



We have been camping out in Hebrews 11 the past two weeks and this Sunday we continue our study on the topic of faith. This morning we are going to look at Jesus' birth narrative in Luke chapter one to see what I am calling Christmas Faith. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah to announce the birth of his son John and six months later Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce the birth of her son, Jesus. Zechariah's response of faith differed tremendously from that of Mary and we can learn much about faith from their examples. But first, let me remind you of three key principles we have established thus far.

1. **Faith in Christ is to be of the type that "removes uncertainty of any basis."** "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen." This is not a leap of faith in the dark but an absolutely certain faith in God's faithfulness. This is the key. It's not faith in faith or a wishful hope or even faith in your ability to believe but a rock solid trust in the trustworthiness of Christ. God is 100% faithful therefore I can have faith in him. Christ is 100% trustworthy therefore I can place my trust in him.
2. **This certain faith must be in God's revealed word in the Scriptures.** The next example of this is our faith in creation. We don't believe that God created the universe out of nothing because we can prove it scientifically nor do we believe it because God has whispered it to us through prayer. We believe it simply and only because it is stated unequivocally in his holy word.
3. **Faith is a persevering, lifelong endeavor.** We learned through the lives of Abel, Enoch and Noah that faith is not a one-time event. Noah persevered in faith for almost 100 years before God's fulfilled his promise. There is a point in time in which we trust Christ for

salvation but after that faith is a persevering, ever-growing trust. Unfortunately, faith often wanes over time instead of growing.

Please turn to Luke chapter one so we can read Zechariah's story together.

⁵ *In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah,¹ ⁿof^o the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both ^prighteous before God, walking ^qblamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because ^rElizabeth was barren, and ^sboth were advanced in years.*

⁸ *Now ^twhile he was serving as priest before God when ^uhis division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot ^vto enter ^wthe temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people ^xwere praying ^youtside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of ^zthe altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and ^afear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for ^byour prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and ^cyou shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will ^drejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be ^egreat before the Lord. And ^fhe must not drink wine or strong ^gdrink, and ^hhe will be ⁱfilled with the Holy Spirit, ^jeven from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and ^khe will go before him ^lin the spirit and power of Elijah, ^mto turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and ⁿthe disobedient to the wisdom of the just, ^oto make ready for the Lord a people prepared."*

¹⁸ *And Zechariah said to the angel, ^p"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."* ¹⁹ *And the angel answered him, "I am ^qGabriel. ^rI stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, ^syou 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." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in ^tthe temple. ²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in ^uthe temple. And ^vhe kept making signs to them and remained mute. ²³ And ^wwhen his time of service was ended, he went to his home.*

²⁴ *After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, ^xto take away my reproach among people."*

Here is what we know about Zechariah. As you will see, his personal story is primed for a powerful faith.

- Zechariah was from the priestly division of Abijah
- His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron so they both came from a 1200 year succession of priests.
- Verse six tell us *they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord*. A person can only be righteous by having faith. Habakkuk, Hebrews 10:27 as well as Romans and Galatians all instruct is that righteous live by faith. Zechariah and Elizabeth both possessed saving faith and they lived their lives by faith.

- *Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.* Here is where the miracle is set up. Humanly speaking, a conception and birth is impossible.
- They were earnestly praying for a child for decades—*your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son*
- In offering the incense on the altar, Zechariah was engaged in the pinnacle of his career as a priest for this was done only once in a lifetime. The evidence of this important day was the multitude of people gathered in a prayer of anticipation.
- Before Elizabeth became pregnant, people must have wondered what sin they committed to have deserved the curse of infidelity. *“Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”* (see Gen 30:23) [Rachel] conceived and bore a son and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” Therefore, the pregnancy took away her shame.
- SUMMARY—Zechariah and Elizabeth had a priestly pedigree, a saving faith, they walked by faith and they practiced a prayerful dependency on the Lord. If anyone was ever primed to believe a message from the Lord, it was these two.

However, Zechariah’s faith stumbled just when it should have been most evident. After Gabriel promised a son to he and Elizabeth, his first response could be called his statement of faith. His statement has two parts—a question and an explanation of his question.

