

The Certainty of the Gospel

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[0 : 00] Thank you both for reading so well. Thank you very much. Let's pray before we start. Heavenly Father we thank you that you are our great God, our holy God. We get to come before you today and read your amazing powerful words. Please will it be powerful in our lives now. Pray that in Jesus name. Amen.

Now before we start properly I want you to kind of imagine a number line from zero to ten in front of me like this. And it's a scale of how certain you are of something.

Now where would you put the sun rising tomorrow? I think this is an obvious one. Ten over here. What about me next year applying for Strictly Come Dancing, becoming a celebrity and winning the show?

Over here. Zero. Obviously. What about asking your child to tidy their room and they do it? We want to be here but I think he's about here isn't it? Here's a real question though. What about the good news of Jesus? How certain are you of that news?

You might be here kind of exploring the Christian faith today and you might not be able to put Jesus that high. That's okay for now and you're very, very welcome here. And actually you might be here sort of ten out of ten. I can put Jesus right over here.

[1 : 32] If you are, that's great. But if we are honest, most of us from time to time, we're a little bit lower than a ten. And that's a little bit unsettling, isn't it?

Because we know it matters to be certain about Jesus, especially in the nitty gritty of our lives.

Perhaps you're kind of in a shaky moment right now in your life.

You've lost your job. You just feel like you're just surviving. Or you've just heard some bad news from the doctor. Perhaps you're just wondering if trusting his ways are just, are they worth it?

Is this worth it? A sin you're fighting against. A thing the world says that you are missing out on.

What is it for you? It matters to be certain about Jesus.

Not only so that we can go all in for him, even in those shaky moments, but so that we don't miss out on the goodness of Jesus. Uncertainty.

[2 : 37] Uncertainty. Uncertainty. Well, it creates jaded, joyless Christians who find it hard to see how good their saviour really is.

How certain can we really be about Jesus? Well, this morning, we're diving into Luke's gospel, which is written to increase our certainty.

That's why it's here. Luke's gospel is an eyewitness account. That's what he says. It's historical. But it's with a very clear purpose. Have a look at verse 4 with me. If you put your Bible away, just get that back open now.

Luke chapter 1. Have a look at verse 4. Luke's gospel is written so that you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught.

Luke's aim, the Holy Spirit's aim today through this amazing true story is to encourage us and to help us. We do not need to doubt Jesus.

[3 : 43] We have everything we need for rock solid, confident faith in him. The news about him is certain enough to build our lives on. A good, good saviour.

So let's get into the story. It's a bit of a long reading, but I think it was worth having all that because it's a great story to get into. We start with Zachariah and his wife, Elizabeth, two faithful, believing Jews.

It says, blameless. They're righteous. Not perfect. But here's the issue. She's able. She's unable to conceive. She's too old.

That's the fact. But this very unique moment in Bible history, well, God has decided to answer their prayer for a child. Very unique moment. And God is going to leave them speechless in more ways

than one.

So Zachariah, who's a priest, he's just been chosen to serve in the temple. But while he's there in the temple, it's a once-in-a-lifetime moment, by the way, suddenly an angel appears right in front of him.

[4 : 47] And he's terrified. He's gripped with fear. That's what the passage says. I don't think we quite understand how scary angels are because we see them on Christmas cards in the media. But actually, in the Bible, they always manage to petrify.

But the angel Gabriel has some news that is going to calm his nerves. And this is what he says in paraphrase. Your prayers are answered, Zachariah. Yes. You're going to have a son called John. John, who's going to be great and he's going to bring so much joy. What a day Zachariah is having right now. It's once-in-a-lifetime to serve in the temple.

It's once-in-a-millennium moment to get spoken to by an angel. For Gabriel to tell him that his prayer is answered. He's going to have a child. But also a moment to see Bible prophecy fulfilled before his very eyes.

Read along with me verse 17, chapter 1. He's talking about the baby John. Verse 17. He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah. To turn the hearts of the parents to their children.

[5 : 57] And the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. To make readier people prepared for the Lord. Now we might not pick up on this. And that's okay. I'm not sure I did absolutely first time reading this. This is a Bible prophecy from the book of Malachi in the Old Testament.

It says, before God would come down from heaven. On an Elijah-like figure, who's a guy from the Old Testament. Well, he's going to prepare the way for this God.

And actually here it is on the screen. I'm going to show you now. From Malachi 4. See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children.

Recognize that language. And the hearts of their children to their parents. The angel says, look, John is that baby. Right there. John is that baby right there. Prophecy fulfilled.

Good news not to miss out on. But. But. A really disappointed response from Zechariah, actually.

