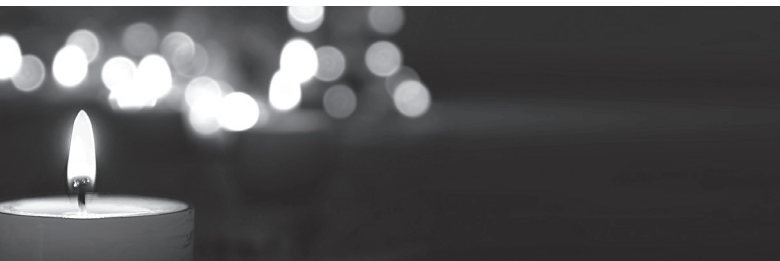


UNEXPECTED HOPE

HOW CHRISTMAS BROUGHT
JOY TO THE WORLD



Dennis Moles



introduction

Unexpected Hope

How Christmas Brought
Joy to the World

The years **2020–2022** were the most difficult season of ministry I have endured. I experienced doubt over every significant decision, disappointment and heartbreak over lost relationships. I felt out of sorts and out of step amid the crush of half-truths, misinformation, and propaganda. I felt like an outsider among people I have pastored for the better part of the decade, and I performed funeral after funeral after funeral—

more funerals in a two-year stretch than I had done in the previous ten years.

I take consolation in the fact that I am not alone. We are all a little bit fried. Our doubts are a little more pronounced, our disappointments a little more grievous, our calamity a little more all-encompassing, and our grief all too real.

And while solidarity does give us a bit of comfort, true comfort only comes from God. Every year the church of Jesus Christ enters into the season of Advent intent on experiencing and extending the hope, joy, peace, and love that the arrival of the Messiah brings.

Christmas (Advent) is a season that reminds us that God has not forgotten us in our doubt, disappointment, loneliness, or grief. It is a time for the church to anticipate and celebrate the arrival of a babe in Bethlehem. A babe who brings hope and encouragement to the weary and brokenhearted.

Dennis Moles

contents

one

Zechariah's Hope.....5

two

Elizabeth's Joy13

three

Joseph's Faith19

four

The Shepherd's Peace25

five

Simeon's Patience29

EDITORS: Tim Gustafson, Jed Ostoich, Peggy Willison

COVER IMAGE: Muenz via Getty Images

DESIGN: Steve Gier

INTERIOR IMAGES: (p.1) Muenz via Getty Images; (p.5) Bruce Rolff via Shutterstock.com; (p.13) ChaiyonS021 via Shutterstock.com; (p.19) UMB-O via Shutterstock.com; (p.25) Tomertu via Shutterstock.com; (p.29) Artem via Adobe Stock

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

© 2022 Our Daily Bread Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI

All rights reserved.

Printed in USA



one

Zechariah's Hope

Encouragement When You Struggle with Unbelief

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." (LUKE 1:18)

When we think about the Christmas story and the part Zechariah, John the Baptizer's father, played in that story, we think of a doubter—a person who had an angelic encounter while serving in the temple and yet still surprises us with words that sound like he dares question the authoritative message of God.

Zechariah was one of the good guys—an insider whose ancestors had dedicated themselves to the

care of temple, the keeping of the law, and the high calling of representing the people before God. Zechariah and his wife were both descendants of Aaron, Moses's brother and the first High Priest of Israel. As priest, Zechariah's job was to represent the people before God to serve as an intermediary by offering sacrifices for the sins of Israel (LUKE 1:8–9).

Faithfulness was a hallmark of Zechariah's family. He was a priest in the division of Abijah—a man who had returned to Judah with Zerubbabel for the purpose of rebuilding the temple (NEHEMIAH 12:4) and who was chosen by God to lead a post-exilic priestly division (1 CHRONICLES 24:10).¹

But just like today, things do not always work out in the good guy's favor. He lived and ministered in difficult and doubt-filled times. It had been four hundred years since the death of Malachi and a great deal had happened since that last prophet of Israel pronounced judgment on God's people for their unfaithfulness (SEE MALACHI 1). Malachi specifically called out the priests and Levites for their disobedience and lack of reverence, telling them he would send a curse on them and their descendants if they did not repent and respond to God's covenant love expressed to their ancestors (MALACHI 2:1–9).

