THE FAITH OF ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH

Luke 1:1–25

Key Verse: 1:6

“Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.”

Unusually, Luke wrote this Gospel for just one person, his friend, “most excellent Theophilus.” The phrase “most excellent” suggests that the man was a high-ranking government official in the Roman Empire. He wasn’t Jewish, but Gentile, just like Luke was. His name “Theophilus” means “friend of God.” According to these verses, he'd already been taught about Jesus. But still he couldn’t be really sure about it. Now it was about 30 years after Jesus’ life and ministry. The uncertainty of Theophilus wasn’t unique; he was like many people in the Gentile world who’d heard about Jesus by now and were interested but had lots of questions. A lot of people are still like this today.

Luke says that all the things that had happened surrounding the life and ministry of Jesus were things that had been “fulfilled.” It means they weren't random, made-up things, but all part of God’s plan from long ago. He says that eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed down these amazing stories about Jesus. It means they weren't fanciful, exaggerated myths; they were true. Luke says he carefully investigated everything from the beginning. He took time and great care to write not an emotional but an orderly account. His purpose was to help his friend Theophilus “know the certainty” of the things he’d been taught. God doesn’t want us to settle with many unresolved doubts. He wants us to live with the conviction that what we believe about Jesus is really true and certain. But for us to have this conviction, we can’t jump to quick conclusions; we have to carefully study what’s been handed down to us.

In the first two chapters of this Gospel Luke tells us about the beginnings of John the Baptist and Jesus. During his research Luke the historian discovered many unusual details surrounding their births. Their birth stories are paralleled, but the main focus soon turns to Jesus. In chapters 1 and 2 great things were happening, but to Luke, what was really important was the key people of God behind the scenes. In this first event of Luke’s Gospel, the great John the Baptist is conceived. But the core of the story seems to be the faith of his old parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. To many young people, old people are annoying and should just die. But to Luke, these two seemingly insignificant old persons were crucial to what God was doing. It wasn’t just because they were old; it was because of their faith. We should “consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Heb13:7b). In this study we especially want to learn what was it about the faith of Zechariah and Elizabeth that made them useful to God.

Zechariah’s name itself is interesting; it means “the Lord remembers.” In verse 5 we learn that they were both born in a priestly lineage. In the Gospels, usually priests were only depending on their past spiritual heritage; they were proud, self-righteous, hypocritical and useless. But this couple was different. Read verse 6. The first thing we notice here is that they were righteous. Today this word has a bad connotation. People say, “Ooh, you’re so righteous!” meaning you’re trying way too hard, you’re judging others, etc. But the real meaning of the word "righteous" is good: it doesn’t mean being better than others; it simply means having a right relationship with God. Verse 6 says that Zechariah and Elizabeth were “righteous in the sight of God.” It means God was the one who recognized them as being right with him. Can you imagine it: God looking at you and thinking, “Wow, that person is right with me”?

What was it that made Zechariah and Elizabeth righteous in the sight of God? Verse 6b says they were “observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.” Here the word “observing” literally means, “walking in.” Many people study the Bible a lot, but they don’t really struggle to put what it teaches into practice. For them, Bible study is a mere intellectual exercise, something to talk about at church meetings then forget about. But to walk in God’s commands and decrees requires that we be thinking about them throughout each day. Honestly, most of the time we live in our own way, have our own ideas and follow our feelings. But these two were always trying to live according to God’s guidelines and instructions. Before doing anything, they first stopped, thought about Scripture and asked, *“What would God want us to do?”* What a great question **that** is! How important it is to really want to know what God wants!

Why were they like that? Why were they always trying to live according to God’s instructions? We so easily can get into doing this for the wrong reasons. We may be trying to prove we’re better than others, or getting superstitious, or even trying to manipulate God to give us what we want. But the reason Zechariah and Elizabeth were trying to observe all the Lord’s commands and decrees seems to be simple: they just loved God. Because they actually loved God, they wanted to do what pleases him.

So where did their love for God come from? We all naturally love ourselves most. How do we start loving God? We can only love someone we actually know. If we don’t know God, how can we even begin to love him? So how did Zechariah and Elizabeth know God so well that they loved him so much and always wanted to do what he wanted? We can get to really know God in an intimate way as we read the Bible. God reveals himself—who he really is and what he’s really like—in his words. To get to know who a person is takes time. The same is true with God. We get to know him better and better as we spend the time reading his word in Scripture. The more we get to know God, the more we love him. It seems Zechariah and Elizabeth had spent a good deal of time reading the Scriptures until they got to know God so well that they actually really loved him. Out of their love for God, they learned all his commands and decrees. Out of their love for God, they wanted to know how he wanted them to live, and then each day they did their best to follow his instructions. It wasn’t dry and mechanical; it was a beautiful, personal, living love relationship.

Their observance of all the Lord’s commands and decrees also shows their practical trust in him. Trusting in God can sound kind of vague. But actually it’s not vague at all. Trusting in God means trusting him enough to just follow his instructions in the Bible, even when we may not fully understand. Most of the time we trust in ourselves. We don’t like to relinquish trust in our lives to anyone else. But a main part of having a relationship with God is to learn to trust him. We can grow in personal trust in him only as we learn to follow what he says. If we’re not following what he says, then we’re not really trusting in him.

