

## #273 "Faith and Christmas"

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Luke says to Theophilus, the recipient of his gospel, that he investigated everything carefully and wrote it out in consecutive order "so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4). God has faithfully preserved His Word because even the details matter. Life is made up of details, decisions of the heart that can make a great difference. A choice has to be made at Christmas, faith to believe the account of Christ's birth or to count it as foolishness and religious myth. The Biblical account of Christmas is reliable down to the last detail, and even the events surrounding the birth of Christ matter and have instruction embedded for believers even two thousand years after the fact. In Luke 1, Gabriel appeared to Zacharias the priest, and then he appeared to Mary. Each had a different response regarding events surrounding Christmas, and there is a great lesson therein.

Zacharias was married to Elizabeth, and they were both advanced in age as the story picks up. They were righteous in God's sight, faithful servants of His who walked blamelessly in the commandments and requirements of God (v. 6-7). One day, while Zacharias was doing his priestly duties in the temple, Gabriel appeared to him (v. 11). He was troubled when he saw the angel and gripped by fear, a typical response in the Bible to seeing an angelic presence as Daniel could testify to (Daniel 10:12). Gabriel, as he had told Daniel hundreds of years ago, told Zacharias not to be afraid. In fact, the angel had great news for Zacharias and Elizabeth, for, despite their old age, God was going to perform a merciful miracle and allow Elizabeth to conceive a child. The child would also have a significant role to play, for his name would be John, the same John who would be the forerunner of Christ and baptize people to signify repentance and heart readiness for the coming Messiah (v. 13-17). Gabriel said that they would both have great joy at his birth as would many others (v. 14). After praying for what was likely many years and suffering the disdain of other people who mocked them, Elizabeth in particular, for not having children, God answered their prayer and even gave them a son who would be used of God in a powerful and special way (v. 15). They were honored of God, chosen of God, and blessed of Him. This should have been a time for celebration, exhilaration, and great joy, but Zacharias doubted. Verse 18 says, "Zacharias said to the angel, 'How will I know this *for certain*? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.'" Gabriel answered Zacharias by declaring his name, he made mention of the fact that he personally stands in the presence of God Who cannot lie, and he reminded Zacharias that he was sent specifically to him to bring him this good news. That should have been more than enough to lend credence to God's promise. In fact, Gabriel had prophesied to Daniel hundreds of years prior concerning the exact timeline for when Messiah would come and be cut off (Daniel 9:25-26). It was now time for Messiah to be born, and Gabriel was back to deliver a message. How much more reliable of a source can a person get? Zacharias got what he asked for, however, for Gabriel gave him a sign by shutting up his mouth until John was born. Verse 20 says, "And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time." God is always merciful even in His discipline, for, the next time Zacharias opened his mouth, it would be in the context of God fulfilling His Word. It would be tough to doubt then and easy

to praise, something he should have done the first time around. But what a lesson learned it would have been for Zacharias, for it would always be on his mind to speak thanksgiving to God and to have faith in response to His Word. Elizabeth got it right, saying, "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked *with favor* upon *me*, to take away my disgrace among men" (v. 25).

Gabriel was also sent to Mary with a wonderful message. Verses 28-29 say, "And coming in, he said to her, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord *is* with you.' But she was very perplexed at *this* statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was." Mary was stunned by Gabriel's appearance, and like Daniel and Zacharias, had to be told not to be afraid (v. 30). Gabriel told her that she would conceive and bear a son whom she would name Jesus (v. 31). He spoke of the fact that this Jesus would be the Son of God Who would have a kingdom of no end (v. 31-33). Mary didn't doubt, but she asked a very important question. Verse 34 says, "Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'" Verse 35 says, "The angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.'" The child in her womb would be conceived by the Holy Spirit miraculously. Gabriel answered Mary's humble, honest questioning and even encouraged her by telling her that her relative Elizabeth was also pregnant even in her old age. "For nothing will be impossible with God," said Gabriel (v. 37). Mary gave a proper response to this wonderful news in verse 38, saying, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." Zacharias wouldn't accept the message from Gabriel and doubted in his heart, but Mary didn't doubt. She didn't tell the angel to "prove it," but she humbly received the message as the honor it was. She submitted herself as a servant of God in this wonderful plan of God of sending His Son to earth as a baby in her womb, and her response was, "may it be done."

If God can make one woman conceive in old age and another conceive by the Holy Spirit, is anything really impossible for God? If nothing else, Christmastime and remembering the fulfilled promises of God should increase the faith of His children. Those who do not believe in Jesus need to start believing and submit themselves to Jesus as His servant. Those who do believe but are struggling with doubt in the present must remember that in God all His promises are "yes" (2 Corinthians 1:20). His Word will come to pass, He does the impossible, He cannot lie (Titus 1:2), and He will make good on what He has said. The Christmas story calls for faith, it reinforces faith, and it ought to greatly encourage and inspire the faithful. The same God Who pulled off the compassionate miracle of the Baby in the manger is still the same God today (Hebrews 13:8). This Christmas, may God grant faith to those who lack it, and may He cause the faith of His children to grow and be strengthened. With God, the impossible is possible, at Christmas and each and every day.