



Enlisted-Part 2
Zechariah: God's Doubting Senior
Pastor Mike Fabarez

Well, Groucho Marx used to say—always good for a serious church to start with a Marx Brothers quote—he said, “I’d never join a club that would have me as a member.” Remember that line? Yeah. I mean, the standards are so low that I could get in, and I certainly wouldn’t want to be associated with that group. I like that kind of humor—self-deprecating humor—easy to laugh at.

But let’s bring it home to where we live. Let me ask you this question: how are your football skills? Can you throw a spiral? Any good at that? Did you play in high school? Maybe? Yeah, a couple chest-swelling “I did, I played in high school.”

Well, let’s just say you’re on your way to your car here in the parking lot after church and you look at your cell phone, and there’s a message there. So you call your voicemail. And on the voicemail, there is a rep from a professional football team and they are asking you to be the starting quarterback for the rest of the season. How are you going to respond to that?

You’d say, “Wow, what kind of team are we talking about here? Didn’t know Pop Warner had a professional league. What are you talking—what? Are you kidding me?” You’d probably think this guy’s got the wrong number. Certainly, I don’t care if you played in high school or not, you can’t possibly—what kind of team could it possibly be to want me to be the quarterback for the rest of the year? I’m not qualified to do that.

Let me put it in these terms: how are your skills in the Christian life? Or let’s put it this way: how great are you as a Christian and capable of doing great things? If you’re honest, you’ll probably say, “Well, I probably certainly shouldn’t be the quarterback. You know, if God wants to do something great in the 21st century, I probably shouldn’t be carrying the ball. It’d really be good if there was a job on the sidelines to do—that’d be more appropriate.” You might think that says something about the church—if they really want me to be an integral part of what God is doing in the 21st century. Most of you would say, as I think would be easy for us to say, God probably could use someone else a lot better than He could use me if we’re really talking about an important job in this thing called Christianity.

Well, that’s not a bad mindset, right? That actually—that kind of self-deprecating and very seemingly humble response to being considered, in your own thinking, to do something great in Christendom—you would say, “Well, that’s not something I would want to aspire to.” It’s not a bad



mindset. But here's the problem: it's not a good mindset either. There's something wrong with that thinking, at least in part, because it isn't how God works.

I mean, I've quoted from this pulpit enough times to make it very clear: when God is going to assemble His team to do something great, He's not picking people that we would expect Him to pick. As a matter of fact, we always quote it—1 Corinthians chapter 1. It says, "Consider your calling, brothers. Think about it. How many of you were wise according to worldly standards?" Not many—more powerful, no—and he goes through this long list. God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; He chose the weak things of the world; the things that are not—to nullify, to bring to nothing—the things that are. Remember that whole list? I mean, look at the team He's assembled to do great things. He uses some pretty flawed people with a lot of foibles and a lot of problems. And He does those great things through people you wouldn't expect.

And here's how the passage ends: "so that no one should boast before God." I mean, the whole point of this is to know that it's not about the players on the field; it's about the coach. It's about the One who's making these calls and enlisting people that are weak by the standards of the rest of the world, so that through those weak vessels He might do things that can only be attributed to Him.

That whole passage—actually the last verse of that—ends with a quotation from Jeremiah 9, which we read not long ago in our daily Bible reading: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." If you're going to boast—really, we need to give the credit to God. And Paul goes on to say a lot to the Corinthians about that, in that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels," right? In jars of clay, so that the surpassing power can be evident and obvious that it comes from God and not from us.

So on the one hand, it's good for us as Christians to be humble enough to recognize that we're probably not the next, you know, Martin Luther or the great leader of the church. You're probably not going to be the quarterback, and I would never aspire to it. I wouldn't want to think I'm going to play some super important role in the 21st century for Christ. But on the other hand, you shouldn't rule it out. Because God seems to employ and enlist a lot of characters that we just probably wouldn't pick ourselves.

I mean, think of the disciples. Think of the prophets of the Old Testament. Think of the characters—the key characters. The most important king of the Old Testament—just a shepherd boy out in a field that didn't even show up for the job interview. I mean, God is a God who chooses some pretty ordinary people to do some extraordinary things. And that's what we've been looking at, at least setting up for, in the first chapter of Luke.



Last week we had the introduction. This week I want to look at our first character. And maybe you can cease being like so many other Christians who only seem to think—and to plan and to pray—in ways that seem, in their own thinking, commensurate with their own abilities. And that’s how most of us operate. I mean, I think about, I pray about, and I trust God for things I think I can handle—things that might fit my gifts and my talents and my personality and my capacities and my brains. And we think, “Oh, I could probably do that.”

We need to be freed from that thinking—begin to free ourselves, as we read God’s Word, from this self-imposed limitation that we seem to be putting on God, who’s promised to work powerfully within us to do things that are far beyond what we could ever ask or imagine. This is the God that we worship. This is the God that we read about. And it certainly is the God that we meet enlisting various characters in Luke chapter 1 to do some amazing things.

Look at the first one we run into here in Luke chapter 1, beginning in verse number 5. As the narrative begins, we run into a priest—an elderly priest—named Zechariah. And I’ll read this here, and of course with commentary because I can’t help but read it that way. But let’s try and work through the first part of this narrative and understand this context a bit.

It begins, by the way, with this line: “In the days of Herod, king of Judea.” Now, if you have ever spent any time with any Christmas sermons—as we preached not long ago on the Magi—it begins with that indication, that timeframe, of Herod’s reign. And unfortunately, if you are doing your homework—and some of you now, you float around on the internet while I preach—if you ever looked up Herod, Herod the Great, you’d find that he reigned in Judea, which really represented not only Judah in the south, but also the north, all of modern-day Israel, and even into Jordan and a lot of Syria. If you were to look at it from a modern perspective, he ruled most of that. Mark Antony assigned him to oversee this. He was called King Herod, and he later was called King Herod the Great because of his power and some of his capabilities. He certainly poured a lot of money into the Jewish people.

But if you read on Wikipedia, or wherever you look for your facts, you’ll find that he reigned from 37 BC to 4 BC. Which, if you’re really thinking a little bit about that, that should raise your eyebrow. He’s here in the narrative story of the birth of Christ, as he is in Matthew 2, and it seems he dies before we move from BC to AD. What’s with that? I have no time to explain all that. But I have—and it was just last year, the year before—and there’s one sermon on the back of your worksheet there which goes into far more detail than probably I even needed to then, talking about why the birth of Christ didn’t happen at the proverbial zero; that it happened at least between 6 and 4 BC. That’s the only real window we have when we study the reigns of the three leaders: we’ve got the emperor Caesar Augustus; we’ve got the governor Quirinius; and then we’ve got the king of the land, and that is King Herod. Dionysius in the sixth century—don’t get me started, but it is the last service so I have a little extra time—Dionysius, in the sixth century, a monk, was assigned by the pope—on a little bit of a rush assignment—to put together the timing of the birth of Christ so

we could stop dating everything by the founding of the city of Rome, and we could date it by the birth of Christ. Well, he turned in his paper a little too soon. He certainly lined up Augustus's rule, and he lined up Quirinius's governorship, but he missed the hard facts about the death of Herod the Great. And so that's why our dating is all wrong. It's off by at least four years and probably five, because the birth of Christ and this all took place at the very end of Herod's reign.

