

Luke 1:5-38 - Grace To and Through the Overlooked wk 2 of Series (Good News of Great Joy for All People)

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

We began a sermon series last Sunday in the Gospel of Luke. Getting a chance to hear Luke talk to us about the purpose of writing his book, that we would have our doubts and our struggles brought to God and have them addressed by his word with truth about Jesus, who he is, what he did, how he turns our expectations and assumptions upside down and yet at the same time remains at the center always, always the focus of our attention and of what God is doing in our lives.

And that's true this week. Even before we get to the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, he's at the center. It's all about him. The whole point this morning as the angel Gabriel comes to two different people is that Jesus is no ordinary baby.

In fact, that in Jesus, God displays his redeeming grace and his rescuing power in a unique way. This will indeed be a unique child to be born.

The unique circumstances we'll read this morning surrounding his birth will highlight his unique identity and mission while at the same time they'll demonstrate the astonishing and unique power of God.

[1 : 38] For now, I'm just going to read the end of the passage we'll look at this morning. Beginning in verse 34 after Gabriel has delivered a shocking message to the Virgin Mary, you will bear the Son of God.

Hear God's word at Luke 1 in verse 34. And Mary said to the angel, how will this be since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Therefore, the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son.

And this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God. And Mary said, behold, I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. Pray with me. Father, thank you for your word.

[2 : 47] Thank you for this passage that reminds us very directly that nothing is impossible with God. And because of that, Father, we come to you this morning with things that may seem impossible to us.

And we ask that you would speak to us. That we would hear. That we would have not just ears to hear, but minds to understand and hearts to believe.

So, Father, would you do that? Would you even speak through me? Through someone who himself must believe again today? Father, use me and speak clearly through your spirit that we might be changed forever.

Do that because we desperately need you. We need you to speak to us. We need you to change us. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I mentioned we're going to look at two angelic visits this morning.

Luke sets them up as an interesting study in comparison and contrast. You'll see that as we read through them. You'll notice the similarities and differences.

[4 : 04] Let's look at the first one beginning in verse 5. Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, a priest and his wife of pure religious pedigree, have been faithfully following God for many years. All the way into their old age, right?

And all along as they've followed God, they've been doing so with a heavy burden. With unfulfilled longings. The desire of their hearts to have a child.

But Elizabeth is barren. We find out later on in verse 25 that this is not only a deep grief for them, but also a public shame.

The passage is clear that their situation is not, in fact, a divine punishment. But people in the community have taken it as such. As an indication of a lack of God's blessing towards them.

[5 : 26] A reproach. A black mark. A burden that they have now carried beyond their childbearing years. And as we keep reading, Zechariah goes into the temple of God at the peak of his religious service to burn the incense.

This would have been the only day of his life he got chosen for this special task. And in the middle of it, an angel shows up with a message for him. Verse 11.

There appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, do not be afraid, Zechariah.

For your prayer has been heard. And your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John. Imagine the emotion Zechariah is having.

He didn't see this coming and all of a sudden a son. A son. We've been waiting for this. But the angel continues. Verse 14.

[6 : 31] And you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink. And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb.

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah. To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children.

And the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. To make ready for the Lord a people prepared. Not just a son. Not just any son.

Now certainly Zechariah had prayed for a son. I suspect many times. But the prayer the angel says has been heard.

Is most likely his prayer for the redemption of God's people. That he would have just been praying before the altar of God. For God to break his silence. 400 years.

[7 : 29] And send the Messiah to rescue his people. And that indeed is what the angel is announcing. Zechariah's son John will prepare the way for God's gracious redemption.

It's happening. But Zechariah can't believe what he hears. Maybe you don't blame him. But he protests that they're too old.

And he asks for a sign. And he receives one. A gracious discipline. To help him trust God's word. He will be mute. Until the baby is born.

So this scene closes with Elizabeth rejoicing in God's grace to her. She says thus is the Lord done for me. In the days when he looked on me.

