

“Learning from Two Old Guys & a worshipping Girl” Luke 1:1-47

Proposition: You can grow your faith and still be real about your struggles/ understanding.

Everyone of us wants to grow our faith and see the intervention of God increase upon our lives. However in the process of doing that we need to be real. I believe that you and I potentially can do what Jesus did but today, speaking for myself anyway, I know I have a long way to go yet. The passage we are studying this morning, can I believe do both things, that is give us clues to grow our faith as well as show us that we can be real with God and others as we live in the here and now.

This morning I want to begin a series from Dr Luke’s gospel. Luke wrote the third book of the New Testament and the book of Acts. In fact Dr Luke wrote ¼ of the whole NT and is the only non Hebrew writer in the bible. Dr Luke wrote in perfect Greek and was a real details man.

Our calendar began the year that Jesus Christ was born. Some 33 years after his birth Jesus went back to the Father, back home again. For the next 35 years or so there were so many eye witnesses to the miracles and the teachings of Jesus the apostles and church leaders moved about and they were never short for an appropriate Jesus teaching for a given situation. But now somewhere between AD 65-AD70 some of the eye witnesses are getting a bit long in the tooth and there became a need for evangelists to formally write down what had been seen and heard so future generations could benefit.

Dr Luke wasn’t an eye witness but he was a fastidious student of detail. He would talk to multiple witnesses, examine their stories thoroughly and then put pen to paper. He was also the apostle Paul’s travelling companion on the last three of Paul’s 4 missionary journeys. And so he had first hand resource material so he could write the book of Acts. We know that Paul who was used by God to work mighty miracles and yet never had his eye problem healed and historians suggest that Luke wasn’t just in Paul’s ministry support team but was also the apostle’s Doctor.

Luke 1:1-4. Many people have tried to tell the story of what God has done among us. They wrote what we had been told by the ones who were there in the beginning and saw what happened. So I made a careful study of everything and then decided to write and tell you exactly what took place. Honourable Theophilus.

Who is this guy? Honorable Theophilus? Three possibilities:

(i) Luke’s previous owner.

While Doctors profession has always been an honoured profession believe it or not in the ancient days it was not a well paying profession. Many Doctors were in fact kept as personal slaves, personal physicians for rich families. People owned their own doctors. Some scholars suggest that Theophilus' owner became a follower of the way and released his personal doctor to support the apostle Paul and his work. That's one possibility.

Another one is

(ii) Theophilus was a pseudo name (ie a code name). At the time of Luke's writing Christians are beginning to get persecuted and killed for their faith. Lion food etc.

Theophilus means – "Lover of God" and many have suggested that Luke's letter was for an individual who needed to be protected from possible persecution.

(iii) Theophilus could be referring to a group of people (code speak) who were lovers of God but who also needed to be kept safe from persecution as Luke's gospel was circulated amongst them.

There is a fourth possibility that historians and linguists haven't considered yet.

It may have been as this guy was being born that the mid wife or the Doctor present saw him and said "This is the ophilist (the awfulist) looking baby I have ever seen.

Whoever he was Luke wanted to give him an absolutely accurate account of what Jesus said and did in this gospel and what the Apostles did in the book of Acts.

Just a few points to consider from this passage if we are to be a community that encourages faith but faces our current realities well as well.

1. Be careful not to assume that some one's suffering is due to their sin or a curse.

5-7. When Herod was the king of Judea, there was a priest by the name of Zechariah from the priestly group of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was from the family of Aaron. Both of them were good people and pleased the Lord god by obeying all that he had commanded. But they did not have children. Elizabeth could not have any, and both Zechariah and Elizabeth were already very old.

In the ancient days if a person was continually sick or if they couldn't have children it was considered in that culture to be a curse. A sure sign that they had done some terrible sin.

As we shall see, this noble old couple had lived under that stigma for years. People talked – and it hurt. They wanted children and had prayed with faith and they were good people who pleased God.

Its true that sickness may be caused by a curse or by some sin like gluttony but be very cautious about making that judgement over some one elses' life. People assumed this of Zechariah and Elizabeth but it wasn't true, God was pleased with them, they had been desperately waiting for a son but God was setting them up for the miracle of a world changing super son, John the Baptist.

8. One day Zechariah's group of priests were on duty, and he was serving God as a priest. 9. According to the custom of the priests, he had been chosen to go into the Lord's temple that day and to burn incense, while the people were praying outside.

