 Chronicles 24**, King David had arranged the priests into 24 divisions, so because there were so many of them at this time, these divisions served on a rotational basis, each division of priests would serve a full week – from Sabbath to Sabbath. The division of Abijah where Zacharias belonged, was the 8th division out of 24.

So, both Zacharias and Elizabeth had come from priestly families, but that's not all. Luke says in **verse 6**,

They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

Notice that both Zacharias and Elizabeth were described not as righteous in the sight of men but **in the sight of God** – which is what counts, and it means that Zacharias and Elizabeth were in a right standing with God – they walked blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. Now, when Luke states that they were “**walking blamelessly**” he does not mean that they were sinless – only Jesus was sinless. Rather, they walked faithfully, seeking to obey God in all their ways. In context, that word “**walk**” has to do with a person's

lifestyle, a person's conduct and character, and it's focused more on their *direction* rather than *perfection*, in other words, Zacharias and Elizabeth had directed their hearts and turned their lives toward God.

Zacharias and Elizabeth loved God, and as a couple, their lives were devoted to Him. They are serving God from their hearts, and in God's eyes, they were in a right standing with Him. Their marriage seemed to be a marriage made in heaven – both from a priestly family line, so given all of this – surely, Zacharias and Elizabeth could expect that blessings would flow from God. Look at **verse 7**.

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.

Here, Luke tells us that this godly, devoted couple could not have children, and this was a very big deal in the Jewish culture.

From the Jewish perspective – God loves the righteous, and according to their interpretation of the Old Testament, God showed His love, God showed His favor to the righteous by granting prosperity and blessings, and among these blessings – children. This was the Jewish hope – this was their expectation from God, living under the idea that you get what you deserve – when you are good, you deserve, you are entitled to receive blessings from God and when you are not so good, you deserve to receive punishment from Him.

This is what Job's friends were telling Job when he was suffering, even though they had it all wrong.

So, from a Jewish perspective, a couple who did not have children suggested that they were being punished by God. That's how they saw it. This was a tragedy for a Jewish couple because of this stigma of God's displeasure upon them. But that's not all. From a practical sense, children served as the social security net as their parents got older, and the more children you had, the better off you would be in the later years. So, for Zacharias and Elizabeth, their inability to have children was terrible on many levels, and at the very least – it was disgraceful amongst the people. They may have been righteous in the eyes of God, but in the eyes of everyone else – they were disgraced.

Can you imagine how Zacharias and Elizabeth felt? Like everyone else, they wanted children – they had expected children. Other family members and friends had children, and grandchildren, and maybe even great grandchildren. And undoubtedly, Zacharias and Elizabeth knew of people who did not serve God and had children – but they were childless, disgraced, and disappointed.

And just so you know, Zacharias could have divorced Elizabeth to add to her disgrace and disappointment. In their culture, barrenness was an acceptable reason for a divorce. Zacharias could have gotten rid of Elizabeth, married another, and possibly had children by his new wife – but this couple stayed together.

Together, they remained faithful servants of God, they were in a right standing with God, their hearts were turned to God – but they received no children from God – and now they were both beyond the age to have children. Some have suggested they were in their 80's, maybe 90's, so at this point in their lives, they fully expected to endure this disgrace and disappointment of being childless for the rest of their lives.

Luke continues with the story – look at **verses 8-10**.

⁸Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, ⁹according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

As I said earlier, there were too many priests to serve in the daily rituals at the temple in Jerusalem, so they organized in 24 divisions, rotating each week with a new division. Within these divisions, they cast lots to determine who was assigned each task for the service – in this case the service was the service of incense.

The Jews tell us that there were three priests involved in the service of the incense; one priest who collected the ashes left on the altar from the preceding service and then he departed; another who brought in a pan of burning coals and placed it on the golden altar, and then he departed; and a third priest who went in with the incense, sprinkled it on the burning coals, and, while the smoke ascended, he offered prayer. He would be alone at the altar. This was the part that fell to Zacharias, and this task was the most honorable in the whole service because it was as close as a non-high priest could get to the Holy of Holies. This was the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a priest.

While Zacharias was on the inside of the temple, others were on the outside in prayer – likely praying for the redemption of Israel and the coming of the Messiah.

Now it is so easy to focus on the details of his priestly task that we overlook the simple fact that Zacharias continued to serve God, and I assume fully supported by Elizabeth. Their circumstances, although difficult, had not made them sour and bitter. They did not give up, leave the ministry, nor turn their hearts from God.

Instead, they continued to persevere and serve Him despite their disgrace and their disappointment.

So, Zacharias is in the temple and something happens. Look at **verses 11-13**.

¹¹And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. ¹²Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. ¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.”

