

## **“The God of Impossibility”**

Luke 1:5-25; 57-80

History has known some remarkable births. Just this week, I came across some fascinating birth stories that seem to defy all odds...

One story was that of James Gil, born in Canada on May 20, 1987. He is the world's youngest surviving premature baby, born at just 21 weeks. To understand the gravity of that, you should know that the survival rate for premies born at 22 weeks is less than 10%. He weighed a mere 1 pound, 1 ounce at birth.

Another story involved an Italian mother who, in September of 1955, gave birth to the world's heaviest baby, a boy who weighed a whopping 22.8 pounds if you can imagine.

What about the most babies born at one time? According to the Guinness Book of World Records, back in 2009 Nadya Suleman gave birth to six boys and two girls at the Kaiser Medical Center in California. You might remember her from TV as the “Octamom” as she was called. I think she might have even went on to star in her own reality TV series or something like that.

Well, the gospel of Luke begins with the story of two even more remarkable births. An even better description would be ‘impossible’ births. When God wants to do something great, He usually always does it against the backdrop of impossibility. Whenever He desires to do something truly wonderful and miraculous, He always begins with impossible circumstances. That is a constant theme that we see emerge over and over again throughout Scripture. He is a God who delights in turning impossible situations into incredible opportunities

that illustrate His steadfast love for us. He never makes a promise that He does not intend to keep, though He doesn't often work according to our schedule.

**Lamentations 3:22-24—“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in Him.’”**

The passage goes on to say that “the Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”

That's where Luke begins his story. The faithful in Israel had been waiting quietly for the Lord's salvation. They were in what seemed to be an impenetrable darkness, but it was the thick darkness that was just before the dawn. God was about to break into human history once more and fulfill the promises that He had made to His people.

And so for just a few minutes this morning, I want to show you from this text how our God is indeed the God of the impossible.

Notice that verse 5 begins in this way, that it was “In the days of Herod, king of Judea.” To those who were living in that particular time, it would be similar to saying to those who lived in Europe in the 1940's, “It was in the days of Adolph Hitler, the Fuher of Germany.” Luke takes us all the way back to the dawn of the first century, a time of political turmoil, oppression, and compromise in Israel. His story of Christ begins before the choirs of angels, the arrival of shepherds, or the story of Mary and Joseph. It begins with an elderly couple who were among the priestly family of Israel—Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Their story is significant because of something that had been foretold some 400 years before through a prophecy that served as the last promise of the Old Testament. The Lord had promised:

**Malachi 4:5-6—“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”**

And that is how the Old Testament concludes. It begins with a curse and it ends with a curse. It is this idea that the stage has been set, but the plot is still unresolved. There is a period of some 400 hundred years where Israel is without a prophetic voice. It is a period of divine intermission. All of the promises that God had made to His people were yet to be fulfilled—such as the promise that Abraham would have descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore, the promise that David’s son would be on the throne.

A remnant of Israel had returned to the Promised Land after years in captivity, but things were never quite the same. Jerusalem was still under foreign power. Some who were zealous even began to rebuild the temple, but it was a mere shadow of its former glory under Solomon. God’s presence never came to dwell within it like He had before.

During the time between the testaments, a lot of history transpired. Alexander’s Greek empire became divided up among his four generals, and it wasn’t long before the whole world was under Roman rule, including Judea. To oversee their territories, the Romans would often put men in charge who proved loyal to Roman causes, men who could be bribed and bought and who sought political power. In 37 B.C., Rome had come to rule Jerusalem through a puppet leader

known as Herod the Great. Herod was an Idumean (Edomite) which meant that he was a descendant of Esau. God's covenant had been established with Jacob, and Israel's throne was promised to one of his rightful legal descendants, which meant that Herod was a usurper. He tried to win Jewish favor through his expensive building projects, most notably of which was his elaborate renovations of the temple in Jerusalem. Herod's temple was one of the wonders of the ancient world.

Herod was also a suspicious and insecure man, and he jealously guarded the ill-gotten title that Rome had given to him, "King of the Jews." He killed anyone who challenged his claim, even if that meant killing members of his own family. In Matthew, he is visited by the wise men who came looking for "one who has been born king of the Jews." In response, Herod had all of the male infants in Bethlehem slaughtered so as to not be threatened. Once ancient Roman historian even said:

**Macrobius Theodosius** — *"When Caesar Augustus heard that Herod king of the Jews had ordered boys in Syria under the age of two years to be put to death and that the king's son was among those killed, he said, 'I'd rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son!'"*

And so Luke's orderly account of the life and ministry of Jesus begins with a very dark cultural context. It seemed impossible that the Messiah and God's promised salvation was anywhere near the horizon. This ought to encourage you and me because it isn't circumstances that determine our hope, but a sovereign God who controls them.

Our God is the God of the impossible. From the text, let me point out a few ways in which we see this to be true:

## 1. The PAIN of a barren couple (1:5-7)

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

In many ways, the story of Israel up until this point seems to mirror that of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Just as Israel was without a true King, they had no child. Just as Israel was in a hopeless situation, they were advanced in years and beyond the age of having children.

We’re told in verse 5 that Zechariah was a priest according to the division of Abijah. According to 1 Chronicles, there were 24 divisions of priests, each of which took turns ministering in the temple. They would perform routine duties for a week at a time, and the division of Abijah was eighth in the rotation. Not only was Zechariah from the priestly line, but notice that his wife was as well. She was from the daughters of Aaron.

Notice what Luke says about their personal character. In contrast to Herod whom history has described as being a ruthless man, verse 6 says that they were both righteous before God.

**“Righteous”** — *upright; notice that they are describe as being righteous ‘before’ God or in the sight of God*

Their righteous character wasn’t merely surface level. It was not for the sake of appearance like it was among so many others in religious circles. They were

righteous in the Lord's sight, which meant that He had declared them to be righteous. This is only possible through faith!

Not only does Luke describe them as being righteous in the Lord's sight, but notice also that he says they walked 'blamelessly' before Him in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

**“Blamelessly”** — *doesn't mean that they were perfect; it simply means they were without accusation*

Here we are presented with a righteous couple who loved the Lord and are committed to His Word. And yet notice that they were not without their own personal pain—verse 7 says *“they had no child because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.”*

Just because you are righteous does not mean that you are exempt from pain. This undermines the false ideas that are at the heart of so much of the 'prosperity gospel.'

Jewish thought at the time held that childlessness was an indication of God's displeasure. To be barren was one of the most difficult social stigmas that a person could carry. It was a source of cultural shame, not to mention the deep personal sorrow that infertility often caused. And when you add on top of this the fact that both of them were advanced in years, pregnancy was simply out of the question. Their situation was bleak and hope seemed out of reach.

Yet it was against this hopeless backdrop that a ray of light penetrated the darkness of night.

That's often how it is in our lives, isn't it? I'm sure you have felt the pain of some hopeless and impossible situation or circumstance. All of us have been there.

Maybe you've felt powerless to change in some area. Maybe there is a problem that seems impossible to get past, like some glaring obstacle that is always staring you in the face.

The mention of Zechariah and Elizabeth's childlessness and the fact they were both past childbearing age only points to the human impossibility of their situation. Maybe Luke assumed that his readers would recall similar situations from redemptive history in which God blessed the barren with a son who would fulfill some divine task.

I think about what the Bible says concerning Abraham. Both he and Sarah were childless, even though God had made a promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. God even changed his name from 'Abram' to 'Abraham' to reflect that promise.

He and Sarah were well past the childbearing age. A son in their old age seemed impossible. It was a promise that Abraham had to receive by faith.

**Romans 4:18—“In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”**

It says he didn't weaken in faith when he took his body into account, which was as good as dead since he was nearly 100 years old. Nor did he weaken in his faith when he considered Sarah's barrenness.

**Romans 4:20-21 —“No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised.”**

That's why Abraham is an example of what it means to be justified through faith. He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Just as Abraham believed the promise of God, so also must we. Only those who believe that Christ died for their sins and that He was raised from the dead are truly made righteous.

