

Doubt and Discipleship

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 December 2020

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] As we close out these final weeks of the year 2020, I've heard from many people who are struggling in their faith.

They're struggling with enormous levels of doubt, some more than at any point previously in their life or in their faith. As I look at our church, in response to the COVID pandemic, out of a desire to prioritize the safety and the love of our neighbors, we made the difficult decision as a church to go without meeting in person for worship, and we've been doing that for nine months.

And even as we plan to start regathering in person very soon from now, this has taken its toll. It's taken a spiritual toll. It's taken a psychological toll. It's taken an emotional toll.

And this pandemic at this point feels interminable. And when you add to that the fact that injustice and racial divisions seem irreparable, when politically our society feels irreconcilable, I think naturally many of us are asking, where is God in all of this?

When will God powerfully intervene? When will God bring these things to an end? When will we see evidence of God's healing power in the world? And I think that this has caused a lot of doubt to rise up in people's hearts as they question the place of God and the power of God in all of this.

[1 : 3 4] And that's why I want to look together at this wonderful passage, this Advent passage in Luke chapter 1. We'll be looking at verses 18 through 38. And what we're going to see here is a contrast between two people who are greeted by an angel and given news.

And these people respond in different ways. And in this contrast, we see something about doubt. We see something about the role of doubt in the life of the disciple, the life of those who desire to follow Jesus.

And so I think this passage has a lot of comfort and guidance to offer those of us who are doubters, even as we seek to follow Jesus in faith. So we're going to look at what this says, and then we're going to look at three implications for doubt and our discipleship.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for the Advent season, and we thank you that there is a place given to us in the church calendar when we might focus on the challenges of waiting and the challenges of uncertainty and unfulfilled longing and unanswered questions.

But as we turn our attention to your word, I pray that you would speak to us in those deep places in our hearts where we need reassurance that you are our God, that you are good, that you're powerful, and that you love us.

[2 : 5 2] And so I pray that this would happen for our good and your glory, in your Son's name. Amen. So first of all, just a few minutes to get a sense of what this passage is saying.

There is a contrast, as I said before, between Zechariah and Mary, and I think that Luke intentionally places these accounts together to draw out the similarities and the differences.

There are a number of striking similarities between these two accounts. Both people are visited by the angel Gabriel. We see that in verse 19 and then again in verses 26 and 27.

Both of them are given a promise, and a very specific promise, a promise that they will miraculously conceive and give birth to a son.

And both are equally unlikely to be able to have children. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are old, and we are told that their past childbearing years and that Elizabeth is barren.

[3 : 52] And Mary is almost too young to have a child. She's a virgin. She's single. She's not even married yet. And so both are sort of equally unlikely to be able to have a child.

And then both respond to the angel Gabriel in the same way. They both express doubt in response to the good news that is announced to them. They both ask, How?

We see that in verse 18 and again in verse 34. So a number of similarities. But then we see that they receive different responses from the angel Gabriel in response to the doubt that they express.

Zechariah has his voice taken away. Gabriel strikes him mute, dumb. And this is clearly done in response to Zechariah's questioning of Gabriel's news.

We see that in verses 19 and 20. Mary, by contrast, is met with a gracious response, an even loving response, a patient response. And Gabriel gives her more information.

[4 : 57] And we see that in verse 35. And so you read these two accounts side by side, and you have to ask, why the difference? It almost seems as though Gabriel was just in a bad mood when he was talking to Zechariah, and in a much better state of mind when he encountered Mary.

But what we actually see, if we look closely at the passage, is we see the truth about the difference between Zechariah's heart and Mary's heart. Verse 20 shows us the truth behind Zechariah's question.

It says, Zechariah did not believe God's word. So behind his question, there was a clear posture of unbelief. Whereas in verse 45, we see that Mary, by contrast, believed God's word.

So even as she's asking the question, she's coming from a posture and a place of belief. And we actually see that. It is something that is said by Elizabeth. And you can imagine Mary is at the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah.

And if you remember, Elizabeth has had her husband lose his ability to speak because of his unbelief. And so then Elizabeth says this. And you can imagine her sort of looking at Zechariah as she says to Mary, blessed is she who believed.

[6 : 14] Zechariah? Wouldn't that have been nice if you had had that response as well? And so we see that Mary believes God's word. And then it says that she was willing to obey. She responds with submission and obedience.

In verse 38, it says, and Mary said, behold, I am the servant of the Lord. That could also mean the slave. I'm the slave of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.

And that's a posture of total submission to the will of God. And then in response to this, they both receive a sort of poetic justice, if you will.

