

Text: Luke 1 and Matthew 1
Title: "Christmas Responses"
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Introduction: No phrase better sums up the true meaning of the Christmas season than the one coined by the angels: *good news of great joy* (Luke 2:10). You may have by now received numerous Christmas cards from friends and loved ones. I know that we have, many of them coming from you folks. They have been a blessing.

The very first well-wishes ever delivered for the first Christmas season were not delivered in the form of cards. They came by way of the angel Gabriel. Gabriel appears four times during the first Christmas season, and each time he brings good news of great joy. He first announced the birth of John the Baptist to Zacharias (Lk. 1:13-17), then about six months later he visited Mary (Lk. 1:30-33), and after Mary he had a message for Joseph (Mt. 1:20-21). Finally, three months later, the shepherds in the field were given the same good news of great joy (Lk. 2:8-12).

The common theme of this Christmas gospel is that the baby born of a virgin is the Savior of men, Christ the Lord. Repenting of sin and believing that Christ was born to die for our sins is the most important response each of us can have to this Christmas news. If you have not received Christ as your personal Savior this morning, you have not responded well to the good news of great joy.

But as believers we too must respond well to the truth of Christmas. There are heart-searching lessons for us especially in the responses of our fellow believers, Zacharias, Mary, and Joseph, to the messages that they heard from

Gabriel. I want us to look at these three Christmas responses to this good news of great joy, so we can think again about how our lives are a response to Christmas truth.

I. Zacharias responds with the fear of unbelief (Lk. 1:5-25).

Illustration: There are certain experiences of life in which progress is preceded by a feeling of apprehension or fear. My kids used to have to play the piano in their school chapel every now and then, and that was an activity that was more prone to producing fear than was the mere requirement to attend chapel and listen to someone else play. But the chapels that required them to play were greater growing experiences as well.

Application: The Lord has good news and great joy in store for Zacharias, but his response to the angel's message was the failure of unbelief, and he failed to believe, in part, because he was afraid (v. 12).

Fear is the common experience of those whom the Lord desires to use in a special way. It was the common experience of three of the four recipients of good news from the angel: Zacharias (Lk. 1:12), Mary (Lk. 1:29), and the shepherds (Lk. 2:9). The Lord has to tell scores of his children to "fear not" throughout the pages of Scripture. It is natural to be fearful when God desires to use us in a new way. Dealing with fear is an important component of the useful and growing Christian. If you never do anything for the Lord that makes you afraid, chances are that you are not growing the way you should.

Fear is the opposite of the qualities that make us useful to the Lord. The spirit of fear must be overcome if we are to be

controlled by the spirit of power, love, and a sound mind (2 Tim. 1:7). Fear makes us weak, self-centered, and irrational.

We are told that fear fell on Zacharias. The phrase used here to describe Zacharias's fear is also used in the Greek translation of Josh. 2:9 (LXX) to describe the fear that fell on the enemies of God as Joshua and his armies approached. There Rahab describes this fear: "I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you."

Why was Joshua feared by God's enemies? It was in part because God helped Joshua first conquer his own fears: "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest" (Josh. 1:9). Joshua believed God's promise was trustworthy, and that dispelled his fear. Zacharias, however, failed to conquer his fear because he demanded a more trustworthy authority than the Word of God (v. 18). Gabriel is clear that no more trustworthy source of authority can be found anywhere in God's universe (v. 19).

We need to contrast the question Zacharias asks in this verse with the question Mary asks Gabriel later on (v. 34). In both cases, God was asking his servant to believe some promises that to them seemed incredible: the birth of John the Baptist in spite of old age, and the birth of Jesus in spite of virginity.

But there is an important difference in their questions. Zacharias asks, "How shall I know for sure?" and Mary asks "How will this work out?" Zacharias's question protests that there is just not enough evidence here that God's

Word can be trusted; Mary's question expresses confusion over how the details are going to work out while knowing that they will because God said so. There is a fine line between these questions that we need to be able to see if we are to avoid the pitfall of fear Zacharias found himself in.

Gabriel answered Zacharias that God's Word should be enough to confidently know something is true (v. 19); he told Mary, on the other hand, that God was going to work a miracle that is not completely explicable (v. 35). He wants to dispel Zacharias's fearful unbelief, but not Mary's confusion. God can use us while we are confused, but He cannot work through us when we are doubting His Word.

We may not understand "How shall this be," but if God has promised it, we must always confess that we understand "How we know that this shall be." The way we know that this shall be is that God said so. There is simply no authority higher than the Word of God that can be appealed to in order to answer this question.