Question—*How shall I know this?*

Explanation—*For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.*

Zechariah was asking for a sign. In effect he was saying something like this. “How can I know that what you promised will come true? My wife and I are old. Do you see our gray hair? Did you notice that I had difficulty walking up the steps to the temple and that my gait was slow? I am an old man. How can my old, worn down wife possibly bear a child? If this is true, I need a sign from you. Give me something so that I can prove the reliability of your statement.”

What did Gabriel think of Zechariah’s faith? He wasn’t very impressed, was he? *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’s response reminds me of the scene between Gandalf and Bilbo in the first movie. Gandalf asked for the ring and Bilbo, under the spell of the ring, started to argue with Gandalf. Suddenly, Gandalf yelled at Bilbo and seemed to become large and powerful, saying, “Bilbo Baggins. Do not take me for some conjurer of cheap tricks.” In that scene, Gandalf played his hand. Bilbo caught more than a glimpse of his true power.

Gabriel’s response to Zechariah is 100 times more powerful but unlike Gandalf, Gabriel didn’t appeal to his own power but rather to God’s power. Even though he is an arch angel on par with the powerful Michael, Gabriel did not brag about himself. He knew full well that he was nothing apart from God. His influence, and most importantly the reliability of his message, came from the fact that it was God’s message, not his own.

Rather than tell you, let me show you Zechariah’s final response. (Stand silent for a few moments...) His punishment for his lack of faith was to be struck silent for over nine months. But why was Gabriel so disappointed in Zechariah’s request for a sign? The Lord gave Moses a sign without Moses even asking for one. And of course we are all familiar with Gideon’s two

fleeces which served as signs of God's promise to him. If these men were not chastised for asking for a sign, why was Zechariah? I will answer this important question after we look at Mary's statement of faith.

²⁶ *In the sixth month the angel^x Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named^y Nazareth,*
²⁷ *to a virgin betrothed² to a man whose name was Joseph, ^aof the house of David. And the*
virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, ^bO favored one, ^cthe Lord
is with you!"³ ²⁹ But ^dshe was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of
greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for ^eyou have found
favor with God. ³¹ And behold, ^fyou will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and ^gyou shall
call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of^h the Most High. And the
Lord God ⁱwill give to him the throne of^j his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of
Jacob ^kforever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."
³⁴ *And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"⁴*
³⁵ *And the angel answered her, ^l"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of^h the Most*
High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born⁵ will be called ^mholy—ⁿthe Son of God.
³⁶ *And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the*
sixth month with her ^owho was called barren. ³⁷ For ^pnothing will be impossible with God."³⁸
And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant⁶ of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."³⁸
And ^qthe angel departed from her.

Here is a summary of Mary's story.

- Joseph was from the house and lineage of King David.
- Mary was a relative of Elizabeth so even though we don't know her direct genealogy, she has some associations with the priesthood of Aaron.
- Mary was a virgin but unlike Zechariah and Elizabeth, nothing is stated about her faith, her righteousness and her walk with the Lord.
- The text does not tell us this, but we can assume with a high degree of certainty that Mary was very young, probably in her late teen years.
- After Mary became pregnant, people gossiped about the sin she committed. Therefore, unlike Elizabeth whose pregnancy ended her shame, Mary's pregnancy was just the start of her shame.

Zechariah's entire life prepared him for a strong statement of faith in response to God's promise to him. Zechariah and Elizabeth had a priestly pedigree, a saving faith, they walked by faith and they practiced a prayerful dependency on the Lord. They were praying for a miracle child to be conceived but Zechariah failed to believe the miracle when it was told to him. Everything pointed to the fact that he should have believed but he did not.

But Mary's story does not have the same level of powerful pedigree attached to it. She did not have fifty years of faithful service to the Lord under her belt and she was most definitely not praying to become the virgin mother of the promised Messiah! Yet this young Jewish woman exhibited a faith well beyond her years. Here is her statement of faith in response to Gabriel's announcement, like Zechariah's in two parts.

