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LESSON ONE

HOPE IN GOD

“The Lord has done this for me . . . in these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

LUKE 1:25



REFLECTION

It's hard not to envy good fortune. Someone else's windfall always raises a few thoughts of *why didn't that happen to me?* Some people can rejoice at others' good fortune, but others become victims of bitterness. Think of a time when God did an amazing work in a friend's life. How did you react? In what ways did that friend's blessing kindle hope in your life?

SITUATION

Having explained to Theophilus the purpose behind his letter, Luke immediately wades into the historical account of Jesus' life. He has to choose a starting point, and he decides the best one is a preliminary event that involves an elderly couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke's biography of Jesus begins with the birth of John, who became known as the Baptizer.

OBSERVATION

Read Luke 1:5–25 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

⁵ There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

⁸ So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will also 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 a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸ And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

¹⁹ And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. ²⁰ But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."

²¹ And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. ²² But when he came out, he could not speak

to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless.

²³ So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. ²⁴ Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

EXPLORATION

1. What kind of reputation did Zechariah and Elizabeth have in their community?

2. How did Zechariah and Elizabeth cope with the humiliation of childlessness?

3. Where was Zechariah when he met the angel? How did he react to the angel's appearance?

4. The angel promised a child. In what way did this offer hope to Zechariah in his situation?

5. How did Zechariah respond to God's promise? What happened as a result?

6. In what way did Elizabeth react to the fulfillment of the angel's prophecy?

INSPIRATION

We had hoped. How often have you heard a phrase like that?

"We were hoping the doctor would release him."

"I had hoped to pass the exam."

"We had hoped the surgery would get all the tumor."

"I thought the job was in the bag."

Words painted gray with disappointment. What we wanted didn't come. What came, we didn't want. The result? Shattered hope. The foundation of our world trembles. So we trudge up the road . . . dragging our sandals in the dust, wondering what we did to deserve such a plight.

"What kind of God would let me down like this?" . . .

Our problem is not so much that God doesn't give us what we hope for as it is that we don't know the right thing for which to hope. (You may want to read that sentence again.)

Hope is not what you expect; it is what you would never dream. It is a wild, improbable tale with a pinch-me-I'm-dreaming ending. It's Abraham adjusting his bifocals so he can see not his grandson, but his son. It's Moses standing in the Promised Land not with Aaron or Miriam at his side, but with Elijah and the transfigured Christ. It's Zechariah left speechless at the sight of his wife Elizabeth, gray-headed

and pregnant. And it is the two Emmaus-bound pilgrims reaching out to take a piece of bread only to see the hands from which it is offered are pierced.

Hope is not a granted wish or a favor performed; no, it is far greater than that. It is a zany, unpredictable dependence on a God who loves to surprise us out of our socks and be there in the flesh to see our reaction. (From *God Came Near* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. Why do we, like Zechariah, sometimes doubt God's desire to fulfill our deepest longings?

8. What comfort or encouragement does this passage offer to you when you find yourself in a seemingly hopeless situation?

9. What steps can you take to deal with feelings of hopelessness?

10. In what way does this passage affect your attitude toward your frustrations and problems?

11. What spectacular things are you expecting God to do in your life?

12. In what way can you demonstrate your faith in God's promises?

LIFE LESSONS

There's a difference between expecting God to be faithful and anticipating the specific ways he will demonstrate his faithfulness. The first attitude hopes in God's constancy and wisdom; the second may assume that we know what's best. If we get the two confused, we are liable to be disappointed with the results.

Even though God always gives us good things in the long run, we're sometimes disappointed because he didn't answer our prayers according to our exact agenda. This passage doesn't forbid us to tell God what we want. It simply teaches us to express even our most fervent desires within the boundaries that God ultimately knows best. He sees what we can't see; he knows what we don't know. Sometimes, as in Zechariah and Elizabeth's case, the answer is delayed because a much larger plan is in motion.

DEVOTION

Thank you, Father, for giving us hope in a world of broken promises and dashed dreams. You have proven your trustworthiness by keeping your promises to your people. O Father, you are our only hope. Strengthen our dependence on you, give us patience to wait for your perfect timing, and teach us to rejoice in your goodness.

JOURNALING

What personal hopes or dreams are you tempted to give up on? How can you entrust them to God today?

FOR FURTHER READING

To complete the book of Luke during this twelve-part study, read Luke 1:1–3:38. For more Bible passages on hope, read Psalms 42:5; 62:5; 130:7; Proverbs 23:18; Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 12:12; 15:4; and 1 Timothy 4:9–10; 6:17.