There were 24 groups of priests who served in these days. They might be farmers or retailers for most of the year but twice a year they would leave their regular work and serve in the temple for a whole week. For two weeks of the year a group of priests would be roistered on plus all of the priests would turn up and serve during the major feasts. Zechariah had been chosen to do a very holy service and to go into the temple and to pour incense on the hot coals as a symbol of prayer and worship to the Lord while the people waited outside.

11. All at once an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah at the right side of the altar. 12. Zechariah was confused and afraid when he saw the angel.

At this point in history though there were many who loved God no one had seen a miracle or heard from God for a period of 400 years.

13. But the angel said to him; "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. God has heard your prayers."

2. You need to know that God has heard your prayers!

Zechariah no doubt had been praying for a son for years and years and years and years. "Lord have mercy on Elizabeth and I and give us a child." We don't now if Zechariah was still praying this prayer or even if he had stopped praying this prayer a decade ago. But the angel comes and says "hey, your prayer has been heard." I can imagine Zechariah thinking, now you tell me. Where have you been with this message for the last 50 years??

For you bible scholars the alter of incense is a symbol of the prayers of the saints being offered up to God. And they are to God like a sweet smelling incense in his nostrils. He enjoys hearing our prayers. So here's this great old guy, he's been praying for a son for forever. This day he is pouring on the incense onto the coals and watching the steam and the

aroma rise towards heaven a symbol of the people's prayers to God. While he is doing that an angel appears and says "God has heard your prayers."

Rev 8 tells us that God keeps our prayers, treasures our prayers. They are of eternal significance to Him as are our souls and our tears.

When Jesus taught on prayer he said keep on praying, asking, knocking at the door of heaven.

James wrote that we have not because we ask not. That asking is written in the present continual sense. Ie keep on asking.

God enjoys your honest, trusting prayers and whether you get an answer instantly or like this old couple you have to wait 50 years. You need to know that God has heard your prayers. He is going to do something about it. Your prayers are treasured by Him.

Years and years after this Godly couple started praying, hubby gets the message from an angel. Hey, Your prayers have been heard

13b Your wife Elizabeth will have a son, and you will name him John.

14. His birth will make you very happy, and many people will be glad.

15. Your son will be a great servant of the Lord. He must never drink wine or beer, and the power of the Holy Spirit will be with him from the time he is born.

16. John will lead many people in Israel to turn back to the Lord their God. 17. He will go ahead of the Lord with the same power and spirit that Elijah had. And because of John, parents will be more thoughtful of their children. And people who now disobey God will begin to think as they ought to. This is how John will get people ready for the Lord.

The name John means – "God is gracious" the perfect name for the one who is to introduce Jesus to the world.

Wow, what a message. You and I would be expecting this old guy to be bopping around the temple by now. Shouting, worshipping, giving thanks for the miracle but...

3. Unbelief robs us of our ability to speak about him and to enjoy Him.

Instead of rejoicing and giving thanks old Zechariah had prayed this prayer for a son for so long he no longer believed it would happen and his disappointment with God had made him loose faith for a miracle and he had become cynical.

He should have been rejoicing but instead he was cynical.

18. Zechariah said to the angel, "how will I know that this is going to happen? My wife and I are both very old."

That is what unbelief does. It robs you of the ability to trust God today. To enjoy daily blessings and we find ourselves feeling down and worried and thinking that things will never really change.

19. The angel answered, “I am Gabriel, God’s servant, and I was sent to tell you this good news. 20. You have not believed what I have said. So you will not be able to say a thing until all this happens. But everything will take place when it is supposed to.”

This is how I imagine this conversation went down.

Zechariah says, to this angel standing right in front of him. Oh, I don’t know. Oh, I find that word a bit hard to believe – I need some more proof.

And then the head angel, the one who appears to Daniel and great prophets of old says, hey buddy, look who is talking to you. Its me, Gabriel, does that name ring any bells for you.

And Gabriel says that God’s purposes will still be fulfilled for baby John but that Zechariah would not be able to speak. That is what unbelief does in a person. It robs them of the ability to speak about Jesus, to witness for him, to give testimony about him. The person who doesn’t believe really has nothing to say.

Personally I believe that there are three huge barriers in the west to Christians not sharing their faith verbally with others.

Fear of man.

This false idea that you have to witness in a certain way.

Thirdly, unbelief.

I am not sure which of these is the biggest hindrance to evangelism in the modern church but unbelief has to be right up there. If you don’t believe, you won’t speak about Jesus to others.

