

Series: TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?
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TOUCHED BY AN ANGEL...REALLY?!

Luke 1, Matthew 1

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1. Christmas seems to be a time when we get a *lot* of mixed messages. The lights, the music, the décor, the buzz in the air would make any outsider think, “Wow! This holiday must be important to everyone! Look at all the time and effort and money people are putting into this holiday! Whole sections of stores become *seasonal*—i.e., jammed with red and white stuff—inflatable snowmen, sleighs, bells, candles, lights—Santas that dance and sing—and reindeer made of grapevines painted white and decorated with lights.

-And the Christmas movies? They all seem to have happy endings—that bad relationships can be mended, that cold, bitter hearts can change—that *nothing* is beyond hope!

- a. It’s actually surprising to see how many of these stories feature the changing of a human heart—and how angels are a part of that process. In **The Family Man**, the angel shows up disguised as a gang member waving a gun in a convenience store. In **The Preacher’s Wife**, the angel shows up as a good looking guy in a gray overcoat—who, incidentally, falls in *love* with the preacher’s wife! By the way, I know my wife is gorgeous—back off! But, I digress!
- b. But that’s not the real picture behind Christmas in our world, is it. You don’t usually find hope, or angels, or a change of heart when you unwrap our culture’s celebration of Christmas. Oh, you *may* find storeowners on their knees—but they’re probably plugging in the Christmas tree. If they’re praying—it’s not for a change of heart; it’s a quick prayer that Black Friday will actually transform red ink—to black ink.
- c. We used to play a prank when I was a kid. You’d give someone a giant, beautifully wrapped gift. They’d open it up—and inside would be *another* gift. And another. And another. In the gift I gave my brother one year, the final box had a roll of toilet paper. He returned the favour. The next, *my* final gift was a plastic box filled with old dirty toenails he’d clipped and saved for an entire year.
- d. I think there are a *lot* of people in our world who think that if you peel back all the layers of Christmas that have accumulated—what you’d find underneath is, well, just bunch of nice stories—with no point! Some creative person made up the whole, unbelievable thing! It’s just...**TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE!**

-What I’d like to say is this: Some of the stuff we assume about the Christmas story has no factual basis. For example. The song *We Three Kings*? Nice song—but we don’t know how many there were—and they weren’t kings, they were magi. Astrologers. And they came to the house where Joseph, Mary and

Jesus were living—not the manger. We don't know if Mary rode to Bethlehem on a donkey. Frosty the Snowman wasn't there—and Jesus did actually cry—Hey, he was a baby!

-When you read the account Luke writes of Jesus birth, it's historical, it's brief, and it's believable—because he names specific places and historical figures. He was educated as a physician and carefully sifted through all the eyewitness accounts—and probably interviewed a number of the people who were involved. This is what he writes:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4 NIV)

2. If you find yourself struggling to believe the accounts—you need to know a surprising secret: The Christmas story starts with **doubt**—not **belief**! Listen to how the record starts:

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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. 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 worshipers were praying outside. (Luke 1:5-10 NIV)

-Luke, being the historian that he is, is very careful to place this story in it's actual political and social context.

- a. First, Israel was a country dominated—occupied by the Roman Empire—an empire that had declared that their emperor, Caesar Augustus, was Lord. Ironically, they called him the **Son of God**. We know this about the Romans. They were brutal—and if you didn't fall in line you either got scourged or crucified. And the taxes? Horrible.
- b. Another historian, Matthew, tells us that Herod the Great was king of the Jews. He was a brilliant builder and strategist. Included among the structures was the very temple where Zechariah was serving—one of the wonders of the ancient world. People **still** don't know how Herod's builders placed some of the massive temple stones **[pic]**—one of which was 45feet by 11 feet by 17 feet and weighed about 600 tons! To pay for all these buildings, Herod **also** taxed the people!

- c. Luke starts his narrative with a couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. People just didn't come more highly qualified than these two. From everything that's said about them—they were amazing people. They **both** had the priestly credentials—but their devotion to God went way deeper than their bloodline—they were **blameless** in the way they obeyed and honoured God.

-And Zechariah was at the top of his game. Burning incense before God in the holiest place in the world of that day—the inner sanctuary of the temple was usually a once in a lifetime experience. He is literally representing the prayers of the crowd outside with the smoke rising in the Presence of God. This is an **amazing** moment!

3. Well, the stakes in the story go up. Let's read on.

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 will 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 is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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." (Luke 1:11-17 NIV)

-Has anyone here—besides me--ever prayed, but didn't really expect an answer—and you would've been **shocked** if something blatantly supernatural had happened? Now, Zechariah's a devout man—loves God. But God had been silent for over 400 years—and even though he's in the holiest place in the world—he's really going through the motions. An angel shows up—and he almost has a stroke! I'd freak, too!

