

How to wait well

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[0:00] So this is God's word. Once, when Zechariah's division was on duty, and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him, do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard.

Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He'll be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

He's never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he's born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

[1:31] And he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. To make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Zechariah asked the angel, how can I be sure of this? I'm an old man, and my wife is well on in years.

The angel said to him, I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I've been sent to speak to you, and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent, and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time. Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he'd seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them, but remained unable to speak.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant, and for five months remained in seclusion.

[2:44] 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.

This is God's word. Amen. Let me pray. Almighty God, we so thank you for your word, the Bible. We thank you that this is the way that you have planned and ordained.

And with this part of the Bible, you've planned it to speak to us today, in this moment. And so we pray for our hearts. We pray for any distractions that we might have, that you'd perhaps put them away, so that we could just centre our attention and who we are and everything that's gone on, that we could centre it upon you speaking to us.

And I just ask that you would move our hearts and help us with anything that we've got going on. And so bless as we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Have you ever waited so long for something to happen that eventually you just gave up?

Has that ever happened to you? That you just gave up and resigned yourself, that what you were hoping for was never going to happen?

[4:07] Have you ever been in that situation? Years ago, when I was a whippersnapper, I remember waiting for a bus with my grandad to go to a club in the evening.

And the bus was late. And we did what everybody does when the bus is late. It'll be here any minute. Any minute it's going to show up.

Just, you know, it's fine. One minute turned into five, turns into ten, turns into thirty. And if you're ever in that situation, the longer that you wait, the harder it is to leave.

Because the logic goes like this, where we've been waiting like half an hour now. If we leave now, I've just waited like, wasted thirty minutes.

And then, what if we leave and as soon as we leave it comes and we miss it? And so you're caught in two minds. Either you continue waiting, but you think, well, it's already been half an hour.

[5:16] How long are we going to be here for? Or you think, well, I've been here half an hour. We might as well just leave and try to find to get there some other way. So you give up.

We gave up. And we started walking back along their road back home. Lo and behold. What do you think happened? No sooner had we walked, like, just far enough so that we couldn't get back there in time.

The bus hurtles down the road, drives past the stop. There's no one there, so he doesn't stop. Because we'd resigned ourselves to the bus not coming, we missed out.

In Luke, in this chapter that we've got, Luke 1, we meet a couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who have been waiting. But they've been waiting for something much more significant than a bus.

They've been waiting for a child. This couple, really, as well, what's going on here is there's two groups of people that have been waiting.

[6:26] There's Zechariah and Elizabeth. But really, they're actually a picture of where the nation of Israel are at. Because Zechariah and Elizabeth have been waiting for a child.

But the nation of Israel have also been waiting for, they didn't know it, but have also been waiting for a child. There is a sense that this couple have resigned themselves to being childless.

And Israel, in a sense, have resigned themselves that not only to the promises of God, they're just not going to see them happen.

They've not heard from God for 400 years, the book of Malachi. And they've given up that God will speak. They've given up that his promises will come to pass any time soon.

We can live in that same place. We can live where we just kind of have that air of resignation. You know, accept our lot in life, believe nothing will change.

[7:42] Think, maybe, you know, this is just how it is. Maybe we've just got to accept, we've just got to suck it up, grin and bear it. And we can have that both in our personal lives. And sometimes we can even have that, you know, we think about God and maybe even in the life of the church.

When you're waiting for a bus that hasn't come, it's because the bus is behind schedule. The problem is, is that we can bring the way that we have to wait for other stuff in life, that way of thinking, that, you know, we can bring that and transfer it onto God.

We can assume that because God isn't running to our schedule, that he's negligent. That he's running slow. He's not on, why is he not on my timetable?

But we need to reframe the waiting period. You know, divine delay, is what I'll call it. Divine delay is not because God has got too much on his plate.

It's not that he doesn't care. It's not because he's behind schedule. But because he's got an intentional sovereign plan. He's got an intentional sovereign plan for each of us.

[8:59] If we take that outlook, it means something. This is what it means. And this is what I'm wanting us to get from this as we look at God's word together. It means that rather than living with resignation when the wait is long, it means that we can live with expectation that God will act at the right time.

That's what it means. And so if you've come to church today, if you've walked through the doors and there is a cloud of resignation hanging over you, my prayer is that you listen and you see that we see together how the living God works and that what he brings is hope in the middle of despair. That he's the same God for us today. He's no different and his character towards you and me is the same. That's where we move to our principle for this morning.

God surprises by speaking. He surprises by speaking. Luke, the writer of this gospel, he deliberately constructs verse 5 to mimic how prophecy in the Old Testament was introduced.

