



*The Wonder
of the
Nativity*

*Reclaiming the Christmas Season
an Advent devotional*

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Luke 1:5-25 (NIV) "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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

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

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

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. 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.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 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.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. '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.'

Luke 1: 57-66 (NIV) "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.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, 'No! He is to be called John.'

They said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who has that name.' Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.' Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, 'What then is this child going to be?' For the Lord's hand was with him."



Disbelief, selfishness, and impatience seem to pervade our 21st century culture - it is how we live, and often how we survive. The sense of urgency and immediacy to which we feel helplessly tethered seems unrivaled in the history of the world. We are in a hurry, easily distracted, and if something doesn't immediately align with our worldview we demand *proof*. We often pack our schedules full and pursue our goals relentlessly no matter the cost, even if the cost is our family's quality time or our kids' worldviews or cultivating important relationships.

The truth is, our modern busyness and time crunching might be unrivaled, but skepticism, entitlement, and impatience are not new to our century. Enter in the priest Zechariah. We are not told much about Zechariah's life before this event in the temple occurred, but his reaction does seem a bit odd for a man deemed "righteous in the sight of God." Especially in contrast to Mary's reaction to *her* visit from an angel. But we're not here to judge or to compare; we're simply observing Zechariah's very human response to what appears to be the answer to his lifelong prayer. Out of context, this seems like a no-brainer - a response of, "Thank you, God!" would be appropriate. But *in context*, taking into consideration Zechariah's age and many years of service, the unknown state of his childless marriage, and the continued silence from God throughout Israel, his doubt is understandable and most of us can probably relate. Perhaps Zechariah had given up on his prayer for a child; maybe he had resigned his prayer for God's voice to once again be heard in Israel. When we give up on God, it often breeds resentment, bitterness, even a sense of entitlement. But Zechariah experienced continued faithfulness from God, even when he was *faithless*.

When we follow Jesus, He will inevitably lead us to be counter-cultural. In the days of Zechariah, it was expected for the firstborn son to be named after his father. You see in our passage that people wanted to go over Elizabeth's head to ensure the child was named as such. But Zechariah was faithful and obedient to the Lord when he wrote "His name is John" on the tablet. As a result of this, the people around him *were in awe* of what happened and in turn spread the word about this miracle, praising God first. We too must step out in faith and *expect* God to come through as promised. It may not appear as standard practice or in line with our culture's expectations. Part of sanctification is learning to faithfully wait and willingly obey, in spite of our unbelief or skepticism (Mark 9:24).

Instead of spending this week stressing over our shopping trips, preparing for house guests, or maybe waiting for it all to be over, let us take time to faithfully prepare our hearts for the celebration of the coming Messiah. Let us spur on our spouses to embrace the eternal perspective of Christ's human birth on earth. After all, this is one of the greatest joys and privileges of marriage: to spur one another on toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus and His perfect sanctification. In doing so, our marriages will become much like the season of Advent--a period of waiting, preparing, and expecting the unseen. *Prepare the way for the Savior*, born in Bethlehem, sent to die on Calvary, seated in heaven at the right hand of God.



What is Faithfulness?

"Great is Thy faithfulness!" "Great is Thy faithfulness!"

*Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided--*

"Great is Thy faithfulness," Lord unto me!

-Thomas Obadiah Chisholm & William M. Runyan

2 Timothy 2:13 (NIV) "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot disown Himself."

In the context of marriage, we often think of faithfulness as the opposite of adultery. We are faithful to our spouses when we don't lust after others or flirt with our coworkers. Merriam-Webster defines "faithfulness" as, "steadfast in affection or allegiance; firm in adherence to promises or in observance of duty; given with strong assurance; true to the facts, to a standard, or to an original." That last definition is striking. *Faithfulness is being true to a standard or to an original.* If marriage is a reflection of Christ, then *faithfulness* is much more than chastity; it is holding to a standard of holiness that is a mirror image of Christ's endless pursuit of His people.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's faithfulness was evident in their obedience, their boldness, and in the awe that others beheld as *they witnessed the fulfillment of God's promises.* [Read Luke 1:57-66.](#) In the end, despite Zechariah's doubt at the beginning, this couple was faithful to God's plan. Despite the shock and judgment of others, despite breaking with tradition, they chose to obey in naming their child. As a result of their faithfulness, look at what happened. Everyone wondered. The neighbors were filled with awe. *When we are faithful to God's plan, He is glorified.* As the hymn states above, God comes through for us. He is steadfast. When we are faithful, we reflect our glorious Original. Our lives become a living testimony and invitation to those around us to *come and taste and see* the goodness of God. Oh come, all ye faithful!