Question—*How will this be*

Explanation—*since I am a virgin?*

At first glance there doesn't seem to be a lot of difference between her response and that of Zechariah.

Mary—How will this be since I am a virgin?

Zechariah—How shall I know this for I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years?

The key difference is that Mary believed the message but Zechariah did not. He needed some sort of sign. But if you look closely, Mary already believed the word of Gabriel and was merely looking for more information. In essence, her response was something like this. “I believe that the Lord is going to give me this privilege, but could you please explain how this miracle is going to take place since I have never known a man?”

It's a good thing she asked because this is the only place in all of Scripture where we are given details about the virgin birth of Christ. Gabriel replied: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...* That's the kind of answer you get when you ask to have a miracle explained. It's a bit like asking Jesus, “How did you raise Lazarus from the dead after four days in the tomb.” Jesus could have explained all of the intricate details, including how he regenerated decayed flesh and organs, but no one would have understood his answer. If he told a group of the world's smartest surgeons and researchers today they still could not comprehend his answer. How did God multiply five loaves and two fish in order to feed five thousand people (which was probably more like twenty thousand, counting women and children)? How did Jesus calm the Sea of Galilee with a single word? How did he speak the universe into existence with mere words? But if we are not careful, we step headlong into Job's sandals when the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
6 On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone,
7 when the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

But Mary was not demanding anything and she surely did not call God on the carpet as Job did. She expressed deep faith and asked a simple question. The answer is profound in its simplicity. *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.* It's a marvelous answer when you think about it. It gives you all that you need to know but no more than that, because anything more would have been unintelligible to Mary—and to us as well.

Unlike Zechariah, Mary still had a voice after Gabriel was done speaking. Her final response demonstrated the depth of her faith. *Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.* She never doubted the word of the Lord. She received it with joy even

though it was going to cause her immense shame to be accused of adultery. Mary's name is not listed in Hebrews 11 but it obviously deserved to be there.

Mary believed Gabriel's words in an instant but Zechariah asked for a sign of confirmation. Why was it wrong to have asked for a sign, as Gideon and others had done? Simply stated, his response showed a lack of faith, but it was a lack of faith for his reason—The word of God *is* the sign. In Luke chapter eleven Jesus said, *This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.* Zechariah's request was not on the same level evil as the unbelieving generation of Jews, but judging by Gabriel's response, it was dangerously close.

Let me tell you why the lack of faith that we express in the Word of God is so much worse than Zechariah's lack of faith. When Zechariah served as priest, God had not spoken to his people in over four hundred years. Not since the book of Malachi had the people heard a new message from the Lord. God had been silent for four centuries awaiting the revelation of his son and the revelation began with Gabriel's visit to Zechariah.

Zechariah can and should be faulted for his lack of faith but you and I should be all the more. Our generation is the most blessed of every generation that has ever lived. We have the complete Word of God in our own language. The original languages have been determined with 99.9% accuracy. The Scriptures have been studied for two thousand years. Its teaching have been applied, tested and found faithful for two millennia since Jesus ascended to Heaven. Moreover, we are free to study the Scriptures. We are free to believe them, to practice them, to teach them and to share our faith (at least most of the time).

In Luke 12, Jesus said, *Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.* We have been given much and because of this, much is required of us. If Mary, the mother of our Lord, had the capacity for a faith that “deprived uncertainty of any basis,” how much more do you and I have this capacity? She did not balk or hesitate at the prospect of a virgin conception and birth. I know that the Roman Catholic Church has assigned Mary her own virgin birth. Like Jesus, they teach that she was immaculately conceived” and they have given her the heretical title of co-mediator with Christ. They have made her into God but most of us, possibly not wanting to make too much of Mary lest we appear too “Catholic,” have downplayed her significance. Her child-like faith should be shouted from the rooftops and held up as a model for every believer.

And do not forget that her faith was not just a short term thing. For the rest of her life, practically everyone she encountered would have considered her an adulterer and a liar. “Mary, how did you become pregnant?” Mary: “Well actually, the Holy Spirit did it.” Right. She was either an adulterer and a liar or else she was insane. The only person we know for certain who believed her was Joseph because an angel told him it was true. Hers' was a lifelong, persevering faith.

