

If you have your Bibles, let's go. Luke 1 is where we're going to be. I went short last weekend, and so I'm going long today, baby. We've got a lot to do and not a lot of time, so let's get after it. As I began to get to know the Bible and as God began to stir my heart for the Scriptures, I remember very early on that there were these late nights where I would come across verses, and although I did have a background in church, I'd come across these verses that have never really come alive to me before. And so, it's a pretty funny thing to come across a verse that you've known for some time but all of a sudden to have the Holy Spirit kind of breathe into it. And finding those type of texts, finding those promises of God that would stir and move and create worship, they became this kind of driving force behind me studying and me digging. Like coming across Romans 8:28 after the Holy Spirit's introduced you to Jesus and you come across that all things work for good for those who love Him. I mean, you come across a text that says everything in your life, everything that comes, every bit of joy, every bit of sorrow, every detail, every moment, it's come through the sovereign God's hand into your life for your good. I mean, this changes every dark night of the soul, it changes every time I get sick, it changes every mountaintop, every valley, all the feelings of despair, loneliness, frustration. In that moment for me, coming across this verse, they disappear. All things, everything working together for my good. God loves me in such a way that He's even willing to let me suffer in order to get me mature, to get me deep to show His love for me. I can't tell you, several years into my walk, the frustration that was coming out of having a mind that was growing in knowledge of Scripture but a soul that kind of felt like it was shriveling in its relationship with Christ to come across Philippians where it says, "He who began the good work in you..." Like, "I started this in you, Matt. You didn't start this. I started it." He who began the good work in me will be faithful to complete it unto the end. So now all of a sudden, there's this weight, there's this promise that I have not been abandoned, I have not been left and that even in what feels like the most stagnant, dry period of time, God's growing me into maturity, that He's finishing what He started in me. This is an unbelievable promise. I mean, it's a weighty, thick, beautiful, worship-creating promise. And then there's 1 Corinthians 10, and this is one I warred over for years. You've got this promise that no temptation has seized you except what's common to man and that God will never tempt you beyond what you can bear and He'll always provide an escape route. And to know that God's never going to let anything come through His hands into my life that will destroy me or implode me is one of the great promises, that there's no sin that's going to be able master me because God's going to give me a way out and He's not sending anything in that He hasn't given me, by the Holy Spirit's power, the power to walk away from. He's never going to let the circumstance occur in my life where sin has to happen, but He's always going to give me a way out. I love these promises. And really, we could go on and on and on. I mean, there are dozens more, but these three in particular are very, very, very powerful in my life. In fact, if you have any kind of history here, they get quoted often.

But here's what I want to address today, here's what I want us to talk about. What do we do with these promises when it seems like and it feels like they're impossible? What do we do with the promises of God, that all things are working for my good when there's no good to be seen in it and in the moment, the weight of it has stolen our ability to breathe? What do we do with that promise in that moment? What do we do with the

promise of God that He's leading us into good after four months, six months, eight months, twelve months, twenty-four months, thirty-six months of overwhelming sorrow? What do we do with that promise? How do we respond to the God that made it? What do we do with, "He who began the good work in us will be faithful to complete it" when it feels like and it seems like and with all variables taken into account, it seems like we've been abandoned? It seems like there's no growth there, that we're stuck in the same sins, that we're stuck in the same ruts. What do we do with the promise in that moment? And the third one's my favorite. Have you ever tried to concentrate on this verse when your sin is owning you? Like, have you gotten this sin that haunts you, that stalks you, that prowls you, that at any weak moment pounces on you? Have you had that sin that seems like no matter how disciplined you try to be or how carefully you try to orchestrate the details of your life, continually creeps up and destroys you? I mean what do we do with this text that God promises that He's not going to put anything in our lives that we can't have victory over when it seems that victory's a billion light years away? I guess what I'm asking in a real practical way is how do we handle these promises when somebody we love dies? What do we do with these promises when we get sick and not the kind of sick that's there for a couple of days but the kind of sick that changes the way the rest of your life will play out? What do we do with these promises when we get betrayed? What do we do with these promises when our love is rejected? And I could go on and on with the list of really horrific things that happen in a sinful, fallen world. What do we do with promises that seem absurd? What do we do with them?