[7 : 02] Verse 18. Let's read it together. How can I be sure of this? That's how it should be real, I think. How can I be sure of this? Really? Says Zechariah.

Yeah, right. Well, you know, actually when I first read this, I thought he might be kind of fair to question. And it kind of really is okay to ask questions.

You know, it's okay to doubt if you're truly seeking rest in Jesus. But Zechariah is not fairly asking a question here. Because of all people, he really should know better.

God's angel is delivering God's message to him at one of the most unique moments of his whole life. It's always been kind of manufactured by God to happen with the lots being cast.

And it's a prophecy he should have been expecting. He's a priest. He should know this stuff. How can I be sure of this? I need a bit more evidence, please.

[7 : 58] I think that's tragic. Zechariah doubts something true, but also something so good. So we know what happens next in the story.

It's quite funny, actually. Gabriel shuts him up. Well, maybe not that funny for him, but he makes him dumb until the baby is born. Nine months of charades for you. At this point, Luke skips ahead, actually.

Six months. Six months now to Elizabeth, his wife, where we see God's word actually fulfilled. He didn't need to doubt. She's six months pregnant with John.

But now the angel isn't going to appear to Zechariah this time. This is where we start the second reading. He swoops down to an unknown girl from an unknown town, the Virgin Mary.

Now, notice something. It's the same script. The same thing that happened to Zechariah happens to Mary. Again, she's terrified. There's way more parallels than this.

[9 : 03] And also, she gets some news to calm her nerves that sound quite similar. Have a look at verse 31. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and yours will call his name, not John, Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. That's right. Incredible. Even better than Zechariah's news.

But actually, again, we have some fulfilled prophecy. And we all know this one, the first one in Isaiah 7. That classic kind of Christmas verse that we all know. Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign.

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son. Now, Mary is that virgin, he's saying. And the baby is none other than the one two chapters on in Isaiah 9.

The mighty God there involved. The mighty God. But there's more. Verse 32. Have a look with that. Of me. Verse 32.

[10:08] The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will have no end. More Old Testament prophecy. Now, there's a lot here, but actually Luke's kind of purposefully kind of overloading us with all these references to kind of build a case.

So, it's a lot there, but he's doing it on purpose to make us feel, wow, there's loads. So, here it is on the screen. 2 Samuel 7. Really big verse. I will raise up your offspring to succeed you.

Your own flesh and blood. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father and he will be my son. The high point of the Old Testament. The expectation. Well, it's been fulfilled here.

The long expected. Forever king. Mighty God. God has come in Jesus. That's the point.

Same script. How does she respond, though? Maybe slightly different this time. Have a look at verse 34. But how will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin?

[11:14] Reading that, you can hear my tone. I'm trying to bring that out. Initially, it looks like Zachariah's doubt, but it is different. And Zachariah asked for more evidence. But Mary just wants an explanation.

She wants to know how this thing is going to work. It's quite different. Now, we all have questions like this from time to time, don't we? And it's okay to ask. We believe that maybe we just don't get it. We just don't get it. That's okay. So Gabriel explains, and it's extraordinary. 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. This is not just a baby from two people who can't have children. This is a supernatural birth through a virgin.

And she believes. May your word to me be fulfilled. Great story. So what are we to make of this story?

[12:19] I mean, we could merely see it as a nice, fuzzy Christmas story that makes it all feel nice in size. But that's not why the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write this in the first instance.

Remember, it's all about giving us certainty about the news of Jesus. Remember that. So with that in mind, how does this story help increase our certainty?

Well, two things today. And the first thing is that we help to see that it's historically robust. To be certain that it's true.

It's true. Here's where all those fulfilled prophecies that we kind of had thrown at us kind of come into play, come in handy. Actually, those prophecies, you know, they're not just there to merely show us that Jesus fulfilled them.

Don't get me wrong. It's amazing that Jesus fulfills a prophecy written centuries earlier. That's incredible. But it's showing us Jesus as the long expected one who's now arrived.

[13:34] Long expected. Now, what do I mean? What is the difference between those two things? Well, Jesus being long expected shows that he's not random.

And this is really good because if you show up randomly, it makes you way less credible. Now, let me explain.

Imagine this. If there wasn't any prophecies about Jesus and he wasn't long expected, but he was just kind of this random person that just turned up claiming to be a saviour.

Well, I think we'd have every reason to question him. You know, because saviours, they don't just appear out of the blue, do they? But Jesus isn't an unexpected bolt out of the blue.

His arrival is something that comes off the back of loads of build-up. Think about all those prophecies that we've seen today. There's loads of them. Malachi 4, 2 Samuel 7, Isaiah 7, Isaiah 9.