This sounds more like it. The good folks get

1 Major Contributors and Editors. (2016). Abijah the Priest. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, . . . W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

rewarded and the evil ones get punished. It's the law of sowing and reaping. Bad guys go to jail; good guys walk free. Bad guys bring shame and reproach upon themselves and their families; good guys bring honor and blessing to those they love. Right?

Not always.

Zechariah lived in a society where Roman oppressors ruled God's people and occupied the land that God had promised to Abraham. The Maccabean revolt² against the Seleucid[■] Empire, who had controlled the region before the Romans took over, offered a short season of freedom through violence and bloodshed. But God's people still staggered and swayed—as they had for centuries as different occupying forces controlled the region—under the oppression and heavy taxation of Rome. Adding insult to injury, Rome had installed an Edomite, Herod the Great, as ruler of the Palestinian region.■ A descendant of Esau, not Jacob or David, sat on the throne and ruled Israel.

■ **The Seleucid Empire** lasted from 312 to 63 BC, and was established by one of Alexander the Great's generals, Selucus I Nicator. At one time, the Seleucids controlled an area extending from the Indus Valley in the northwest region of India, all the way to the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. (https://www.worldhistory.org/Seleucid_Empire/)

2 The Maccabean Revolt. <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/827/the-maccabean-revolt/>.

➤ **The Edomites** were the descendants of Esau, the older son of Isaac and Rebekah. Esau's young twin brother was Jacob whose name was later changed to Israel. Jacob would become the one through whom God's blessing to Abraham was passed.

It wasn't just the wider world that seemed to conspire against Zechariah's faith. The ramifications of sin and the fall had come home. Zechariah and Elizabeth had no child—no son to carry on his name or his family's priestly line. All his life Zechariah had tried to do what was right (LUKE 1:6). Not only had he observed the commands and decrees of God, he had been faithful to his calling to help others do the same. Yet despite Zechariah's faithfulness, despite the cries of God's people, God still seemed absent and silent.

I wonder if Zechariah felt like he was living under the curse—both personally and societally—Malachi talked about so long ago? I wonder if Zechariah, as I often do, misunderstood God's silence. I get impatient. I want God to move on my timetable and when he does not, I can get a little skeptical, asking questions like, “God, are you really there?” “Do you really care about me?” “Do you not see what a mess we are in down here?” So much so that even when God finally shows up, I wonder if it is really him.

This is the context into which God sends his angel to Zechariah with a message that will not only change Zechariah's life, but the trajectory of the entire world.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah

saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 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. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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.” (LUKE 1:11–17)

Yes!

After generations and generations of silence from heaven, God has finally spoken again. Not only that, if you are Zechariah, he has spoken *to you*—and not just about your particular situation of childlessness. In one short message God, through his angel, announces the remedy not only for personal suffering for you and your wife, and not only for the tribal suffering your people have endured, but also an end of suffering for the world.

Finally, at least in Zechariah’s mind, all is about to be right with the world both societally and personally. That is why his response to the angel of the Lord is so interesting.

“Zechariah[■] asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years’” (LUKE 1:18).

➤ **Zechariah's** situation calls to mind Abraham's response when the Lord told him that his aged wife Sarah would have a son. The text says that Abraham "laughed and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'" (GENESIS 17:17). Zechariah knew this story well, yet he still struggled to believe God.

In responses to passages like this, we modern Bible readers may be tempted to shake our head in disgust, wondering how anyone could still doubt after such a supernatural encounter. Three things should have been clear to Zechariah based on this angelic interaction. First, this message is from the Lord. Zechariah's angelic encounter in the Temple made it clear that God was up to something out of the ordinary. Second, God was going to redeem Zechariah's personal pain and shame of childlessness. Third, God was going to make good on his promise to bring a Messiah who would relieve both Israel's tribal suffering and the global suffering of all humanity. Zechariah's son was to be the forerunner of this promised king. But something—a sickness of sorts—crowded out the joy that should have accompanied such a revelation. It was doubt. Even after this supernatural encounter, Zechariah's experience of deferred hope made him doubt what he saw with his eyes and heard with his ears.