To take away my reproach among people. How incredible she says. God has heard the cry of our hearts. Our whole lives we have suffered waiting for a son.

[8 : 32] Our whole lives we have suffered waiting for God's redemption of his people. We've carried grief. We've carried shame.

We've felt forgotten. And now both these things are going to happen at the same time. Both the things we've been longing for and waiting for are coming.

And isn't this just like God? Who time and again uses childless couples. In the advancement of his kingdom. Just think back to many examples in the Old Testament.

You could start with Abraham and Sarah, right? Childless at the age of a hundred and then Isaac comes. You could think of Hannah and Elkanah who are blessed with Samuel later in life.

Think of widowed Ruth who not only receives a husband in Boaz. But then with him bearing children who are in the line of Jesus.

[9 : 35] God meets us in our pain and our disgrace to remind us that he's not forgotten us. And also to show his miraculous power that indeed nothing is impossible with God.

That's the message here. No barren womb prevents him from giving life and rescuing his people. He's intent on giving gifts that people have not earned.

He has a son coming for Zechariah and Elizabeth. And a savior coming for his people. Elizabeth realizes when she says this at the end of this scene.

I think she realizes in her suffering what our African American brothers and sisters have learned over the years in their suffering. As one of their sayings goes, God may not come when you want him.

But he's always on time. That's true, isn't it? It may not always be our time. It may not always be what we want. But it is right on time.

[10:45] Elizabeth helps us hear the message that the angel delivered to Zechariah. It's a message of grace. Of unmerited favor from God. That we'll hear repeatedly this morning.

God's message through Gabriel is this. Grace to you, Zechariah. Don't lose heart. Don't be afraid. Don't give up hope. My redeeming grace and rescuing power are coming to you. And through you to many others. That's what Zechariah hears.

But then the scene shifts from mighty Jerusalem to a tiny town called Nazareth. Of which it is said in these days, Can anything good come from Nazareth?

They didn't think so. But Gabriel visits there a young woman named Mary who's engaged to a man named Joseph. Yes, the Mary and Joseph you're familiar with. You can be quite confident as you begin to read the portion of God's word where Gabriel comes to Mary that Mary didn't have grand thoughts of herself before the angel came.

[12:02] Too young to be important. Women were not well respected in the culture of the day. And besides that, she's from Nazareth.

Low expectations. Let me explain it to you this way so you. Get a little bit of the feeling of how Mary might have felt. I was watching the Olympics this week and saw a swimming race where all the attention was focused in the middle of the pool on the American and Australian swimmers, the powerhouse favorites who were supposed to win the race, the top qualifiers.

Everybody was watching them. And down at the bottom in lane one, almost off of the screen on my TV, was a swimmer from Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan, the great swimming powerhouse with a grand total of zero swimming medals in the history of the country, I believe.

The commentators, of course, glossed right over him saying something like he had a personal best in the semis just to kind of get in the pool here, don't pay attention, watch the ones in the middle. And having been dismissed, with no one watching him, at the last second this guy creeps up, sticks out his hand, and touches first a gold medal for Kazakhstan.

[13:22] Kazakhstan. Nazareth. She never would have expected to be of great significance. But the angel comes and brings grace to Mary too.

Listen, verse 28. He came to her and said, Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Now, saying Mary was greatly troubled as Zechariah was has to be an understatement, doesn't it?

She's very young. Many think as young as 12 years old or perhaps her early teens at most. She lives in the middle of nowhere in a place full of nobodies and an angel shows up to talk to her.

Just being there would have been overwhelming. But what's the message? The message again to her is grace as it was to Zechariah. Favored one means recipient of grace from God.

[14:33] That's what the word is actually saying. That God's special blessing and God's presence, the Lord is with you, both are being promised to her. You have found favor with God is again saying God has graciously determined to bless you.

These words to Mary are often misunderstood, but the nature of the divine favor that's coming to her is emphasizing not her merit, but rather God's great generosity.

It's not so much Mary full of grace that attracts God, but God so full of grace that He pours out on Mary so that she is blessed.