It's deliberate. If you were to look at lots of places in the Old Testament, you read a prophecy book, it always starts with there's a year, there's a king, and there's a place name. This is how it happened.

[10:22] That's done purposefully. And it's in itself there to bring anticipation because the readers would know, oh, this is kind of like how the prophets of all introduced their stuff.

Maybe the first readers of Luke think, something is going to happen here. The first readers would know God is about to do something. He's going to speak and he's going to speak not just into the

ether, but also he's going to speak to a particular person at a particular time in a particular place. Meet Zechariah. A priest born in the line of Aaron. And Zechariah's once in a lifetime moment has arrived.

His name, drawn by Lot, pulled out of the hat, as it were, to burn incense in the temple, is here. He goes into the temple, he's praying inside, the people are also praying outside, and the incense is burning.

It's a symbol of prayers going up to the living God. It's at this exact time, moment in time, that God speaks the first times I've said in 400 years, and it's fair to say Zechariah is caught off guard.

[11:33] He's caught by surprise. God's primary way of communicating with us is by speaking with words, because words matter, don't they? Words establish relationship.

They bring clarity. They create God's words to more than just communicate, but they bring life.

They create life out of nothing and meaning where there isn't any.

We've thought even this, in the kids we thought about, you know, that God created all things. What? He created them out of nothing with words. God's words are powerful.

So the angel Gabriel, when he meets Zechariah, notice with me, he doesn't come with a puzzle to decipher. There's no tricks. It's not a bunch of clues that, you know, some, like, do you remember Crystal Maze that he's going to kind of work it out and think, oh, to work out what's happening, that he's got to piece together.

The angel doesn't come with a piece of art that he's got to kind of interpret. He comes with a message. It's words direct from God's own mouth. Angel means messenger. And it's words that reveal God's character.

[12:42] There's no small talk from the angel or idle chit-chat. When God speaks, every word matters and carries weight. God is revealing himself to Zechariah as the God who keeps his promise.

Zechariah, Elizabeth and the rest of the nation might have been waiting, but the delay is perfectly timed.

God never gives us his divine timetable. There's no app where we can see the route he's going to take with when and where and how he'll intervene. He never runs behind schedule, but his timetable is sovereignly prepared and he always arrives on time.

The difference is, we wish we knew. We want to know when he's coming around the corner. It's because we can't track him. It's because we don't have the app that we can't look away, that we look away from him.

And the default, we go to the default, don't we? Our default is resignation. He's not going to show up when we need him. So while we move to our problem, which is we're surprised and respond with unbelief.

[13:56] Imagine what it felt like for the Israelite nation. Not a word from God for 400 years, roughly 15 to 20 generations with nothing. Just the stories, the echoes of a former time passed down through the ages.

The religious atmosphere after 400 years, I mean, I don't know what the church was doing 400 years ago. Mostly. The echoes of a former time passed down.

The religious atmosphere in Israel just going through the motions. Week by week, same old, same old, same old rhythms. Zechariah, you know, they've been praying and people have been, oh yeah, remember that promise about the Messiah?

What's going on with that? They've continued to pray, but by now you wonder if their prayers had become more, not hopeful expectation, but wishful thinking.

Their inability to conceive and the way that they think about it is kind of symptomatic of the spiritual resignation of the nation.

[14:55] We go back to that question at the beginning. Where in your life have you been patiently waiting for an area to turn round?

Where it doesn't seem, where it seems perhaps to you like you just can't catch a break. You've prayed until you can't pray anymore and it feels like God is silent. And it feels like you've been forgotten.

Are there temptations, sins you just can't seem to resist and you've prayed asking for help and you feel beaten up, worn down, burdened by your inability to say no to sin?

Is it perhaps the health of a loved one? You've prayed and prayed, but they don't seem to get better.

Maybe it's someone that you know who doesn't follow Jesus and you've prayed for them, you've shared with them, but they seem just as far away now from him than they've ever been.

[16:04] We can feel like Zechariah, like God has stopped speaking, that he stopped listening and we feel that sense of resignation, like giving up.

What's the point? We might just as well accept the status quo. This is just how it is and how it will be. Resignation, giving up, it's a coping mechanism.

It's something that insulates us from further pain. Because what happens when we do that is giving up and being resigned, it actually feels easier to process.

It's easier to be resigned that God won't surprise you. It's easier to give up because it prevents from further disappointment. It actually prevents you from placing yourself in the vulnerable place of faith. And its core resignation is losing hope. It's unbelief. If you stay in that place though, if you stay in that place, which you can, it will scar you.