[14:34] They don't just predict a saviour. They create expectation for him. You see the difference there? So when Jesus arrives and he fulfills all these prophecies, it isn't a leap of blind faith to believe in him.

It's the rational response to the expectation that the Old Testament built for us. You know how the Old Testament is to Jesus? It's kind of like what a drum roll is to a crash cymbal.

You've got no reason to hear a crash cymbal randomly in life, have you? I don't expect just to hear random crash cymbals. Unless there's a drum roll before it.

You've got no reason to expect Jesus unless there's the Old Testament before him expecting him. He's a rational expectation after the Old Testament drum roll, you could say. There's loads of things we could say about evidence for the Christian faith.

[15:40] There's so much. But what we have here, I think, is quite an underappreciated one. It's a powerful apologetic for the Christian faith, actually. I'd even go as far to say that Luke's eyewitness account is really compelling and it's vital.

But it's actually kind of incomplete without that Old Testament backdrop. Together, they show that Jesus isn't a random addition to history.

He's the completion of all that it yearned for. He's the completion of the greatest story. History is his story.

History is his story. The Bible, from start to finish, is a Jesus story. He's expecting the Old Testament and he completes it in the New. The Old Testament is a puzzle with that glaringly final missing puzzle piece.

And when Jesus comes along, Jesus fits. The piece fits. And confidence to believe in him skyrockets, doesn't it? It's... You know, brothers and sisters, what we believe, it is amazing that it is true.

[16:59] That is actually amazing, isn't it? So many people believe things that are nice but aren't true. But we believe something that is true. Don't forget that. It's not myth. It's not wishful thinking. It's history.

It's true. It's real. You're trusting in Jesus. You are in step with reality. Reality. And what he says on those promises, they're not just nice words that Jesus says that don't amount to anything.

But promises that will become reality. You know, what is your favourite promise that the Bible holds out to you? What do you cling to through the ups and downs of life?

Well, Jesus isn't lying about those things. It's reality. You can build your life on him. We can be certain that the news about Jesus is true.

But is true enough? Is true enough?

[18:02] Up until this point, we've been talking about the kind of mental ascent. I believe this in my head. I've done my calculations. Jesus is real. But even though that's vital, necessary, it's not good enough.

Think about that scale from earlier. You could be a 10 on the certainty scale about Jesus, believing that he is real. But it doesn't mean for one second that you believe in Jesus.

It doesn't mean that you're satisfied in Jesus, that you love Jesus.

Now, mental certainty is crucial, but it's just half the picture. I've got a number of friends, actually, who are actually kind of sure that it's probably true. This stuff is probably true, they say.

But because it will mean going against their ways and following God's ways, putting Jesus above all else, they just can't bring themselves to love Jesus.

[19:16] If you don't see Jesus as good enough, well, you're never going to love him. You're never going to trust him. It's the same for us Christians, definitely.

In that call to follow Jesus with everything, we're not going to do it if we don't think it's good. And here, that's where we go next.

The news about Jesus is true, but it's also so, so good. Not to be missed out on. Not to be missed out on.

Luke invites us to believe with our heads, but also with our hearts. Now, how does he get us to do that? Well, we've talked about this comparison.

He gets us to compare two really similar events that are following the same script. And he's intentionally kind of put those two side by side. Two angelic appearances, two people who can't have children, people who will have a baby that will be great and will bring joy, two babies who will fulfil Old Testament prophecy.

[20:18] But all those similarities are there to make the differences shine through. Because although both John and Jesus are described as great, one is greater than the other.

Like how the trailer is to the movie, John the Baptist is to Jesus. John the Baptist prepares the way for the Lord.

Jesus is that Lord. People will rejoice over John's birth, but only because Jesus is the next one to come. John is that holy set-apart Nazarite.

Jesus is the holy, divine son of God in the flesh. And the worldwide king to put everything right. John just goes to show how good Jesus is.

So now that the spotlight's on Jesus, let's see why he's so good. Partly because he brings new life. Because he's bringing new life today.

[21 : 27] Let's have a look at these titles that Jesus gets given, kind of towards the end of the passage. I don't know if you saw them there. Son of God. You see that? Son of David.

I don't know about you, but I often skim over these titles, you know. We kind of think that we know what they mean. We miss their significance. Because they show us why Jesus is such good news. Son of God. Let's take that. Often it just means kind of God's king, and that's kind of partly the meaning here as well. But there's clearly a sort of divine God aspect to this.

Now who is the son prophesied to be? Who is the Lord John is preparing the way for? The mighty God.

Yahweh. Now don't forget this baby in the manger. Don't forget who he is. Don't forget the embryo in Mary's womb, who this is and what he will do for you.