First, God promises His grace to Mary. But then as if that weren't enough, it gets even more remarkable.

Verse 31, Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of His kingdom there will be no end.

[15 : 48] The grace God gives to you, Mary, is also going to be through you to many others. You're going to have a son.

But again, not just any son. The Son of God. His name, Jesus, tells you, Yahweh saves. And that's the plan here, right?

As we just read it. This is the Son of God, the promised Messiah, the one who's promised to reign over God's people forever. The one that they've been waiting for to sit on David's throne forever. He's going to be the hero. He's going to be the hope of the world. This is even bigger than a gold medal for Kazakhstan. This is the most important person in human history through all the Old Testament.

The one Mary and all her family and friends know is the hope of God's people. They've heard about Him. He's the one she's read about over and over in the prophets but never knew when to expect.

[16 : 53] The one of greatest significance will come through one of seeming insignificance. The Messiah seemed almost like a dream to Mary and now I will be His mother?

Mother? But Mary believes. She assumes it will happen but she does want to know how this is going to work out.

You know, I got a fiance after all. She wasn't hoping for a pregnancy. It's going to be complicated for sure and the angel explains in the words that we read earlier how it happens.

Just like this miraculous event taking place with your relative Elizabeth, the reason this can happen is that nothing will be impossible with God.

You need to know, Mary, that God is powerful enough to overcome your insignificance, your youthfulness, your station in life. He rescues His people because of His great power.

[17 : 52] And isn't this just like God? To condescend to Mary. Isaiah tells us that God dwells in high and lofty places.

Places like heaven. Places like the temple in Jerusalem and so on. But that He meets with the lowly.

that He meets with young Mary in Nazareth and gives her through Gabriel the message of grace. Grace to you, Mary.

Don't lose heart. Don't be afraid. Don't give up hope. My redeeming power, my redeeming grace, my rescuing power are coming to you and through you to many others.

Now part of the many others that God's promising His grace is coming to is all of Israel, His people. You've probably picked up on the similarities between the accounts of Gabriel's visits to Zechariah and to Mary and I've tried to highlight along the way some of the distinct differences too.

[19 : 06] Look at some of the differences this way. First of all, Zechariah's a man. He's male. Mary is female. Zechariah is old.

Mary is young. Zechariah has long been a faithful priest. Mary's merely a maidservant. Zechariah is there in the temple at Jerusalem and Mary is stuck in nowhere Nazareth.

Side note before we move on, which one of these two responds appropriately to the angel's message. It's not the one you might expect, is it?

And we're going to come back to that as we go through the Gospel of Luke because as I told you last week, one of the things Luke is going to show us over and over again is it's the insignificant outsiders who become honored insiders in God's kingdom.

This is how he works and this is one example of it here at the beginning. Zechariah's mute. Mary's commended and praised for her faith. But for now, notice that despite their different responses, grace comes to both of them, doesn't it?

[20 : 19] To the two extremes of the spectrum of God's people covering everyone in between, grace comes to them. To both of them who may have been feeling overlooked.

Imagine what God's people in general must have been feeling. Overlooked may have been putting it mildly. For 400 years, they haven't heard from a prophet.

Used to happen all the time. Where is God? Why is he silent? Has he forgotten about us? Certainly they wondered. We're back home finally, but with the Romans on the throne, not the Davidic king who's supposed to be reigning and ruling over us.

We've got all these promises from God, but fulfillment-wise, I'm not really seeing a lot of it turning out. Certainly God's slow at best.

God must have seemed very far away to them. Some, I'm sure, felt the grief and the disgrace that Zechariah and Elizabeth felt. Others, I'm sure, felt the insignificance, the smallness that Mary felt.

[21 : 34] But all of them would have been in the same place of needing to hear from God, of being desperate for him to act, to speak, to come and rescue.

