



The Sermon

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Luke 1:18-25

"The Dumb Priest"

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TRANSCRIPT

Well, I want you to take your Bible and turn with me to Luke chapter 1, Luke chapter 1; and today we are in verses 18-25. The title of this message is "The Dumb Priest." Luke chapter 1, beginning in verse 18, "Zacharias said to the angel, 'How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.' The angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.'

"The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute. When the days of the priestly service were ended, he went back home."

"After these things, Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, 'This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men.'" This is the reading of God's word. Let us go to Him in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we've read Your word. We now desire to look at it carefully; and we have need for You to shine light upon this passage, and to shine light into our understanding and into our minds and into our hearts. We want to grasp all that has been recorded here, and we desire to see its relevance for our lives. So we need Your Holy Spirit to do a great work of grace within us this day. Bless Your people who have gathered here this morning. Strengthen encourage them even from this passage. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. [End]

Once again, the title of this message is "The Dumb Priest." I want to make sure you got it. They will not get it at 10:45, trust me; they'll just, "Woo," be right over their heads.

So, in these verses we see Zacharias learning a very important life lesson that each one of us needs to learn today, and the lesson is we must take God at His word. Whatever the Scripture teaches, that is what we must believe, and that is what we must act upon it. Faith takes God at His word, even when human reason might seem to indicate otherwise. Faith believes whatever it is that God says no matter if the circumstances might seem to argue contrary. Faith takes God at His word no matter what the majority of people may say. It takes God at His word no matter what opinion polls may say. It takes God at His word no matter what the media may say. It takes God at His word no matter what so-called experts may say. Once ounce of what God has to say is worth more than ten thousand pounds of what man has to say. Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." And this is what Zacharias must learn, that without faith in the word that has been brought to him from God, it is impossible for him to be pleasing to God.

So, as we look at this passage, several things I want to set before for you, and the first is "the rejection by Zacharias." We see this in verse 18: "Zacharias said to the angel," and just pause for a moment. This is in response to what the angel has just said to him earlier in verses 14-17, that in their old age they will have a son, but not just any son: he will be great, and he will be the forerunner of the Messiah, and he will be a powerhouse

of a preacher, and he will turn the hearts of men back to God. This is what God has said to him through the angel Gabriel.

And so, "Zacharias said to the angel in response, 'How will I know this for certain?'" The words "for certain" are not in the original as Luke wrote this, and it just literally reads, "How will I know this?" And what he is asking for here is a sign; and it's a part of his unbelief, because we know that from later in this account where it says that he was not believing in verse 20, "because you did not believe my words."

And so this is not a humble petition, this is really an unbelieving objection to what this angel has said to him. What he is saying, what Zacharias is saying is, "I cannot take God at His word unless there's some sign, unless there's some proof." And then he gives the reason why he cannot take God at His word, and it is because of the impossibility of his circumstances from his own perspective.

So he says, "For I am an old man." The word "for" introduces the explanation. "For I am an old man." "Old man" here is literally the word *presbutés* that is translated "an elder in the church," "an older man." "For I'm an old man." And he's thinking to the angel, "Just look at me. I've got gray hair. I've got a bulging waistline. I've got a sagging torso. I'm past my prime. How in the world are we going to have a child?" In fact, he is saying, "There's no way that I'm going to be able to sire a child with my wife Elizabeth. But it's not just me; look at mama. Mama's not getting any younger either. And my wife is advanced in years, she is past her prime. She's past her productivity."

And so Zacharias, upon receiving a message direct from the throne of grace, puts up a stop sign and says, "I can't believe this. I do not believe this." And so the problem with Zacharias is he has elevated his human reason above divine revelation. He has elevated his human perspective above a divine and eternal perspective, and he's looking at the impossibility of the circumstance rather than what God has so clearly, plainly said.

I mean, we often find ourselves in situations somewhat like this, not as unique as Zacharias' situation here; but nevertheless, we have to be continually making a choice, "Am I going to believe what everybody else in the block believes or am I going to believe what God says? Am I going to believe what everyone down in the office believes or am I going to believe what God says?" That's going to be increasingly the challenge for you and me in this culture and in this society that is in a freefall away from God, on a slippery slope descending further and further away from the truth of God's word. We're going to find ourselves in situations and at times having to make the tough choice, "No, I'm going to believe what God says."