II. Mary responds with the submission of service (Lk. 1:38, 46-55).

Application: Humility and submission to authority go together, as do pride and rebellion. Notice with me two things Mary realized when she heard the Word of the Lord:

1. Spiritual blessing comes from spiritual responsibility (Lk. 1:38, 47-49).

Illustration: Did you ever get a promotion at work that did not come with a raise? I have. I got a new title, a new location, a new boss, and a whole new set of responsibilities, but no new money! The only blessing of the promotion was

that of added responsibility and opportunities for experience which would be valuable in the future.

Application: Most of God's spiritual blessings work this way, at least in this life. They involve more responsibility without a lot more of this world's dollars and cents.

God's call to Mary was a difficult one. We know that the circumstances surrounding the birth of Christ were no picnic for Mary and Joseph. After the Christmas story, we see Mary four times in the gospel narratives, each time dealing with some tension or adversity.

In Luke 2 she is frantically looking for her 12 year old Jesus only to be rebuked by Him. In John 2 she requests the first miracle Christ performed at the wedding at Cana and again is rebuked somewhat by Him. In Luke 8 she desires to gain access to Christ, but she is rebuffed, and finally we find her in John 19 at the cross weeping over the death of her Son.

Mary believed and lived the truth that the path of blessing is the humble service of a bond-slave. This is why Jesus calls His service taking up our cross daily and following Him. Do we look for opportunities to humbly serve the Lord? This service is God's way of blessing us spiritually.

2. Our faithfulness blesses others (Lk. 1:50-55).

Application: Mary mentions generation after generation, the humble, the hungry, Israel, and Abraham's offspring as categories of people which she knew would be positively affected by God's work in her life, bringing the Son of God into the world. No believer can live without having an impact on the people of God, because the people of God are the various members of the body of Christ. This impact can be positive or negative, but not neutral. Eph. 4:15-16, "But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all

things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." What kind of impact is your life having on the health and welfare of the body of Christ? You are a joint that the body is counting on.

III. Joseph's responds with the patience of obedience (Matt. 1:18-25).

Illustration: Mary was espoused to Joseph. Alfred Edersheim was a former rabbi who wrote *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, a great commentary on the four Gospels. This is what he says about what it meant for Mary to be espoused to Joseph:

"The ceremony would conclude with some such benediction as that afterwards in use . . . the whole being perhaps concluded by a benediction over the statutory cup of wine, which was tasted in turn by the betrothed. From that moment Mary was the betrothed wife of Joseph; their relationship as sacred, as if they had already been wedded. Any breach of it would be treated as adultery; nor could the band be dissolved except, as after marriage, by regular divorce. Yet months might intervene between the betrothal and marriage." All this is a beautiful picture of how Christ will rapture His church someday.

Application: So betrothal was a time of commitment to obedience and patience for any Jewish couple that the Lord brought together. But clearly for Joseph there are some complications here that called for his patient obedience beyond what was normal for a betrothed couple. Notice especially three characteristics of this patience of obedience.

1. Joseph's patient obedience was willing to be misunderstood and even mistreated (v. 24).

Application: We have no record of Joseph and Mary being mistreated for the public perception that they had conceived a baby together prior to their marriage, but we do get a hint of that malevolence years later when some Jews who had believed on Jesus at some level stop just short of accusing Him of being born of fornication (John 8:41).

Surely, if an accusation like that can surface thirty years after the events of our passage, getting through these days must have been hard for Joseph as well. But patient obedience focuses on God's command, not on public opinion. Joseph was used of the Lord because he learned to please God, not man. How high does pleasing man rate with us?

2. Joseph's patient obedience was willing to sacrifice even legitimate blessings to honor the Lord (v. 25).

Application: Against the teachings of both the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church, the Bible tells us that Joseph kept Mary a virgin up until the time of Jesus's birth. These traditions teach that Mary was a perpetual virgin, but the Bible is clear that eventually Joseph and Mary gave Jesus some brothers and sisters (Matt. 13:55-56). Their home knew the blessing of children, whom Scripture calls the Lord's reward (Ps. 127:3).

But Joseph married Mary and kept her a virgin until Jesus was born. Nothing in the angel's message seems to demand this course of action. Perhaps he was committed to the Scripture that prophesied, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." We do not know his reasons, but we do know that this required the patience of obedience on Jo-

seph's part. At times, we have to forgo even legitimate blessings to accomplish the Lord's will for our lives.

3. Patient obedience is the commitment to do right with mercy and humility (v. 19).

Application: It is not only important to do right, we must do right in the right way and for the right reasons. Patient obedience is merciful and humble. It is hard on self and forgiving toward others (Mic. 6:8).

Conclusion: And so the good news of great joy called for a response these many years ago. The same is true of the Christmas message today. Unto you is born a Savior who is Christ, the Lord. How will you respond? Will it be the faithlessness of fear or the submission of service and the patience of obedience? Clearly, the greatness of this wonderful gift should rightly inspire within us sorrowful repentance over our fearful faithlessness and a renewed love for the Savior that serves submissively and obeys patiently.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching