



Jesus and...

Study Guide Part 1 –

A Story of Hope

This study is taken from Robert Fergusson's book "Jesus and...". We have taken chapter 1 of Robert's book "Jesus and Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John – Finding hope for your family", and made it into a 3-part study. As the title suggests, this first chapter recounts the faith journey of an ordinary Jewish couple remaining faithful throughout their lives, overcoming doubts, and eventually seeing God's promise come to pass.

Luke 1:5-23

Luke begins his gospel with a story of two everyday people in their old age, both descendants of Aaron, who were servants of God. Luke records that 'both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly' (v6). Yet, they were not able to conceive, and remained childless for most of their lives. It may seem odd for Luke to begin the story of Jesus this way. But this is our God; He writes the most beautiful and most powerful stories. Where people are faced with impossibilities and fruitfulness, where the natural says too late, too difficult, too impossible, God steps in and does what only He can do. Only He has the power to change the course of our lives. Our God is a God of hope. Our God is the God of the impossible. Our prayer for these three weeks is for you to encounter, discover and come closer to our God of hope, for yourself, for your family and for your community. Jesus and you is all you need.

⁵In 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. ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest

before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And 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.”

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

¹⁹The 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. ²⁰And 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.”

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²²When 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.

²³When his time of service was completed, he returned home.

Luke 1:5-23 (NIV)

A Story of Hope

Let's dive right in and read about the encounter that changed the course of Zechariah's and Elizabeth's lives. Read Luke 1:5-7.

In these verses we are introduced to a little family unit; two ordinary people, loving and serving the Lord for all their lives. They are described as righteous and blameless. It is no small thing to be called as such in the Bible. Yet, despite their life-long commitment of faithfully serving His house, and their dedication to a life of obedience, their prayers remained unanswered, and for a very long time, Elizabeth was not able to conceive. By the time we read their story it is said 'they were both very old' (v7, NIV).

- How would you describe your family unit?
- Is it large or little like Zechariah's and Elizabeth's; is it broken or blended?
- Whatever your family may look like, each one of us is part of some sort of family. And every one of us has some kind of aspiration and hopes for it.
- If you feel comfortable, share your dreams and hopes for your family. Maybe you want it healed, restored, saved, for your family to prosper and grow?
- The church is described as God's family (Hebrews 2:11) (Galatians 6:10). In what ways can the church/your Connect group model a healthy family/community to the world?

Zechariah and Elizabeth's family unit, despite facing the reality of the natural, remained faithful and consistent throughout their lives. Until one day, this little, yet favoured family got God's attention. All along, God had a purpose and a future in mind for their family and beyond. And if you let Him, He can do the same for you. God sees you; He sees your family. He has a plan and a future for your family too. – Let Him write your own story of hope.

Pray

Pray together for each other's families, whether you have a natural family or a spiritual family, or friends you consider family. And if, for whatever reasons, in this season you find yourself feeling rather lonely and not belonging to any family, be encouraged that you belong to God's family. If you feel comfortable, ask your Connect group to pray for God to come through on your behalf.

Go Deeper

The Bible is filled with stories of hope and unexpected acts of grace. All of them point straight back to Jesus and His salvation for humanity. The book of Acts alone has plenty of records of entire families saved, restored, and having their course of life completely changed forever (Acts 16:13-15, 16:25-34, 18:8). And God can do the same for yours.



Jesus and...

Study Guide Part 2 –

Do Not Fear. Believe.

“But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard...’”

Luke 1:13 (NIV)

In our previous study, we were introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story. For all their lives they were both fervent and faithful God-followers, despite living with (what seemed) unanswered prayers, they kept doing what they were called to do, where God had positioned them to be.

In this week’s study, we continue unpacking Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story. As we continue in Luke 1, we read how one day, while Zechariah was on duty serving God, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and spoke God’s promises over his and Elizabeth’s lives. His prayers had been heard, he and Elizabeth would have a son; not just any boy but one who was to be consecrated and dedicated to the Lord, with a specific God-given purpose. His name was to be John. Yet, even though Zechariah had this supernatural encounter with God’s messenger, audibly and visibly, he failed to believe. As a result, he was unable to speak until the promise was fulfilled. – Read Luke 1:8-25

It wasn’t until after the child was born, and it was time to name the newborn, 8-day old baby, that Zechariah’s mouth was finally opened again. The child was named John, which means the favour or grace of God. (v59-63)

Zechariah failed to believe the good news about the upcoming birth of his son. Even though he was a servant of the Lord, a priest for that matter, descendant of Aaron, chosen and positioned in God’s house, he did not believe. Not even a supernatural being, a powerful angel appearing and speaking to him convinced him. The Bible is filled with stories of people’s unbelief and doubt. Their flaws and their stories exemplify human frailty and mirror our own weaknesses and failings.

After all, how many of us can relate to Zechariah’s story, and have failed to believe the promises of God?

Questions

- Are there areas in your life where you have yet to see your prayers answered? Are you still hopeful and believing, or have doubts started creeping in? How can we overcome our unbelief?
- Humanly speaking, Zechariah, and Elizabeth’s circumstances were impossible, and yet God answered their prayers. If you feel comfortable, share with your group the impossibilities you find yourself facing today. What areas are you believing for God to show up and turn impossible to possible?

A Different Response

³⁴“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

³⁵The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷For no word from God will ever fail.”