## **2. The PROMISE of a special child (1:8-17)**

*“Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen 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.”*

At this point in Israel's history, there were so many priests that they all couldn't serve in the temple at the same time. To determine which priests would fulfill each role, they would cast lots.

It just so happened that Zechariah was chosen to offer up the incense in the holy chamber. It wasn't by accident, nor was it coincidence.

**Proverbs 16:33—“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”**

God was providentially arranging the circumstances of Zechariah's life. No such thing as fate or happenstance with God!

To be the priest selected for the incense offering was a once-in-a lifetime opportunity. It would be the one and only time he would have this high honor. What did it involve?

The priest who was selected for this duty would enter the holy place. Exodus 30 says that the priest would then trim the wicks on the lampstand and also burn incense on the altar that was in front of the veil before the holy of holies.

This happened twice a day, once in the morning and then in the evening. As the priest offered the incense on the altar, he would pray, as would all of the worshipers who were gathered together on the outside.

As he was faithfully discharging his duties, verse 11 says:

*“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.”*

It was something totally unexpected. One minute, he’s simply carrying out his responsibilities in the silence of the chamber, and the next minute he senses that he’s not alone.

**“Troubled”** — *word means shaken or terrified*

Go back through the Bible and pay attention to how every time an angel appeared to someone, it provoked this same type of response. It was an encounter with a heavenly being, which always left the person feeling small in comparison. Verse 19 says that the angel is Gabriel.

Notice in verses 13-17 what the angel has to say:

*“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been 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 must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will*

*turn many of the children 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.”*

It marked the first time that God had sent word through one of His messengers in more than 400 years. Zechariah is told that his prayer has been heard. What had he been praying for? No doubt he and Elizabeth had begged God for a child for many years. But more than that, as the priest would apply the incense to the altar, he would also at the same time offer up a prayer of salvation.

The angel is giving Zechariah the confirmation that God is about to break through the scene, and that he and his wife had a key role to play involving a son that would be born to them in their old age.

**“John”** — *the Lord is gracious*

The birth of John would mark a turning point in redemptive history. Zechariah and Elizabeth are chosen to give birth to the very one who would announce the coming of the Messiah. John wouldn't be the Savior, but he would be the one who would serve as His forerunner.

The angel tells Zechariah that several things would be true of John:

- He will be a cause for rejoicing (v. 14)
- He will be great before the Lord (v. 15a)
- He will not drink wine or strong drink (v. 15b)
- He will be filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 15c)
- He will turn many to the Lord (v. 16)

- He will go before the Lord in the spirit of Elijah (v. 17)

John would have a unique ministry in that he would be the one chosen by God to herald the arrival of God's own Son. After 400 years, God's voice was heard once again!

Waiting on God to move isn't always easy. We are all too prone to become impatient. We often confuse God's delays with God's denials. God always works on His own schedule and not ours. He doesn't leave us in the dark, however, for He always gives us a promise that we can count on and place our confidence in.

### **3. The PROBLEM of an unbelieving heart (1:18-25)**

*“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. I 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 take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.’”*

If an angel showed up to tell you that you were going to have a child, you would think that you'd believe what he had to say. Instead of receiving the angel's announcement in humble gratitude, notice how Zechariah's fear turns to skepticism. He is given a promise, but he asks for proof.

Asking for a sign wasn't something totally uncommon or out of the ordinary. You can find plenty of examples in the Bible of those who asked God for a sign:

- Moses (Exodus 4:1-17)
- Gideon (Judges 6:36-40)

- Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:8-9)

Zechariah didn't need a sign because the word that the angel gave him was sufficient. It was a miraculous and stupendous event that he of all people should have welcomed in faith.

The scribes and the Pharisees were guilty of wanting to see a 'sign' from Jesus to prove He was the Messiah...as if His miracles and His authority was not enough.

And how did He respond?

**Matthew 12:39—“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”**

In other words, they didn't need a sign when they had the Savior. And neither did Zechariah. He didn't need proof when had a promise. Rather than trusting in the divine promise, Zechariah immediately begins to think of himself. He can't get past both he and Elizabeth's age. It all just seemed too farfetched for him to wrap his mind around.