Well, I love where Luke goes here. Luke's going to tell two stories in chapter 1. He's going to tell of Zechariah, who's an old man, I mean a really, really, really old man, and then he's going to tell the story of a young woman, a young girl, by most people's accounts, they think she was a 13, 14, 15-year-old girl. And they both get absurd promises from God, and they both handle it in different ways. And I think we can answer the question tonight: how do we handle the promises of God when they seem absurd, when they seem a million light years away, when they seem and feel impossible? How do we handle the promises of God? I think we're going to see what not to do and what to do. And so, let's look in Luke. Pick it up in verse 5. *"In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years."* Now follow me here. I think the question is, "How old are they?" I mean, how old is Zechariah? How old is Elizabeth? Well this phrase, "they were advanced in years" is used another time in Scripture and it's used to describe Abraham and his wife, Sarah. And the apostle Paul would tell us in the book of Romans that Abraham, when he found out he was going to have a son, was as good as dead. That's how old they are. And I don't know the age that is, but it's old. When Scripture calls you "as good as dead," you're old, you're really.....really old. Verse 8, *"Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And 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. 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.'" Zechariah and Elizabeth spend their whole lives pleading with and begging God for a child. Now, Gabriel shows up in this place where they find themselves so old that they're as good as dead, and they've done life in a culture that views being barren as a curse from God, that views being barren as evidence that you've done something that has displeased God and now your price, your penance is that you can't have children. Now, if you can imagine the sheer sorrow of wanting children and not being able to have them and that pain and frustration and despair being compounded by a society that judges you as being some type of sinner and having something in your life that's angered the Lord, you can see that this is a sore spot. This is a nerve and a place of sensitivity probably more so than any other area of their lives, specifically because it seems right out of the gate that Zechariah and Elizabeth have served God faithfully. So they've served God faithfully for all these years, they've pleaded for a son, they've begged for a legacy, they've never got it and now that they're beyond elderly, Gabriel shows up and says, "You're going to have a baby. It's go time. Let's do it. You're going to have a son. And not only are you going to have a son, but you're going to have a son with an unbelievable legacy. Not only are you going to have a son, but I'm telling you this: of women, there will never be a greater man born. He is going to go out in the spirit of Elijah. He's going to prepare people for the Messiah. He's never going to drink wine, he's going to be completely obedient. He's going to walk in an obedience that shames the rest of Israel. This is your son."

And look at Zechariah's response in verse 18. *"And Zechariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.'*" It's funny, if you'll look at what "advanced in years" means, he calls himself "old man" but his wife "advanced in years." He's basically like, "Look, she's older than me. I'm old, but that girl is old!" And really, when it comes to child-bearing, that makes sense. *"And the angel answered him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.'*" So, Gabriel gets indignant at this response. Here's what just happened. The promise of God goes out and in the moment, there are all these reasons why it's absurd. The promise goes out and Zechariah goes, "How can this possibly be?" And he begins to list out, "I'm old, my wife's advanced in years. This doesn't make any sense." And so, his question is, "I'm going to need a little bit more evidence than this, I'm going to need a little bit more information than this and I'm going to need a little bit more of a sign." And Gabriel goes indignant by this. He's like, "Need I remind you who I am? Need I remind you that I am Gabriel? I stand in the presence of the Most High God. Need I remind you that I am a servant and a messenger from the God who you're in here lighting incense to?" Gabriel grows indignant by it. And then look at what happens. Verse 20 *"And behold, you will be silent and unable to*

speaking until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” Here's the first biblical case of a massive “time out.” The promise goes out, Zechariah won't receive it and follow me here because I think we all play this game. If you'll think back to those dark nights of the soul and those moments where the promises of God are so hard to believe, we all have reasons why those promises aren't true for us. “I've done this...This is my situation...” As if God is unaware of the situational places our lives are when the promises went out. And this is what Zechariah does. He's saying, “This is why that can't be true for me...this is why this isn't true for me.” And I think to a man, to a woman, in this place today, we've all been guilty at one time or another going, “That promise isn't valid for me because of (fill in the blank)...because I've done this...because this is my past...because this is who I am...because this has been such a problem for so long...” And we basically lie to ourselves and try to discredit the power and the sovereign command of God over the universe by our petty circumstances. And this is what Zechariah's done. So Gabriel grows indignant by this, because Gabriel's an angel, so he's not omniscient, he doesn't know all things. So he's coming in going, “Here this guy's been crying out for 60, 70, 80 years for a son, and I'm going to tell him he gets it. This is a great job, God. Thank You. Much better than some of the stuff that went down in the book of Daniel. Thank You. This is great.” He shows up, “This is the greatest news in the universe, Zechariah.” And Zechariah's going, “How can that be? I'm old, my wife's older than old. This can't be. I'm going to need more proof.” “More proof than Gabriel showing up in in your house? Two seconds ago, you wet yourself and fell on the floor. Now all of a sudden, I'm not enough?” And he shuts his mouth.