Discuss

When have you seen God's faithfulness in your marriage? What impact has this had on your relationship with God? Take some time to discuss what faithfulness means in the context of your marriage. As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that God would use your marriage as a part of His plan to fill others with awe and wonder of Christ. Pray for the Spirit to daily inspire faithfulness in your relationship with God, in your marriage, and in your community.



Faithfully Waiting

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV) "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients are commended for."

Hebrews 11:13-16 (NIV) "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they

were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

It seems like we are always waiting for something. Waiting for the next holiday, the next promotion, the next child to be born. Advent itself is a period of *waiting!* Ultimately, we are waiting for God's plan to be made complete in us. But when we can understand and appreciate that we will always be waiting and longing for the fullness of Christ until we die, we gain a new perspective. Hebrews 11 champions people from Scripture who faithfully obeyed God's commands, walking by faith. They did not know what they were working towards, and, as our passage states, they were not always the beneficiaries of God's plan--the opposite in fact. They paved the way for others to experience the fruit of their labor. Their confidence in God's omniscience and faithfulness was enough for them to continue working toward what was unseen.

Zechariah was a faithful servant of God. He was called righteous. We do not know if he was able to witness the ministry of John the Baptist. We *do* know that as a result of Zechariah's faithfulness, we get to experience the grace and mercy that was given to us by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. John fulfilled prophecies by his ministry, prophecies that came true according to God's plan for us. Zechariah did not get to experience this, *yet he was faithful*. In the spirit of Advent conviction, our hearts must be changed to embrace an eternal perspective, waiting for the complete work to be finished. A complete work that we may not experience on this earth. This requires trust that God is good, no matter how we see Him working in our lives. We are not at the center of His story - *He is*. What a humbling and satisfying and comforting truth. As we seek to be true to our glorious Original, we must faithfully wait as we faithfully serve.

Discuss

How often do you rely on your spouse to fulfill you or make you happy? Do you find yourself frustrated that you cannot see the results of your hard work? Discuss how to encourage one another to be eternal minded--on the preparation for what is to come. As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray for God to renew your spirit to be one with His. Pray that He would allow the Spirit to sharpen your eternal perspective, being more and more aware of it. Pray God would give you, as a couple, the opportunity to pave the way for the second coming of Jesus, when His work will be made complete.



Are We Ready?

Luke 10:38-42 (NIV) “As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came

to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

How much effort goes into preparing for the arrival of a new baby? How about preparations for guests in our homes? If you’re anything like us, you know that the preparation for either of these events can be all-consuming. It makes us wonder how well Mary was able to prepare for Jesus’ arrival, being away from home and not even a cradle for her newborn. [Read Luke 2: 6-7](#). How well was Elizabeth able to prepare for the birth of John with her increasing age? We wonder how well these women handled those less-than-ideal circumstances, and how this translates to our spiritual preparedness for Christmas. God came down not when the world was ready and waiting but rather when the world was unsuspecting and unprepared. He came in His timing and in His way. In a large sense, Zechariah and Elizabeth were completely out of the driver’s seat for the birth of John – they had to trust God that His timing was perfect and they welcomed John with humility and with grateful hearts.

Likewise, later in Jesus’ ministry, Mary and Martha were preparing the house for Jesus to stay there. When Martha became upset that Mary was not helping, Jesus gently reminded her that He did not need an extravagant meal or a pristine house – He just wanted her heart. When we are hyper focused on preparations, it is easy to fall into these traps: stress that conditions are not perfect, worry over disrupted plans, or consumed by our to-do lists. We miss out on the joy of the season and the celebration of God come down to us. May we learn from these godly women that our preparations need not be perfect and that we need only to *be with Him, faithfully*, in order to experience the thrill of hope that is Christmas.