And you could read it that way, knowing the rest of the story: "in the days of Herod"—the last days of Herod, nearing the end of Herod's reign—"the king of Judea." That's way more comment than I have time for the rest of the text. But let's keep reading. Now we're going to meet our character for the morning.

"There was a priest named Zechariah." That's an Old Testament name—you know that name. And the priestly tribe—of course we've got 12 tribes of Israel; there's one tribe that is your candidate, at least because of your tribal ancestry, of being a priest—and that's the tribe of Levi. So not all Levites are priests, but you have to be a Levite to be a priest. And you've got Zechariah here who is a priest, and then he's described further as being "of the division of Abijah."

Now, when you read through the Bible in your Bible reading, this is the part you probably glaze over—there in 1 Chronicles 24. But they're going through the list of the priests, and they give us this insight that there were 24 divisions of the priesthood. And here's what they did: they served on the Temple Mount in the temple. Josephus tells us as it was all reconstructed—and a lot of money poured into it by King Herod—they served there for two weeks a year. That covered almost the whole year, each division. Josephus tells us that at the time of Christ there were probably anywhere from 17–18,000 priests to 20,000 priests. Now, that's a lot more than when it was set up in the Old Testament. And these priests used to live off the sacrifices. Now you had so many that every division had at least, on average, between 800 and 820 priests in each division.

So here's Zechariah. He's of the tribe of Levi, he's a priest, and he's one of 20,000 priests. In his division, he's one of ~800 priests that get to serve twice a year on the Temple Mount and to lead the worship. And because of that—by the way, I should say, and later we learn he's from the hill country of Judea—he doesn't live...he's not a downtown priest. He lives out in the country in the hill country of Judea. And he just has to travel to the Temple Mount when Abijah's number is called to serve on the Temple Mount. And he serves there for two weeks out of the year and conducts the worship. So he only gets two weeks of income from that, and probably is bivocational—and he's a mechanic or a plumber, I don't know what he does on the side—but he's doing something else. So he's full-time, at least in terms of a card-carrying priest, but he's only serving on the Temple Mount twice a year. And even then it's in a group.

“He had a wife from the daughters of Aaron.” Now, if you know anything about the priesthood, you could marry within the tribes of Israel. You didn’t have to marry within your own tribe, and you didn’t have to marry the daughter of a priest. But he does. And he’s got a wife named Elizabeth—which, if you really know your Bible trivia, is the name of Aaron’s wife. So here is Elizabeth—born in a priestly tribe, marries a priest, and named after the first wife of the first priest, Aaron the high priest.

And here’s the greatest part of their description as we meet them in Luke 1:6: “They were both righteous before God.” That’s not a statement of justification—though I’m sure in God’s mind they were justified; God declared them righteous because of their faith. But this speaks to their sanctification. Look at the rest of it: “walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” Now whenever we see that, some of us balk and we go, “Oh, they’re perfect.” The Bible’s not trying to say they’re perfect. Clearly the Bible is very clear from beginning to end—no one is perfect but God, and the incarnate Christ, and the Holy Spirit—we get that. But in this case, what we have here is that phrase “blamelessly,” which is much like the New Testament phrase “above reproach.” That means that these guys were consistently godly. Oh sure, they failed. As a matter of fact, we’re going to see Zechariah trip and stumble here. But what we learn about them is that they were righteous people. They took their godliness seriously. They walked circumspectly, as Paul used to say. They were careful to do what the Bible said. They were very careful to be godly.

“But” (verse 7)—contrastive conjunction—what’s that all about? “They had no child.” Well, here’s the deal: according to Psalm 127, to have kids is a reward from the Lord. Now here’s a priest and a daughter of the priestly line; they had a good marriage; they were righteous; they did what God asked them to do. And here’s the thing: God never rewarded them with children. What’s with that? I mean, not only the pain of infertility that you can have—not having kids when all your friends are having kids—but in the first century, in the ancient Near Eastern culture—in most ancient cultures—your kids were your Social Security. Your descendants were the pride of the patriarch and matriarch of the family. This was a big deal. Not to have kids was a real disgrace in the culture. So they carry not only the emotional pain of wanting to be a mommy and a daddy and not being able to do it, but they bore the disgrace of people kind of raising their eyebrows: “What’s with these folks? They don’t have kids. That’s too bad. It’s a shame God has not delivered them from this cultural disgrace or this personal pain.” And worse than that, it says Elizabeth was barren and they were both advanced in years—so pretty much they’d given up on this. It seems they’re old and they’re past that time; they’ve given up on having any children.

“Now” (verse 8), “while he was serving as a priest before God when his division was on duty”—remember, I said twice a year you get two weeks of this duty—“according to the custom of the priesthood,” verse 9 says, “he (that is, Zechariah) was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.”

Now, you might just picture 800 priests coming to Jerusalem to do their job for two weeks out of the year, and they all kind of mill around and do the work and in and out of the temple. That's not how it worked. Nobody goes into the temple. You have the temple courts. If you've been to Jerusalem, you've seen the Temple Mount where you've got the Dome of the Rock mosque on it now—but picture Herod's temple, this imposing, very large, 15-story temple that stood there, and Herod had decked it all out. You didn't go in that building. There were courts—there were concentric courts. You had the Court of the Gentiles; you had the Temple Mount—the Court of the Gentiles; the Court of the Women; the Court of the Men; and then you had the building. And the building was ornate, and it was off-limits. You could go in if you were a priest and serving in the daily sacrifice—but not everybody walked in. One priest did that with every sacrifice. You went in and you burned the incense; you offered the sacrifice at the altar outside; you went into what was called the Holy Place. It was a room with the table of bread—they called it the showbread—they laid out before God that they baked. Then you had the candelabrum—the big candelabrum that burned there—and the candles inside the Holy Place. And then you had this altar that burned with coals, and incense was put on that—which was a sign, the Bible says (Psalm 141), of the prayers of the saints. And then you had the curtain. And right by the coals was the curtain, and behind the curtain you had a cubed room—a small room—and that's called the Holy of Holies. Within the Holy Place was the Holy of Holies. And the priest didn't go in there—Zechariah was never getting in there. That was the high priest, only once a year on Yom Kippur—he would go in there on the Day of Atonement. (So what Yom Kippur means.)

And this is interesting here: it says, “as was the custom,” chosen by lot. See, the priests, when they came to serve—let's just say there are 800 priests that came in the division of Abijah to serve that week—they were put into two groups, and the two groups were: who has served to burn incense before God, and who hasn't. Because you could only do it once. You can only do it once in your entire career as a priest. One day you got. And with 20,000 priests at the time of Josephus, you had decades' worth of priests—and of course they kept adding to the ranks, and then others were retiring from their ranks. But here's the deal: you got one shot at doing this. One time you got to go in and burn incense in the Holy Place—in the holy room—right in front of the curtain, in front of the Holy of Holies. One time. They drew straws, threw dice—whatever the casting of lots—it was some chance game that was played that pulled a straw, rolled the dice, your number was hit. And it was Zechariah's time—providentially picked by God through the casting of lots—to go in and to burn incense.