Zechariah, who does not believe God's word, has his own words taken away. And Mary, who believes God's word, goes on to utter some of the most powerful and beautiful words ever recorded.

The Magnificat, which is a song that she sings about her son Jesus and how he's going to completely transform and renew this world. So that's what's happening in this passage, the similarities and the differences.

[7 : 19] But what I want to do now is to draw out some of the implications, some of the encouragement that this offers to those of us who may be struggling in our faith right now. Those of us who face doubt.

And the thing about doubt is it is everywhere. If you're a believer, you will always doubt your beliefs. If you're an unbeliever, you will always doubt your unbelief. You'll wonder, maybe this is true.

And so this hopefully speaks to everybody in one way or another. But the first thing that we see in this passage is that doubt can either help or it can hinder belief.

A lot of times people think that doubt is the opposite of belief. Well, it depends on what kind of doubt you're talking about. Zechariah and Mary both express doubt, but not all doubt is the same.

Mary asks literally, how will this happen since I have not known my husband? And what we see here is an example of honest doubt. She's looking for more information.

[8 : 18] She knows that she's a virgin, that she has not been sexually intimate with her husband or anyone else. And so she simply wants to understand the angel better. How is this going to happen since I'm a virgin?

Zechariah, if you notice, asks a subtly different question. He doesn't ask, how will this happen? Give me more information. He asks, how do I know? How do I know that this is going to happen?

In other words, he's not looking for more information. In a way, he's saying, prove it. Now, I've been around a long time. I've never heard of anything like this. It doesn't align with what I believe is possible in the world.

How do I know? Prove it. And this is the difference. It feels like a subtle difference, but it's actually a massive difference. Honest doubt is intellectually humble.

It comes from a posture and a heart that is humble. You're starting with the assumption that you don't know everything. You're starting with the assumption that there are things out there, possibilities, realities, that may be outside of what you believe is possible.

[9 : 29] So you're genuinely open-minded. You genuinely want to learn more. And so this comes from a genuine desire to know and to understand and to trust God more.

Help me know more about what you're saying. So we see another wonderful example of this in the writing of Habakkuk in the Old Testament. Habakkuk is a very interesting and challenging but also encouraging book.

Because it opens with some very challenging questions about God. It opens with the kind of questions that a lot of people are afraid to ask if they're Christians. Habakkuk essentially says in chapter 1, God, you say that you're a good God, but it seems like you let evil happen all the time and you remain silent.

He says, God, you say that you care about justice, but we're surrounded by injustice every single day. He says, God, you say that you love us, but honestly, it feels a lot like you've abandoned us.

And he expresses these doubts. And if you were just to stay right there, you would think, has Habakkuk completely lost his faith? Has he completely walked away from God? But if you read on, you realize that even as Habakkuk asks these questions, he's coming from a place of honest doubt.

[10 : 50] And we know that because beginning in chapter 2, the next chapter, we see Habakkuk. He's gotten his questions out. He's gotten his frustration out. And then he is waiting with rapt attention to hear God's response.

And he is ready and waiting to respond when God speaks. And that's the posture of discipleship. And so Habakkuk is this wonderful example of honest doubt.

You can ask hard questions, but with a genuine desire to hear from the Lord and to understand better what is happening. Dishonest doubt is different. It's a different animal.

It is not intellectually humble. It's actually something that comes from the place of pride. Pride. It's dismissive. Dishonest doubt says, no way.

That's impossible. That's crazy. Dishonest doubt walks away without ever really seriously considering the claim that is being made. It also tends to be intellectually lazy because it's a way of avoiding having to do the very hard work of thinking.

[11 : 54] Thinking well, thinking consistently is very hard work. And a lot of people just don't want to put in the effort. So it's easier to dismiss something than it is to really think through what it means and the implications.

And you can usually tell within the first few minutes of a conversation with someone which kind of doubt they have. Honest doubters tend to ask a lot of questions.

They ask more questions and they genuinely want to hear your thoughts. And so they will ask questions and then they will wait to hear what you say. That's honest doubt. Right?

Dishonest doubters don't ask nearly as many questions. Instead, they tend to make assertions. And often those assertions sound a little more like talking points that they have borrowed or stolen from someone else than actual genuine thoughts that they have personally thought.

And the reason for that is often that's exactly what's happening. You're hearing talking points that are being parroted that have come from somewhere else. Again, it's a way of getting around, actually doing the work of thinking well.

[13 : 02] So for those of us who struggle with doubt, it's very important for us to identify what kind of doubt we have. And that comes by looking honestly at our own hearts.

