BOTH OF THEM WERE RIGHTEOUS IN THE SIGHT OF GOD

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.”

Have you ever asked yourself, “Do I matter?” In a world full of problems and people sometimes we feel insignificant. Especially our personal problems and struggles can seem unimportant. But in today’s passage we find two people who really mattered to God. Usually history is written from the point of view of “the great people”— great leaders, thinkers, achievers. But Luke wrote a gospel history focused on ordinary people. The two in today’s passage weren’t young and dynamic; they were old, maybe out of touch with their times, and it even seemed that life had passed them by. But they, of all people, were the ones God chose to fulfill his great plan of salvation. The times were spiritually dark, and hopeless, but God was still quietly working, through people like these two. The message that God still uses such people is so encouraging. As we prepare to celebrate Christmas this year, may God open our hearts to learn how he can use even us in his greater work in our time.

Look at verses 1–4. In this one long sentence the author Luke introduces his Gospel. The whole book is addressed to “most excellent Theophilus.” This name means “lover of God.” Theophilus was likely a Gentile, and probably a high official in the Roman government who’d come to believe in Jesus. He even may have sponsored Luke financially to write this Gospel. At that time there were many new religions based on wild stories. As Christianity was just getting started, Luke believed there needed to be a thoroughly researched, well written and orderly account so that Theophilus and other intelligent people could be sure that what they’d been taught about Jesus was true. So in verse 2 Luke mentions those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. These were the original 12 apostles, who orally passed on all that had happened. But Luke also “carefully investigated everything from the beginning.” Many believe he actually went in person to the Holy Land to interview people still alive who knew all the stories surrounding the life and ministry of Jesus. With this backdrop Luke begins the story.

Look at verse 5. It starts with the phrase, “In the time of Herod king of Judea…” This refers to Herod the Great, who ruled from 37–4 B.C. Many authors would use the names of those in power to give a date to their story. But “the time of Herod” calls to mind much more than that. This Herod was famous for his many building projects, but even more for his cruelty. He had his political opponents and even some of his own family members killed to protect his position. When Jesus was born, Matthew 2 tells us that Herod had all the baby boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old or under murdered. When a scary person is in power, it’s really a dark time. Verse 16 says that many of God’s people had turned away from him. Verse 17 adds that many parents had turned their hearts away from their children, maybe for the sake of making money, and that many had become disobedient to God.

But Luke tells us there was a couple who were different. Who were they? Look at verse 5 again. They were Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were both from priestly families. It meant they both came from a strong spiritual heritage. It was a special blessing that they both shared. But it was not just their ancestors’ faith. Read verse 6. We learn several things from this verse.

**First**, they both lived in the sight of God. Though many people were living as if God were not there, Zechariah and Elizabeth believed that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Heb11:6). Their awareness of God made them take his words seriously. Their awareness of God made them seek to please God. Because they both did it, they must have been helping each other to live before God. Though people may have looked at them in many negative ways, they were more concerned with how God was looking at them. It tells us how to live. Instead of being too sensitive to people, we need to learn to live our lives in the sight of God.

**Second**, they both observed all the Lord’s words. Literally this word “observed” means “walked in.” To do that, they first had to know what the Lord’s word actually said. So they carefully studied the Bible—all of it. Some people pick and choose what they like, but this couple didn’t do that. They listened to all the Lord’s words, did their best to understand, then took action based on his words. “Walked in” suggests that following his words was their daily lifestyle. Why did they live like that? It’s because they too were lovers of God. Because they loved God, they made pleasing and obeying God the focus of their daily lives. Again, they helped each other to do it, and they did it all their lives. They never got bored or thought they didn’t need his words anymore. Their personal obedience to the Lord’s words was at the core of their spiritual life.

It tells us how to maintain a life of faith. It’s to pay close attention to the Lord’s words and do our best to obey what he teaches us. Before Jesus came, the Jews tried to obtain righteousness by obeying God’s laws. After Jesus came, believers live under grace. But it doesn’t mean we ignore the Bible, the Old or the New Testaments. We pay attention to it all. We still listen to all the Lord’s words, from Genesis to Revelation—not to earn righteousness but to learn more of who God is, who we are, and how he wants us to live. Those who are faithful to live by the Lord’s words, even against the trends of the world, are those God still has his eye on. They’re those God can still use, no matter how dark the times.

Look at verse 7. This tells us of their personal problem—childlessness. And now they were both too old to do anything about it. But throughout their lives they refused to let this problem define them, divide them, or distort their relationship with God. Childlessness in their society was considered a disgrace, a sign that God was not pleased, that they had somehow sinned. This public disgrace was something Zechariah and Elizabeth had to bear all their lifetime—the way people looked at them or talked about them. But they never doubted God’s love and goodness. They still loved and obeyed God even though he’d never given them what they wanted. It may seem like a small thing, but it really moved God’s heart.