Look at verse 10: “The whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.” That's what they did. And there's the connection there—as I said, Psalm 141, and even in Revelation chapter 8, by the way—the picture of the heavenly throne room—the picture of an altar there burning the incense—even there it is said to be rising before God: it's the prayers of the saints. So here's this symbol of all the people praying.

Whenever you look ahead to chapter 2, there's a guy named Simeon who's on the Temple Mount who really captures the essence of the godly old priests of Israel. And they were, as it says of him, “waiting for the consolation of Israel.” I mean, that's code for: they couldn't wait for the Messiah to



come. It was kind of looking dark. They had to reign under the proxy hand of King Herod; the Greco-Roman government was upon the Jews, and they couldn't wait for redemption and freedom from that. And they couldn't wait, if they were insightful about passages like Isaiah 53, for the coming of the way for their sin to be taken away—as John the Baptist would later say, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” They couldn't wait for the Messiah to come. And a lot of those prayers were: “God, deliver us. God, send Your Son. God, send the Messiah.” And so here's this picture of him burning this as everybody was outside.

This happened two times a day, by the way, and the text doesn't tell us whether it was the morning incense burning or the evening incense burning, but one or the other—either mid-morning or mid-afternoon—he's burning the incense of the prayers, symbolic of the prayers of the saints.

Verse 11: “And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord.” Now I'm already nervous about my once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to burn the incense in the Holy Place—this is the highlight of his career as a priest—and standing there was this appearance of an angel at the right side of the altar of incense. You can see the curtain, you can see the candelabrum, the showbread, and here is the altar. And here comes this Person—appears. Now, no one's in there. Once or twice a day, one priest gets to go in there one time in his life. And here you've got the priest in there, and there's a dude that shows up—an angel. And that hasn't happened—it's been 400 years, right? Between Malachi—which is the last book not only in our English canon, but it's the last book in the chronology of the Old Testament, written probably in 430 BC. The prophecies of Malachi. We've had silence. We call them the 400 silent years. We don't have revelation; we don't have angels coming down; we don't have any books of the Bible being written. You've got some history in between, but you're waiting. When's God going to send His Son? Angel appears.

As you would imagine (verse 12), Zechariah is freaked out by this—“troubled” is the biblical word for it—when he saw him, and fear fell upon him, as it would upon you. And the angel said to him (verse 13), “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.” Can you see the play on the setting here? Incense is just burning here, going up as the prayers of the saints. The angel says, “Hey, your prayer has been heard.” And what's that? “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.” Month after month after month after month in your marriage you prayed for a kid—God has denied that. Here's the deal: your prayer has been heard; you're going to have a kid; you're going to call his name John.

John is the combo of two Hebrew words—Yahweh (a very short abbreviation of that at the front end) and the word for grace (the actual form of the word “gracious”—adjective). “The Lord is gracious” is what the word John means. The Lord is gracious. Now that all fits—prayers; incense goes up; angel shows up; God's answered your prayer. He is gracious. He's going to give you the answer to your prayer. You're going to have a kid; you call him “Yahweh is gracious”—“God is gracious,” “the Lord is gracious.”



“You will have joy” (verse 14) “and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.” I guess so. Everyone that gave up on these two being parents are all going to rejoice—you had a kid! I can’t believe it. Amazing. Fantastic. Everyone’s going to be happy and happy.

But it doesn’t end there. Now this thing gets weird. I mean, it’s already weird, but it gets even weirder. Verse 15: “For he will be great before the Lord.” Now, you know every parent—especially one who’s waited for a kid their whole life—obviously it’s going to be the apple of his eye, going to be special, the best—he’s a scholar at Jerusalem Elementary School and on a roll—he’s going to be proud of his kid. But now he doesn’t just say he’s going to be great to you and everyone’s going to like him; he’s going to be “great before the Lord.” How much so? We’ll learn this in three weeks. But in Luke 7, just a few chapters later, here’s what Christ says about John the Baptist: “Of those born of women, none are greater than John the Baptist.” Think that through. Jesus Himself—barring Him, of course—this is the greatest guy ever. “Great before the Lord”—he is going to be great. That’s an understatement.

Verse 15, middle of the verse: “He must not drink wine or strong drink.” Even that caught his attention, I’m sure. Because that’s something—you know, when you read in the Bible, every now and then, everybody’s drinking wine; that’s what they drank in the day, and it’s very different than our wine—but still, every now and then you’d see statements like this. In Proverbs 31: “It’s not for kings to drink wine; it’s not for rulers to drink strong drink.” I mean, there were times when you look at certain people that were going to deny themselves these things. Those are guys—just important—they’re not going to be in any way inebriated or even put any dullness in their minds because of alcohol. They’re refraining from that.

The Nazirite vow in the Old Testament—remember that?—part of that, not only not cutting your hair, but you were to refrain from all alcoholic beverages. And so even there you’ve got this ascetic kind of flavor to his life, and you think this guy is going to be important. He’s going to be focused—like a laser beam—on something here, doing God’s work.

Keep reading: “and he’ll be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.” Now that freaks out an Old Testament guy, because we’re right at the turn of the Old Testament to New Testament—think about that. You read about the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament—He comes upon prophets to do ministry; then He leaves them. He comes upon kings, and they prove that they’re under the direction of God’s Spirit, and then even then He leaves them—even David, when he says, “Don’t take Your Holy Spirit from me.” The Spirit’s work was transient in people’s lives in the Old Testament. And here, this is not only going to be someone who has the Spirit on them a lot in their ministry—the promise of the angel is: from the time that they’re born, from the mother’s womb, the kid is going to be filled with the Holy Spirit. That—I mean—that had to blow the seminarian’s mind here. “What are you talking about?” That’s weird.

Verse 16—talk about a powerful ministry: “He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.” You’ve been reading our daily Bible reading in Jeremiah—that’s been a sad book to read, is it not? I mean, this guy’s got a tough ministry. Here he is preaching all the time, and even at the beginning of his ministry, “You’re going to preach—no one’s going to listen to you.” I mean, I don’t want to sign up for that job. That’s what he’s going through. Here’s the guy—the promise at the beginning—even though he has plenty of opposition (and we’ll learn about it in three weeks; we’re going to study his life a little bit from this text), but the point is—he’s going to have a lot of success. A lot of people’s hearts are going to be turned to the Lord their God.

Keep reading—let’s define the pronouns now (verse 17): “And he”—who’s the he? That’s Zechariah—sorry, that’s John, his son—“will go before him.” What’s the antecedent to that pronoun “him”? Who—“him”? “The Lord their God.” Think that through now: he—John—is going to go before the Lord their God “in the spirit and power of Elijah.” Now, if his head wasn’t spinning fully yet, now it’s moving quickly—the RPMs are just...what are you talking about? I mean, this is clear. Remember, he’s got a seminary degree. This guy’s a priest; he studied the law, he’s studied the prophets, studied the Torah. He knows what the Bible says. And here’s what he’s hearing in that very simple statement there: the Lord is coming; my kid is the predecessor to the Lord coming; and he’s going to come “in the spirit and the power of Elijah.” That’s how Malachi ends. If you don’t know that, surely it’s in your reference Bible there in the small print—Malachi chapter 3 and Malachi chapter 4 (beginning of chapter 3 and chapter 4). That’s the end of the Old Testament. It talks about the coming of the Lord, and it says it will be preceded by the coming of Elijah—the power of Elijah, the ministry of Elijah (whatever that means). He knows what he’s saying here: “My kid is going to be that prophetic figure that the rabbis have been expounding on for 400 years since Malachi wrote it.”