-But this was **amazing** news. "**Your prayer has been heard!**" My guess is that Zechariah had been praying that God would deliver his people and end their misery. But there was another prayer I'm sure he inserted—for **children**. See, in that culture—your **children** were everything! Literally. They ensured that your name would be carried on—that all of your stories and history and family line would be carried forward. To **not** have children was seen as the judgment of God. But their prayers had apparently nested in the ceiling for 50 years. They prayed, they cried, they begged—they may have even bargained! **Nothing!** Solomon's words were widely known and quoted:

**Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him.
(Psalm 127:3 NIV)**

- a. The common interpretation was, "If God's pleased with you—He gives you a bunch of kids! If you **can't** have children...well, guess what **God** thinks of you!" You're flawed.

-But the answer goes even deeper than removing their shame. This son is going to bring great joy and delight—and cause **others** to rejoice. God was going to give them a son would be **great—filled with the Spirit from birth**. You have to understand—**it didn't get any better than that!**

-When the angel continues—the message is even **more** profound because they echo the last words of the last book in the Old Testament.

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty... “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.” (Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6 NIV)

- b. Now, do you understand how **profound** this is? Almost without skipping a beat—God's silence is broken by picking up right where He'd left off! Zechariah was a priest—and **very** familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures—so it wasn't like he would've missed what was being said. God was stepping into history—and what had been prophesied for **thousands** of years—was starting! The **Lord** was coming back to his temple!
4. What's not to like about that? They're going to have a child—and God is stepping in to save his people! People would turn back to God, parents hearts would turn toward their children. There would be joy! And Zechariah was **right smack in the middle of the whole thing!** He should've been skipping through the temple! But...oddly enough, his response is, well, **under-**whelming!

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have 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.” ...When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. “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.” (Luke 1:18-20, 23-25 NIV)

-Want my take on what happened? I think a combination of familiarity with holy things and disappointment with God had permanently curdled his joy—turned his faith to dust. He got to the point where I'll bet some of you have been: “I just **can't** afford to be disappointed again. It's too late.” This happens to **good people—who love and respect God!**

- a. Please understand—Zechariah was an **excellent** man—devoted—good. He was a **religious professional!** But he'd lost hope that anything would ever

change. He'd just keep praying the same old prayers, don't the same old temple stuff—but **hope?** Nah!

-Disappointment with God from waiting and waiting and **waiting** will do that to you. You get to the point where you go through the motions of praying, singing, faith—but down deep, you really don't believe things will ever change.

- b. As you know, Lori and I went through 5 years of infertility—while living in the **fertile crescent**, where **everyone** had babies—even people who **didn't** want them. Except, of course, for us. Since we worked with people—we say the best...and the worst. People who just **never** stopped bragging and talking incessantly about their kids—**and** people who abused them. We saw it all.

-We had a friend who watched a lot of **blab it and grab it** TV. He said, "I think you've got a faith problem! Why don't you go out and buy a crib and toys and baby clothes to show your faith—and I'll bet God will give you a baby!"

-What Zechariah and Elizabeth went through was **infinitely** worse than our pain. People felt bad for us. Elizabeth described her experience as **disgrace among the people**. Pretty powerful words. It's easy to be critical of Zechariah, isn't it? To think, "Man, you should've **known** better!" But, sometimes when you **believe** in and are faithful to God, your disappointment drives you to ask, "God, is **this** how you treat people who love You and are faithful to You? I thought I was Your friend? You're treating me like a **stranger!?**"

- c. Well, the angel's response is tough—almost indignant:

"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have 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."
(Luke 1:19-20 NIV)

-I don't think the angel's response here is vindictive—at all. But it is stern—and Zechariah is disciplined. The angel says, "This **will** happen—in God's timing—but you will be silent until it happens!" To doubt that you will ever be touched by an angel is different than stewing in your unbelief when you are!

-Let me just make a comment about angels at this point. The word angel means **messenger**. Angels are powerful spirit beings who **serve God and do only what He asks**. They are **not** independent contractors. That's why we are told not to pray to them or try to arrange meetings with them!

- d. Some people, when they read that Zechariah was disciplined with being unable to hear or speak might think, "Great! So, if I'm disappointed and struggling to believe—God will zap me!" I don't exactly think that's the point here. I believe that what happened was a sign to Zechariah that what God was up to **wasn't** about him; it was about God's intervention in the world. If this little boy was

going to grow up to be a part of God's intervention—he would need a Dad who **believed** God!