[17:17] It'll lead to cynicism. It'll lead to numbness. And it will lead to despair. The predictability of resignation feels safe.

But look at what it does to Zechariah. When Zechariah hears good news, he hears good news. The angel says it's good news. He hears good news, he doesn't believe it.

There he stands in the holy place. His once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He stands face-to-face with Gabriel, with a message from the living God. He hears that his prayers for a child, that he's prayed for years, are going to be answered.

But his defensiveness, his unbelief, his resignation seems like the safer bet. And man, can we identify with that. I don't want to get my hopes up in case it's just one more disappointment.

But it costs him. He's struck mute. This is his moment. You think, you think what the opposite would have been. You see what the living God was actually presenting to Zechariah, the opportunity.

[18:26] He could have run out of the door and proclaimed the blessing to the whole crowd waiting outside. That's what he had before him. He could have run out of the door and said, you've never guessed what's going to happen.

The Lord, my son is going to prepare the way for the Lord. That was his opportunity. He could have told everyone. But he can't speak. Now before we get, see it's quite easy isn't it, to get on our moral high horse.

Before, we shouldn't see Zechariah as a failure. You know, we're told he's a righteous man. Really, you know, he's just a picture of the human reflex we all have when we lose hope.

You know, we live in a world where we're told to accept our lot in life. We're told when we feel like this to just try a technique, change how we think, try PMA, positive mental attitude, or even give mindfulness a go.

I don't want to be too harsh on those things. But, that doesn't rub either, does it? We aren't meant to bury our head in the sand when we see the impact of sin in our world.

[19:40] It's supposed to make us feel like something isn't right. It's supposed to make us ache for a better world. The answer isn't hopelessness, ignorance, or putting on a brave face.

There is an answer. The answer comes in the person of Jesus. That's the good news that Gabriel announces, that Zechariah's son, John, will prepare for the Lord's arrival.

He's going to prepare for the Lord's arrival. Zechariah, a priest, has the amazing privilege of his son will prepare for the great high priest that we all need.

Brings us to our gospel. Jesus, our surprising great high priest, our surprising high priest. There is the gospel all over this passage.

We talked last week about shadows, how everything before Jesus is a shadow pointing to him. Just remind you, you know how that works, a shadow. Just to quickly outline, a shadow gives the outline of the real thing, doesn't it?

[20:52] If you just look at the shadow and not what it's a shadow of, you can only tell part of the truth. You need to look up at what it's a shadow of to know the thing, to know the real image.

Everything in this temple scene is a shadow pointing to Jesus as the real deal. Zechariah, he is the shadow. He's a priestly shadow that points to Jesus.

You think of what Zechariah does for the nation, his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, offering prayers and incense in the temple, but because of his unbelief, he's struck mute.

He loses his voice, he's powerless to proclaim the blessing over the people waiting outside. You look at Jesus, our great high priest. Jesus doesn't get in a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

No, he offers a once-for-all sacrifice, not just for one nation, but for anyone who puts their trust in him. And he doesn't go into a temple made with human hands to offer incense.

[21:52] No, he offers himself. He offers himself his very own body on the cross. While Zechariah was forced into silence because he didn't believe God's word, Jesus, who is the word made flesh, willingly chooses silence.

When he's falsely accused, he didn't open his mouth. He hung on that cross in silence, fulfilling everything the prophets ever spoke so that the cross itself would proclaim a better word of grace over us.

Jesus chooses to be silent, but there's another silence. It's at the cross where he experiences God's silence.

When he cries out, why have you forsaken me? When he cries out, he cries out to God, why have you forsaken me? And he hears nothing back. There's a difficult word in here that I think, I don't, really don't like it.

You know, the word barren, it's a hard word, isn't it, to describe a woman who can't conceive because it means wilderness. wilderness. It means a place without life.

[23:11] In our modern days, it's not the kind of compassionate word that we'd describe, but in these times, that's how it was phrased.

But there's a purposeful meaning behind it because it is Jesus Christ who goes to the true wilderness. He goes to the true place of spiritual barrenness. He goes to the place of crying out to God and hearing nothing back.

Jesus' experiences goes through spiritual barren emptiness so that in exchange, we, his people, don't have to go ever through that again. Look at Elizabeth when she realises she's pregnant.

The Lord has done this. It's right at the end, verse 25, that the Lord has done this for me. In these days, he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.

People were not as sensitive around that issue. Not being able to conceive was seen as an affliction sent from God, a curse.

