

- ***READ Matthew 1:18-21*** As I read through our daily Bible reading over the past couple of weeks, I was struck by the story of John and Jesus's conceptions and births. Being as someone who has gone through what Zacharias, Elizabeth, Joseph, and Mary in becoming pregnant and have a child, I was struck by their different reactions to what was taking place. I'm sure the Siedenstrangs, McDonalds, and Katie can attest these same thoughts...but we were all expecting to have babies at some point back in 2016. We were all planning on bringing children into the world and going through that whole process for the first time, and yet we were all still a bit freaked out when it became a reality! That's just kind of how this whole first time parent thing goes.
 - But then I think about the uncertain circumstances that Zacharias, Elizabeth, Joseph, and Mary found themselves in, and I was intrigued by their reactions to their own realities. Zacharias and Elizabeth were both well beyond child bearing years and on top of that...Elizabeth was barren! **(Luke 1:7)** What must have been going through their minds when Elizabeth finally found herself to be with child? Joseph and Mary were legally married under Jewish law and tradition, yet they had not yet come together. What must have been going through Joseph's mind when his supposedly virgin wife finds herself pregnant? What must have been going through Mary's head when she realizes she is pregnant without ever knowing a man?
 - These are questions that I pondered as I did my Daily Bible reading, and what I realized I was seeing was different reactions of faith during times of great uncertainty. Because of the differing viewpoints of the synoptic Gospels, we are able to gain a clearer view of what was going on within the lives and minds of these people, and I think there are some great lessons and realizations to be considered from their reactions. I know I was a bit unsure knowing that I was about to be responsible for the life of a child, yet I had expected that to be the case. I couldn't imagine being in the shoes of these people as the most unexpected was taking place in their lives. Let's take a few minutes to consider those lessons and realizations in our time of study together this evening.
- I. **Zacharias: Even people of great faith can become afraid and doubt during times of great uncertainty.**
- A. Zacharias was a very godly man, yet he was paralyzed with fear and doubt during his uncertain circumstances.
1. Both Zacharias and Elizabeth are recorded as having been righteous people. Luke says they walked, *"blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord."* **(Luke 1:6)** On top of that, Zacharias was actually a priest! He was a spiritual leader of the people. He was someone who possessed a great faith, yet we see him doubting and being fearful once the angel Gabriel appeared to deliver the news of John's impending conception. **(Luke 1:8-17)**
 2. Zacharias hears what is being told to him, but he isn't convinced that these things could actually be taking place. *"How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."* **(Luke 1:18)** Logically none of this was making sense and Zacharias continues to seem gripped by his fear to this uncertainty.
 3. Gabriel responds harshly with Zacharias because of his doubt, and he strikes Zacharias mute because he had not believed the words that had been spoken to him. **(Luke 1:19,20)** Zacharias was unable to speak to anyone with his mouth upon leaving the temple, and he didn't regain his voice until the day John was born. **(Luke 1:64)**
- B. **When we face times of uncertainty, we must guard against being paralyzed by doubt and fear.**
1. Zacharias was a strong man of faith! He was godly in his character and service to the Lord, and yet he himself was still gripped with fear and doubt. If it can happen to a man like Zacharias, then we must sure guard against such things ourselves. I look to **Luke 1:64** and my heart hurts for Zacharias because he robbed himself of the ability truly express his joy and excitement through his doubting of what Gabriel had told him. The same thing can happen to us.

2. Satan loves to use times of doubt, fear, and uncertainty against us. He loves to plant those seeds within our minds because he knows that they can cause us to be paralyzed to where we can't and don't do anything. Instead of reacting to the situation in strong faith, we find ourselves frozen in fear and doubt. There are few things that Satan loves more than the disciple that is gripped and frozen in fear and doubt. That is a disciple that will begin to question God, His love for us, or even His existence at all! It is a place of great danger.
3. We must stand strong in times of uncertainty and lean all the more on God when things seem uncertain and our futures are unclear. We must learn and grow to have the mentality of the song we sing, *"All The Way My Savior Leads Me."* *"What have I to ask beside? Can I doubt His tender mercy, who through life has been my Guide? Heavenly peace, divinest comfort, here by faith in Him to dwell! For I know whatever before me, Jesus doeth all things well; For I know, whatever befall me, Jesus doeth all things well."* When times are uncertain, we cannot freeze in fear, but we must lean upon our God and remember the power He possesses and that He indeed does do all things well. We cannot rob ourselves of the joy that comes through the blessings of God, even in times of uncertainty.

II. Elizabeth: Times of uncertainty are opportunities for us to praise God for His goodness towards us.

A. Elizabeth took her uncertain situation and praised God for His favor upon her.

1. Elizabeth finds herself in quite an awkward situation in **Luke 1:24,25**. She becomes pregnant in her old age after being barren all of her life, and then it is at this point that her husband decides he can't speak. Her head must have been constantly filled with uncertainty, and this is evidenced by her decision to hide herself for five months before going back out in public to where others could see her as being pregnant.
2. On one hand there are those who have looked down upon her because she was unable to conceive. In this society, it was seen as great dishonor to not be able to bear children to a husband. This was something she had dealt with all of her life. But now as a woman advanced in age and pregnant, people would still look upon her as being unfit to not care for a child in her advanced years. Yet, her attitude was one of gratitude and praise towards God. *"This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men."* (**Luke 1:25**) Some might have looked down upon her, but she wasn't going to allow them or these uncertain times to cause her to not find opportunity to praise and honor God.

B. We, like Elizabeth, can choose to be people who find the goodness of God in all circumstances, even times of great uncertainty.