³⁸“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

Luke 1:34-38 (NIV)

Just a few verses later, we read of an ordinary, young girl Mary and her personal encounter and her response to God's promise.

As was Zechariah, Mary also was visited by the angel Gabriel and promised a son, but unlike Zechariah, she believed. While Zechariah showed disbelief and wondered if the miracle could happen, Mary wondered how it would happen. “..’*how will this be..*’ “ (Luke 1:34).

Both these stories teach us that when God makes a promise, He will do it. If He speaks to us, what He said will come to pass, and it is better for us if we believe it. Are we prepared to learn from Mary's example and take God at His word?

Questions

- Zechariah and Mary responded in different ways to the angel's message. Which response is closest to the way you respond to God's promise?
- What can we learn from their reactions?

Pray

Take some time in prayer and pray for one another for courage and renewed hope. Dedicate some time to pray for those among you who may need to start dreaming again, who need to dust off some of the promises God has spoken over their lives but have not yet come to pass. Pray and have faith to believe again.

Go deeper

What is in a name? Read in Robert's book the p.38 – 41

Can our names describe our destiny? Throughout the Bible, names are given or changed. For instance, Abraham (Genesis 17:5), or Peter (John 1:42). Often names have prophetic significance. Let's have a look at what the names mean in our story.

Zechariah means "God remembered", Elizabeth means "the oath of God", John means "the favour or grace of God". As so often, this little family unit's story reflects and points to God's bigger story for all humankind. God did not only bless this family, but their story foreshadowed the salvation that we can all receive in Jesus Christ.

- God remembers His covenant (see Hebrews 12:22-24)
- God swears an oath to bless us (see Hebrews 6:13-20)
- God makes grace and favour available for each one of us (see Hebrews 4:14-16)



Jesus and...

Study Guide Part 3 –

From Doubting to Confessing

Zechariah was unable to speak throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy. It wasn't until it came to naming the child, that finally Zechariah's tongue was loosened, and he was able to speak again. The moment Zechariah confirmed what Elizabeth said the child's name was to be, Zechariah's mouth was opened, and what was his first response? He began to praise God.

⁶⁷His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—⁷²to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Luke 1:67-75 (NIV)

Zechariah is confessing three truths about God and His people:

- God remembered His covenant to save His people.
- God swore an oath to bless them.
- God showed grace to rescue them.

From our previous study, do you remember what the names of this little family unit mean?

- Zechariah means: 'The Lord remembers'
- Elizabeth means: 'the oath of God'
- John means: 'the favour or grace of God'

Questions

- Are there areas in your life where you have yet to see your prayers answered? Are you still hopeful and believing, or have doubts started creeping in? How can we overcome our unbelief?
- Humanly speaking, Zechariah, and Elizabeth's circumstances were impossible, and yet God answered their prayers. If you feel comfortable, share with your group the impossibilities you find yourself facing today. What areas are you believing for God to show up and turn impossible to possible?

From confessing God's truths to prophesying

In the following verses Zechariah prophesied over his son.

⁷⁶And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

⁸⁰And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Luke 1:76-80 (NIV)

'...and you, my child..' how powerful these first few words. What was not, what was impossible, Zechariah was now holding and witnessing firsthand how good and mighty and faithful God was. Zechariah then spoke and prophesied over his son, speaking faith and God's promises over his child's life.

As we all know, John went on to become a great prophet, known as John the Baptist, the one Isaiah prophesied concerning (Isaiah 40:3) – who was to come to prepare the way for Jesus Christ.

The story of this little family unit can give hope for all our families. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in immensely difficult times. The people of God were under oppression, yet this family remained close to God. God's Word and Spirit sustained them. When you and your family or loved ones are going through difficult times and face battles, uncertainties, threats, and impossibilities, do what Zechariah did: confess the promises of God over yourself, over your family, over your circumstances.

Be encouraged today with these two truths:

- As God saw Zechariah and Elizabeth's struggle and heartbreak, He sees yours.
- As God answered Zechariah's prayers, He will answer yours.

God delights in doing the impossible. What God did for them, He can do for you too.

Questions

- Zechariah's prophecy (Luke 1:68-79) fulfilled several Old Testament prophetic promises (Genesis 22:16-18, Isaiah 9:2, Jeremiah 23:5, Micah 7:20, Malachi 3:1, Malachi 4:2). How do you think the people who heard it might have responded?
- Zechariah and Elizabeth discovered that God's timing was perfect and yet different to theirs. What have you learned about God's timing and what does submission to God's timing look like in your life?
- What has been your main takeaway from this month's studies? What lessons have you learned that you can apply to your life today?

A final advice – Jesus and us

What final advice would Zechariah and Elizabeth give us today? Most likely what they would tell us is that God has His own time frame, and that we should and can trust Him. After many years of seemingly unanswered prayers, they finally received their miracle. Their son John arrived just at the right time.

When we read about their story, maybe some of us can relate and see ourselves in it, with our own doubts and dreams, our own faith, and our own flaws. If there is one thing that Zechariah and Elizabeth would tell us today, it could be this:

- Learn to trust God
- Praise God
- Prophecy over your promises

The story of Zechariah teaches us that God uses the most unlikely of people, and that He has good news for each one of us. And this good news extends to our whole family and beyond what we could ever ask or imagine.

Pray

Take a moment to praise Him. Pray together to learn to trust Jesus and His plans for our lives, and the part we play within the larger family narrative.