Something big. You’ve just told me: my kid is going to be the one who fills the role of the Elijah that was to come, and he’s going to set the stage for the coming of the Lord. This is cataclysmic. This is eschatological, in his mind. This is huge. “And he’s going to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children” (that’s quoting Malachi) “and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just—to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” He’s going to prepare them. A lot more on that in three weeks. But that’s a big deal—what you’ve just said.

Now, it’s one thing to hear that you’ve been praying for a kid and late in life you’re going to have the kid that you never thought you could have. But there’s a big shift between verse 14 and verse 15—where we start talking now not just about the prayers of a couple wanting a kid, but the prayers of a nation wanting the Messiah; the prayers of the nation wanting God to appear to do the work He promised to do—which was to take care of sin and to set up a kingdom (a kingdom they didn’t know would be postponed for many years). But that’s a huge expectation that you’ve just said is about to be fulfilled in the birth of my kid. Big, big deal. You want to talk about getting called into the game—to be the quarterback here—and you’re going to raise the Elijah that was to come to set



the stage for...this is a big deal. It must have been an amazing, mind-blowing thing that he just heard. Clearly it was.

But what I'd like to note—before we go any further—is the context in which it takes place. This is a country priest who serves two weeks out of the year, who lives way down in the hill country of Judea—miles from Jerusalem. He's not a professional scholar. He's not a downtown priest. He's not...he is just your country priest, who works a bivocational job doing something besides being a priest. And yet he's given himself to walk circumspectly and carefully and obediently—to do what God asks him to do. And he finds himself here, faithfully carrying out his responsibilities, when God shows up and says, "It's time for you to step up."

I just love that picture. And I see it so often in the Bible—and that is: the people that God chooses to use in great ways in the Bible usually are caught simply going about their work, being faithful and obedient. Let's start with that—Parallel Number One on your outline (that's a lot to get to number one, but let's shut it down): just like Zechariah, if we're going to be useful to God, we need to be faithful and obedient. Let's just work at that. I'm not saying—I don't want, as a result of this sermon—"Hey, I want to be the quarterback of the 21st century; do the greatest thing that's ever been done in the 21st century for Christ." I'm not looking for that kind of overweening ambition. What I'm looking for here is people that are willing to say, "I will be as faithful and obedient as I can at the thing God has called me to do right now." Because that is what we find God reaching for—that is who we find God reaching for—to take off the bench, so to speak, and to put into the game to do something that really far exceeds anything you could have ever asked or imagined. That's the kind of thing that we do to prepare ourselves to be used in any way God would want us to be used.

Oh, we all need to be willing—willing and ready—to do whatever God wants. But you want to prepare for that? Just do what you're called to do, and do it as faithfully as you can, and be as clean and as biblical and as godly and as righteous as you can in your daily behavior.

Keep your finger here in Luke 1 and turn with me, if you would, to 2 Timothy chapter 2. 2 Timothy chapter 2. If you are following along in our daily Bible reading, and you do your reading in the evening, this is the passage we're going to read tonight. If you read it in the morning like I did, this is the passage we read when we got up this morning to get our daily reading going. We read this just this morning. And here is one of the greatest summaries of what we just read in the narrative of Luke 1: a faithful, obedient guy walking carefully in the commandments and statutes of the Lord—whom God reaches out and says, "I need to use you to raise the Elijah that was to come—John the Baptist."



Take a look at how it's put. Let's get some context in verse 19: "God's firm foundation stands"—perhaps that's an allusion to the church as he's called the church "the pillar and foundation of the truth"—"bearing this seal" (this is 2 Timothy 2:19): "The Lord knows those who are His." That's probably more than knowledge—*ginōskō*—that's a word often talking about God's love and His involvement and His intimacy with His people. He loves His people—perhaps what we're getting at there (more on that another time). Then the second thing is: "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." Right—we're talking now about sanctification. Live a godly life.

Now he illustrates it (verse 20): "Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay—some for honorable use, and others for dishonorable." "Therefore" (verse 21), "if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy"—love this next line—"useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work."

Read that again: if I want to be ready to be used—useful—to the Master, I need to cleanse myself (verse 21) of all that is dishonorable; then I'll be a vessel for honorable use—set apart as holy (speaking now of my lifestyle)—useful (because holy people are useful to God)—"useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work."

Then he gets into specifics. "So what do you work on?" Work on being as great as you can in this generation? That's not really the strategy. The strategy here is (verse 22): "Flee youthful passions; pursue righteousness; pursue things like faith and love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." I don't know what God's going to call you to do in your generation—in your family, in your workplace, in your neighborhood—have no idea. But here's the deal: you should be ready. And to get ready—be faithful to what you do, just like Zechariah was. And work on being godly. Work on being pure in your heart. Work on taking those secret sins that no one knows about and eradicating those so that you can be ready when God asks you to step up to do something for Him. Make sure that you're working on having the kind of heart that's responsive to what God's Word has to say. And God will use you.

We find this in a lot of people in the Bible—Amos, out working as a farmer in Tekoa, not far from Zechariah's house in the hill country of Judea. He's a faithful farmer. He says, "I'm not a prophet nor the son of a prophet"—remember that?—but God's called me to step up, and I did it. Just faithful.

Gideon—what's he doing? Midian's oppressing them. He's out there—he's actually hiding in a winepress (which is used for pressing out wine), and he's threshing grain in the winepress. He's just out there trying to provide for his family—faithfully doing his work. God shows up, calls him to do something great—deliver Israel from the Midianites.



You've got Moses working for his father-in-law out there in the middle of the desert—outside of Egypt—telling his father-in-law, “Whatever you need me to do, I’ll do,” and he’s tending the sheep. David doing the same thing—working hard, not even aspiring to great things—and the prophet shows up (Samuel) to anoint him to be the king.

All I’m saying is: I want to be careful to be faithful and obedient. I like to put it this way: God often calls people to step up who do the little things with the faithfulness that most people only bring to the big things. Here was Zechariah—frankly, probably living a more circumspect, faithful life than a lot of the downtown priests who were big shots—who knows, maybe even the high priest himself. And because they were living their lives with the kind of faithfulness and care that most people only bring to the big events and big stages of Christianity (if you will), that’s the people that God chooses to step up: “I need you. I’m going to use you.” If He can reach into the tool-chest drawer of the church and pick someone to do something important, He often picks those who are being faithful. Didn’t Jesus say that often in His teaching? “If you’re faithful with a little, you’ll be faithful with a lot.” That’s what I’m looking for.