Dishonest doubt rooted in pride is a barrier to belief. It's a barrier to belief. If you're someone who has never really taken seriously the claims of Christianity and you're coming from a posture that says, I think I already know most of what's important in the world.

And if something doesn't align with my sense of what is possible, it must not be true. If that's the posture that you're coming from, that's going to be a barrier to belief. It's going to be a barrier to a lot of different kinds of learning.

Honest doubt, by contrast, comes from a place of humility. It's true open-mindedness. It's a willingness to admit that there may be things out there, realities that you're not yet aware of.

Things that may be true even if you haven't experienced them yet in your life. And honest doubt, this kind of openness, desire to learn, humility, that is integral for spiritual maturity.

[14 : 09] Knowing how to incorporate that doubt into your life of discipleship is integral. And we're going to talk about that a little bit more in a few minutes. But this is the first thing. Not all doubt is the same.

You can either have a kind of doubt that hinders your belief or you can have a kind of doubt that helps your belief, that helps your maturity. The second thing that we see in this passage is that doubt can actually be evidence of spiritual life.

Doubt can actually be evidence of spiritual vitality. Mary and Elizabeth, if you look at them, Mary and Elizabeth are simply two examples of a much longer list of women that we see all throughout Scripture who seem, at the outset, incapable of bearing children, who nevertheless have children because of God's divine intervention.

And so we're compelled to ask, as we read this passage, why is this theme so central throughout the story of Scripture? Why does God seem to want to find barren women or women who should not be able to have children and to bless them with children?

Why would that matter to God? Well, in the ancient world, being able to have children was extremely important. It was, for many women, the highest honor. It was the greatest thing they could achieve.

[15 : 30] And so for that reason alone, it matters quite a bit. That's why Elizabeth says at one point, God has taken away my reproach, the shame that she felt at her inability to conceive and bear children.

But there's a lot more going on here than that. Barrenness is actually a metaphor that God uses to teach us something important. Something important about us and something important about Him.

Physical infertility is heartbreaking. And I want to be very clear that I in no way want to minimize or disregard the pain that that causes.

It's heartbreaking. It's a part of what it means to live in a broken world. And it can be devastating for people who truly desire to have children. But what the Bible says is that we actually have a much deeper problem.

Something that you might consider a kind of spiritual infertility. A spiritual barrenness. One of the consequences of sin and our broken relationship with God is that we are spiritually dead, so to speak.

[16 : 36] We're cut off. We're not able to connect with the one who made us, who is the source of all life. So as Paul says in Romans chapter 1, our hearts are actually darkened.

Our thinking has become futile. Which means we cannot reason our way to God. We can't reach Him in our own. The futility means and the darkness means that we may have a longing, but we can't get there on our own.

We can't wake ourselves up. We can't bring ourselves spiritually alive by sheer force of will or devotion. So just as barren women in Scripture need God to miraculously give them a child, all of us who are spiritually barren need God to miraculously create life within us.

And this is the image that God is giving us. You're spiritually barren and you need God, you need me, to create life where life should not be possible in your heart.

All right, so this is why it's so crucial for us to understand what this passage does and does not say about Mary. For those of you with a Catholic background, and we have a number of you who are part of our church community, for those with a Catholic background, you all know the phrase from the Hail Mary prayer that says, Hail Mary, full of grace.

[17 : 59] Now this implies that there is something about Mary. It implies that Mary must have been extra worthy, that she must have stood out in some way, that she must be full of grace, and therefore God saw that and deemed her worthy of this very special blessing that he was going to give her.

And you know, that assumption lines up with many, if not all, other religions that say that blessing is somehow tied to merit. You know, the idea that good people get blessed because they're good.

If you want to be blessed, then live a good life. And that bad people don't get blessed because they're bad. And in some cases, they get punished because they're bad. That also lines up, by the way, with the kind of cultural American dream.

The idea that with enough hard work, you can prosper. It's the same idea. But this is not actually how we should translate the Greek here. The word that we see here that is often translated as full of grace is keheritomenai.

And keheritomenai is a different Greek phrase. Keheritomenai actually means one to whom grace has been given. Right? One to whom grace has been given.

[19 : 15] It's receptive. It's somebody who has received grace that was given to them. The phrase full of grace actually is a different Greek phrase. It's the phrase in Greek, pleris keratos.

And pleris keratos shows up in places like John 1, verse 14. And it's talking about Jesus. Jesus who is full of grace and truth.

Right? So Luke's point here is not that there is something about Mary. It's not to say that there's something unique and special about Mary. That she's extra good or extra worthy. I actually think his point is exactly the opposite.

