



Luke 1:21–25

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in seclusion. 25 ‘The Lord has done this for me,’ she said. ‘In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.’

Reflection

Are you familiar with the term Achilles’ heel? It comes from Greek mythology. So the story goes, when Achilles was a baby, it was foretold that he would die young. To prevent his death, his mother Thetis took Achilles to the River Styx, which was supposed to offer powers of invulnerability. She dipped his body into the water. However, as Thetis held Achilles by the heel, his heel was immersed in the water of the magical river. Achilles grew up to become a fearless warrior who survived

many great battles, friend and foe alike coming to believe that he was invincible. Until one day however, when a poisonous arrow was shot at him and lodged in his heel. It killed him shortly afterwards.

Hence the English expression 'to have an Achilles' heel'. A weakness that in spite of overall strength can lead to downfall. I wonder what your Achilles' heel might be? One of my many Achilles' heels is the tendency to lose my voice when I'm run down. I tend to push myself hard and when I go just that little bit too far my weakness is a cold whose only usual symptom is a croaky voice, and sometimes no voice at all.

And it's usually at that point, isn't it, when God takes something away from us like

my voice, that we realise how dependant we are on it, and on him, for the daily functioning of our lives. So I think, on a few levels, I can relate to Zechariah's story in today's passage.

It's been a long time. Embarrassingly long. A privileged few of Zechariah's brothers from the priestly division of Abijah are praying outside the Holy Place in the Court of Priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. In the outer court, devout Jews gathered for worship are also becoming restless. It did not take long for a priest to offer incense – and in this most sacred of rites one did not tarry. Normally the priest came out quickly to lead in blessing the people. What could Zechariah possibly be doing in there? No doubt his priestly brothers had begun to worry for him as the crowds outside grew

increasingly restless at the long delay. Let's pick up Zechariah's story in today's passage, reading from Luke 1:21–25,

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ple.’

On the greatest day of his life, in the highest moment of Zechariah’s career as a priest before God, the career he loved, Zechariah’s faith had failed him. His Achilles’ heel – the pain he carried around, Elizabeth’s inability to conceive that had gnawed away at them their whole life – had come and stolen this moment. As we saw yesterday at the angel’s stunning promise of a child graciously given to them by God in their old age, instead of worshipping, Zechariah balked. He doubted. And today, in a moment in which he could have triumphantly announced the imminent consolation of Israel through the arrival of the long-promised Messiah to all those gathered outside; instead, when he opens his mouth – nothing. And the comedy con-

tinues as we imagine Zechariah making signs and gestures and performing a little skit on centre stage trying to relay what had occurred; and people looking at him as if he had gone mad!

But God has a way of working through our weaknesses and taking the evil we have done and turning it into good. Zechariah would have got the words out eventually, no doubt painstakingly writing them down. And when it came to telling his dear wife Elizabeth, well to see the stunned disbelief on her face slowly turn into the deepest joy and elation, all in slow motion as he excitedly wrote down each next word – drawing that precious experience out would always be amongst their fondest memories and most told stories as a couple.

In God's infinite mercy, his punishment of Zechariah was not merely punitive but also gloriously remedial. In God's sovereignty over good and evil, this is often the case as we live through the consequences of our sin. For Zechariah, so dependent on his voice in his occupation as a priest before God, nine long months of silence would have given him plenty of time to reflect on what has just occurred in the Temple. As punishment, but also by way of blessing, Zechariah, in the daily frustrations of his inability to communicate would have had a constant reminder of his failure. He would also have had ample opportunity to seek the forgiveness of God and to resolve to trust his promises more deeply. And all this reinforced as he watches with tear-filled eyes his beautiful wife of many

years growing with child, the disgrace finally removed from their household, by a God who is always faithful to his word.

As a final note today it's important to notice in our text that it was only after Zechariah returned home that Elizabeth fell pregnant. See there in verses 23 and 24,

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This is no immaculate conception. There has only ever been one of those. John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb but he was not conceived by the Holy Spirit like his cous-

in Jesus , as Luke will go on to show us in chapter 2.

Think & Pray

But with the time that remains today I'd like you to take a few minutes to consider your Achilles' heel. What is your Achilles' heel in the Christian faith? Your weakness despite all your strengths that may one day be your downfall? What is it that might trip you up? What moral failure, what secret sin indulged? Zechariah's fixation on Elizabeth's barrenness tarnished the greatest moment of his life, expressing doubt and unbelief before the most wonderful promises from the angel Gabriel in the heart of the Temple in Jerusalem. What is the chink in your armour? What foothold is there in your life for the Devil? And most impor-

tantly, what are you going to do about it?

Consider today as well the justice and kindness of God. Sin has consequences, but so often God in his sovereignty over good and evil uses the consequences of our sin as both punishment and restoration. So often he takes what we meant for evil and turns it into good. As we work through the consequences of our sin, and suffer and struggle, so often this can be a time of deep repentance and heartfelt turning back to God. Moral failure exposed. A secret sin indulged and thousands lost. Angry words spoken in haste and irreparable damage done. Too much alcohol at a work function, and your license lost for twelve months.

Some time in the wilderness, as painful and

shameful as it can be, in God's grace can also have a deeply restorative effect on our faith. And sometimes the person that emerges from the other side is twice the person they were before this trial, trusting God more deeply than ever, resolved to make amends for what they have done, and living a far more holy life than even well before they stumbled. Perhaps this is you right now, living with the painful consequences of your sin. Take hope from this passage, and pray today that God would redeem this time of painful rebuilding. And if you are yet to stumble, confess your sins and weaknesses to God this morning, and pray for the grace you need to leave them behind forever.