Proverbs 13:12 tells us that "hope deferred makes the heart sick." It seems safe to assume that we see the sickness of delayed hope in Zechariah.

There were consequences to Zechariah's doubt—

nine months of muteness being the most tangible. But just as human faith does not dictate God's plan, neither does human doubt derail it. Zechariah's doubt didn't stop God's plan, but it did limit Zechariah's ability to participate in it. Doubt does not inhibit God; it simply limits our participation in what God is doing because it keeps him at a distance. Doubt asks a version of the question the serpent asked Eve in the Garden, "Did God really say?" Doubt asks, "Can God really be trusted?"

Our doubts do not tie God's hands so much as they can lead us to despair. We have all heard the phrase, "That's too good to be true." Doubt did not creep up on Zechariah. It was, from a human perspective, the natural response to a lifetime of waiting.

I wonder how many of us are honest or courageous enough to admit that our doubts have led us to a place of discouragement and hopelessness. We have prayed and hoped and waited. And still, God seems silent and distant.

All of Zechariah's life had been spent waiting. Hoping and waiting for Messiah. Hoping and praying and waiting for a son. And here, in his old age, when God finally shows up with an answer to Zechariah's prayers, his initial reaction is to question God. The answer did not come in the way he expected or in a time that was convenient. The long wait had led him to doubt.

Every year the church of Jesus Christ gathers to anticipate afresh the arrival of our King, Savior, and

Messiah. God did not follow Zechariah's timetable, nor did he follow Zechariah's plan or take his counsel on how best to fulfill his promises.

This can be a hard thing to hear. It is hard to hear that God is doing something in our waiting that could not be done any other way. It is hard to hear that maybe, just maybe, I am not the center of God's plan. I can wait and God can still be true to his word of "[being] slow in keeping his promise." (2 PETER 3:9). But consider this: after his angelic encounter, Zechariah went home and trusted the Lord to accomplish all that had been spoken to him. He no doubt communicated to Elizabeth what had happened, and it is likely that she, seeing the miraculous sign of her husband's sudden inability to speak, showed faith too.

Doubt's consequences may well outlive doubt itself. In the end, Zechariah's faith overcame his doubts; but the effects of those doubts—nine months of muteness—lasted until the day his son received his name. Happily, the effects of a thing are not that same as the thing itself. Doubt wins in our lives only when we persist in it—when we cling to it. And hope dies only when we give up on God's ability to make a way in a hopeless situation. The moment doubt gives way to faith, hope is born. Doubt is understandable; it was understandable for Zechariah and it is understandable for us.

Be encouraged. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a promise-keeper. The hope of Christmas is that despite our doubts he is faithful.



two

Elizabeth's Joy

Encouragement for the Disappointed

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. (LUKE 1:57-58)

According to the Mayo Clinic, between ten and fifteen percent of couples in the United States struggle with infertility. That means that statistically one out of every ten couples have at some point found themselves in the same boat as Zechariah and Elizabeth. Let's break

this down into raw numbers. According to the 2020 US census, there were just over 62 million married couples in the United States. This means that 12.4 million individuals in the United States alone are personally touched by the disappointment and pain of being unable to conceive and bear children.

Think about it this way: if this number of struggling people constituted a city, that city would be the 26th most populous in the world—just behind Moscow, Russia, and just ahead of Chennai, India; Bogota, Colombia; and Paris, France. It would be the largest city in North America—outpacing New York, Los Angeles, and Toronto.

Twelve and a half million image bearers of God who feel the crushing grief of being unable to carry out a key aspect of the first human mandate, “Be fruitful and multiply” (GENESIS 1:28 NKJV). This is to say nothing of the many who wish to find a suitable mate but never do. So many people who suffer in silence and isolation.

Women especially endure endless questions that cut at their very souls. Elizabeth knew this grief all too well. She lived in a culture where the primary job of a woman was to become a wife who provided her husband with children: daughters who would care for them in their old age and sons who would take over the family business and carry on the family name.

As the Psalms say, “Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him” (PSALM 127:3).

Not to have children in this context was not only shameful, but it was considered a spiritual deficiency.