This was the greatest day in Zacharias' life as a priest – the one time when he got to offer incense. He's performing his assigned task, he's all alone in the temple or so he thought – then poof, out of nowhere, the angel Gabriel shows up standing next to the altar, and he has word from God for Zacharias.

Now bear in mind, nothing like this has happened in 400 years. Between the last book in the Old Testament – Malachi, up to this appearance by Gabriel – heaven has been silent. That does not mean that God was not working in the lives of people, but for 400 years – no angels were appearing, no prophets were preaching, and no Scripture was being written. Nothing – silence from God until now.

Well, Zacharias sees Gabriel – he's never seen an angel before, he's only read about them in the Old Testament, but he has no doubt that he is looking at one right now, and go figure – he's terrified, but Gabriel says to him:

“Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.”

Your prayer has been heard and you will have a son. I like what one writer had said about this, suggesting what Zacharias may have been thinking:

I don't know what you are talking about angel. My wife and I prayed for a child day after day, year after year, but we gave up on that prayer for a child a long, long time ago. I'm now praying for the salvation of Israel. I'm now praying that God will send the promised Messiah – but I haven't been praying for a son for many, many years now. I gave up on the idea of ever being a dad long ago, and just so you know angel, we are both well, well past our golden years.

But what Zacharias didn't know was that God would answer that long-forgotten prayer and his current prayer at the same time – in God's time – and use his miracle boy to usher in the promised Messiah. Even though Zacharias and Elizabeth were living in disappointment – their disappointment did not change

what God thought about them or change His Christmas plans for them. Gabriel goes on to tell Zacharias about his unborn son. He says beginning with **verse 14**,

¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice over his birth. ¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb.

¹⁶ And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.

¹⁷ And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Well, it's clear their son, whose name will be John, is not going to be an ordinary son. We are told that John will bring joy and gladness to his parents, and his birth would bring joy into the world. John would be great in the sight of God, but he would not follow in the footsteps of Zacharias and serve as a priest in the temple – for John was given another mission at birth. John would be set apart for a special task – a major mission, filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb, and he would prepare the people for the promised Messiah.

We might think this was the first birth announcement for John, but it is not. The first announcement occurred 700 years prior in **Isaiah 40:1-3**, where we read,

¹“Comfort, comfort My people,” says your God. ² “Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her guilt has been removed, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” ³ The voice of one calling out, “Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

Some 300 years after that, we read another birth announcement in **Malachi 3:1**.

“Behold, I am sending My messenger, and he will clear a way before Me. And the Lord, whom you are seeking, will suddenly come to His temple;

I suspect that Zacharias and Elizabeth knew the Scriptures – they may have even known these specific passages, but there is no way they could have imagined that these passages were talking about the boy they thought they couldn't have. They had no idea that John would connect the Old Testament with the New Testament.

God had not dropped the ball, instead He waited for the proper time to set His plan in motion. For Zacharias and Elizabeth, it was a long time to wait in disappointment. God knew that they had desperately wanted a child. He knew

they suffered from disgrace in their culture, but in God's time, at the exact right time, they got much more than a son – they got a prophet of God – they got the forerunner of Jesus Christ – the Savior of the world.

As I said at the beginning of my message, I love this story – it's a great story, it's a hopeful story, it's a true story, it's the beginning of the Christmas story – it's His story of redemption and salvation, and living in His story was not easy for Zacharias and Elizabeth and it's not easy for any of us either.

As we live out our lives, as we take part in His story, disappointments with God are sure to come for each of us because, quite frankly, we don't always get what we hope for. Just like Zacharias and Elizabeth, we get disappointed when we have our hearts set on one thing, but we receive something less than we had expected or nothing at all – where it appears that God has dropped the ball. Zacharias and Elizabeth thought they would never have children, they were well past child-bearing years, but God had something else in mind in His story.

There's something else I want to say. In your disappointment with God, don't demand that His story go your way, because that reveals you are more concerned with what you want than what God wants. God chooses to act or not to act according to His perfect and holy will in order to bring about His purposes – just like He did with Zacharias and Elizabeth. **Remember the prayer?**

“Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Do you really mean it? Do you mean it when things don't go your way?

And one more thing. Like Zacharias and Elizabeth – it's important we stay in His story. In their disappointment, they continued to serve God, and they continued to turn their hearts toward Him, instead of walking away from Him in bitterness. Don't shut down when it does not go your way, instead remember that God is working in your life, He is faithful, His timing is perfect, His purposes are greater, and the end of His story will be more than you could have ever hoped for.

God is writing a story, a story from eternity past to eternity future – it's His story of redemption and salvation, and in His story are the names of Zacharias, and Elizabeth, and John, and as believers in Christ, our names have also been written down in His story. We are blessed and fortunate just to be in it, and if you still feel entitled or that God owes you something – He did all He needed to do by sending us His Son at Christmas, only to deliver Him later to a cross.

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