

How Not to Talk to an Angel

by John Piper

Luke's Gospel highlights the sovereign God's work in the birth of John and Jesus, and the importance of faith and trust in God's promises.

Scripture: Luke 1:13-45, Romans 4:19, 1 Corinthians 13:12, Philippians 2:14, Philippians 3:12

Topics: "Divine Sovereignty", "Faith And Obedience"

Description

John Piper delves into Luke 1:5-25, highlighting the announcement of John the Baptist's birth to Zechariah and the parallels drawn between John and Jesus. Piper emphasizes the importance of recognizing God's unique work in the births of these two men, showcasing His sovereignty and control over humanly impossible situations. He contrasts Zechariah's unbelief with Mary's faith, urging listeners to trust God's promises without demanding excessive evidence and to seek understanding with humility. Piper also encourages repentance and continued obedience, emphasizing that falling into unbelief temporarily should not lead to despair, but rather to seeking forgiveness and blessing the Lord.

Transcript

Luke 1:5-25

Last time we studied Luke 1:1-4, the preface to Luke's two volume work: the Gospel and Acts. The main point of the preface (we saw in verse 4) was to state Luke's aim in writing, namely to persuade Theophilus that the Christian teachings he has heard are true. He does not want Theophilus' faith to be a leap in the dark. He wants it to be based on sufficient evidences. So Luke uses the preface to show why he should be respected as a reliable narrator of the history of Christ and his earliest church. He points out three things:

1) in verse 3, that this account is the product of thorough, careful and patient research; 2) in verse 1, that he has many written sources;

3) in verse 2, that he has direct access to eyewitnesses to confirm his work.

Now Luke begins his story. Let's read Luke 1:5-25.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, it fell to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is 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 shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons 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."

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he made signs to them and remained dumb. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she hid herself, saying, "Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men."

Luke is the only gospel writer who recounts the foretelling and birth of John the Baptist. He begins in 1:5-25 with the announcement of John's birth to Zechariah, his father. Then in 1:26-38 comes the announcement of Jesus' birth to Mary his mother. Then in 1:39-56 a connection between the two is made as Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and magnifies the Lord. Then in 1:57-80 comes the birth of John and his father's song of praise, followed in 2:1-20 by the birth of Jesus and the song of the angels. So there is clearly a pattern in Luke's presentation: announcement of John--announcement of Jesus; birth of John--birth of Jesus, with a link between the two pairs as Mary and Elizabeth, pregnant with these two unexpected children, meet each other.

Evidently what Luke wants to do with this pattern is get the reader to compare and contrast Jesus and John the Baptist. For example, both children are announced in advance by the angel Gabriel (1:11, 28); both births are unnatural or miraculous; in both cases the angel tells what the name should be (1:13, 31), and so on. But even more important than the similarities are the contrasts. John was born to an aged and sterile woman, Jesus was born to a virgin; John was given a name which means "God is gracious"; Jesus was given a name which means "savior"; John was to prepare for the Lord, Jesus was the Lord who would reign forever.

In this way Luke helps Theophilus and us to see two important truths. One is that God is uniquely at work in the birth of these two men. This is the all important thing for Theophilus to see about the history of Jesus: it originates with and is guided by the sovereign God. It was not easy for a Roman official to believe that a poor Jewish teacher, executed as a criminal is in fact the Son of God. That such a man could be an eternal king and savior of the world was very hard for Theophilus to accept. So Luke starts at the

beginning to show that this Man and his forerunner were no ordinary people: the sovereign God ordained and ordered their births and their destinies.

How does Luke show this? In at least two ways. First, by describing how, through his angel, God predicted what would take place before it happened. In verse 13 the angel says, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son"; and verse 24 says, "After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived." The only thing that makes that kind of authoritative prediction possible is the sovereignty of God. He can say what is going to happen because he controls what is going to happen. God sends his angel beforehand to predict these pregnancies rather than sending him afterwards to explain them because He wants to demonstrate unmistakably that He is in charge here. This is God's work. These births were not unusual coincidences found by God and used. They were ordained and ordered by his sovereign will.