[24:24] She would have been looked down and talked about behind her back. What must she and her husband have done to live their lives in this disgrace? It would have followed them around like a bad smell. Her disgrace has been taken away.

That's what Jesus does. He takes away our disgrace. But the disgrace of our sin covering it with his blood. All our unbelief, all our resignation, all the times we've walked away thinking the way in was God forgetting us, Jesus absorbs it all so that we can stand before the living God like Elizabeth with joy, favoured, loved.

And it reshapes how we respond when we've been waiting for God to act. We can live trusting his divine delay so that instead of living with resignation, we get to believe that God will surprise us.

our response is exactly that. Instead of living with resignation, we get to believe that God will surprise us. When it feels like God is silent, that does not mean he's absent.

we often conflate the two. Naturally, we impose human relationships onto our relationship with God.

[25:50] We do that. If you don't speak to someone for a long time, you give it long enough and you kind of have to keep that up, don't you? You have to keep the phone calls or however it is you communicate.

If you don't, the relationship will inevitably break down. With a living God, his silence does not mean his absence. Because Jesus entered the barren wilderness of silence on the cross, it changes everything.

We don't have to live with resignation that this is just our lot in life. We can live with confident hope, with expectation that even when it feels like he's silent, he never is.

He says to us, this is what he says, end of Matthew's gospel, he says, I will be with you until the end of the age. I'll be with you until the end of the day, end of the age.

I'll never leave you. My son was silent, I was silent to my son when he said, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[26:51] So that we are never alone, so that he's never silent with us, which means that is the reason we don't have to give up. That is the reason that we can keep praying for that sick relative.

We can keep loving and believing that person that you would long to know Jesus for themselves. You can keep hoping because the gospel changes the ground beneath our feet.

It means you can keep fighting sin, even though the battle rages and it feels at times like it's getting the better of you. We can keep going, not because we've only strengthened ourselves, but because we look to the one who brings good news, the priest who offered himself, who is interceding, praying for each one of you at God's right hand.

The crowd waited expectantly for Zechariah to emerge. They were disappointed when he couldn't speak. But we in prayer have hope because Jesus surprised and shocked the world, not because he emerged from the temple, but because he emerged from a tomb.

once dead, but now alive, conquering death. Anything the world can offer is surpassed. We're tempted to lower our expectations so that we don't get hurt, resigned to a hopeless attitude so we're not disappointed.

[28:17] What we have in Jesus Christ is better than wishful thinking. It is confident expectation because God never leaves you and he speaks to you and he will speak to you through his son.

Situations might not change overnight. I can't promise you that. You know, that person might not come to faith immediately.

The sick relative might not get better and you will still face temptation in your life. But you are not in it alone. The living God is at your side.

And he's at your side as one who walked out the tomb. And that's why we can have hope. That really is our hope. Whatever happens in you, the hope is that he's with you, that the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is residing in each one of us, giving us the strength and the grace to keep going, to never give up, give up and to leave resignation behind.

As we come in for landing, you know, waiting for a bus only to see it drive away the minute you walk away is annoying. It's frustrating. It shows that we had given up hope.

[29:36] But we, we don't have to treat Jesus like that. We expect him to show up. And I know some of us here have been waiting a long time for God to show up for different things in our lives.

If you've been waiting a long time, can I encourage you to keep on going? God has a habit of surprising his people. We don't have to give up because Jesus didn't give up on us.

We are supposed to see this world as broken. It's not how it's meant to be, but our hope is the one who won't just meet our expectations but will surpass them. We've waited over 2,000 years for him to return.

Don't walk away. He's not running late. He'll be bang on time. And if today, if today, if hope feels distant, if you feel that air of resignation, come and lay it at the feet of your saviour, he doesn't wait until you've got everything worked out together.

He doesn't wait until you've got your life together. Today, you don't have to stand outside a temple waiting for an earthly priest to come out. Jesus walked out the tomb alive and so you can lay all at his feet.

[31:12] Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, you know our lives and you know that there's things going on as we've heard you speak to us.

It's bringing things to mind now in our hearts. Things that we've cried over, that we've wept about. people that we've cried over.

Situations that even now seem hard and we just want to come now and lay them all at your feet. We thank you that the reason that we can do that is because you walked out the tomb and so I just pray for each one of us that we do that this morning and that you transform the way that we see the situations that we're in in our lives the people that we love and that you'd we wouldn't lose heart but you'd give us hope that we can keep going that we can keep praying that we can keep on battling for you and so equip us by the power of your spirit to live and work for your praise and glory.

We ask for this in his name alone. Amen. Amen.