Unbelief is by default the natural disposition of humanity.

Belief in God isn't something that comes natural to us, and that's why faith is a gift from Him. In His grace, God has to rescue us from our unbelief. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and generates faith in a person's heart.

Every single sin has unbelief as its ultimate source. It was through Adam's unbelief that sin entered the world. It was unbelief that led to the destruction of the world in Noah's day. It was unbelief that resulted in Israel's captivity. It was

unbelief that led Israel's leaders to reject Christ. And it is still unbelief that is crippling humanity.

Jesus was rejected by His hometown because of unbelief:

**Mark 6:5-6—“And He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. And marveled because of their unbelief.”**

Just a couple of chapters later, Mark records the account of a boy who had an unclean spirit. The boy's father brought the child to the disciples, but they couldn't do anything to help. They brought the boy to Jesus, and the father said:

**Mark 9:22-24—“But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief.’”**

Notice that Zechariah's unbelief draws the angel's rebuke. And as a result, he would be unable to speak until the day that the things promised were fulfilled. For nine long months, he would be unable to utter a single word.

Interestingly enough, his silence brought on by his unbelief served as an object lesson. It reflected the 400 year long silence that Israel was without a prophet.

Unbelief was the same thing that had led to Israel's long silence. Israel failed to believe God, and as a result, they lost their prophetic witness to the nations. God intended for Israel to be a 'priestly' nation that represented God to the rest of the world. Even the location where God placed them shows this to be true.

Unfortunately, Israel failed to live up to this purpose. But in no way does that mean God's purposes failed. It was His plan all along to raise up a faithful Prophet and true Priest.

**Charles Swindoll**—*“Luke’s narrative shows Zacharias to have been a type of Israel, in that he, too, answered a priestly call but, due to wavering belief, failed to fulfill his obligations. Consequently, Israel and Zacharias endured similar divine discipline. Both endured an imposed silence.”*

God's last promise to His people before the long silence was that a forerunner would come to announce salvation. Their long dark night of silence would soon enough be shattered with John's prophetic voice. This was a promise that they were to find hope in. In a similar way, Zechariah will have to rest in the knowledge that his silence will end with the birth of his son.

Zechariah's silence should serve as a reminder to us that God's people have no voice apart from faith in God's Word.

#### **4. The POWER of an omnipotent God (1:57-80)**

Sure enough, verse 24 says that Elizabeth conceived just like the angel had said she would. Within nine months, a baby's cry was heard in their home.

God always keeps His promises, no matter how bleak our situation may seem to be. No matter how impossible our situation may seem. No matter when circumstances seem to tell us otherwise. When the baby is finally born, notice how Zechariah attributes his birth to power of God.

His agreement to the name 'John' shows that faith had replaced unbelief. Verse 64 says that “immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.” Look at what he goes on to say beginning in verse 67 and

how it reflects his confidence in the power of God. This passage is known as 'Benedictus' in Latin:

*67— "...Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,*

*68—Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people*

*69—and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David,*

*70—as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from old,*

*71—that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us;*

*72—to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant,*

*73—the oath that He swore to our father Abraham, to grant us*

*74—that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear,*

*75—in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days."*

And then notice what Zechariah says to John, which also serves as a demonstration of his faith:

*76—"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways,*

*77—to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins,*

*78—because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high*

*79—to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Listen, we serve a God who specializes in the impossible. Is anything too hard for Him? Into the darkness of our night, He shines His radiant light. The night is darkest just before the dawn! Trust Him.

Application:

- Impossibility often sets the stage for God to do His greatest work
- God operates according to His schedule rather than ours
- All things work together for the good of us and the glory of God

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth ought to be one that gives you hope when you face impossible situations in life. It shows us how God is sovereign and in control of life's circumstances, and He uses them for His own purposes. It was an impossible situation that God used to set the stage for the arrival of His own Son. Jesus came to take on the impossible task of rescuing humanity from sin's black night, though it would involve His own death on a cross. He came to die in my place. He did what no one else could do, and He was successful—His resurrection proves it.

Who can be saved?

**Luke 18:27—“What is impossible with man is possible with God.”**