And so these messages of grace are speaking to all God's people, to the old men as well as to the young girls, to the ones in the temple in Jerusalem, all the way over to the nobodies in Nazareth. It's finally happening. Someone named John is coming to turn many of us to the Lord our God, to make ready for him a people prepared for the coming of the Lord.

And then the Messiah himself is coming, the son of God, the Davidic king, the eternal ruler of God's people. God's fulfilling his promises. We can have hope again.

He's going to use the old as well as the young for his saving purposes. What about me? That means me. He'll use me. And so we hear the message of his grace.

[22 : 40] Grace to you, my beloved people. Don't lose heart. Don't be afraid. Don't give up hope. My redeeming grace, my rescuing power are coming to you and through you to many others.

And that's the message of grace that each of us needs to hear and trust this morning. In general, you see, it's not too hard for us to believe that nothing is impossible with God.

It sounds good. It feels good, we like to think, that his redeeming grace and rescuing power will come to and through the overlooked because we love a good underdog story, don't we?

I mean, that sounds great. Sure, that could happen. God could do it through Zechariah and Elizabeth. God could do it through Mary. He could use anybody. It's not so easy to believe when you are the one who's overlooked, is it?

When you're the one feeling the shame or the disgrace. When you're the one who feels insignificant and small.

[23 : 54] When you carry shame or you've experienced rejection or unfulfilled longings like Mary or Zechariah or Elizabeth, it's easier then to respond like Zechariah to the promise of God's grace.

Oh yeah, sure. But me? No. But us? No. We're too old. I've blown it too badly.

You don't understand. It's easier to feel that than it is to respond with faith like Mary. I think of just some of the conversations I've had recently and I realize that it's very hard for us to believe this message for ourselves.

There's the older couple with grown kids who are wayward and they worry. They followed God all their lives and they expected better but now it's embarrassing.

Perhaps others will think they weren't very good parents and could God still use even them to reach their kids? There's the elder who feels God has seemed distant lately and wonders if the exciting feeling of nearness to God that he loves to share with others will ever return.

[25 : 19] There's the young woman without children even though that's the desire of her heart and some days she feels marginalized some days she feels just painfully empty and like she can't share with someone she'd long to share with.

There's the pastor I don't talk to myself that often but when I do I try to tell you. The pastor's struggling some days to believe he's significant if the church is not making a big splash like the one across town.

Am I doing great things for the kingdom? Is God at work here too with ordinary, inadequate me?

There's the guy staring divorce in the face and maybe not for the first time and fearing the shame and disgrace that Elizabeth felt from the community and thinking he'll be sidelined in God's plan.

There's the high schooler who grew up in the church but now doesn't sense she has significance. Wonders about her place in God's kingdom. Where do high schoolers fit in?

It doesn't seem to be a place for her. There's the mother who's exhausted without ever leaving the house to do something that feels truly important to her and it seems no one notices except her toddlers.

[26 : 53] Now when we feel emotions like those and others that you may be feeling it's hard to believe God's message of grace is for us isn't it?

It's very difficult to imagine there that God could not only rescue us but that he could use us for the sake of others. We seem left out and we get discouraged and we're hopeless even.

But it's what God says to us this morning. It's the message he wants you to hear. God's grace to us grace to you dear ones whom he loves.

Grace to you who feel overlooked. Grace to you who feel neglected. Grace to you who feel ashamed. Don't lose heart.

Don't be afraid. Don't give up hope. my redeeming grace my rescuing power are coming to you and through you to many others it's how he works.

[27 : 58] It's people who feel overlooked and disgraced or insignificant that God delights to bring his grace to and through. You remember Daniel just this summer and his ordinary faith in an extraordinary God?

That's the point. Ordinary people like us can believe the promises of a God who nothing is impossible for. He's the one who is great not us.

I don't know if you heard the interview with synchronized divers David Badiah and Steele Johnson after they won an Olympic silver medal this week. Apparently all I did was watch Olympics this week.