The other way God's preeminence and control appears is in the miraculous nature of these births. They are not just predicted; they are humanly impossible births. Verse 7 says, "They had no child because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years." But after John was conceived the angel says to Mary in verse 36, "Behold your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." God's purpose in bringing John and Jesus into the world through humanly impossible births is to demonstrate vividly that nothing is too hard for Him; he is in control here and something unexpected and stupendous is beginning to happen in the world.

That is one of the two truths Luke wants to teach us by paralleling the announcements and births of Jesus and John, namely God is uniquely at work here. These men are God's men. But the second thing this pattern teaches is that Jesus is far greater than John the Baptist. Even before John appears on the scene saying that he is unworthy to tie Jesus' shoes (Matthew 3:11), we see from Luke's narrative that the paralleling of John and Jesus finally serves to show that Jesus is vastly superior. As Gabriel says in 1:32f, "He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever."

There is another thing that I think Luke wants us to see from the contrast between the announcements of Jesus' birth and John's birth. Luke wants Theophilus to see the power of God and the preeminence of Jesus, but he also wants him (and us) to see the right way and the wrong way to respond to God's promise of power. This contrast is unavoidable when we look at how Zechariah on the one hand and Mary on the other hand respond to Gabriel's promise that God is going to give them a child and make the child great. Luke clearly wants Theophilus to follow Mary's example not Zechariah's. Let's read both responses. Zechariah says to Gabriel,

"How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel who stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their time."

Zechariah did not believe Gabriel's promise. He was in a spot almost just like Abraham but did not respond like Abraham, of whom Paul said in Romans 4:19, "He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body which was as good as dead because he was about 100 years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God but he grew strong in his faith giving glory to God. . . ." Zechariah did waver in unbelief. And I think Luke

intends for us to contrast this response to Mary's faith, because Zechariah's wife (in verse 45) commends Mary in a way that sounds like a criticism of her husband's unbelief. She says, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

How did Mary's faith express itself? When the angel was finished predicting the miraculous birth of Jesus, Mary said in verse 34, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" Note the contrast: Zechariah says, How can I know this?--Mary says, How can this be? Zechariah asks for more evidence; Mary asks for an explanation. Zechariah says he can't be sure; Mary says she can't understand. Mary receives at least a partial explanation (which we will speak more of next time) but Zechariah receives a rebuke and is made dumb by the angel. Luke's point, therefore, to Theophilus is: be like Mary when you hear about Jesus, don't be like Zechariah.

There are three lessons I think we can learn from this contrast of belief and unbelief in Mary and Zechariah. First, it is possible to demand too much evidence before you believe God's promises. It is not wrong to want evidence for our faith--that we saw last week from Luke 1:3; Acts 1:3; 17:11. Belief is not groundless. But there is an evil in demanding signs beyond what a humble and open heart would require. Luke shows us a vivid case of this later in his gospel. In 11:29-32 he says,

When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, "This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the men of Nineveh, so will the Son of man be to this generation. The queen of the South will arise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."

Note well that Jesus is not belittling evidence for faith; he is exposing the hard and unrepentant hearts of his contemporaries because they cannot see in his miracles and character sufficient signs of his truth.

This is a warning to us, lest we like Zechariah demand too much evidence before we will believe God's promises. How many of us, when we are laid low by dark and distressing circumstances, cannot believe that God is working it all out for our infinite good until some ray of light, some extra evidence, shows us that it is all going to be O.K.? Oh, how often we fail to take God at his word! And if Gabriel has a right to become indignant, how much more the absolutely trustworthy God whom he serves! Remember, Gabriel said to Mary, "With God nothing is impossible" (1:37). And it is clear from Luke's narrative that God loves to exalt his sovereign reliability by keeping his word where humans can see no possible way for him to do it. "I am an old man, my wife is barren and advanced in years. I can't believe it." Let's not be like Zechariah. God wants to teach us from this text : Trust me! Trust me! I can and I love to do the humanly impossible. Trust me! You can hear the heart of Luke going out to Theophilus: Trust him, Theophilus! Don't proudly insist on more signs than are necessary. Put your whole trust in God and in his Christ.