By the way, one more thing before we leave this point of being ready to be used by God—enlisted by God. Think about—just jot this down; we won’t take time to turn there—but John chapter 15, verse 2. John 15—you know that, Sunday school grads—that’s the passage about the vine and the branches, remember? The second verse puts it this way: if you don’t bear fruit—cut off, cast away. Okay. If you do bear fruit—this is the second half of verse 2 in John 15—He prunes every branch that bears fruit so that it’ll produce even more fruit.

Think this through: here is a branch doing a good job. The vinedresser doesn’t ignore it. The vinedresser—who Jesus says is “My Father”—comes and prunes it. Ouch. I don’t want to be pruned. No, no—I’m going to prune you so that you’ll bear even more fruit.

I mean, you think Zechariah was a blessing to his town, to his village, to his family? Well, sure he was—a godly man, probably a wise, godly person. Well, God puts him through some pain. And the only pain we know about in this text is that he is infertile—he and his wife can’t have kids—which, I told you as I read the text, is even more of a disgrace and reproach than most of us can imagine. Even though many of you—as I did for 10 years of my marriage—struggled without kids, went through years of all the treatments and trying to see if we could. We know the pain of not having children. It was even worse in those days. And that pain, in this context, certainly would give us something of a biblical principle regarding the way God uses pain to prepare people.



Doesn't James 1 say it explicitly, starting in verse 2? You want to "count it all joy," my brothers, when you encounter various trials. Why? Knowing that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance have its perfect work—let it play itself completely out—so that you may be *teleios* (if you've heard that word from this platform enough—*teleios*). I like to translate it this way: being "just right"—being prepared in just the right way. *Teleios*—it's translated in that text "perfect" in the ESV—"lacking in nothing."

God is going to take people who (as it's put in 2 Timothy 2) are "ready for every good work"—who He has not only prepared with faithfulness and obedience, but people that are faithful and obedient even when their prayers aren't answered—even when they're hurting. As Tozer liked to say: "He rarely uses anyone greatly—God, that is—until He hurts them deeply." There's something about the pruning process that will help us, if we understand it, look at our own pain differently. You need to look at your own pain differently. Think it through. We can't be people that just hurt and go, "Oh God, just take it away. I don't want it," and ignoring it. Look at it (as James says we should) as the testing of our faith in God so that that testing could produce something in our character he calls perseverance—*hypomonē*—the ability to hold up under the pressure, so that we can build the kind of sterling character so that God can have us ready—*teleios*—perfectly equipped to do whatever He calls us to do, lacking nothing.

You think the years of infertility prepared Zechariah and Elizabeth to raise the most important preacher in all of the Bible—barring Jesus Himself? Absolutely. And that pain was preparation. And you need to see your pain that way. You need to think that through next time God doesn't answer your prayer and you're in some protracted illness or sickness or difficulty or trial and you're going, "Man, I don't like this." God's preparing you. It's the seminary of pain. There's a seminary you go to to prepare your mind. But there's a seminary, if you will—a preparatory Bible college, if you will—that takes place when you go through personal trials and pain. Don't disregard it. As a matter of fact, it's very counterintuitive—James 1:2 says count it all joy. Look at it in a more positive light and recognize that that pain is preparing you for a kind of usefulness in the future that maybe you can't even imagine right now—as you keep praying really simplistically to just have the pain go away. I don't want to be masochistic; I don't want to pray for more pain in my life. I want to pray for my pain to go away. But I want to see it in the light that it's presented to us even in this narrative—and that is: Zechariah and Elizabeth were prepared by their years of deprivation and infertility to be useful.

Be faithful and obedient (and I might add parenthetically—even when your life is filled with disappointment or hurt—to be useful). Be faithful and obedient.

Sometimes, though, we recognize—as we do with Zechariah here—that when God calls His man or His woman to step up to do something for Him, we find that even the faithful people lack faith. When that happens—we left the story at verse 17; let's pick it up in verse 18—we're going to find Zechariah here, godly man, showing that he doesn't have the trust in God that he should have.

“And Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this?’” He says, “I’m an old man.” Matter of fact—here’s the implication—I don’t think I can know this. I don’t think I can believe this. “For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” You’re calling me in to be the parent of someone super important—so important that Malachi prophesied that he was coming. I’m telling you what—you called the wrong number here. Not me. Can’t happen.

Look at this now—here’s one of the biggest ironies of this text. What did he just do? He offered incense on the altar—which was what? Symbolic of the prayers of the saints. Gabriel had just said to him—the angel had just said—“God has answered your prayers.” What does that imply? You have prayed for a kid. God’s showing up to say, “Here’s your kid,” and you’re saying, “I can’t believe that. That isn’t going to happen.” Do you see the paradox there? Do you see the conflict—the contradiction? I mean, that’s a bit of a problem here, Zechariah—Mr. Godly Man, priest. You’re telling me you’ve been praying for something and you don’t even believe it’s happening when it happens. That’s kind of...that’s how a lot of our prayer gets, is it not? Our prayer gets to a place where we lose expectancy in our praying. And here’s a guy who’s faithful and godly and he’s praying through his pain, but in a sense we learn he doesn’t even really expect God answers prayer. That’s a sad place to be. And it’s not only a sad place to be—that’s a place where you’re going to get God angry. And in this case, the messenger of God—angry.

Verse 19: “The angel answered him, ‘I am Gabriel.’” Now up to this point we don’t have his name. Matter of fact, we probably never would have had his name—humanly speaking—unless Zechariah hadn’t doubted the answer to the prayer he was praying. And here’s the play on words we miss, which is great. The reason he gives his name—if you were in our angelology study last year on Thursday nights, we talked about the only two angels in the Bible that were named: Michael and Gabriel. We looked at Michael’s name and what it means; we looked at Gabriel’s name and what it means—and it’s usually translated (strangely enough) “the man of Elohim,” “the man of God.” That’s a weird name for an angel. Sometimes they translate it “hero of God,” because it’s such a conflicting idea. But it has that sense of—you’re standing strong, and you’re a person who believes God, and you trust God. You’re a man of God; you’re a hero of God.

Well, the play on words here is that when it comes to “God’s answered your prayers; you’re going to have a kid”—Zechariah says, “I’m an old man.” And the angel turns back and he says, “Listen, I’m the man of God.” You may not be trusting God—I certainly trust God. “I’m the man of God, and” (verse 19) “I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you, to bring you this *euangelion*.” *Euangelion*. You’ve heard that word—*euangelion* is transliterated into English words like evangelistic, evangelism, evangelical. *Euangelion*—that’s how you say it in the Greek language—and that means what? Good news. It’s also translated in English “gospel.” The first reference—by the way, one of the few references that Luke employs of the word “gospel” in the Gospel of Luke. And here he says the angel brings him good news.

Now, this happens on two levels—don't lose that. Level number one is: you and your wife have been praying for a kid; I've got good news—you're going to have a kid. But between verses 14 and 15 we learned this isn't any ordinary kid; this is a kid who's going to be great in God's economy; this is going to be the kid that is going to "prepare the way of the Lord." And that's an answer to the prayers not only of two infertile people—that's an answer to the prayers of an entire nation. As Simeon prayed, "We're waiting for the consolation"—they were praying. In the worship service, the undertone of all Jewish worship was that the Messiah would come. And here he says, "I stand in the presence of God; I'm going to bring you the *euangelion*—the gospel, the good news." And the good news is—on your level, in your life—you're going to have this kid; on the bigger level—the Messiah is coming, and your kid's going to set the table, so to speak, for the Messiah.