-Second, I think God may have sand-bagging Zechariah's unbelief to keep it from spreading to Elizabeth. As an old woman giving birth—and raising a toddler—it was **critical** that her faith not get tainted with unbelief. Well, Elizabeth got pregnant—and when their son, John, was born—Zechariah **exploded** in praise. God...**can be trusted!**

5. I want to talk for a few minutes in closing about an uncomfortable subject: disappointment with God. Philip Yancey wrote a great book on this—if you want to dig further. But the truth is that sometimes when we need Him most, God seems strangely silent. Sometimes we love God...and are faithful and obedient—and it **hurts** when we pray and pray and pray and...**nothing** seems to happen. Based on what I've seen and heard, disappointment with God creates more atheists and agnostics than almost anything else.

-Steve Jobs biography has just recently come out [pic]—and it tells about a brief intersection Steve had with the church and Jesus. Steve's parents apparently wanted him to have a religious upbringing—and took him to the Lutheran church. That all came to an end when Steve was about 13.

-In July, 1968, **Life** magazine published a shocking cover showing a pair of starving children in Biafra [pic]. Steve took it to church, and confronted the pastor.

“If I raise my finger, will God know which one I'm going to raise before I do it?” The pastor answered, “Yes, God knows everything.” Then Steve pulled out the Life cover and asked, “Well, does God know about this and what's going to happen to these children?”

-There was a brief, “Yes, God knows, but you don't understand...” kind of answer, and then it says that Jobs announced that he did not want to have anything to do with worshiping such a God. He never went back to church.

- a. The suffering that goes on in our world is a **huge** issue, isn't it? If you read any of the books written by atheists—like Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett or Christopher Hitchens—you'll find that, for them, suffering and need is at least one of the core reasons in why they've rejected any notion of God.

-People think: “If I had **God's** power—I'd do something! If God is great—and can do **anything**—why doesn't He act on evil and injustice? Why would He disappoint so many people?” So, either God isn't great—or He isn't **good!** He just doesn't care! Or—maybe he just doesn't exist!

-And I get that. I understand why the issue of suffering raises tough questions about God. The problem is that eliminating God—or moving into scepticism or cynicism doesn't solve the problem of suffering. The story of Jesus' coming is that God cared **so** much about suffering—that He entered into it; He became small and weak and vulnerable—and **suffered!**

- b. From the outside, there is every reason to doubt that angels spoke and that God interrupted human history by entering it. It **does** seem unbelievable. Too good to be true, really. I mean, think about it. It's a story of a God who **loves** the world and all of its fallen people. Who, instead of nuking the whole mess and starting over—**enters** the mess to change it from the inside out? And he did it without violating His most important gift to the human race—**choice!** He chose to love us; we can choose **not** to love Him! He chose to redeem and restore humanity; We can choose to cooperate...or **not!**
6. Funny, isn't it, that a story about belief and faith—about splitting history in half by God showing up here—**starts** with an old disillusioned man—who loves God--but **doubts!** "I've waited and waited and waited—and it's just **too late. Too late!**" That may describe you. You need to know—doubt is not evil or disgraceful. It is, in fact, connected with **faith**. Just a few reminders here:

*First

Doubt is an inescapable part of the human condition.

Sometimes we doubt because we're depressed—or we've waited and **waited** and given up. Sometimes we doubt because to **believe** would mean change—and we don't **want** to change!

But the Bible says,

**Be merciful to those who doubt.
(Jude 1:22 NIV)**

Know why? That describes me—and it describes you. I'm finite. I struggle. I have questions. But, see, if I had waited until **all** doubt was removed, I would've never gotten married, gone to university, had kids, made friends, or moved to Canada!

Doubt is part of who we are!

*That leads to the second observation:

Every human being lives by faith!

How many of you believe that life, generally speaking, is good, that children deserve lavish love, and that all humans are created equal? ***Those things cannot be scientifically proven!*** The Bible says, "The righteous live by faith. Truth is—no one can live without faith!"

*Third,

Doubt can lead to stronger faith.

You don't have to be afraid of doubt. Abraham, Moses and Elijah all doubted. In fact, John—this baby born to Zech and Liz—would one day, in his pain, doubt that Jesus was the Messiah. I, for one, am glad that Zechariah had the **courage** to be honest--

say, “Hey, wait—we’re old! Old people don’t have babies!” The message? God uses **real live people**—and their doubt doesn’t make them **unusable!**

7. Disappointment with God—seems to lie at the heart of this story. See, the people standing outside the temple the day Zechariah offered incense had been praying for **hundreds** of years; “God, please **do** something! **Please** deliver us from our enemies!” Both Simeon and Anna—who met Joseph, Mary and Jesus at the temple—were looking forward to God’s re-engagement with his people. After Anna met them, she,

...spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:38 NIV)

-Some of you have prayed this prayer—perhaps over your home, or over some awful situation you’ve faced. It’s a prayer of desperation—just like Zechariah and Elizabeth. “God—don’t you see how painful this is? We belong to you! When is there going to be at least **some** indication that you’ve even heard us?” You pray, and wait; pray...and wait some more.