Sorry. It was a great interview. They asked him how do you keep calm with the pressure of the Olympics bearing down on you? And they both gave great responses one after the other. How do we stay cool under pressure? Well you see it's not as big a deal as y'all might be picturing it because my identity is in Christ they both said. My significance is rooted in Jesus Christ and so standing up there on the diving board at the Olympics it wasn't all that pressure packed.

[29 : 11] It wasn't all riding on that one dive. A great answer. What I didn't love is how they instantly seemed to become heroic Christian examples.

They were the ones who'd finally made a testimony for Jesus because it made me feel like if I really wanted to make a difference for Jesus I'd have to start by winning an Olympic medal and then talking about Jesus on TV.

And how was I ever going to get from here to there? What about the lady facing cancer at home with her identity rooted in Christ?

Or the young person entering a new school or the man losing his job with their identity rooted in Christ? We don't have to be the Lord's Olympic medalists.

We can just be the Lord's servant the way Mary was. See the message of God's grace meeting us in all those ordinary places in Jesus is powerful too when you share that with others.

[30 : 23] Don't you long to experience and express God's grace? To have the rescuing power of God flow to you and then through you to many others?

It is this amazingly unique Jesus whose angels are coming to talk to people about his birth. He's promised in this passage he's actually already come to us.

He's not someone we're looking forward to maybe one day that will develop. He has come to us as evidence that God is speaking grace to us and himself the very content of that message.

In Jesus God's redeeming grace and rescuing power have already come to us so we can believe he will continue to meet us right where we are.

Because you see it's not actually something new that we are putting our hope in and waiting for. It's not about us getting everything we ask for and all our desires fulfilled. Mary wasn't asking for a child was she?

[31 : 29] Not every childless couple in Israel were promised a son like Zechariah and Elizabeth but everyone received the message of God's grace through John.

Not every insignificant young woman in Israel was promised to be the mother of God's son like Mary but everyone received the message of God's grace the fulfillment of God's promises the hope for eternity and redemption through Jesus.

that's for all of us. God's message of grace for all of us because it's here at the cross isn't it? That Jesus provided for us the greatest instance of God's rescuing power his redeeming grace coming to the overlooked because Jesus himself became overlooked by his father.

Jesus himself took upon him our shame on the cross he carried our griefs on the cross and was punished and put away in our place.

What was just the promise of a baby to Zechariah and to Mary has become a man who lived for us and died for us so that what is promised in Jesus would be true for all of us no matter how badly we failed no matter how insignificant we feel no matter how undeserving we are that all of us who trust in him would be welcomed at the table of the father of heaven.

[33 : 12] That's the message of grace for you this morning. It's the message Jesus preaches to us through his body and blood which he offers to us this morning. Grace to you.

Grace. He has come in power to rescue us and he will through you share that good news of his grace with many others.

Remember what he told his disciples as he instituted this supper. He said I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and said this is my body which is for you do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying this cup is the new covenant in my blood do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

this is the table of the Lord where we're reminded that nothing is impossible with God where we're reminded that he could save me that he could save you because he could come and has come and has taken our place this is not the table of Southwood or the Presbyterian church if you know Jesus and that he has stood in your place for your sins come welcome and eat with us if you don't know Jesus if you say that sounds interesting to me I've heard him talked of before but you don't know him and trust him to be the only reason that you could walk in to the throne room of the holy God and be at peace then don't come and pretend outwardly something that's not true inwardly we'd much rather you actually meet Jesus not just the bread and the juice that represent to us his body and blood we'd love to introduce you to

[35 : 17] Jesus so I'd encourage you not to take the elements but to wait and to come and to talk with us and hear more about who Jesus is let me pray and then we'll come to the table together Father it is a good thing that nothing is impossible for you because we are those who could not have made it to you on our own we could never have done enough and gotten things figured out enough to deserve to eat with you and yet you have invited us to come you have made the way for us through the blood of Jesus and so we thank you for that would you take these very common elements that give us just a picture of his body and his blood and make them effective in our hearts to build our faith and our trust in him that he would be the only one we trust strengthen our faith we ask in his name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org