1. In **I Thessalonians 5:16-18**, Paul writes, *"Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* When Paul says to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, and to in everything give thanks...what times in our lives are we allowed to not do such things? I think always, without ceasing, and in everything are all-inclusive terms that show us the need to find the good in everything we might experience.
2. However, this is much easier said than done. When we find ourselves in the middle of uncertain times it can be easy to not be able to see the goodness of God, yet the ability to go to Him in prayer and cast all of our cares upon Him because He cares for us (**I Peter 5:7**) is a blessing in and of itself. To know that God will carry us through whatever the uncertain time might bring is a comfort and peace that those who don't have God will never know.
3. Elizabeth might have been looked down upon by others for much of her life, yet she knew that God was looking down upon her with love and mercy even though her circumstances might have been very much less than ideal. We must give effort to see the same when we find ourselves in uncertain times.

III. Joseph: We must not allow uncertainty to cause us to not show love and mercy towards others.

- A. Joseph didn't allowed possible betrayal to cause him to anything less than love towards Mary.
1. Though not officially husband and wife, Joseph and Mary were essentially considered husband and wife under Mosaic law. This meant that any sort of unfaithfulness was on nearly equal terms with adultery in the actual marriage covenant. So for Mary to become pregnant without her and Joseph ever coming together would give him grounds to put her away.
 2. However, Matthew records that Joseph didn't respond to Mary's assumed infidelity with resentment and anger, but he, *"being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to put her away secretly."* (Matthew 1:19) Even though Joseph was possibly finding himself in the middle of a great scandal, he wasn't looking to take anyone down in the process. Instead, he sought to extend grace to someone that he obviously loved very much, and that example of grace and mercy extended is something we can learn a great deal from.
- B. Even in times of great uncertainty, we must remember the love and patience we are to have with others who we might feel have done us wrong.
1. In uncertain times, it can be easy for us to allow our emotions to cause us to treat others poorly, especially if we think they are a cause of our current issues. It can be very easy for us to lash out hatefully and mistreat those who have possibly caused us harm. It can be easy to even find satisfaction in "giving them what they deserve."
 2. Yet, this isn't the mindset that Joseph had. He was a righteous and godly man, and he didn't want to cause any unnecessary pain and difficulty for Mary. He wanted to show her love and mercy. The same love and mercy was shown by his Son on the cross. *"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."* (Luke 23:34) That same love is expected of us even when others might have done us wrong and put us in a tough situation. *"Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,'" says the Lord.*" (Romans 12:19) Joseph was facing the uncertainty of betrayal, yet that did not stop him from loving his neighbor as himself and showing her grace and mercy, and we would do well to do the same if we find ourselves in the same circumstances.

IV. Mary: A strong faith takes what is given and trusts that God will see us through the uncertain times.

- A. Mary, having found favor with God, trusted in Him as she endured much uncertainty in her miraculous pregnancy.
1. Not much is said about Mary prior to the beginning of the Gospel accounts, but it is revealed by Gabriel that she had *"found favor with God."* (Luke 1:30) Upon Gabriel's appearing to her, she is perplexed by his greeting of calling her *"favored one"* and she pondered within herself what this could mean. She was quite confused as to how she could become pregnant while still being a virgin, yet Gabriel tells her of the work of the Holy Spirit and reminds her that nothing is impossible with God. (Luke 1:34-37)
 2. Mary considers what has been said to her and she fully submits to what is being done. Without questioning, she believes and gets on board with the plan. (Luke 1:38) We then see her going to visit her cousin Elizabeth, and while with her she takes time to praise God for the great work that was being done in her life even though it had left her in a place of uncertainty. (Luke 1:46-55) Her reaction easily shows us how it was that Mary had found favor in the sight of God.
- B. We would do well to imitate the faith of Mary and be prepared to trust in God regardless of the uncertain circumstances we might find ourselves in.
1. It can be a great temptation to seek to find all of the answers to our problems within ourselves. Yet, Mary's example shows the benefit of simply allowing ourselves to be used by the Lord in the best way He sees fit. Mary wasn't going to be anything more than just the Lord's bondservant. She was going to rely upon Him for guidance to the completion of His will.

2. Mary was living out the words of Solomon from **Proverbs 3:5,6**, *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight."* Mary was willing to be a bonds slave to the word of the Lord, and in Him she put her full faith and trusts. This in and of itself can give us uncertainty at times, but even in the uncertainty we can be certain that our Lord will be with us all the way. No matter the trial or obstacle, we serve a great God who will be with us and strengthen us to overcome to His glory and praise. Mary was certain of this fact, and we can be certain, as well.

In just a short period of time the lives of these four individuals was turned upside down. Zacharias and Elizabeth went from being childless and passed the point of changing that to being with child in their advanced age. Joseph and Mary had their whole lives ahead of them with a wedding in the near future, but that was completely altered by the will of God at work in their lives. Zacharias didn't handle the uncertainty as well as the rest, but with all of them great lessons can be learned. May the greatest lesson be to simply trust in the Lord and know that He is God and that He will always be exalted throughout the earth. **(Psalm 46)** May God be praised through our faith in our lives, even in those times of great uncertainty.

PRAYER *Our loving Father...we are so thankful that in times of uncertainty we can be certain of Your never ending love and care for us. When we are tossed about by the storms of life, we know that You are our anchor keeping us secure. When doubts and fears surround us, we are thankful that You are our refuge and strength. May we always remain faithful to You, and may we always trusts in Your love, grace, and mercy upon us. Bless us as we go throughout this week, may we lean upon You for strength, and may You be praised in our victories over the evil of this world. We love you so very much, and it is in Jesus's name we pray these things...amen.*