Verse 20: "And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place." You want to know that Gabriel was frustrated and angry—either by proxy, delivering the message and the judgment from God, or whether just having the delegated authority to invoke some discipline in his life—he's mad at Zechariah for going, "I can't believe that's going to happen." And he inflicts him here with disciplinary action. "You want to sit there and mouth off with me about your excuses why God can't do this? Shut up for nine months." I mean, that's basically what he says. "You're not going to speak, then. You'll be mute for nine months"—which, I know, it's more than nine months because actually in verse 24 we find out that he goes home. The angel is not saying, "Your wife has already conceived; you're going to have a kid." But you've got a homework assignment when you come back to the hill country of Judah—you get to conceive this kid. Which is an interesting thing—come home and explain to your wife...

Anyway, the point is: he's got nine months plus—he's got to finish out his task here serving on the Temple Mount. And so he's nine months silent. Why? "Because you did not" (well, let's read it) "because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." God is going to do it—why do you doubt Him?

"And all the people were waiting for Zechariah" (verse 21), "and they wondered at his delay in the temple." Now, here's the thing: the Old Testament was very clear—both by precept and by example—that you cannot mess around in the temple or you will die. Have we seen enough of that in the Old Testament? I mean, He had no problem killing off His priests who go in there with irreverence and do things their own way. You think this guy is godly, and you're sitting outside going, "Oh, Zechariah's away too long, man. Maybe he was a fraud after all—I don't know." You're thinking he's struck dead or something. "You want to go in and get him?" "I don't want to go in and get him." "Well, wait. Wait a little longer." I mean, you're concerned about the poor guy. They're waiting for him to come out.

And while they're kind of wondering what's going on, finally (verse 22) he comes out, unable to speak to them. Now, here's what you need to understand—which I haven't explained yet—but there was something you said (Talmud talked about it) before you went in to do the incense. And then



there was something that the priests were to say when they came out—which was from the book of Numbers—the Aaronic blessing. Aaron's blessing. And the blessing was given in the Old Testament—you remember that—the Aaronic blessing: "The Lord bless you and keep you; may He make His face shine upon you; may He lift up His countenance toward you and give you peace." The Aaronic blessing. That was the tradition. And they did this very risky, scary thing they only did once in their life—they had one opportunity to stand up and to give the blessing of the great first high priest, and to say, "The Lord bless you and keep you..." All of that was the end of this exciting, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

He comes out—mute. He can't speak. He can't even pronounce the blessing he's waited his whole life to pronounce on the people of God. And they realize there's a problem here. This guy's seen a vision in the temple. "And he kept making signs to them"—he's learning a crash course in sign language—"but he remained mute." He couldn't speak. "And when the time of his service had ended, he went to his home"—with an assignment. And it was time for him to tell his wife all that had happened.

Now, here's the deal: he stumbled in his faith. Having prayed for something, and then when it came time to get that thing, he didn't believe God. I don't want you to make the same mistake that Zechariah made. Let's put it this way in your worksheet, if you don't mind: jot it down like this—prepare to have your faith stretched. If you're saying—as I'm assuming we're all saying—"God, I want to be used by You to do something—whatever it is. I'll be the waterboy; I'll be the towel guy; the equipment kid; I'll be the running back, the defensive back; I'll be the quarterback—whatever You want me to be. I will just be faithful and obedient in doing what I'm doing. I'll see my pain as preparation. I'll just keep serving You as faithfully as I can." Then know this: at some point, I'm assuming God's going to call you to step up to something. And when He does call you to step up to something—providentially or by His Spirit—and you make that clear connection that it's time for me to step up here, I just want you to know you could stumble like Zechariah did by going, "I don't know if I believe I can do this."

Because I see it throughout the Bible. I talked about Gideon in the winepress—you know what his response was when it was said, "Okay—time for you to step up. Let's go. You're going to deliver Israel from the Midianites"? What did he say? You know it, Bible scholars: "But I can't—my clan is the weakest and smallest in all of Israel. I can't do that."

Jeremiah—we talked about that in our daily Bible reading. How did that start? In chapter 1—"You're going to go and be a mouthpiece for Me in this nation." He said, "The kings of the south at the end of this reign need to hear from you; you need to go and preach." And what did Jeremiah say? "I can't do that. How can I do that? I'm just a kid—I'm just a teenager. I don't have the clout to do that."



We see it over and over and over—even Moses, this paragon of godliness—a guy who’s humble (the Bible says—“more humble than anybody”). He stumbles with faith. All right—let’s look at that really, really quick. Exodus chapter 4. If you know your Bible: Exodus 3, burning bush—he’s still having the conversation into chapter 4, and it’s really deteriorating quickly.

By the way, as you’re turning here, I want you to think about Moses. He’s being asked to step up to deliver the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Question: how often had Moses prayed for that? Oh, I can only imagine—all the time. Think about the early years of Moses—he was dead set on seeing the Israelites delivered from slavery. He worked at it. He prayed about it, I’m quite sure. It was on his heart. Now God says, “Okay—now it’s time. Let’s go.” And what’s his response? It isn’t good. It’s not good.

Matter of fact, the highlight of it all—drop down to verse 10. And this is the irony of it—praying, praying, praying... “Oh, okay—let’s do it.” Now—“I don’t think I can do it.” Before we even read this, it reminds me of Acts 12. Remember in Acts 12 when the pastor of Jerusalem—Peter—he’s pastoring (he’s got 5,000 people; this is a big mega-church on the Temple Mount) where he is pastoring—I mean, all the time, day after day—he’s teaching on the Temple in the Temple courts. He gets arrested by the authorities and thrown into jail. Of course—I hope, just like me, if I got arrested for preaching Christ—I hope you’d pray for me. Let’s just make that decision right now: pray for him.

They’re praying for Peter, their pastor—Peter’s in jail. They’ve gathered together—as a lot of the early church did this—they had the biggest house in the congregation; they would meet in big courts, gates and all that. So they’re in this little compound of this rich guy’s house, and they are praying for Peter to be released from prison. You know the story—Acts 12. Peter gets released from prison in answer to the prayers of the people, and there’s a knock at the door. It’s actually out at the gate, and Rhoda opens one eye—here’s the knock—okay? And she runs down the pathway, gets to the gate, opens the speakeasy or whatever is there. “Hey, who is it?” “It’s Peter. I’m out of jail.” She shuts the thing, goes up, runs back into the prayer meeting—fails to unlock and open the gate for Peter. She bursts in and says, “I know you guys are all praying for Peter to get released, but here’s the deal—Peter’s here. He’s been released from prison. He’s at the gate.” You know what they all said? “Nah. Can’t happen. There’s no way.”

I mean, that is so typical of even us, isn’t it? You’ve been praying for a lot of stuff—been praying for your family members to be saved; been praying to make a difference in your Bible study; been praying for you to have an influence on those other families in that athletic thing your kids are involved in; trying to make a difference in your workplace; you’ve been praying for God to use you—sometimes even find yourself saying, “Doesn’t God use me in a powerful way to do something great for these people? Let me see people want to grow.” And then the door opens, and God says, “Great—let’s do it today.” “I...I don’t think so. I can’t believe that that would happen. I don’t think God would use me to do that.”