That's the first lesson we learn from the contrast between Mary's response and Zechariah's response: it is possible and dangerous to insist on too much evidence before you believe. The second thing we learn is that it is O.K. to want and to ask for explanations when we are perplexed. Mary was not accused of unbelief like Zechariah when she queried the angel: "How can I have a son when I have no husband?" (1:34) Mary saw the human impossibility as clearly as Zechariah but her heart did not reject the possibility in unbelief; she responded humbly and desired only to know how such an impossibility might be. I infer

from this that when our heart is right, God is never opposed to our seeking to understand his ways in history and in our own lives.

We will never understand everything in this age because, as Paul says, we see through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12). But the possibilities of what we can understand about the ways of God on the basis of his revealed Word are more vast and deep than any of us here has imagined. The only acts of God that we should not try to understand are the ones he has told us not to. What we must guard against is not that we probe the ways of God too deeply but that we probe with the wrong spirit. A spirit of idle curiosity or arrogant skepticism would be wrong. But a spirit of earnest longing to know more of God's wisdom and a humble readiness to be taught something new-- this spirit pleases the Lord. That was Mary's spirit.

There is one other lesson to learn from Zechariah's unbelief. It was preceded by a life of godliness and followed by a life of godliness. Zechariah's unbelief is in the same category with Peter's three denials of Christ: it is a temporary lapse-- not a way of life. Look at the billing Zechariah and Elizabeth get in verse 6: "They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." (We will come back to this in a minute to see if it means sinless perfection.) At least this means Zechariah was not a chronic unbeliever. Not only that, verse 13 says that God was answering Zechariah's prayer when He promised him a son. So Zechariah was a righteous and prayerful man. But even the best of men fall into unbelief now and then. None of us trusts God's promises perfectly from day to day.

But thanks be to God, though we may have to endure some chastisement for our unbelief, God does not cast us away if we repent and set our hope afresh on Him. When Zechariah followed through obediently and named the child John, verse 64 says, "Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed and he spoke, blessing God." And verse 67 goes on, "And (Zechariah) his father was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people." That's the last we ever hear of Zechariah. He's there righteous and blameless, then unbelieving, then blessing God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So the lesson for us here is that we must not despair if we fall into unbelief. Instead we must repent, accept God's forgiveness in Christ and go on blessing the Lord--even more fervently because of his great mercy to us in our sinfulness.

Now I said I would go back and ask in what sense Zechariah and Elizabeth were blameless. It would be exceedingly strange if Luke meant that Zechariah was sinless until the day Gabriel approached him and then for the first time he sinned miserably. Walking in all God's commandments righteous and blameless need not mean sinless perfection. In the Psalms the "righteous" were not without sin (Ps. 32). They were those who did not rest in their sin but repented and trusted God and on the whole made his commandments a way of life. When it says they walked in all his commandments it does not mean they never once coveted; it means this was not the normal track of their life. "Blameless" sounds very strong but probably means: they do their duties in such a way as to give no one an occasion to hold anything against them.

Paul uses this word of himself and Christians generally. He says in Phil. 2:14f, "Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation among whom you shine as lights in the world." Then in 1 Thess. 2:10 he says, "You are witnesses and God also how holy and righteous and blameless was our behavior to you believers. . . ." Yet Paul clearly

denied his own perfection in Phil. 3:12, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own. . . ." The idea seems to be one of so living as to give no one an occasion to hold anything against us, including God. This implies not necessarily sinless perfection (though that's our goal) but quick and speedy amends for all wrongs.

What then have we seen from Luke 1? There is a pattern: announcement of John--announcement of Jesus; birth of John--birth of Jesus. By focusing our attention on the similarities between these events Luke shows us that the sovereign God is uniquely at work now in the births and destinies of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Both births are predicted and humanly impossible. But Luke's pattern also focuses our attention on the differences between John and Jesus so that Jesus is seen to be vastly supreme. That is very important in Luke's purpose. Finally from the contrast between Zechariah's response and Mary's response we learned three things: 1) Take heed lest you demand too many signs before you trust God's word of promise; 2) It is O.K. to want to understand the ways of God when they seem perplexing---the danger is having an arrogant or cynical attitude, not going too deeply into God's mind; and 3) We should not despair that we are cast off from God if we fall into distrusting God for a time. What counts is coming out again and blessing the Lord in the obedience of faith. "Nothing is impossible for our God." So let's trust him to do the humanly impossible for us and walk fearlessly in all his commandments.

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