[22 : 28] That embryo is the almighty creator God. And he humbled himself by coming to earth as a fetus. Taking on flesh to live a perfect life, to die on the cross, to take the punishment that sin deserves.

So that you could know him, if you trust him. And what does knowing him mean? And it means abundant new life forever.

It's exactly how Luke frames this, that Jesus is kind of bringing in a new creation. This is quite cool when I first saw this. It's amazing. Verse 34.

Have a look at that with me. Verse 34. It's echoing Genesis 1. Just like the spirit hovered over the waters, ready to create in Genesis 1, the spirit hovers over Mary, ready to bring in a new creation. He's not saying that Jesus is a creation. He's saying that that's what Jesus is bringing. New life. Jesus stepped into our disordered world, into our broken lives, and offers to restore the world and make us new.

[23 : 54] This little zygote, this little thing, is where the new creation first breaks in. Listen, we all want restoration.

We're all looking for a fresh start. We all need transformation. We're all broken people at the end of the day. We all want hope and eternal new creation life.

And in this baby, well, the news is that you get to participate in this new life, knowing the mighty God.

Such good news. You don't want to miss out on this. And lastly, what does it mean? Let's think about what it means for Jesus to be the son of David. Well, that's kind of a kingly title.

It means he's the king bringing in new life under his perfect rule. Here's a little quote, actually, from one of the writers of the Old Testament in 2 Samuel.

[24 : 59] And it's about what it feels like to be ruled by this king. It's what it feels like. It's not just head, it's heart. Let me read it. When one rules over people in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise, on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain.

What does that feel like to you? That's heart stuff, isn't it? That's not head, that's heart. A refreshing sunrise, warm rays on your face.

You can imagine that now. Wonderful imagery. It's trying to communicate life. New, abundant, joyous, eternal life in him.

This king is yours if you trusted in him. Most of us have. This king really does know what's best for you. He's full of justice and he rules well.

He cares for you. Unlike the kingdom of this world, his kingdom is about real justice and real kindness, not fake kindness. What a king to be ruled by.

[26 : 13] What a king to follow, love and obey. You don't want to miss out on knowing this mighty God, this life-bringing good, good saviour. We call the news about Jesus the gospel for a reason.

It's good news. It's so, so good. So as we take stock on this story, now we can kind of hone in on the clearest contrast between these two events of all.

Zachariah, Mary. Let's see it. Zachariah hears the true and good news, but he doubts. Mary hears the true and good news, but believes.

So the question for us is simple. Which response will you choose? Response we have to keep on choosing in the Christian life.

Now perhaps you're here looking into the claims of Christianity today. I want to encourage you not to pass on this amazing saviour in Mary's womb. He's God come to restore you, a king that is everything you need.

[27 : 29] But to most of us here, almost all of us, it's important to say that Zachariah is actually here to really help us and encourage us.

Because Zachariah isn't primarily the picture of an unbeliever. I think that's maybe how I might have kind of presented him almost. That's maybe wrong. He described, firstly, as a faithful, blameless believer in God.

He's not an unbeliever. But in this particular moment, he's just not certain. I think it's really hit home to me. He's actually, well, Zachariah's kind of a picture of me and a picture of you a lot of the time, from time to time.

Now we're faithful, but sometimes we don't nail our colours to the mast. Maybe it's when a friend or colleague or a mate of school asks us about our faith. We're believers, but sometimes avoid those costly steps of faith that might negatively impact our lives and our futures, you know, our savings, our bank accounts, our relationships, our time.

We trust God, but we might doubt sometimes if walking in his ways are good, especially when they're completely against the culture, when we just don't trust why that thing is we're being asked to do that thing, whatever that is.

[29 : 03] What Zachariah moments can you pinpoint in the last week? I can pinpoint a few. But here's the encouragement.

Luke is aiming his Gospels at Zacharias, like me, like you. And he says to you, I know that you're jaded by the bombardment of secular culture, that you're not always confident enough to go all in. I know that you have moments where you don't think you can build your life on this news, on the truth of the Gospel. I know that you forget just how good Jesus is. And not only are we forgiven and we have the Spirit, but he says, brother, sister, you don't need to doubt.

He doesn't say it's okay. He doesn't say it's fine or whatever. He says, you don't need to doubt. You don't need to hold back.

Jesus is true. And he's good. You wouldn't want to miss out on this Saviour for anything in the whole world. Let's pray together.

[30 : 20] Heavenly Father, we thank you for this amazing story which tells us about the birth of Jesus, the arrival of him. Thank you that we get to know this Jesus.

Thank you that he brings a new life. Thank you that he is true. The news about him is true. That we can trust him. Thank you that we can have certainty that he is so good for us, that his ways are so good for our lives.

We pray that in his name. Amen.