But if you and I embrace the messenger (the Word) with God like simplicity and just believe the promises of the Father you will be able to speak to others and you will be full of joy.

Now after the priest had burnt the incense he was meant to come out. To stretch his hands over the people and bless them by saying” The Lord Bless you and Keep you, the Lord cause his face to shine upon you, the Lord be merciful and gracious unto you, and give you His peace.

These guys are waiting for Zechariah but he’s still in there.

21. The crowd was waiting for Zechariah and kept wondering why he was staying so long in the temple. 22. When he did come out he could not speak, and they knew he had seen a vision. He motioned to them with his hands, but he could not say a thing.

23. When Zechariah’s time for service in the temple was over. He went home. 24. Soon after that, his wife was expecting a baby, and for five

months she did not leave the house. She said to herself, 25. “What the Lord has done for me will keep people from looking down on me.”

26. One month later God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee , with a message for a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David. 28. The angel greeted Mary and said, “You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you.”

That same phrase “truly blessed” or “highly favoured” as some translations put it is the same phrase to describe all Christians who are “in Christ” in the NT.

Mary is confused but not doubting of the angels message. She basically says well if that what God wants, great, I don’t understand how it is all going to happen but ... I believe.

4. Mary believes the angel and is able to speak and sing (vs46-56)

The question Mary asks of the angel is not is it going to happen but how.

29. Mary asked the angel, “How can this happen? I am not married?”

ie how can I get pregnant as Joseph my fiancé is not here to help me?

She was wondering if a man would help her fulfil her destiny. People often do that. They think, this person, that ministry, that pastor, that elder, they will help me become what I need to become.

They might be aware of struggles in their own lives, addictive behaviour, areas of character that need to be sorted out, issues that need healing and we like Mary ask ourselves, who is going to help me get that gap filled, get that area addressed, get from here to there in my destiny. What man, what woman is going to help me make this a reality?

Look at Gabriel’s answer.

Gabriel doesn’t give any scientific answers just points to the mysterious and powerful work of the Holy Spirit and he says

35... “The Holy Spirit will comedown to you, and God’s power will come over you. So your child will be called the Holy Son of God.

Now I don’t think that would have made any sense to this 15 year old teenager at all. It was enough to know though that it wasn’t through human help that she would fulfil her destiny but God would bring that about in her.

5. Miracles, and radical transformation come not via a man or woman, not via a preacher or ministry but via the Person of the Holy Spirit!

6. Grow your faith by spending time with people who are a few months further on than you are (in a specific area).

Mary is accepting God's will and believing for it although she can't get her head around how such a miracle is meant to happen and so Gabriel encourages her.

36. "Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son.

17. Nothing is impossible for God!"

If you are struggling in your marriage and things like impossible, spend time with someone who has been where you are and seen God turn up and transform their marriage.

If you are struggling to see how God could work in your business or in your finances or with that teenager of yours. Find someone who is a few months further on than you in their experience. Find someone who has had the breakthrough or the healing or the provision or the relationship healed.

You will be encouraged to trust God and believe for the impossible if you spend time with them.

One principle of faith that I have witnessed all my life is this. If someone has a miracle in one area of their lives they will have the faith to help others enter into the same type of miracle.

Someone shares a testimony of how God healed their marriage then in the days to come others too experience the same sort of testimony.

Friends I want to say this to.

Much of how God works is a mystery and I am totally comfortable with that. If he loves us enough to send Christ to die for us, we can trust him. You need to know for certain though that your prayers have been heard, they are incredibly important to God.

If you struggle to believe the message (the Bible), then seek, research, get that doubt in your mind sorted, otherwise you won't be talking about Jesus to anyone much at all.

If you believe the things he says to you, you might see an answer to prayer instantly or you might have to wait 50 plus years but be ever so sure of this. It's God you need to look to, to have that issue dealt with in your life, to meet that need, heal that hurt, or to transform that area of your life. People help and encourage but transformation comes from the Holy Spirit coming into your situation.

And as you are trusting God, taking him at his Word look to other people who have seen God take them through the things that you are currently facing. Be encouraged to trust Him because of their stories. Resist becoming cynical or negative because God seems to be taking so long and we don't know why the transformation hasn't happened yet. Instead surround yourself with people who are a few months further on than you

in that area of life and faith and continue being real about where you are at and what is happening in your life.
RBC is a faith family where we can be real and we can grow.