I mean, the irony of unexpectant praying. That shows something's wrong with our heart. We're believing something about God we shouldn't believe—which is less of Him than we should—who promises (with the power that works within us, to paraphrase and re-jumble Ephesians 3) He promises to do far more than we could ever ask or imagine. Think about that. You're praying to that God, and then when He says, "Let's go—step up—I'm going to use you to do it," maybe like Moses you say this (verse 10): "I can't be the spokesman for this. I'm not eloquent, either in the past or ever since You've spoken to Your servant" (this is Exodus 4:10). "I'm slow of speech and tongue." And the Lord said to him, "Who made man's mouth?" Think about this. "Who makes him mute?" You can ask Zechariah about that—he knows the answer to that. "Or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" Yeah, God controls all of that. "Now therefore" (verse 12) "go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."

Big mistake coming up—verse 13: But he said, "Oh, come on. Please send someone else. I can't quarterback this thing." I often talk about Dad getting off the couch when we were kids—do you remember that? You're being brats with your brother—brats, brats, brats—and you're pushing hard and Dad's just sitting there passive, and then at some point, you know, the legs spin around and go on the floor and Dad stands up—and you know you've gone way too far. I call it "when Dad gets off the couch," right? The sleeping giant awakes—you know you're in big trouble. That's exactly...you see God being so long-suffering with Moses—"I can't do it." He even starts at the beginning: "What if they don't believe me?" "Well, take your staff, throw it on the ground." "I don't know; I'm not a really good speaker after all." And at the end of all that—God's giving him all these reassurances—"Can You just send someone else?" God gets off the couch in verse 14. Just underline this: "And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses." And He provides a solution—which is really a compromise for Moses; it ends up being all kinds of trouble for him—that Aaron becomes his partner in this.

But here's the deal: don't make God mad. When the door opens—you'll see it; it'll be clear—and God will say, "Time for you—out on the field, on the gridiron—now. Please go. In your name, your way—we're calling your number. Let's go." And if you sit there with knocking knees, saying, "I don't think I can do it," or like Zechariah, "I'm too old; my wife's too old; we're not smart enough; we're not eloquent enough; our clan's too weak"—whatever your lame excuse is that we've seen played out over and over in the Bible—don't use it. Stretch your faith. Prepare to have your faith stretched. Because God is going to move you into a place that seems way beyond your natural abilities—and that's exactly how He operates. Get ready for that. I mean, we could illustrate this all morning; I could give you all kinds of personal anecdotes from my own life. This is the reality of it all. Get ready to have God use you in ways you never thought you could be utilized.

The story doesn't end here. Actually, there's a lot of what Zechariah says in what's traditionally called the Benedictus of Zechariah—we'll study that on the last week of this series in Luke 1. But let's at least finish the narrative part of this. Drop down, if you would, to verses 62 through 64. He goes off; they conceive a child; the child is born; they bring the child to be circumcised. For a little

context—let’s start at verse 57: “Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son” (verse 58). “Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they would have called him Zechariah after his father.” That was the plan—I’m sure they even talked about that—even through their years of infertility—“If we had a kid, we’d call him Junior, right, Zach? He’d be named after you.” “But his mother answered”—everybody standing around, all the relatives, big event—circumcision, the Law of Moses, they’re doing what they’re supposed to do—“No; he shall be called John.” Now, there’s been a lot of sign language going back and forth—a lot of writing from Dad. Clearly she knows: my husband says the kid’s name’s got to be John. So she tells everybody: John. They think, “Oh, no—that can’t be John. None of your relatives are called by that name. Why do you want to call him John? That’s not right.”

Verse 62: “And they made signs to his father”—which is an interesting thing. If it were in the singular, I would say maybe it’s just “Hey, get over here.” It’s in the plural, and some people (commentators) would even say—even though it wasn’t in the disciplinary statement of the angel—perhaps he wasn’t only mute, but he was also deaf. I mean, think about that—you’re not going to hear anything for nine months, and you’re not going to be able to speak for nine months. Either way, that’s a tangent there, but we’re not sure what’s going on here. But anyway, they get his attention. They want to know what this kid’s supposed to be called. “I mean, come on—we want to call him Zechariah after you.” Love this (verse 63): “He asked for a writing tablet and wrote”—this is very, very emphatic in Greek—“‘His name’—not ‘I want it to be,’ ‘it will be,’ ‘it should be’—‘it is John.’” That’s his name. Let’s not argue about that. “This is what his name is.” “And they all wondered”—they’re head-spun. “What’s that all about?” “Immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.” Great fear came upon all his neighbors, and all these things were talked about all through the hill country of Judea. Now this is a big deal. It’s a bit of a vindication for a guy who stumbles in the race—someone who, when his number’s called, says, “I can’t do that—that’s not us.” And God gets mad and, through the angel Gabriel, disciplines him. Now we see confidence in Zechariah—the confidence we would have wanted to see at the beginning of this, but nevertheless, it comes back around. And now he’s ready to say, “Okay, all right—I trust You. His name is John. Nobody’s going to debate me on that now.” And God opens his mouth with a sense—almost—of that sense of affirmation from heaven: now you’ve got it. Don’t doubt anymore. Get out there and raise the forerunner to the Messiah. And off he goes.

I put it down this way, real simply—number three: when you stumble (and you will), just get up. Let’s make it as simple as we can. When you stumble—you don’t trust God, you balk when your number’s called, you’re afraid, you don’t do it, you don’t open your mouth when you know He’s asking you, you don’t sign up when you know you should, you don’t step up and do that thing you know God’s calling you to do—when you stumble in unbelief, just get back up. I use the verbiage from Proverbs 24:16, which says, “The righteous fall seven times, and they rise again.” What’s the point? I may stumble a lot, but you get up off the ground.



See, that's the thing about how God operates. He wants us—even when we stumble—to recognize that it's time for us to bolster our faith in a God who can do more than we could ever ask and imagine, and get off our butt, get off the bench, stand up, and do what God has asked us to do.

Peter is a great example of that. Peter stumbled, did he not? He's sitting there at the moment of the crisis of Christ, when He was on trial in Caiaphas's courtyard. All it took was a servant girl to accuse him of being a Galilean, and he sat there and cursed like a sailor and denied Him three times. And what happened? Rooster crowed. He went away sorrowful. That sorrow lasted all through the crucifixion night, the weekend, the resurrection—and even after the resurrection and the appearance of Christ, he takes, in John 21, all his buddies and says, "I'm going fishing. I'm done with this." Now remember—He had said, "You're Peter; on you I'm going to build My church; the gates of hell will not prevail against it." And as it plays out in Acts, he's going to be the senior preaching pastor of the first mega-church in the Bible. And what happens? "I'm just going to go back to what I know. I'm good at this. I mean, I've never really stumbled in my fishing career like I did trying to be some spiritual leader."