I was in a store the other day, and as I was checking out was in a conversation with a salesperson wanting to know what I do, and I told him, "I preach here at Trinity, and I'm also a professor out in Los Angeles at a seminary."

"Oh, a seminary! What do you do there?"

"Well, I train men how to preach."

The response was, "Only men? You don't train women to preach? Why not? Are you prejudice?"

I said, "No, I'm obedient, obedient to the word of God."

Zacharias here is not being obedient to the word of God. It just seems too farfetched for him that "We're going to have a child in these latter years."

Well, second, I want you to note "the rebuke by Gabriel." The angel now responds, and it's not what Zacharias expected - listen to this - it's not what Zacharias wanted to hear: "You want a sign? You're not going to want

the sign. You're not going to want the sign we're going to get you. Okay. Once you get what you want, you're not going to want what you get."

And so, verse 19, "The angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel.'" In other words, "You don't understand who I am. I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God. I'm not some lower-rung peripheral angel, I stand in the immediate presence of God." Most probably, Gabriel has taken Lucifer's place, after Lucifer was the highest of all of the angels, and led a coup against God and rallied a third of the angels to rebel against God and to follow Lucifer. And God cast them down to this world, and they have become demon spirits, and Lucifer became the devil. Next man up is Gabriel.

And Gabriel is the most brilliant, the most gifted, the most intelligent, the most faithful of all of the angels. His name means "the mighty one of God." Some translate it "the hero of God." He's closest to the throne of God. He stands in the presence of God. This word "in the presence of" literally out of the original language means "face to face with God," "in the immediate presence of God." And so this message is that important, that God would not dispatch the B team to bring this message, but that God sends the highest of all of the angels, who is the archangel, to bring this message straight from the throne of grace.

And by the way, there's only one other angel who's mentioned by name, and that's Michael. So for Gabriel to say, "I am Gabriel," this is a rare statement to be found in the Bible, that an angel gives his name; but it is to underscore, "You'd better believe what is being said here. I've been dispatched on this mission straight from the immediate presence of God."

He goes on to say in verse 19, "I have been sent to speak to you." This verb "sent" comes from the same root word as "apostle." An apostle is one sent on a mission with a special message. That's what an apostle is in the New Testament. Same root word here put in verb form, which means, "I have been sent here on a special mission with a special message; and this message is that important. It is that trustworthy. It is that reliable."

And then he says, "and to bring you this good news." Zacharias can't even believe good news, much less, bad news. And so, "bring you this good news," interestingly enough, is one word in the original language, and it means "to preach the gospel," "to preach the good news." "This is glorious news that I am bringing to you, Zacharias. And you are stiff-arming me; but in reality, you're stiff-arming God to refuse His word."

And so, in verse 20, he says, "And behold," - "behold" here is in the imperative. This is a command: "You need to note this well. Note this carefully. Behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak. You want a sign that this is true? Here's the sign. You're going to be shut up. You're not going to be able to utter a sound. You're going to go dumb. You're going to become mute. You will not be able to utter a word until the day when these things take place."

And "these things" refers back to those previous verses, verses 14-17, on the announcement that "You will bear a child in your old age. Until the day he comes out of Elizabeth's womb, you will not be able to say one word. You will not be able to speak." I mean, this is a death sentence for a priest. This like an artist who can't see. This is like a musician who cannot hear. This is a priest, preacher-teacher, who cannot speak. And what this is is the chastisement of God upon him. It's the discipline of God. And there are painful consequences that follow unbelief.

And so Gabriel explains why. He says, "because," - "because" there in verse 20 - "because you did not believe my word." See, that's why we know verse 18 is really Zacharias responding in unbelief, in disbelief, a failure to take God at His word when it's delivered by His servant, "because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time." I love even the verb "will be": "will be fulfilled." There's a divine certainty about this.

And so, one thing that just captures my observation as I look at this answer is actually the precision with which the plan of God will be worked out as

it's revealed in this verse. There's the who, the what, the when, and the why all in this verse. The who: this involves Zacharias and Elizabeth. This is not "whosoever will." No, this is Zacharias and Elizabeth specifically. The what: "Zacharias, you will be unable to speak." The when: "until the day these things take place, and until the day these are fulfilled in their proper time." And the why: "because you did not believe."

