**Part A: John 5:1-9**

Modern people are not the only skeptics. Ancient Greek and Roman society was also very skeptical. Luke knew this, and wanted to make it clear that the stories about Jesus were not embellished legends, but recent events witnessed and verified by many people.

Today, some people think that Christianity is blind faith, but that is not true at all. The four gospels, telling the story of Jesus’ life, were written by three people who were part of Jesus’ ministry on earth, Matthew, Mark, and John, and Luke, who tells us how he drew up his account:

**Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.**

He recognizes that others have written these things. There were many written sources. He recognizes that this is the fulfillment of prophesy, and we will focus on that Wednesday night at the Advent service. But there is a guy out there, Theophilus, and this person asked Luke to write his own version. Why? Probably because he trusted Luke. Now the gospel was written for a large audience. Probably Theophilus was a rich guy who paid for Luke to do the several years’ research it took to write the gospel. Luke was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul, and most people have assumed that he did most of the research and writing of this gospel while Paul was in prison in a town on the Israeli coast called Caesarea. It was a common custom to dedicate your book to the person who paid for you to write it. That was a Greek custom, not a Hebrew custom, but Luke is actually the only non-Jewish writer to write a book of the Bible, and he follows his own Greek customs. He will later dedicate the book of Acts to Theophilus as well.

How do I know this is truth? Many people back then and now question is the Bible is really accurate. How can we be sure? There is one answer with two parts. The main answer is: study it. Part A: The more you study the Bible, the more it convinces you of its truth. The more the Holy Spirit works on your heart to simply trust it. You see the way it all fits together. You see its unity and diversity. Second, you can compare it to historical sources, and while you cannot usually prove that things happened, you can show that they fit with what we know of history and are plausible.

We’re going to spend the next four and a half months with this gospel. We will read approximately 85% of it in worship from now until Easter, and you can read the rest on your own. Why are we doing this? I want everyone to be certain about Jesus. If you are on the fence about whether he is real you will probably be on the fence in the way you live your Christian life. But the more God convinces you that this is true, the more you will be emboldened to live out your faith.

**Part B**

**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 upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.**

He was a pious man and a pious wife, and we really don’t know much about them, but their entire life was marred by barrenness. They must have spent many nights crying together. They must have spent many hopeful days only to be crushed at the realization is was not to be. And at some point they must have given up hope, accepting the fact that they would never have children. And while that is a hard, sad thing for us today, back then it was traumatic. Your value was in your family. And perhaps they still wondered why, or perhaps the memory of the old desire for children had faded. But it is unlikely they expected a miracle. Yes, God had worked miracles for Abraham and Sarah when she was barren, and Isaac and Rebecca, and Hannah. But those were ancient stories from another age. There was no reason to expect God to work such miracles now.

But there was some good news. Finally, at this advanced age, Zechariah had the opportunity of a lifetime. There were tens of thousands of priests living at this time. They did not live in Jerusalem, but they were scattered around the land and took turns serving in Jerusalem for just two weeks a year. But on this occasion, finally Zechariah was given an honor that most priests only experienced once in their lifetimes, if at all:

**8 Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.**

What a marvelous day. He would wash, prepare himself, and go into the temple. Throngs would be outside. He would approach and go in alone, carrying the incense. He had never done this before, but it had to be done right. Everyone was outside praying and waiting. This was a tourist type event, something like the changing of the guard at palaces in Europe. And he was in there, standing in the holy presence of the Lord. After a lifetime of trusting God, obeying his commandments, serving as priest, questioning why he could not have a child. And even now we are about to find out that he was praying about what else, but his child.

**11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.**

Usually when people in the bible see angels, they are overcome with fear. I think we would be too. The angels are holy and without sin. They are powerful, spiritual beings. We are surrounded by them all the time, yet we don’t think about it. If they would appear to us, it would likely knock us over. You can understand Zechariah’s fear. He thought he was alone in the room, and suddenly someone from another dimension is standing there.

**13 But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son,**

So on this momentous day, what was he able to think about other than not having a child. Think how much this must have been torturing him. But now, his prayers are answered. He is going to have a son. Like Abraham and Isaac of old, he has been granted a son in his old age. What a miracle!