Now, let me be real clear about what's happened here, because I think what could happen here if you're not careful is fear could creep in and go, “Oh no, God's going to blow me up because I've doubted.” Because you're going to find this out next week, but what's happening is God is disciplining Zechariah because He loves him. And what's going to happen after this discipline from the Lord is he is going to blow up in worship once this is said and done. When John is born, this old man sings and dances and spins around and spits out poetry. God disciplines at times, He tightens up at times and He responds to our wicked heart the way He does, not because He's full of wrath, but because He's full of love. And let me be really honest with you, because the older I get, the more I believe this. The wrath of God is best seen when He does nothing about your sin, when He allows you to keep walking in it. When He doesn't bust you, when He doesn't expose you, that's when the wrath of God can be seen. Because God's going, “Alright, keep pretending. Alright, keep chasing that.” The love of God manifests itself when God shows up and says, “No more. I am not going to let you sin against Me any longer. I'm not going to allow you to walk in loneliness and despair and here's why we're going to have to get there through surgery and surgery hurts.” This is God's infinite love towards Zechariah, sealing up his mouth like this. But Zechariah's response to the promises of God was, “I don't believe it. Here's why I don't believe it. I don't believe it because of this, this, this and this. And you answer these question for me and then maybe I'll believe.” It's a heart full of pride, full of doubt that God is capable or able and believes that his circumstances trump the power and authority of God.

Then the story moves on. Look in verse 26. *“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.”* Now, this word “virgin” literally just means a young maid or a young woman but can also mean a young woman who hasn't had sex. And so, although the word just means a young woman, we find out from the apostle Paul later on that Mary had never been with a man. And we find out from the prophecies about her in Isaiah and the Old Testament that she had never been with a man. Let's keep reading. *“And 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.”* I love this line because you're already seeing a difference in the make up of their hearts. Gabriel shows up and says, “Greeting, O favored one, whom the Lord's found favor” and she's like, “Who? You're talking to me?” She's trying to figure out what kind of greeting this is. “Who are you talking to? Is there somebody else in the room? Do you know who I am? I don't know that I'm the favored one of God.” I love it. Verse 30, *“And the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And 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.’”* And this is just as absurd of a promise as Zechariah got when the angel showed up and said, “In your almost dead bodies, you're going to conceive the Elijah-like preparer of the way for the Messiah.” You've got a young woman who is not royalty in Roman occupied Israel to whom the angel has shown up and said, “Despite the fact that you're not married, despite the fact that you've never been with a man, despite the fact that in your knowledge you're not of any type of royal lineage, you're going to have a baby growing in your womb whose kingdom will never ever, ever, ever, ever end.” This is just as absurd as the promise that went out to Zechariah, just as absurd, just as crazy, just as much shock value. No one lives life expecting for Gabriel, the angel of hosts, to show up with a message. Nobody thinks that today, when they're sweeping the floor or sitting in their office cubicle, that Gabriel the warrior angel is showing up with a message. And he does and he throws out what had to have sounded insane.

And look at Mary's response because Mary's response is very, very different than Zechariah's. And it gives us hope for those frustrating, dry, dark moments. Look at her response. *“And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’”* Now this is a very, very different question than the one Zechariah asked. Zechariah fires off, “How shall I know this? How can I know this? Here's why it's impossible.” But Mary's response is, “This is impossible, but You can do it. How in the world are You going to do this?” And there's a humility in Mary that says, “I don't understand and I don't know how You're able, but You are. How are you going to do it? Because I haven't been with a man. How am I going to get pregnant when I haven't been with a man? You are able, but how are You going to do it? How are You going to accomplish this?” I mean, here's the crazy part. Gabriel gives her an answer. And for the record, I think we can go on record and say getting an explanation is kind of rare on God's part. God doesn't tend to throw out a lot of explanations, does He? Ok, so He does in yours. Congratulations. You can have my job. Listen to this, *“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...” Can they ever mention that woman's name without throwing out how old she is? I mean even now, you think she's in heaven going, “Every time? I mean, can I not just get one little moment in there where I wasn't the old chick?” I'm sorry, let's go. “*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.” There is this massive amount of humility in Mary that says, “I am not God, I am not holy, I am not, but let it be done what You will.” Now, do you not think Mary knows what's coming? Do you know how absurd the story's going to sound? “Hey honey, we're pregnant!” Joseph's got some questions. “How is that possible?” “Well, I'm glad you asked because while I was sweeping the kitchen, Gabriel showed up, and this baby's the Holy Spirit's baby.” I'm trying to get my head around it. I'm trying to fathom that conversation at supper that night. So, knowing what's going to occur, knowing what's going to unfold, knowing honestly that according to the law, she might get herself pelted with rocks until she dies, Mary humbles herself and says, “Let it be done as You've commanded. And I don't fully understand and I'm scared out of my mind and most of this doesn't make any sense, but You are God and if You can help me understand how You're going to do this, it would help me. But even if You don't, I trust that You'll do what You've said You'll do.”