I mean, this is how God runs the universe. All God's trains run on time. There is a precision about providence and the outworking of God's plan for our lives; and this is but a keyhole for us to look into and through to see on the other side, "This is what it looks like in our lives," because God is working out His plan for us, and there is a perfect reason, there is a perfect timing, there is a perfect set of circumstances with which God is working out what He is doing in our lives. And we need to be careful and not be like Zacharias and go, "Well, I just need some kind of a sign," because you and I may not like the sign that we're given.

So, third, this leads to "the retribution by God" in verse 21, the retribution by God, because, yes, there are painful consequences that result from disobedience and disbelief. So, verse 21, "The people were waiting for Zacharias." These people were mentioned earlier in verse 10. Just to remind you, twice a year the division of the priests would be assigned temple duty; and this time is now Zacharias' division to go into the temple area to serve. And they cast lots, and once a year - excuse me. They cast lots, and it came up Zacharias' name: "It's the only time in your entire priestly career that you will now be allowed to go into the Holy Place, offer prayers, offer incense, and serve there."

The people, the multitude, are outside. They are in the courtyards around the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. And so they are in the court of men, the court of women, the court of Gentiles, and they're praying that Zacharias' prayers will be answered. And they're used to the priest going in for a short period of time and turn around and coming right back out; it's, rather, routine. But he's not just coming immediately out because, obviously, he's been detained by Gabriel.

And so that's why we read in verse 21, "The people were wondering at his delay in the temple." It's never taken this long for the priest to come back out. Something's wrong in there. Something's happened in there." Or, "Why the delay?" "And wondering at his delay in the temple." "Temple" is used in two different ways - one in a generic way, and one in a specific way. The generic way just takes in the whole temple complex with all the courtyards surrounding it. In the specific way, it refers simply to the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. And here it means the Holy Place, the inner sanctuary. So they're perplexed.

And so we read in verse 22, "But when he came out," - and no doubt, as he came out, he must have looked like maybe he's seen a ghost. He might have been pale-faced or white-faced and eyes bug-eyed. I mean, he's just had an encounter with the highest of all of the angels, who has actually rebuked him. "And when he came out, he was unable to speak." Just like Gabriel said it's going to happen, it happened.

Now, Zacharias always speaks. That's what priests do. They're talking heads. They pray out loud. They read the law out loud. They teach the Scripture out loud. They pronounce blessing out loud. They lead worship out loud. But Zacharias is now mute, and he's dumb, and he's speechless. And for a priest, this is like a death sentence, as I as I've already said. This is like a preacher losing his voice, and he can't preach. He's lost his reason for existence.

A couple of years ago I was preaching at Shepherds Conference out in Los Angeles. This may have been 15 years ago at least. And I was preaching on Jonah, Jonah chapter 3; and in the strange providence of God, I lost my voice, just completely lost my voice, couldn't utter a word. And John Piper was preaching, Iain Murray was there, MacArthur is there. I mean, if there's ever a time you want to be able to preach well - and I know. My wife says, "The Lord is watching." But you want to preach well on a setting like that. Well, my voice literally went completely out. And there were a couple of times I struggled, and I was within a millisecond of just sitting down and just looking at Dr MacArthur and just putting my hands up like this. But



they turned the microphone so loud, I mean you could hear me breathing; and it was a horrible experience.

And I remember when it was over, Iain Murray – if you don't know who that is – he was the right-hand man of Martyn Lloyd-Jones and founder of Banner of Truth publishing house, and incredible author of biographies. Well, he makes a beeline for me; and he is so excited. And he comes up to me and he says, "You are just like the doctor referring," to Martyn Lloyd-Jones. I thought, "Well, this is the greatest compliment I've ever had in my life." He's comparing me to Martyn Lloyd-Jones, his right-hand man. "You're just like the doctor." And so my chest is kind of protruding. And he said, "Yeah, he used to lose his voice, too." So that's my only point of comparison with the doctor is when you can't hear me preach, that's when I'm most like Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

So, this is where Zacharias is. He's being just like the doctor. And so, the people conclude in the middle of verse 22, "They realized that he had seen a vision." I mean, they're connecting the dots, they're putting two and two together. And Zacharias cannot explain what's happened, he can't utter a word. And so the only explanation that the people can come up with, and it probably circulates among them, "He must have had a close encounter of a divine kind. I mean, he must have seen a vision."