And the reason I think that is because by every first century standard, Zechariah should have been the one to receive this special blessing.

Zechariah was a man which was considered better in the ancient world. He was a priest chosen by lot for the high honor of serving in the temple. To be chosen by lot for your division to serve twice a year and for you to be the one from your division chosen to go and serve in the temple was a great honor.

[20 : 22] He had been chosen for that. So obviously God must like him. Right? That's what people would have thought. He's also described along with Elizabeth as being righteous and blameless. They were fastidious keepers of the law.

He and his wife had also been praying for a child for however long we don't know but we sense that it's been for a long time. And probably like Simeon and Anna they were praying for the consolation of Israel.

So all of these things point to the fact that if God is going to find somebody who is extra worthy to bless, it should be Zechariah. Mary is an obscure young woman, an early teenager.

We know almost nothing about her but she's probably not been praying for a child because she's not even married yet. God bestows this special grace on Mary not because she is extra worthy or full of some unique kind of grace but because he is the kind of God who delights in giving his grace and blessing to people who seem least worthy to receive it.

That's the point that this is making here. God delights in giving grace to people who seem least worthy of it. In fact, the only people who are unable to receive God's grace are the people who do believe that they are worthy of it.

[21 : 46] The people who say I should get that. I should be entitled to that. That's the attitude that prevents you from being able to receive it. And you know, this is extremely good news for those of us who are doubters.

Faith is not a way to earn God's blessing. Faith is evidence that God has already blessed you. It's evidence that God has already blessed you.

If you struggle with doubt, it probably means that God has bestowed his grace on you. It probably means that God has spiritually awakened you.

If this is something that you struggle with and that you wrestle with, something that troubles you, it probably means that the Holy Spirit of God is at work in you. Right? The fact that you even care is evidence of that.

Spiritually barren people don't struggle with doubt because they're indifferent. They're apathetic. They don't care. Their hearts are still darkened and their thinking is still futile.

[22 : 50] So this is the second thing I want us to see about doubt. Doubt can actually be evidence of spiritual life. Evidence that God is at work in you, bringing you alive.

The third thing, the final thing that we see in this passage, is that doubt does not preclude discipleship. A lot of people say, well, I'm so filled with doubt and I'm just not really sure what I believe.

And therefore, their life sort of reflects that lack of direction or focus. And what we see very clearly here is that doubt does not preclude discipleship. Mary clearly has some doubt.

You know, it's worth noting that she doesn't immediately respond with joy and happiness and clapping her hands and dancing when Gabriel shows up and gives her the news. She has doubt.

She has uncertainty. She even has some fear and trepidation. She's greatly troubled and somewhat disturbed by this encounter. And yet there is no clearer example in Scripture of what it means to be a disciple.

[23 : 49] Right? Mary shows us the two essential pieces of discipleship in her response. She believes and trusts God's Word. And she responds with submission and obedience.

Verse 38, And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. And, you know, all through Scripture we see examples from Abraham to Mary to Thomas.

People who voiced their doubts and questions to God. People who even objected to what they were being called to do. And yet at the same time they trusted God and they obeyed Him.

They were able to do both. Express their doubts and yet continue trusting and obeying God even in the midst of their doubts. And, you know, you see this all the time with parents and children.

You think about your own parents or if you have children you think about your children. You know, none of my kids are old enough to really understand why I don't let them play on the roof of our house.

[24 : 52] Right? They're not old enough to understand why they need to go to the dentist even though it's a miserable experience. They don't understand why they need to get immunization shots. They don't understand why it's important for them to eat fruit and vegetables instead of sugar all the time.

They don't understand why I would want to limit their screen time. They don't understand things like this. But what they do know is that I'm their dad and I love them and I want the best for them.

And so the important thing for them is not that they fully understand all of my reasons and motives. I wouldn't be able to explain many of those things, especially to our three-year-old. The important thing is that even if they don't understand and even if they're filled with doubt about what I'm asking them to do, that they still obey.

Right? That they obey not because they understand but because they trust me. They trust the fact that I love them. And they trust the fact that I want the best for them. So they can disagree. They can ask why. They can complain.

But the funny thing is even if they disagree and complain and have all of their doubts, if they obey me over time, even if they don't understand my motives, it benefits them.

[25 : 59] Right? That act of obedience to their mom and their dad, even if they don't agree or understand, still benefits them. They grow. They mature. They're healthier as a result.

And the same is true in our relationship with God. Right? We don't understand God's motives. We don't understand many of the things that God calls us to do or the things that God calls us away from.

But the important thing is not always that we understand but that because we trust that he's our loving father, because we trust that he loves us, because we trust that he knows what's best for us, that we obey.

And even if we disagree, even if we doubt, in that act of obedience, we grow. We grow spiritually. We grow more mature. We flourish as a result.

Now, you may hear this and you say, well, you know, it's one thing to hear the audible voice of God. And if a glowing angel appeared in my bedroom and told me something, I would be much more likely to believe it.

[26 : 57] But how do I know that I can trust the scriptures in the same way? And, you know, the fact of the matter is there is no one who is more emphatic about the trustworthiness or the authority of scripture than Jesus Christ himself.

When it comes to the written word of God, there is no one with a higher doctrine of scripture than Jesus Christ himself. Jesus saw it clearly as God's word written.

He quotes scripture to explain virtually every aspect of his ministry. He makes it very clear to the Pharisees and the scribes and the teachers of the law that their view of scripture is intimately connected to their view of him.

All right, if they fail to recognize what is being said in scripture, then they will fail to recognize him. When he desires to reveal himself after his resurrection to a couple of disciples on the road, he opens the scriptures in order to do it, which is teaching us something about the ability of scripture to reveal Christ to God's people.

And Jesus made it clear that he lived his entire life not to subvert or overthrow or replace the scripture, but rather to fulfill it. In every way he could, he tied himself, his life, his ministry to the scriptures.

[28 : 15] And essentially the message is, if we believe in Jesus and if we trust Jesus, we need to believe what Jesus said about scripture. That our relationship with Jesus and our relationship with scripture should mirror one another.

They're sides of the same coin. That's what we see Jesus making clear again and again and again. So for all of us who struggle with doubt in one way or another, this is the final assurance that we have.

The doubt does not preclude discipleship. You can be a doubting disciple. And in fact, I think many, many people would say that it is almost impossible to be a discipleship for long without having to face and wrestle with a certain amount of doubt.

It's simply a part of belief. So if we draw all of this together, and we think about doubt, and we think about Advent, and we think about the hope of Christmas, I just want to summarize what we've said.

Doubt can either help or hinder belief. It depends on what kind of doubt you have. Is it honest doubt, which is essential for mature faith? Or is it dishonest doubt, which is dismissive and comes from a posture of pride?

[29 : 30] Number two, doubt can be evidence of spiritual life. If you struggle with doubt, if you wrestle with doubt, it's probably because the Spirit of God is at work in you. That's why you care. And number three, doubt does not preclude discipleship.

Like children, there will be many times when we don't understand God's reasons, but we still obey Him. Because like any good parent, He loves us. And He knows more than we do what we need.

Now there is no doubt that 2020 has been a clear reminder that we live in a barren world. That we live in a world that for all intents and purposes seems completely spiritually dead.

And we find ourselves standing in the place of Zechariah and Mary. Because Gabriel's good news was not just meant for them. As he makes clear, the kingdom of this child who is to be born will have no end.

This has implications for every single one of us, including you and I. So just as God was able to bring life out of a barren womb, the good news of the gospel says that God is now bringing life to a barren world through Jesus Christ.

[30 : 45] And so Christmas confronts us with a choice. When we hear these good tidings of great joy, will we respond like Zechariah? Or will we respond like Mary?

Will we dismiss it out of our pride and our cynicism? Or will we have the courage to respond in faith? Will we take God at His word? To believe that there is no situation beyond hope.

To believe that there is no evil that will not be undone. To believe that there is no death that will not one day give way to life. Because we're dealing with a God who is able to bring life out of places where life should not be possible.

And that is the heart of the gospel. And if ever you doubt that, you have only to look at the cross. I don't think we can talk about Christmas without talking about the cross.

The cross was the Roman symbol of hopelessness, pain, and death. And yet Jesus Christ transformed the hard wood of the cross from a barren symbol of death into a beautiful tree of life.

[32 : 04] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. Lord, and on this last Sunday of Advent, as we look forward to the announcement of the birth of Christ at Christmas, I pray that you would prepare our hearts.

I pray that whatever pride might prevent us from being truly open to the hope of Christmas, I pray that you would eradicate that pride. I pray for humble, open hearts that genuinely desire to know you more.

And then, Lord, I pray that you would meet that longing in us by pouring out your spirit on us. Lord, I pray this Christmas you would give each of us a powerful reminder of your presence.

I pray for people to be blessed with overwhelming, undeniable experiences of your joy and your love. I pray that our celebration would rise to new heights, Lord, in the coming weeks.

And I pray this, that we might be a people who, in the midst of darkness, praise you for your glory and the sake of your name. And we pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.