Children meant God's blessing. A lack of children was assumed to be God withholding blessing. Furthermore, in this culture, it was automatically assumed that the fault was on the part of the woman—that she had done something wrong and was experiencing God's judgment.

Elizabeth was intimately acquainted with disappointment. She endured the sidelong glances month after month, year after year, until sorrow became a constant companion. She finally, through necessity, came to grips with the fact that she had to develop a theology of the empty. Despite her obedience to God and faithfulness to his law, Elizabeth had to come to grips with the fact that a part of her life would—apart from divine intervention—remain empty.

The empty womb.

The empty nursery.

The empty house.

The empty hopes.

How do we find encouragement in midst of disappointment? It only happens when we, like Elizabeth, allow God to fill the empty spaces of our lives in his time and in his way. It only happens as we learn to embrace God's presence amidst the absence of our desires.

In our own church, the Alles family had to learn this the hard way last Christmas. Three days before the first Sunday of Advent, Judy—beloved mother, sister, and aunt—went to be with the Lord. My family

also had to learn this lesson almost a quarter century ago when we lost Grandpa Crawford just a few days before Christmas.

Pain and loss show up in all kinds of ways. The empty seat around the Thanksgiving table. The leftover packages under the tree because the one to whom they are addressed is no longer with us. The empty nursery. The cold and vacant side of the bed. The shame of the unemployment line. The fear associated with the empty checking account. Sooner or later, we all face the reality of “the empty” and the disappointment that comes from unmet expectations and unfulfilled hopes.

How we face the emptiness says a great deal about our faith and our character. This passage shows that even in the midst of Elizabeth’s disappointment she still pursued faithfulness. She still loved her husband. She still served God. Her faithfulness was not contingent upon getting what she wanted or what she thought she deserved.



Long years of disappointment, longing, and resignation taught Elizabeth something that we learn only through struggle, pain, and disappointment. Gifts are not earned.

I think the long years of disappointment, longing, and resignation taught Elizabeth something that we learn only through struggle, pain, and disappointment. Gifts are not earned. I wonder how Elizabeth's response would have been different if she expected God to give her a child in her old age? Joy comes from a heart that is broken and tender. When someone thinks they deserve or have earned grace it produces resentment not joy.

I deserved an A on that paper. How dare the professor give me a B!

I deserve to have more money in my bank account. After all, I need that vacation, and I could really use a better vehicle. How dare my boss not give me that promotion!

I deserve to be happy. How dare you tell me it is sinful to pursue a relationship outside of my marriage!

Like Elizabeth, your disappointment may be completely understandable. You might feel that God has forgotten you, abandoned you, betrayed you, or been cruel to you. And the truth of the matter is that your feelings may be legitimate. You may have experienced people abandoning, betraying, being cruel to you, but not God. The question at hand, however, is not the legitimacy of my feelings or your feelings. The question is whether we can find joy in the midst of our disappointment.

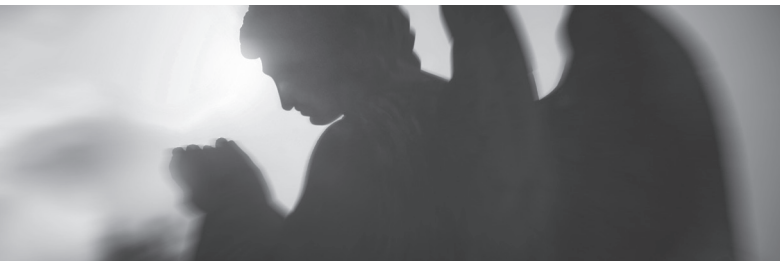
Elizabeth's story reminds us that even though God seems distant, he is in fact always near. The story of Christmas—the story Elizabeth was invited to

participate in after long years of discouragement—is that God is coming near. Her baby would be the one to announce the Messiah. God’s timing did not fit with Elizabeth’s, but his timing was perfect.

When we trust God—even when we don’t understand—he will fill the cracks of our broken hearts. He can turn our mourning to dancing. When we realize that gifts are given to show us the love of the Giver, we stop feeling like we have earned something that we have not.

As the psalmist said, “His anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but joy comes in the morning” (PSALM 30:5).