Jesus shows up—does two things (two primary things—does a lot there). But He cooks breakfast for Peter and impresses him with two truths. The first one is providential, and in all in God's design, He approaches Peter—yelling out from the shore—beckoning Peter in the same exact way that Peter came to Christ. Remember—Peter was first called when he was fishing and there were no fish, and Christ said, "Put your nets on the other side." It's exactly how He approaches him in John 21. What does that bring his mind back to? His conversion—the initial steps. And when you stumble, I want you to go back to your conversion. Think that way. You didn't get saved because God looked around and tried to find the most godly person to win to Himself. You were saved not on the basis of your works; you were saved purely by grace. And when you stumble and you don't step up when you should, can you relive your conversion? Just go back to that time and recognize, "You know what? Let's just start over." He's faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Relive your conversion.

The other thing He does—He asks him those three questions over and over again: "Do you love Me?" Then what does He say? "Feed My sheep." "Do you love Me?" "Tend My lambs." "Do you love Me?" "Feed My sheep." What's the point? You're supposed to be doing ministry and you're out fishing. Listen—do you love Me? Do what I asked you to do. Do you love Me? Do what I asked you to do. Do you love Me? Just do what I asked you to do. What is He saying? Step up. Step up. Step up. He relives his conversion and then he realigns his focus to focus not on himself—"I'm unworthy, I'm a failure, I've stumbled too much, I'm too old, I can't do it, my clan's the weakest, I can't speak well, I couldn't possibly be used for that"—and Jesus says, "Look at the task. Look at the people you're ministering to—feed My sheep for the glory of God and the good of the people. Stop worrying about you and your inadequacies." Do the job.



When you stumble, get back up. Get out on the field and get to work with a kind of confidence that's different than the confidence I warned you about at the beginning of the message. I said I'm not looking for people to go, "Put me in—I'm the greatest football player ever; I'll be the quarterback for them." I don't want hubris; I don't want overweening pride in our own abilities. But I want confidence—a different kind of confidence that reminds me of when I was 11 years old, and I saw a flyer at my elementary school for a Long Beach Unified School District chess tournament. And my parents had bought this little plastic chess set for us, and my brother—who was four and a half years older—had taught me to play, and I had played enough times to start beating my older brother. And I thought, "I'm a genius. I need to go and enter this tournament, because if I can beat my junior high brother as an elementary school kid, I'm going to mop the floor with these guys—let's go."

So I said, "Mom and Dad, can I be in this chess tournament?" They said fine. Got the entry fee. I went there. I'll never forget—rode my bike on that Saturday, went down there, locked my bike up at the bike rack. I walked in; it was in the cafeteria, and they had all these tables and all these chess sets out and all these kids milling around. They called us to attention; they had all the matches on the wall and all the brackets and everything. And this was going to be great—like three-round elimination. So you've got games to play. I thought, "Man, this is great. I'm so good at this—I want my name on that trophy. I can see it."

I bounced into the cafeteria with a great sense of confidence. And I sat down for game one. And then game two. And then game three. And I got smoked in all three games—in 15 moves total. It was the most humiliating thing ever. I remember leaving, telling my folks, "I'm going to ride now to the school where the chess tournament is. It's supposed to last all day; I'll probably be home 3:30." It's 9:30. I'm done. Eliminated. 11-year-old chess failure. I walked out of that, sucking back the tears—just, "Ah, I hate this game. Those eggheads are nerds anyway; I don't know why I'm here playing with these guys. I don't ever want to play chess again." I felt like the biggest loser.

Now, on the other side of the world—in the Soviet Union—there was an 11-year-old (he was just turning 12 at that time, we're almost the same age): Garry Kasparov—the greatest chess player of his generation. Matter of fact, when he was 11 years old, he was winning the USSR National Youth Championship. He didn't lose a game. He beat everybody he played. By the time he was 17, he was a grandmaster at chess. I mean, there was none better. He was the one—you might remember, if you're old enough—back in the day they started building computers to play against him. He kept beating them. Took them three massive computers before they finally built a computer that could beat Garry Kasparov.

Let's just imagine they put him in a little Russian jet and sent him over here to the Long Beach Airport, and he landed and he got in his limo and he came over, and he saw me coming out with tears in my eyes from the Long Beach Unified School District chess tournament. He said, "Hey, loser—you're leaving at 9:30? You're done already? Here's the deal I'll make with you: I know



next weekend there's another chess tournament—next Saturday there's going to be one. But here's the deal: it's a little different. It's a team chess match—there's partners in this one; it's two against two. I want you to be my partner. And you know, two 11-year-olds will go against all the competition here in LA County—it's the LA County tournament—so we'll partner up."

Now, it would have taken a lot to try and talk me into playing chess again—because I don't think I've ever played it again since I was 11. But had Garry Kasparov showed up and said, "Come on, Mike—let's do it," in time—had he showed me enough of his résumé; had I learned really who he was—he could have gotten me to walk back into the next cafeteria up in LA or Carson or wherever the next one was. I probably would have walked in with a lot of confidence. A lot of confidence.

Like I said, I walked into the first chess match with a lot of confidence—it's just that this confidence would be really different, right? Would it not? Because my confidence wouldn't be in me; my confidence would be in my partner. Now I'm a part of the team; I'm ready to do it—but I'm putting my trust in Garry the Great.

Hymn that the Israelites used to sing—Psalm 20—goes this way: "Some trust in chariots and some trust in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." And if you do—then the next time He calls you to step up to do something for Him—whether it's evangelism at work, whether it's raising kids (you have no idea who those kids are going to be), whether it's doing something in this church—in a ministry that you think, "I don't know—that's over my head; I don't think I can do it"—whatever it is—can you remember who we do this with? A God who says, "According to the power that mightily works within you." The God who says, "I will empower you with My strength." Can you recognize that our confidence is not in us—it's in Him?

I want confidence. I'd like a real sense of "Give me the ball," but not because of who we are—because of who you trust. So let's not follow the example of Zechariah to a T. Let's be godly and faithful. Let's trust Him through our pain. But when it comes time to step up—to do something in this generation—let's say with Isaiah, "Here am I; send me."

Would you stand with me as we close in prayer?

Pray with me, please.



God, I know some trust in chariots and horses. A lot of people are trusting in their church programs and their talents and their track record—and others are just giving up. A lot of people out there just don't even want to talk about doing something great for You because they just think it's beyond them. I pray we could find that right place—that biblical, godly place—of being very biblically optimistic about the future—great confidence. Not that I can change the world for Christ, but that Christ can change the world through me. And I'm ready—anytime, any place, anything—I'll do it. I just want to be faithful with what You've called me to do. And when the doors open, the opportunities present themselves, we're willing to step up and walk through with a kind of faith—I pray—that Zechariah doesn't even demonstrate in this text. Frankly, the kind of faith that his wife seems to demonstrate—Elizabeth in this text—more on that in a couple of weeks.

But God, give us a kind of confidence in You so that we might be a generation of Christians who step into a very dark place in a time that is pivotal in our world—where the church needs to be strong and unafraid, bold, courageous, and uncompromising. Not because we trust in ourselves—because You use the weak things of the world to shame the strong. So do that through us. God, we'll tell You that we're available, and we'll work hard at being faithful. Make us that, and do good things in and through us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.