But just like those men of old, the miracle was not Zechariah’s to do with what he pleased. God gave him this precious baby boy for a very specific purpose. Whatever plans Zechariah had for his son, whatever he wanted him to be, he could forget it. Because this was not going to be a normal son, and he was not going to do the normal son things:

**and you are to give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 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 from birth. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”**

Even the baby’s name was prescribed by God. He was devoted to God in a special way. Not drinking wine was difficult in their culture because they often drank wine mixed with water to kill bacteria. But he was devoted to God already at his birth. God promised to fill him with the Holy Spirit already from birth. There would be something about him. He would turn the people back to God.

Now did Zechariah appreciate this? The people had wandered far from God. Even as they observed his laws, they had become Pharisees and hypocrites. People went through the motions but for many their faith was only ritual without repentance or relationship with God. John was going to change all that. He was going to turn the people back to a living relationship with God. Really, what he was doing was imply acting as a prophet. All the prophets in the Old Testament spent most of their time criticizing the people for their sin and encouraging them to turn back to God. The greatest prophet was Elijah, and it was written that one day there would be another prophet like Elijah. He would show up, cause a great repentance, and then the Lord would come.

In particular he was going to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children. In the Old Testament, it’s fair to say that faithful Israelites were always living for the next generation. We say we care about our kids. We say we’re putting them first. Are we really? And what does it mean to care about our children? Are they little trophies for us? Are we living vicariously through them? Or do we just want the good feelings that come from having our kids like us? None of this is what God wanted in the Old Testament.

Rather, what God wanted parents to do for their children was very simple. Teach them his ways. Pass on the truth about God. Tell them the stories of their ancestors, instruct them to obey his laws, repeat them until they learn them, internalize them, and embrace them as their own. And the chief commandment was to love the Lord with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. That is what God wants us to pass on to the next generation. We are always one generation away from losing the gospel. Look how fast it’s happening in our society. Do we need God to come and turn our hearts back towards our children: not simply making sure they have the money they need to participate in today’s materialistic society, but making sure our hearts are right towards them?

And he would turn the hearts of the disobedient back to the wisdom of the righteous. Do we need to be reminded of this today? Remember, the problem in Zechariah’s day wasn’t that people were unaware of what the Bible told them. It’s that they didn’t really believe it or put it into practice. It’s good if you know God’s Word says to forgive as God forgives us. But do you do it? If you don’t, then knowing it hasn’t really done you much good, has it? Gossip is a real problem. Talking about other people behind their backs. Do you know that it’s wrong? Great! Pretty much everybody does. Even people outside church usually understand that. But the question is, do you gossip? Do you say nasty things about other people behind their back? Do you question people’s motives or do you enjoy the drama of fighting? If so, it doesn’t really matter much that you can circle the right answer on a multiple choice test.

Instead, John will turn the people back to the wisdom of the righteous. Wisdom is not just knowing information. Wisdom is putting it into practice. You don’t get wisdom from taking a catechism class for example. Catechism class gives you knowledge. You get wisdom when you apply that knowledge to your life, and as you seek to live righteously, serving God, day after day putting what you know into practice. That is what produces wisdom. And so as I seek to follow God’s will by not gossiping, I run into all sorts of dilemmas that force me to think about that is the best way to proceed. Someone comes to me with a concern about someone else. I have to weigh the value of listening to them and showing support with the command not to gossip. I have to figure out if they are coming to me because they are genuinely hurt or because they just want to stir up trouble or get me on their side. It’s all very complicated. But after years of doing that, the Holy Spirit makes you wise.

Our society today does not value wisdom because we value emotionalism and knee-jerk reactions. We are too distracted with entertainment and a myriad of activities to give deep thought to our conduct. If you really pursue God’s will to be a wise person seeking righteousness, other people will see it and it will be a great witness to your faith in this world.