Be encouraged. Sorrow endures for a season. Joy is coming soon.



three

Joseph's Faith

Encouragement for the Broken-Hearted

But after he [Joseph] had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (MATTHEW 1:20–21)

Few betrayals match that of an unfaithful spouse. And while Mary and Joseph were not officially married at this point in their relationship, the process of betrothal in the ancient world was very different than it is in the modern west.

First, the betrothal was not simply a romantic agreement between a man and a woman. There were likely no grand romantic gestures, no moonlit strolls, no months or years of dating to discern if this one is “the one.” Marriage was not just two people declaring their love for one another; it was arranged by parents or other responsible parties. And love often had little to do with the arrangement, at least in the beginning. It was a contractual binding of two families.

Second, at this point, the negotiations between the families had ceased. The bride-price had been exchanged, and legal processes had been followed. The couple was considered married. Betrothal was more than modern engagement but less than what we could consider marriage in our cultural context. The betrothed, while legally bound to each other, would not consummate the marriage or live as husband and wife until after the wedding ceremony.

Do you see the issue?

Joseph and Mary were pledged to marry and therefore legally bound to each other as husband and wife. They were also culturally and religiously prohibited from sexual activity until after the wedding ceremony. When Mary turned up pregnant there were, humanly speaking, only two options. Fornication on the part of the betrothed couple or adultery by the wife. No other natural options existed. Every onlooker was safe to assume one thing. Mary had sex with someone. Having sex with Joseph before the end of the one-year betrothal and the wedding ceremony

would bring great shame upon both families. Having sex with someone else would lead to an ugly and shame-filled future for both the woman and her child.

The Mosaic Law is quite clear about the punishment for adultery—both parties are to be put to death (LEVITICUS 20:10). In this case, the proof of sexual activity was the pregnancy. The question of who the parties were would have landed squarely on the testimony of Joseph since Mary, as a woman, was not allowed to give legal testimony. Capital punishment was not a likely option since only Rome could administer the death penalty. And there was some ambiguity since Joseph and Mary's marriage had not been consummated. Yet the text still calls Joseph Mary's "husband" (MATTHEW 1:19).

The common practice would have been for Joseph to publicly break the engagement and allow all the shame of the situation to fall on the guilty party—Mary. This is what the current application of the Law would have allowed and what the community—including Joseph's family—would have likely called for. If Joseph did not break the engagement, he was essentially telling the world he was the father. Break the engagement and retain your reputation and your family's honor, or enter into the public disgrace with your presumably unfaithful spouse—seeming to admit to a sin you did not commit. These were the options facing Joseph.

As a man who was faithful to the Law, Joseph is certainly hesitant to sacrifice his reputation and his family's honor to remain with Mary. But as someone

who obviously cared for her, he wants to minimize the public disgrace.

Others might dispute this, but it seems to me that there are two essential elements to heartbreak—love and betrayal. You can feel the heartbreak in Joseph's conclusion. He knew what the Law said. He knew what was expected of him culturally. He knew what would be best for his family . . . yet even in his deep hurt, he wanted to mitigate the pain Mary felt.

This is what love does. It does not make sense to those on the outside looking in. We want justice, punishment, or revenge—especially if someone we love is the one who has been betrayed. But the brokenhearted live in the tension between love and betrayal. The abused spouse struggles to press charges against her abuser because she still loves him. The cheated upon spouse takes the unfaithful partner back because he loves her. Betrayal, real or perceived, does not cancel out love. The brokenhearted know this all too well.

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. Your betrothed has turned up pregnant. You know the baby is not yours and she claims it is not anyone else's either—no other human that is. She says that an angel has come to her and told her that she, a virgin, will bring forth the Messiah. She claims to be pregnant via the work and will of God. After this outrageous and apparently heretical claim, she disappears to her cousin's house, and you are left to pick up the pieces of what remains of your shattered life.

I wonder what Joseph is thinking. Is he angrier about the apparent unfaithfulness or the outrageous lie she's telling in an attempt to cover up the unfaithfulness? How could someone do this to another person? Then again, how could someone, after such a betrayal, want to protect the betrayer? Love. Indifference or hatred would lead to thoughts of justice and vengeance. They empower and embolden us for a fight. But the betrayal by a loved one breaks us.