And it says, "and he kept making signs to them." That means he's gesturing with his hands. He's nodding his head. He's motioning with his arms. He's signaling with his fingers. I mean, somehow, some way, he's trying to communicate what just happened. And it says, "and he remained mute." That means he couldn't utter a word. Now, this is because he was disobedient, because he refused to believe God's word. He refused to take God at His word, and there was this serious consequence in his life.

The same is true for me, and the same is true for you, that God does discipline His children when we go astray from His word. And just because we're under grace, and just because on the front of the worship guide that you have today it says Romans 8:1, "There is now therefore no

condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," and that is so true, that does not dismiss the fact of God's discipline and chastisement upon His children when they violate His word.

Hebrews 12:5, let me just read this. Hebrews 12, beginning in verse 5, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the LORD." And you see, God only disciplines His own children. It actually becomes part of an assurance of salvation. When an unbeliever commits sin, they get away with it. Oh, they'll pay one day, but not now. But we as Christians, we'll never pay for it eternally; but we will pay for it now with painful consequences.

So, he says, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the LORD, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the LORD loves He disciplines." I know I was my father's favorite, because we had a board of education meeting on a regular basis. Yeah. "Those whom the LORD loves He disciplines, and He scourges" - even stronger words: beats, whips - "every son whom He receives." It's not a little slap on the back of the hand, it's a leather belt.

"It is for discipline that you endure," - to build up your discipline - "God deals with you as with sons," - not sinners, sons - "for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" That's a rhetorical question. There should be no child who ever goes un-severely disciplined by their father. "But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers," - all believers have become partakers of discipline - "then you are illegitimate children and not sons." You belong to another family, not our family, if you're not being disciplined under this roof.

Verse 9, "Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us," - I mean, that's just par for the course - "and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?" It's a part of our respecting God. It produces the fear of God within us as He disciplines us.

Verse 10, "For they disciplined us" - referring to earthly fathers - "for a short time as seemed best to them," - in other words, they did the best they could with their limited wisdom and limited knowledge - "but He" - God - "disciplines us for our good" - with His perfect wisdom and His perfect knowledge - "so that we may share His holiness." There a reason for this, and it is to discipline the disobedience out of us.

Verse 11, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful," - it's not joyful for the son, it's not joyful for the father - "but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." If you're a believer, as I'm a believer, we've all been taken to the woodshed; and if you haven't, it's evidence you don't belong to the Lord. You belong to that other family, and your father's the devil, because every son whom the Lord has, He disciplines, He reproveth, and He scourges, according to the severity of the disobedience.

This is where Zacharias is. You take the tongue away from a preacher, you've taken everything away from a preacher. What would it be in your life that's so important to you, to your life, to who you are, to what you are, that if according to God's inscrutable wisdom, He says to you, "May I meet you in your bedroom?" What would it take for the Lord to teach you holiness? What would have to be removed? This is where Zacharias is.

So finally, we see in verse 23, "the reality for Elizabeth." Verse 23, "When the days of his priestly service were ended," stop right there. That means that the week has now been fulfilled. He would serve twice a year for one week each. So you're on for two weeks out of the year to serve in the temple. And he's still serving in the temple, but he just can't pray, he cannot pronounce blessing, he cannot read the Scripture out loud. His reason for existence virtually has been taken away from him. "When the days of his priestly service were ended," - the end of the week - "he went back home."

Now, can you imagine? He goes back home, he's unable to speak. He's unable to explain to Elizabeth what just happened. He's unable to explain

what happened to him. He's unable to explain what's about to happen to her, because this is going to come at a high price for her. And so all he can do is just motion. I mean, the best he can probably do is just go... That's about all he can do. I won't go any further. I think you get the picture. Okay.

So, verse 24, "After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant." I mean, this is a miracle. It's a miracle that he is able to impregnate her. It is a miracle that she's able to be impregnated. It is a miracle that she now has conceived and is pregnant just like God said.

And at the end of verse 24, "she kept herself in seclusion for five months." Seclusion literally means "in hiding." Why? The text doesn't tell us, we can only speculate, imagine. Maybe she's had miscarriages in the past and doesn't want to go through the embarrassment after telling her friends and family, "I'm pregnant," and then to have another miscarriage, because Zacharias still cannot talk. She doesn't have the full body of knowledge that he has.