-When people pray—and are disappointed by God’s apparent indifference—sometimes they just give up. To be honest, any relationship based on love is vulnerable to disappointment. Has anyone here **never** disappointed someone—**ever?** I love Lori with all my heart—but I disappoint her—sometimes just by being Ken Davis. I disappoint my kids. I disappoint some of you. Sometimes I disappoint God. I don’t mean to—but I do.

- a. Can I talk about disappointment with God for a minute? God is **not** a disappointing God. But **sometimes** we are disappointed because we don’t get the answer we expect. Let me ask a question: Is **no...**an answer? If your 8 year old asks for and expects a Harley for Christmas—**do you have an answer** for them? If your 9 year old daughter wants a cellphone and unlimited, private access to the internet—**do you have an answer**—and **will she like your answer?** Maybe not.

-Now, we think, “Yeah—but they’re **kids!** All kids ask for dumb things. I’m an adult; I’m pretty sure I **know** what’s right for me!” Well, what if God is doing something profound and deep that extends **way** beyond you? What if, to give you what you really need—from an eternal perspective—he can’t give you what you want? There are some times when God says, **No!** But I think most of the time He says, **Not yet...it’s not the right time.**” That’s what God’s answer was for Zechariah and Elizabeth; when they first prayed for a child—Mary—who would give birth to the Messiah—probably hadn’t even been **born** yet!

- b. Sometimes God’s answers to our prayers are better than anything we could **ever** have imagined—but it all happens **way** differently than we expect. Lori and I tried to have children--begged God for children. His answer was our adoption of Kelly—and it was **so clearly** His hand on her life and ours. If you know her—you know that His plan was better than **anything** we could’ve done! But it didn’t happen the way **we** expected it to!

c. But...sometimes God's apparent "No" is just mysterious. What we're asking for seems **really** good. The timing seems good. It seems like it would be the right thing for His Kingdom. But it doesn't happen. And that, friends, is where **trust** comes in. **That's** where we are called to believe in God's character; that He is kind, compassionate, good and perfect—**even if life doesn't turn out as we plan**. God says, "Will you trust me? Will you? Do you really believe that My ways are not your ways—that My ways are higher than yours?" Sometimes we have to say, "I believe...but you'll need a microscope to see it! Help my unbelief!"

8. My all-time favourite Christmas movie, as many of you know, is **A Christmas Carol**. I guess what warms my heart is showing how a mean, bitter, selfish old man—changes. It's believable, because he's taken into the past to show him the turns in the road; the influence of the harshness and the rejection of his Dad; how the loss of his sister wounded him; how, when given a choice, he chose money over love.

-And then he's taken into the present—where he has a realistic picture of who he really is—and what the suffering in the world is really like—and how stupid his excuses are. His final journey is into the future—and where his life is taking him. And even though he says he's too old to change—that it's too late to change—he repents of his blindness—and he's changed.

a. If you could somehow take a trip with the angel of Christmas past—**your** past--what would you see? What are the influences that have affected your life? If you're struggling with doubt, or unbelief or outright cynicism—what happened to you? See, people don't just naturally become that way. Would you be willing to come to terms with the way things turned out—and with the **choices** you've made? Would you?

b. If you could take a trip with the angel of Christmas present—**your** present--what are you missing? What are the good things that are happening right under your nose—that you just haven't seen? Is there evidence of God's love and compassion for you—of the direction where He wants you to go—is there **joy--** but you're missing it?

c. And, maybe most importantly, if you could take a tour with the angel of Christmas future—**your** future—what would it be like? If you were to be honest about the path you're on right now—where is it headed? If you **stay** on the course you're on right now—will you ultimately be a more joy-filled person? Will the people around you be better off—because **you** were there? If you don't open your heart, your soul, your mind just a little, where will you be next Christmas?

d. Zechariah's story ends well. **Exceptionally** well. God gives he and Elizabeth a son named John—who is the delight of their lives! In an act of blatant faith—Zechariah gives this baby the name the angel said to—and he gets his speech back.

And the first words out of his mouth—are words of praise! Gabriel said, “This baby will bring joy to **everyone!**” And all the people who saw two old coots cackling and chasing a toddler around town **had** to agree! God had the better plan—and it split history right in half!