Discuss

What are the things that threaten to distract and consume you during this season? What is it that is pulling you away from following Mary’s example and simply sitting at the feet of Jesus? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that God will give you opportunities in the coming week to practice faithfulness in setting aside those “other things” to simply be in the presence of Jesus. Pray that He would be at the center of all of your merriment and that His love and faithfulness would be your standard.



Silenced

Luke 2:18-20 (NIV) "Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.' 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. 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.'"

Have you ever doubted God? It's a rather silly question, isn't it? Of course, we have ALL questioned or doubted or openly rebelled against Him at some point in our lives. It is our natural, sinful inclination to doubt. Zechariah does not stand alone in the ranks of skeptics. It appears from Scripture that Zechariah's question to the angel was not a humble petition for the purpose of confirming his faith, but rather an objection against what seemed too incredible for him to believe. He then asked for a sign, because an angel appearing to him was apparently not sign enough. And while we could sit back and silently judge Zechariah for his attitude, there are two important implications of this story that we must address. First, we are not so unlike Zechariah that we cannot relate. Sometimes, despite years of faithful service, resentment and entitlement fester when our desires are not fulfilled by God the way we want them. We begin to think that God owes us something for our faithfulness. But, at the end of the day, God's plan and timing are perfect. Ours is not. We, too, deserve to be silenced like Zechariah if we do not come before the throne of God with proper reverence and humble submission.

Second, even though Zechariah was faithless in that moment, *God was still faithful*. It would be easy to see this silencing as a harsh punishment. But if we take a closer look, we can see that God deals graciously with Zechariah by silencing him (the wording implies that Zechariah became both deaf and dumb) from speaking any more words of unbelief or boasting in the vision he had experienced. Further, God still fulfilled His promises to Zechariah and Elizabeth – even our unbelief cannot stop the hand of God!

When God's discipline leads to repentance, obedience and submission, God is glorified and we are sanctified. How comforting to know that all of our doubting is incapable of changing God's plan or His gracious faithfulness to us. We have a God who is perfectly just, slow to anger, and relentlessly pursues us for our redemption and His praise.

Joy to the world indeed.

Discuss

When have you doubted God? Be vulnerable and discuss how you can encourage each other in your moments of doubt and/or entitlement and how you can pursue humility and gratitude instead. As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray for humble and grateful hearts this week. Pray that the fear of God would lead you to true wisdom and that you would be willing instruments of God's perfect plan - for the purpose of His glory.



Prepare the Way of the Lord

Isaiah 40:3 (NIV) "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"

John 3:27-30 (NIV) "To this John replied, 'A

person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."

The birth of John the Baptist was the end of an era of silence for the people of Israel. John was the first prophet sent to them in nearly 400 years. While he came before Jesus and became a significant theological figure, John himself greatly emphasized that he was merely a witness to the Light. He was born to prepare the way for the Gospel message that would change the world. John was nothing more than a man with a purpose, a man to proclaim the coming Christ, and we can learn much from his example as we seek to prepare our own hearts this Christmas.

John's message most clearly foreshadowed Jesus' fulfillment of the law and His ushering in of a new covenant. He lived austerely and preached about the importance of true repentance and holy living. He openly confronted the hypocrisy of religious leaders and expected to see practical fruit of repentance from his followers. People hated his message. In fact, he was beheaded by King Herod for it. His message was offensive; it demanded heart change; it required people to submit to a higher authority. But it *prepared* the way for Jesus' message of redemption and sacrifice and eternal life. John understood that his life was not his own, and that he would spend his days pointing to another much greater than him. He faithfully lived in the shadows for the good of the Kingdom. Can we say that we would be willing to do the same? May we become less this season as *He becomes more*.

Discuss

What does this mean to prepare the way of the Lord? Does this still apply today? How can we too live out this role, even if it means living in the shadows? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

As a couple, pray for the Holy Spirit to actively guide you in your daily life - as you continue to prepare your hearts for Jesus. Pray specifically, by name, for those loved ones that do not know Jesus. Pray God would soften their hearts this Christmas season to behold the message of the Christ child.



Living Counter-Culturally

1 John 2:15-17 (NIV) "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has

and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."