That is why this next phase is so powerful and filled with hope and encouragement for those who are brokenhearted.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." (MATTHEW 1:20)

Essentially, the angel is inviting Joseph to step into Mary's shame. "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife." This was the final step, the lynchpin of the wedding ceremony. The groom went with his friends to the bride's house and took her back to his home to make her his wife.

Joseph found hope and encouragement for his broken heart through two avenues. The first was through an encounter with the divine. The second was through surrender.

The psalmist speaks about these two roads in Psalm 51. David had just endured his own personal

dilemma—a crisis of his own making. Having unlawfully taken another man’s wife and seeing to his death, David then faced the consequences of his actions. Having repented and confessed his sin to God, David found forgiveness. He then called a distant and estranged congregation of Israel to sing and declare these words to the Lord: “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (PSALM 51:17).

Your broken heart does not have to get the final word. In this moment Joseph had a choice. Pursue the way of justice, perhaps soothing his broken heart and damaged ego—even though Mary was not guilty of any sin—or choose the way of love and surrender. He had every legal right to divorce Mary, but for the sake of love and in humble obedience and hope in God, chose to take on her shame.

The call of the Savior to the brokenhearted is not to get over your hurt, but to surrender your broken heart to the only one who can mend it. To be clear: the call is not to stay in an abusive marriage or put up with unfaithfulness. But the call is to offer our betrayals to him. We need not be afraid to live lives of worship and surrender.

Advent reminds us that we are not trapped by the Law or the culture and invites us to pursue the way of love and redemption.



four

The Shepherd's Peace

Encouragement for the Outsider

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (LUKE 2:14)

Luke alone tells this story of the shepherds' angelic encounter. Luke's account gives us more information than any other gospel regarding the events that precede and surround Jesus's birth. Luke begins his gospel account by giving a sketch of his methodology and purpose for writing.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first

were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (LUKE 1:1–4, EMPHASIS ADDED)

By all accounts, Luke is the first church historian. He tells his readers that his book is based on investigation and eyewitness accounts. Luke was not an apostle. He may have never met Jesus during his earthly ministry. Luke does not report what he saw with his own eyes, as Matthew and John do. Nor does he relay the accounts of a lone eyewitness, as Mark may have done with Peter. Rather, Luke “carefully investigated everything from the beginning” (LUKE 1:1). This would almost certainly mean interviewing eyewitnesses, one of whom was likely Mary the mother of Jesus. Luke alone tells of her angelic encounter and her poetic response known as the Magnificat (LUKE 1:46–55). Luke alone records the events of the twelve-year-old Jesus at the Temple. Luke alone tells us the stories of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, and the shepherds—all events that would have been known to a select few including Mary the mother of Jesus.

Why bring this up? Because we often think of the shepherds’ story as their story told by them, but it is probably their story as told as told by Mary. It is unlikely that Luke, after several decades had passed, found the shepherds and then learned from them all they had seen on the night of Jesus’s birth. What

is far more plausible is that we are reading about their encounter as Mary recalled them telling it to her. She would have treasured their account as a part of the richness of the backdrop to her child's remarkable birth.

It must have been a shock to have a group of strangers show up only hours after giving birth, but that was what Mary and Joseph faced the night Jesus was born. What did the new parents think when the dirty, smelly outsiders crowded around to get a glimpse of the newborn king. How strange it must have seemed!

Or perhaps it did not seem strange to Mary and Joseph at all. God had chosen two unlikely parents for Messiah. In his sovereignty, he chose to have the Savior of the world born into a scandalous situation. While it does not fit the stereotype, it does fit the narrative. Zechariah and Elizabeth were too old. Mary was young. The pregnancy before marriage was too scandalous. So it makes perfect sense that a group of smelly outsiders—living on the edges of society and clinging to a rung on the bottom of the social hierarchy of the day—would be the ones tasked with announcing the King's arrival.

These are the men to whom the angels proclaim God's favor. These social outsiders are the ones to whom the angels entrusted the dissemination of God's peace and favor to the world. And the first family to whom they passed that peace was Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus.

This is likely why Luke says, “But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (2:19).

Be encouraged. Peace comes as we realize God does not extend his favor to those who deserve it, but to those who need it. Experiencing God’s peace has never been about achievement or ability or social standing. God consistently chooses people whom we as humans would pass over.