So, "she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying," - and this is an extraordinary statement of faith, the opposite of her husband. I mean, he struck out, she hits a grand slam homerun - "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me." She knows only God could have done this. This didn't just happen. Only God could have performed this. And he even still is unable to speak to her, but she can put two and two together: "God has dealt with me. The Lord has dealt with me. The Lord who is life and the only giver of life has created life in me. This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me." "With favor upon me" has been supplied by the translators. It just literally reads, "when He looked." That's all it took, just one look. And in the mind of God, God brought it about.

"God looked with favor and grace and mercy," and she has, "to take away my disgrace among men." It was at a time in which if a woman was barren and unable to produce children, it was perceived to be a curse. It was perceived to be God's discipline upon a woman not to be able to produce offspring - in many ways, the opposite of our culture. And for her to say,

"God has taken away my disgrace among men," is her way of saying, "Other men in town will no longer look down on me when I come to the temple, when I come to the court of women, and I hear other women whispering as I walk up, and they stop whispering when I arrive to them. There will be no further backchannel discussions going on about me, what is wrong with me, why I cannot bear children. God has now shown favor to me." And that's what children are, they are a gift from the Lord. "How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them," Psalm 127. They'll bless your heart and they'll break your heart, but the blessings are worth it.

So, Elizabeth does a good thing here. She realizes, "This isn't because of Zacharias; he's just an instrument that God is using in my life. He's just an intermediary that this has actually come from God Himself." I think of James 1:17, "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." No, there's just been a steady, constant, faithful flow of God's gifts and God's goodness into our lives as believers. Even those of us who would be going through the most difficult of circumstances have nevertheless been lavished with God's grace and God's mercy and God's goodness.

So, what do we learn from this account? Well, when God speaks in His word, we must believe it. We can't hesitate. We can't procrastinate. We can't try to rationalize our way around this: "This couldn't actually mean this," or, "This was only in the context here." No, if we see God's clear teaching in Scripture, we must embrace it. We must believe it. We must live it. "The grass withers, the flower fades away, but the word of our God abides forever." "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for reprove, for correction," et cetera.

No. When God speaks, as Romans 3 says, "Let every man be found a liar, let God be found true." God's word is true. And so if God's word says you are saved, you are saved. If God's word says you are lost, you are lost. All that matters is, "What does God say?" And so, are you saved, or are you lost? And there is no other category.

To be saved means you have put your faith in Jesus Christ alone to be your Savior, to be your Lord; that you've turned your back on this evil world system; that you have repented of your sin, and you have entrusted your life, your soul, your everything to Jesus Christ. And if you have done that, He has forgiven you of all your sins, and He has clothed you with His perfect righteousness. "And there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

But if you've never done this, you're lost. You're exactly what the Bible says, what God says. You're lost, and you're perishing. And one day you will stand at the judgment, and you must prepare to meet God. And the books will be open that will be the record of every thought, every word, every deed, every action, every reaction. God has recorded it, and you will face the record of your life. And the wages of sin is death, not just physical death – eternal death, second death.

And so if the Bible says you're lost and you're perishing, then you are lost and you are perishing, and you can't just try to play like it's not so. No, it is so. And so if you're lost, you can be saved, if you would come to faith in Jesus Christ and commit your life to Him; not just have it in your head, but down in the heart, down in the soul; and to exercise your life, your will in a decisive way, to come to that place in your life where you make the big decision, the big decision to surrender your life to Jesus Christ.

And so if you've never done that, today the gates of paradise are swung wide open. An entrance into the kingdom is accessible to you today; it just requires your step of faith. And it's just one step. It's not a marathon. It's not something you have to do for the rest of your life in order to enter the kingdom. It's not even a 100-yard dash or a 100-meter dash, it's just one step, one step out of darkness into light; just one step out of the world and into the kingdom of God. You must enter through the narrow gate.

And so, there must be a crisis moment in your life where you come under deep conviction of your sin, and you see the glorious forgiveness of God being extended to you and offered to you, the prepaid gift of God. You must

by faith take it. Take Him as your Lord and Savior. He offers Himself to you today. "Him who comes unto Me," He says, "I will in no wise cast out." Let us pray.

[Prayer] Father, every passage that we look at in Your word has something new to say to us; and yet it says the same old thing, that we must believe You. We must put faith in Your word and in Your Son and in what You say. And so it's really the old, old message of trusting You. "Trust the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths." Lord, make that so, even deeper in our hearts today, in Jesus' name. Amen.