God’s people back then needed to return to wisdom because God himself was about to come. And if they didn’t get their heads out of the sand, they might miss it. This was a major Old Testament theme. If you want to dive into it, start attending Sunday morning Bible study where we will be studying the book of Isaiah. There you can see all the details of what God promised his people. But to summarize, he promised that he would restore his people. All through the Old Testament, they were wicked, they were corrupt, they didn’t take him seriously. But God said one day that would all change. And it would happen when one of two things would happen. Sometimes it says that a promised king, the Messiah will come and make it happen. Other passages sound more like God himself will come to his people. And there are even other passages that talk about a coming Messiah as though he is the Lord himself. It must have been confusing at the time, but we can see how it pointed to Jesus.

Zechariah had a lot to process. His son would prepare the way for this Messiah. He would not be the Messiah, but he would lead the people back to a true faith in God so that when the Messiah appeared they would recognize him, or at least, some of the people would. That’s exactly what happened, by the way. The first disciples of Jesus were already disciples of John the Baptist. After he exposed to them their sin and need for a Savior, they were ready to recognize that Savior when he came. God lead us to recognize our need to repent so that we in turn fall on our knees in thanks for the Savior we have.

**Part C**

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

Now think about this for a moment. Was this question really appropriate? Where was he? Either he had gone crazy, or an angel was here speaking to him. Either way, he should have had all the proof he needed.

Today we also can be slow to believe. It’s not because God hasn’t done enough for us. Our weak faith is never God’s fault. He has given us his word, and he always strengthens our faith through it. His promises are all we need. When we doubt, we have no more excuse than Zechariah. And God does not reward doubt. There’s nothing good about doubting what God says. It’s okay to doubt what you see on TV, in fact you should. It’s good to be skeptical of people selling you something or bragging about all the great things they have done. But it’s never a good thing to doubt God. I have heard many people say, “Doubt is part of faith.” That’s not true. Wrestling with God is part of faith. Wondering how he can fulfill his promises, or why he allows you to suffer are part of faith. Begging and pleading for years and wondering why he won’t grant your prayer is part of faith, but faith understands that God is above me. But doubting whether he really means what he says is the same sin that cost Adam and Eve paradise. Questioning whether it will really come true, if God will really save you in the end, is from Satan, not the Holy Spirit.

**19 The angel answered, “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. 20 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 proper time.”**

**21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 22 When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.**

God’s Word comes true whether we believe it or not. Zechariah’s “punishment” was more of a chastisement. There was no real harm done, and this served as a sign for others that something strange was happening. It reminded him not to doubt. He had a lot of time to think, since he couldn’t speak. And in two weeks we will see the beautiful song he composed when his son was born. God’s chastisement had done him great good.

**23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 25 “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”**

God fulfilled his promise. This is no surprise to us. It must have been such a great joy for Elizabeth. It must have been a very strange time for Zechariah, mixed with joy, regret, confusion, impatience, frustration, anticipation, contemplation, and a host of other emotions.

There are a lot of different directions we could go here, but I want to talk about the minor chastisements God puts in our lives. Maybe we need to take some time to think and evaluate. We would all probably say, “Yes, I believe God is taking care of me,” But sometimes things come along in our lives that force us to see if we really believe that. We’ve had a lot of surgeries lately and there are more coming up. We’ve got some members with unexpected troubles in their lives. I can’t tell you why God let’s these things happen when and how they do, but I can tell you how God can use them to strengthen your faith. And that is, keep remembering God’s promises to you. When you feel most helpless is when he often forces us to admit that he really is in control. And how does God use that control? Never for your ultimate harm. Always for your eternal good. That can be hard to believe when you’re facing a risky procedure or a marriage that seems like it’s going downhill fast. But believe it because God promises.

And you can point to your life and the ways he has cared for you in the past. You can point to the history of God’s people. How people like Zechariah had to wait and go through painful years of barrenness only to experience this final joy. But the greatest promise to point to is that one fulfilled by Jesus. We are unworthy. We have not loved God with our whole hearts, not even close. We might know a lot of the Bible, but that only makes us that much more guilty when we don’t live up to it. But the more we realize and feel our sin, the more we see how much God loves us that he would send Jesus for us. There is the absolute certainty of God’s love and care for you. Even when the rest is hazy, his cross is clear. You are forgiven. Eternity is yours as a gift through him. Let that be your peace in troubled times. Cling to the promise that he loves you and will always take you from the shadow of death to victory. And he will give you the strength to believe as you wait.