The shepherds remind us that God’s words to Samuel about David are still true—humans look at outward appearances but God looks at the heart (1 SAMUEL 16:7). God excels at making outsiders insiders. He chooses the meek and the lowly to accomplish his purposes.

That night, the shepherds may have been unlikely recipients, but they were just who God needed. God does not need the high or the mighty, nor does he desire only the gifted and the brilliant to share his message of peace. He needs the willing.

These lowly shepherds not only spread the word of Jesus’s birth to everyone in Bethlehem, they brought a reminder of peace and favor to Jesus’s parents.



five

Simeon's Patience

Encouragement to the Longsuffering

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

(LUKE 2:33-35)

Just like **Zechariah and Elizabeth**, Simeon had waited for Messiah to be revealed. The difference between Simeon and others in Israel during this time was that God had spoken to him regarding Messiah's arrival. The message was

simple yet clear. Simeon would not die until he saw the Lord's Messiah (LUKE 2:26).

I have never had an angelic encounter. I have never heard an audible divine voice. I have never encountered a burning bush and I have never been spoken to by a donkey. But I do believe that I have heard God speak—through his Word, through his people, through circumstances, through nature, and through encounters I cannot quite explain. Let me be clear: I am not claiming to have been spoken to by God the way Simeon was. I am just making a confession that I think most Christians would agree with—God is a God who speaks. That is not in question. The question is do I—do we—hear him correctly when he does speak?

God spoke the world into existence (GENESIS 1:3–26). He spoke through the prophets, but it had been a very long time since God had said anything to his people—four hundred years. Simeon knew that God was a promise keeper through the witness of the Scriptures. As a matter of fact Hebrews 1:1–2 tells us:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

God has spoken and he still speaks. According to the writer of Hebrews he speaks to us today



God has spoken and he still speaks. According to the writer of Hebrews he speaks to us today in the same way he spoke to Simeon—through Jesus.

in the same way he spoke to Simeon—through Jesus. Simeon had a word from the Lord that was fulfilled in Jesus. Not only did Simeon have the witness of the Scriptures, he held the Christ child.

Do you ever grow weary in the waiting? I do and it's likely Simeon did too. It does not strain the imagination at all to picture him asking, "God, how long?" I am sure he was frustrated and discouraged by the plight of his people and God's seeming slowness to do anything about it.

Simeon reminds us that God does some of his best work when his people have run out of human options. Sarah was ninety years old, but God gave her a son (GENESIS 17:17; 21:1–2). The Israelites were

trapped between mountains, the sea, and Pharaoh's army, but God beckoned Moses to stand still and see the salvation of the Lord (EXODUS 14). Hannah was childless, but God gave her Samuel (1 SAMUEL 1). Gideon's army was too small, but God gave him the victory (JUDGES 7:7–25). David was just a boy, but God

gave the Philistine into his hand. Jonah was thrown overboard in the midst of a monsoon, but God sent a great a fish (JONAH 1:17)...

Be encouraged—Simeon's encounter with Jesus reminds us that God is faithful to keep his promises even when the wait is long and hard. Simeon reminds us that what we are waiting for is not a particular answer to our prayer; we are waiting for an encounter with Jesus.



God changed Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, the shepherds, and Simeon, along with numerous others, and all he needed to accomplish it was their “yes.” When they said yes to him, he gave them gifts they could never have imagined. He gave each of them—in their own way—an encounter with the newborn king.

Be encouraged. God will meet you in your yes.



Our mission is to make the life-changing wisdom of the Bible understandable and accessible to all.

Discovery Series presents the truth of Jesus Christ to the world in balanced, engaging, and accessible resources that show the relevance of Scripture for all areas of life. All Discovery Series booklets are available at no cost and can be used in personal study, small groups, or ministry outreach.

To partner with us in sharing God's Word, click this link to donate. Thank you for your support of Discovery Series resources and Our Daily Bread Ministries.

Many people, making even the smallest of donations, enable Our Daily Bread Ministries to reach others with the life-changing wisdom of the Bible. We are not funded or endowed by any group or denomination.

CLICK TO DONATE