It says in verse 6 that they observed “all” the Lord’s commands and decrees. It’s so easy to pick and choose what we like, and to ignore what we don’t. We usually pick the easy things and reject the hard things. But they struggled to accept even the commands and decrees that were hard, the ones they didn’t like or understand. Why? It was simply because they were God’s commands, and they loved and trusted him so much. It was this struggle that actually changed them from self-centered, self-serving people to God-centered people. Sadly, we often have to be pushed to study the Bible. But this couple meditated on God’s words day and night (Ps1:2). God’s words refreshed their souls, gave them wisdom, joy, light and deep satisfaction (Ps19:7–11). God’s words kept their hearts pure and kept them from sinning against him (Ps119:11). God’s words showed them God’s ways (Ps119:15). After learning God’s ways, they walked in them (Jer7:23; Hos14:9).

Sometimes when we read about characters in the Bible we think, “Well, it was **easy** for them; **everyone** was believing at that time. Today it’s different.” But actually that’s not true. Yes, there were some worshiping and praying people (1:10). But this passage tells us that in the time of Zechariah and Elizabeth many of the people of Israel had turned away from God (1:16–17). So in reality, this couple’s faithfulness to God and to his words was going against the cultural trends of their time, just as it does today. It’s hard to be different from everyone else. Surrounded by people who have a completely different mindset and value system from us, we feel lonely and weird. But living in a love relationship with God in a world that lives without him will always be like that. How could Zechariah and Elizabeth do it, living among such people day in and day out? They must’ve gained the strength to live for God as they kept coming back to his words. Their personal meditation on his words kept filling their hearts, inspiring them, renewing them and giving them the courage and strength to live for God, even though people didn’t recognize them or understand.

And they weren’t living in a germ-free tent in a problem-free life. Look at verse 7. It’s hard for us today to really appreciate what was going on here. Today, many people honestly would rather not have children, because kids are too expensive, too messy and too much work. I saw a greeting card recently of a fancy lady laying down in the sun with a cool drink and saying, “Wake me when the children grow up.” But in the culture of that day, not having children was not seen as an opportunity for fun and freedom; it was seen as a curse from God. Verse 25 actually says that due to her barrenness Elizabeth had lived in disgrace among her people. Everybody interpreted their childlessness as their having some sin in their lives. It must have been hard to see other couples not striving to please God, but having so many children year after year. But they didn’t let their personal problem make them doubt God’s love or pull back from their dedication to him. They kept meditating on his words and doing their best to walk in them, not to get God to give them children, but purely, because they loved him.

Verse 6 starts out with the phrase, “Both of them.” It seems pretty significant. Often there are couples where one is a devout person living a spiritual life, while the other is kind of checked out spiritually. But in this couple’s case, both of them were right in the sight of God. Both of them walked in God’s commands and decrees. Both of them loved God. What a blessing to be in a relationship with a kindred spirit, with someone who loves God and wants to serve him the way I do! How beautiful to share our entire life, even into old age, with someone who loves God! Instead of trying to get engrossed in a relationship with another person based on lots of human desires and calculations, we first should grow in our personal relationship with God, until it’s so real and so deep that our lives feel complete. Ironically, it’s only then that we’re actually ready for a relationship with another person. And we should seriously want the person we get involved with to have a real spiritual life, a real love relationship with God. We should never compromise that or rationalize it, thinking it’ll get fixed later.

There are some other important things in this passage. One is that when people were worshiping and praying, God revealed himself. When we really worship and pray to God, God still reveals himself. Another is Zechariah’s persistent prayer. Read verse 13. He’d been praying all his life, even into his old age, even in the temple while on duty, that Elizabeth would have a son. What a great husband he was, who was always praying for his wife’s problem! We learn from him that we can bring every problem in our lives to God in prayer. We don’t have to worry or get stressed or despair; we can pray to God. And God answers prayer in his own time and his own way. We also learn in this passage what true greatness is. John the Baptist would be great in the sight of the Lord. His greatness would come from his purity, his spirit and his dedication to his mission. It would be his purity, his spirit and his full devotion to his mission that actually made him useful to God. Sadly, we define greatness in many other ways—talents, good looks, humor, intelligence. But greatness in God’s sight is actually being useful to God for what he wants to do. Another important thing in this passage is Zechariah’s mute training. He didn’t believe the angel’s words that he would have a son. So the angel Gabriel told him he would be mute until the child was born. God’s training in old Zechariah’s life seems to be too hard; first it was childlessness, and now, muteness. But God’s discipline through these problems was a sign of his great love. Also, the mute training seems to have had a clear point: God was training Zechariah not to speak unbelieving words, but to speak only based on faith in his word. This would be very important for him in being the father of John the Baptist. When we speak recklessly, with complaints, based on unbelief, it doesn’t edify others; it burdens and discourages. We too need training to speak based on faith in God and in his word; then we can contribute to creating a good environment in which others can grow spiritually. Finally, Elizabeth’s personal testimony inspires us. She said that through her pregnancy in her old age God had shown his favor. God’s favor is repeated in these opening chapters of Luke. Elizabeth’s pregnancy wasn’t because she deserved it due to her righteousness; it was God’s favor, God’s beautiful grace in her life.

So we mainly learned today that God uses people like Zechariah and Elizabeth, people who live before him, people who come to know and love him through his word, and people who love him back by carefully living in the ways he wants, regardless of what the people around them are doing. It was through such people that God could send a great man of God, John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus. May God help us to learn from the faith of Zechariah and Elizabeth, that we can be useful to him in our time.