



Luke 1:5–7

5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Reflection

Over the last couple of days we've been struck by the beginning of Luke's gospel, the first four verses, which Greek scholars have described as perhaps the most perfect sentence in the New Testament. In it Luke has announced to the ancient world that what follows, his biography of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, is first and foremost a work of history. But today, his tone changes. From the eloquence and cadence of classical Greek verse Luke descends to more workman like common Greek prose; clear, accessible and sounding more than a little like the Greek version of the Old Testament which was in circulation at the time. From today, Luke's writing begins to sound like the Old Testament Scriptures, and for good reason,

because he begins to chronicle the fulfillment of them. Let me read today's passage, from Luke 1:5–7,

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Luke begins, no surprises here, with historical markers. Because the events that he's about to recount are real. They happened in the time of Herod the Great who

reigned in Palestine from 37 BC until 4 BC. Herod was installed by Mark Antony and the Roman Senate. He was a colourful character – both strong and shrewd, with a gift for taking strategic risks and landing on his feet; he was an artist and a visionary, but was also very unstable. Herod was barbarically cruel to his enemies, real and perceived, which included members of his own family in later life as he hung maniacally on to power. But foremost, Herod the Great is remembered as a builder.

Even now, 2000 years on, if you travel to Israel today the ruins of Herod the Great's buildings are still more impressive than anything, ancient or modern, that visitors to Israel are likely to see. And chief amongst his great building works was the temple in Jerusalem. The ancient Jewish histori-

an Josephus, writing in the first century, describes the Temple in these terms

... [it] wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays. To approaching strangers, it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white.

This shimmering grandeur represented the heart and soul of Jewish culture and religion (which in the first century were one in the same). And in beginning with

the Temple in Jerusalem, Luke begins his story of Jesus on the holiest of ground. There was no more sacred place than the Temple where heaven and earth were perceived to overlay. The Temple represented the meeting place between God and humankind, the earthly dwelling place of the living God. And the whole nation of Israel, zealous Jewish pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean would descend on Jerusalem four times a year in week-long religious festivals to offer sacrifices and worship at the Temple.

And so, as you can imagine, serving as a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem was a big deal, and running the Temple a huge operation. Priests were selected from the line of Aaron (Moses' right-hand-man), his descendants forming twenty-four priestly

divisions of between 300 and 1000 priests who lived in Judea teaching and leading local synagogues. Each division was called to serve in the Temple twice a year, with all divisions serving at the four great festivals when all devout Jews made pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

Luke begins his story of Jesus in these familiar surrounds, with the very human story of a couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah served in the priestly division of Abijah, Elizabeth too came from a priestly line. They led an exemplary life in the sight of God; but a life that was tinged with sadness, as we read in verse 6,

Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blameless-

ly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

In any age and in any culture the desire to have children but the inability to do so is a heavy burden to bear. Your friends so easily falling pregnant, one child, then two, then three. Pictures and videos on Facebook and Instagram, the happiness of others in these posts somehow each a little stab at your own heart. Private anguish. Quiet despair. Feelings of being deficient, incomplete, somehow being less of a woman for not being able to conceive, the fear of being an object of quiet pity amongst your young mum friends. A life tinged with sadness; in any age or culture.

But for the ancient Jew, 'barrenness', that

awful word, was considered a disgrace, even a punishment from God. And so you can hear the whispers when Zechariah and Elizabeth walked by. ‘So holy on the outside, but what secret sin are they concealing?’ And you can imagine their private torment. They love God with all their hearts. They’ve given their lives completely over to his service. As far as is known to them they have upheld God’s law faithfully their whole lives and yet Elizabeth’s barrenness hangs over their household as a disgrace amongst her people (1:25). And now they are both very old. ‘What have we done Lord to deserve this?’

The answer is nothing. People may look at outward appearances but the Lord looks at the heart and when he looks at theirs he sees verse 6,

6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

Think

The grace of God exempts no-one from trouble. But over the coming days, as Luke's story unfolds, we'll see that God in his great mercy has wonderful joy in store for his two faithful servants Elizabeth and Zechariah. Today though I'd like you to meditate on their personal tragedy of childlessness. This may be very close to home for you, or for a couple you know. What is God trying to teach us in his word today when it comes to personal tragedy like this? How can you best love and care

for the Zechariah and Elizabeth in your midst? And how is it that they weren't bitter, but instead seemed to re-double their devotion to the Lord?

One thing that is clear from our passage is that the grace of God exempts no-one from trouble. But if our afflictions drive us closer to him then they are a blessing. We may not think so now. But, as J C Ryle was fond of saying, we will think so when we wake up one day in another world. And don't miss the extraordinary grace and blessing that awaits Elizabeth and Zechariah over the coming days!

Pray

Pray today for those in your midst who are dealing publicly or privately with per-

sonal tragedy. Pray against bitterness in their relationship with God. Pray for empathy, patience, warmth and grace amongst their Christian family. And pray that texts like today's one would remind them that God is sovereign, that he has a plan, and that he is working in human history and in real human lives for the good of his people even amidst suffering that they do not understand.