As we close, let me show you how Mary's life matches our principles of Biblical faith. As we do, I want you to think of a promise or a truth that you are struggling to believe.

1. Faith in Christ is to be of the type that “removes uncertainty of any basis.”

2. This certain faith must be in God's revealed word in the Scriptures.
3. Faith is a persevering, lifelong endeavor.

Rich Maurer
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^m Matt. 2:1
¹ Greek *Zacharias*
ⁿ 1 Chr. 24:10
^o ver. 8
^p ch. 2:25
^q Phil. 2:15; 3:6; 1 Thess. 2:10; 3:13; 5:23; [Acts 23:1; 24:16]
^r ver. 36; [Judg. 13:2; 1 Sam. 1:2]
^s [Gen. 18:11; Heb. 11:11, 12]
^t 1 Chr. 24:19; 2 Chr. 8:14; 31:2; [ver. 23]
^u ver. 5
^v Ex. 30:7, 8; 1 Sam. 2:28; 1 Chr. 23:13; 2 Chr. 29:11
^w ver. 21, 22; Rev. 11:2, 19; [Heb. 9:2, 3]
^x Ps. 141:2; [Rev. 5:8; 8:3, 4]
^y [Lev. 16:17]
^z Ex. 30:1–10; 40:26, 27
^a Acts 19:17
^b [Acts 10:4, 31]
^c ver. 60, 63
^d [ver. 58]
^e ch. 7:28; Matt. 11:11
^f ch. 7:33; Num. 6:3; Judg. 13:4, 7, 14; Matt. 11:18
^g [Acts 2:15, 17; Eph. 5:18]
^h ver. 41, 67; See Acts 2:4
ⁱ Isa. 49:1, 5; Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15
^j ver. 76; John 3:28
^k See Matt. 11:14
^l Cited from Mal. 4:6
^m Rom. 10:21
ⁿ ch. 7:27; Mal. 3:1; Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2
^o Gen. 15:8; [Gen. 17:17]
^p ver. 26; Dan. 8:16; 9:21
^q Rev. 8:2; [1 Kgs. 17:1; Job 1:6; Isa. 63:9; Matt. 18:10]
^r [Ezek. 3:26; 24:27]
^s See ver. 9
^t [See ver. 21 above]
^u ver. 62
^v 2 Chr. 23:8; [ver. 8; 2 Kgs. 11:5; 1 Chr. 9:25]
^w Heb. 10:11
^x [Gen. 30:23; 1 Sam. 1:6; Ps. 113:9; Isa. 4:1]
^y [Gen. 30:23; 1 Sam. 1:6; Ps. 113:9; Isa. 4:1]
^z ver. 19
^a See Matt. 2:23
^b Matt. 1:16, 18
^c That is, legally pledged to be married
^d ch. 2:4; Matt. 1:20
^e [Ps. 45:2; Dan. 9:23]
^f Judg. 6:12
^g Some manuscripts add *Blessed are you among women!*
^h See ver. 12
ⁱ Acts 7:46

^f Isa. 7:14

^g ch. 2:21; Matt. 1:21, 25

^h ver. 76; ch. 6:35; Acts 7:48; See Mark 5:7

ⁱ ver. 69; 2 Sam. 7:11–13, 16; Ps. 89:4; 132:11; Isa. 9:6, 7; 16:5; Acts 2:30; [Rev. 3:7]

^j See Matt. 1:1

^k Dan. 2:44; 7:14, 18, 27; Heb. 1:8; Rev. 11:15; [John 12:34]

⁴ Greek *since I do not know a man*

^l Matt. 1:18, 20

^h [See ver. 32 above]

⁵ Some manuscripts add *of you*

^m John 6:69

ⁿ See Matt. 14:33

^o ver. 7

^p Cited from Gen. 18:14 (Gk.); See Matt. 19:26

⁶ Greek *bondservant*; also verse 48

^q [Judg. 6:21; Acts 12:10]