And I think the lesson for us is there are those of us, because of pain, because of sorrow, because of fear, we've become very indignant and we demand of God signs and we demand of God objective evidences. And God is not a God of blind faith. Over and over again, He communicates His glory and He communicates His might and He communicates His power. And what ends up happening in those dark nights of the soul is we want to forget all God has historically done for us and all the testimonies of others that we've seen Him come through in. We want to forget the testimony of the person that's suffered and came to know Christ so deeply. In that moment, we forget. In the moment where it's our pain, where it's our frustration, where it's our fear, where we feel stagnant and wore out, we want to forget the testimony of the saints and we want to accuse God of failing us. And in that moment, what we see from the story is that God's going to lovingly discipline you in that moment. In that moment, God's going to lovingly say, “Alright, I'll receive that, I'll hear you. But no man gets to stand in front of My throne room and shake his fist at Me. So We're going to break you down. We'll humble your heart. Very gently, because I love you, not with a baseball bat but with a scalpel, I want to show you that I'm God so I'm going to have to cut some things out here.” And it seems like the humble, the one who through tears says, “I don't understand. I'm trying to trust You. I'm trying to believe and I don't understand. I don't understand how this is getting me good. I don't understand how this is working my completion until the end. And I don't understand how to beat the sin in my life despite the fact that You've said I've got a way out. Show me the way out because I don't see it. Help me.” And then it seems from this little story, this little compare and contrast, that God honors the humble, that He draws near to them, that He speaks to them, that He even gives them explanations. Not always. There's a dozen other stories we could turn to where somebody's like, “What are

You doing” and God's like, “I'll show you in fifteen years.” Or really His number is usually forty.

Can I ask you just some questions? Because I think there are questions that we have to get to if we're going to make any sense of any of this. I'm speaking mainly to believers in here and those who have been introduced to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Do you believe that He loves you? Because I think that's the question. Do you think He's vindictive and angry at you? Or do you think that He loves you? I think there's this real weird dualism that occurs in the heart of God when He presses us. Like, I'm still trying to get to the bottom of what the Lord was trying to do in my life by absolutely blowing me up in Asia for ten days. But I think there are two things that happened in the heart of God in that moment. I think there was this real sorrow for my suffering and there was this real joy in what He was producing in it. And in that moment, do you know what the sustaining force was through it all? And there were tears and there was maybe a cuss word or two. I won't fully fess up to that, but maybe during long spells of dry heaving, some curse words. The sustaining thing through that all was that the Holy Spirit convinced me that He loves me. And listen, not some future version of me. And I've said that to you a billion times. I can't tell you how often I plead with Christ to let you hear that, that right now He loves you. I mean, do you have it? Because I think most of us think He will love us and that's completely different than He does. And there's all this objective evidence that He does. He loves you enough to let you suffer right now. He loves you enough to let you go to a dark place where what's really inside of you gets churned up to the top. He loves you enough to let the Son of God, God in the flesh be slaughtered. He loves you enough to call you into Himself. Man, I could go on and on with objective evidences, but at the end, do you know that He loves you? And that in the end, that same Romans 8 passage says nothing can separate you from that, nothing, not sickness, not death, not persecution, not your own stumblings. But we see our sin as this reason for God to not have anything to do with us, and God sees our sin as this monumental opportunity to glorify His name in healing us from it. Do you believe that He loves you? You, not an ambiguous “us,” not because you're good. You're not good. One of my other favorite Scriptures is that all our righteous deeds are filthy rags before Him. I mean, how helpless are we that even the great, amazing humanitarian things that we do are like that rag that's been in the kitchen sink four days longer than it probably should be? Or like that rag that you use to clean the junk off your shoes? I know that sounds crazy that that's such a beautiful verse, but it is because it means that God's love for me is not based off of activities or things that I do or don't do but on the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Do you believe that He loves you? Not on your merit. You've got to eventually let that go. We sang earlier, “No more, my God, I boast no more. The best obedience of my hands dare not appear before Your throne. But grace can answer Thy demand by pleading what the Son has done. No more, my God, I boast no more” Do you believe that He loves you? Because if we can rest there, we get to rest...even when someone we love dies, even when we're betrayed, even when our health disappears, even when marriage is difficult, even when a child goes astray, even when... The love of God is the most humbling force in the universe, not the wrath of God. The love of God. And I'd do anything to help you believe it.

Let's pray. "Help us, Father. Because I know that if we've got any kind of background in church that You love us is just what we know. We've been singing it since we were little, we've been hearing it, but I think there can be a disjoint between understanding something cognitively and sitting under something spiritually. And so Holy Spirit, help us. Stir our hearts to believe. Let the weight of Your love fall on us. Let the goodness of that love fall on us. Let it transcend our circumstance. Let us find rest there, hope there, humility there. Let that kill the pride in us. Let us believe that in Your loving us, Your power's more than capable of working all things together for our good, of completing this thing you began in us and letting no temptation overpower us. Help us. Haunt us with these things. It's for Your beautiful name I pray. Amen."