Look at verses 8–10. It was a special time in Zechariah’s life. To be chosen to do this was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Zechariah was chosen to go and burn incense in the temple, meaning he was chosen to go and pray for all his people. Many were outside worshiping and praying. Why? It was more than their religious custom. They were seeking God and crying out to him because they were suffering in those dark times. They were asking God to do something, to be faithful to keep his promises. We too can keep praying no matter how discouraging things are when we remember who God is and hold onto his promises. Luke is also telling us that their worshiping and praying was not useless—God saw it, God used it, and God was ready to act on it.

Look at verse 11. An angel is a messenger of God. God sends an angel only rarely. This angel came to Zechariah when he was very old, while he was on a special assignment in the temple burning incense. How did he respond? Look at verse 12. Why was he “gripped with fear”? Partly it was because he realized he was in God’s presence. He also may have thought the angel had come to rebuke him or even take his life. Zechariah knew from all his Bible study how holy God is, and how sinful human beings are. But what did the angel say? Read verse 13. The angel had come to comfort Zechariah and give him some amazing news. His prayer had been heard. His wife Elizabeth would bear him a son. God had even picked out the name: “John.” He would be John the Baptist. We can learn some more important things here.

**First**, God answers prayer. All those years Zechariah and Elizabeth had been barren they’d been praying to God for a son. It tells us that as they studied the Bible and walked in its teachings, they also learned to include God in their own needs. Their real-life problem was childlessness, but they didn’t try to solve it on their own—they prayed. It seems from this context that Zechariah was still praying for a son even now, even when he and his wife were very old, even when he should have been praying for his people—probably just out of habit. He probably didn’t even believe anymore that it could happen. He was so old, maybe he didn’t even *want* it to happen! But God answered his prayer in his own way and in his own time. Their prayer for a son was very personal, but God took it and used it for his own greater plan. Sometimes it’s the personal problems in our lives, even the ones we’re ashamed of, that God wants to use for a much bigger purpose. They key is, we need to be praying about them.

**Second**, God is gracious. The name “John” means “God is gracious.” Because this couple was so faithful, obedient and prayerful, it may seem that they deserved or had earned God’s help. But actually, God was being gracious to them by giving them this son, John. God was also being gracious to his people, even though they’d been unfaithful to him. God working in our lives is always because of his grace, not because we deserve anything.

In verses 14–17 the angel goes on to tell him about his son’s life and mission. John would bring joy and delight to his old parents, but also to many, because he would be great in God’s sight. What was John’s greatness? He would never drink alcohol at all, not because it’s evil but because he would be dedicated to God in total purity. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born. His purity and Spirit-filled life would give him power to carry out his God-given mission. What was John’s mission? It was to turn his people back to God. That’s so hard to do, harder than “Mission: Impossible.” So again, verse 17 mentions he would have the spirit and power of Elijah the prophet. Elijah lived in dark times, but he single-handedly turned his people back to God because he was so full of the Spirit. Likewise, the Spirit would empower John to turn people’s hardened hearts back to God. The word “turn” means repent. It’s repeated here twice. This repentance would be practical, starting in families and in personal behavior. Repentance starts with what we’re doing with our own children. It changes wild living into obedient living. Repentance prepares people for Jesus. John the Baptist was a very famous, very special man, but his example shows ordinary people how to live the most significant life. We can give our lives to so many lesser things, like personal achievement, building wealth, or even just personal enjoyment. Often we don’t know what to do with our lives. But a truly great life is a life dedicated to helping people turn to God. We may be so weak, but we can do it when God gives us his Spirit.

How did Zechariah respond? Look at verse 18. Because of the realities in his life he just couldn’t believe it. It was such good news; an angel was even telling him about it, but he couldn’t believe it. He himself had personally prayed for it, but still he couldn’t believe it. Zechariah loved God and had observed all his words blamelessly, but he still found it hard to believe what God wanted to do in and through his life. It tells us that even such people need to grow deeper in faith.

In verses 19,20 the angel Gabriel tells him that as a result of his not believing his words, he would be silent and unable to speak until the day his son would be born. It was tough discipline, but God wanted this man to learn the lesson to speak only believing words. It was important not only for Zechariah but also so that he could be a good father to John. In verses 21,22 there were many eyewitnesses who saw what had happened to Zechariah. Finally, Luke tells us of Elizabeth’s response. Read verse 25. Elizabeth had felt such a wound for being unable to bear children, but through this she experienced God’s healing grace. Here “his favor” literally means “he has noticed me.” This barren old woman Elizabeth felt like a nobody, a loser. But she experienced that God was giving even a woman like her a very special grace.

Let’s read verse 6 again. May God help us learn to live in his sight. May he inspire us to observe all his words. May he help us experience that he answers prayer and that he is gracious. Though we may seem to be nobodies in the world, may God use us quietly in his own way and turn people back to God.