The word *repentance* strikes a chord for many of us and causes discomfort. There are likely many reasons for this, but largely it offends our sense of self-proclaimed goodness. We like to believe that we do the right thing, most of the time. So we can absolutely relate to the way many reacted to John the Baptist's rather insulting message of repentance for all. But the truth is that there is so much hope in it. After all, guilt is not always bad - it's what we do with it that matters. Shame is simply guilt that turns inward and leads to death; but repentance is born of guilt that seeks forgiveness and *leads to life*. Just like John's own father repented of his doubting heart and was able to celebrate the promises of God, we too can experience the joy and fulfillment that comes with glad obedience and faithful surrender.

This is a far cry from the lifestyle and philosophy to which the world around us subscribes. It seems that from every corner and rooftop we hear these messages blaring: "Do what makes you happy" and "You just need more..." and "You do you." It is easy to get swept up in this powerful rip current of societal influence, especially this time of year. The messages just take on a different sort of holiday cheer-coated voracity. If you find yourself unduly stressed about meal preparations, travel plans, gift giving, or scheduling all of the Christmas festivities, we have some news for you - you've been swindled by the culturally relevant version of Christmas. You may be wondering, *how did I get here?* We've been there! These messages are so subtle and speak to our desire to be good and generous. When we are so busy running around ensuring everything is perfect with all the "right" holiday things, there often isn't time for *what really matters!* If we're too burnt out to experience the joy that is inherent in this season, then we are no longer celebrating Jesus' birth but rather a made-up holiday decorated with colorful lights, evergreen trees, and exorbitant spending. Let's choose something different this year. In humble repentance of our "me focused" attitudes, *let's prepare our hearts with a willingness to choose Jesus over everything else.*

Discuss

Are there areas where, together, you can choose to be counter-cultural? How are you loving the things of the world, rather than loving the things of Jesus? This Christmas season, how can you faithfully pursue things/traditions/service that are eternal? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

As a couple, pray that God would reveal in your hearts areas where you can live counter-culturally. Pray that He will give you an overwhelming peace and a soft heart towards others outside of your comfort zone. Pray for boldness as you live your lives to prepare the way for Jesus.



Abiding in Christ in the Preparation

John 15:9-11(NIV) "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

The dictionary definition of "abide" is "to continue without fading or being lost" or "to bear patiently." Other definitions use words like "remain" and "stay" and "steadfast." To abide in Christ means to *patiently continue* in His presence, without giving up hope, as we wait for what comes next. Read John 15: 1-11. This wait is not an inactive wait, as we are *commanded* to go and share the Gospel with others. We are preparing for His glorious return to welcome in a new heaven and earth. And so in this advent season of preparation and abiding, we have a chance to renew *our sense of wonder, to reaffirm our adoration of Jesus, and to reclaim the joy promised to us*. If we are not abiding in Jesus, we wither. This may look like discontentment, resentment, marital tension, insecurity, restlessness, and selfishness. We may seek to rid ourselves of these feelings by throwing ourselves into our work, idolizing our kids' success, shopping for "more," or self-medicating. The problem is, we're not understanding the *problem*. We are either still trying to do it all on our own or still thinking it is all about us. This beautiful passage from John 15 is not meant to condemn, but to bring hope and joyful expectation. He cares about our happiness and wellbeing, but He cares about His own glory more because it *is all about Him*. Whether we like it or not, without the fear of God in our hearts, there is no grace. What a beautiful picture of the perfect Father.

We have been grafted in as true branches of the true Vine. Adopted without distinction. As we prepare for the coming of the Christ child and the celebration of the Gospel beginning, may we find rest in our true identity as sons and daughters of the King of Kings. We may not be the perfect hostess or the best gift-giver or the most organized planner, but we are without a doubt the recipients of the greatest gift of all time - no strings attached - and it is time we start receiving His love and stop focusing so much on what must be *done*. This is a call to slow down, be still, adore, and prepare. This is a call to abide in the love of Jesus, that your joy may be *full*.

Discuss

What are the distractions you encounter as a couple during this holiday season? How can you slow down and refocus on the eternal things? How would this change the feeling of the holiday season? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that God would draw you into His presence and teach you to truly *abide* in His love. Pray that God would give you the strength and the desire to say "no" to some of those other things to pursue the one thing that truly matters.