

You Will Be Silent Until... (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

¹⁸And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” ¹⁹And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” ²¹And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²²And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. ²³And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵“Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.” (Luke 1:18–25)

The Outline

- A. The announcement and promise of a son to be born to Zechariah has now been fully delivered in vv. 13-17. We have given ourselves to this announcement in the previous weeks and we should now picture Zechariah as having been standing back, listening to it all, taking it in. But as we move into v. 18, Zechariah speaks, he responds to all he has seen and heard, and it is not particularly endearing, even a bit upsetting, but God’s grace shall have the final word.
- B. It will take two sermons, but we will follow these verses through three headings:
 - 1. The Drift of Doubt (v. 18) [this morning]
 - 2. The Discipline of Grace (vv. 19-23) [next time...]
 - 3. The Destiny of the Saints (vv. 24-25)

(1) The Drift of Doubt (v. 18)

- A. As we come to consider The Drift of Doubt, let’s read again together v. 18 and make note of just what Zechariah has to say here: “And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”
 - 1. We might be prone to immediately sympathize with Zechariah here. After all, the words of this angel would be a bit hard to believe, and Zechariah’s question seems reasonable to us given the years and years of praying with no answer.

- a. But we must not follow this line first. For there is a stubbornness here, a hardness of heart, a drifting doubt that mustn't go unnoticed. When we read the narrative, just looking at the words on a page, we're prone to miss all that's happening. And one of the things we might miss is the state of Zechariah's heart at this point.

Talking Back to an Angel

- A. We might just read past the first part of v. 18—“And Zechariah said to the angel...”—to get straight to the content, but we must not! We have to remember, this is not just another person Zechariah is talking to but an angel of God! A being magnificent in stature and glory.
 - 1. There is indication of the awesome nature of these creatures even in the details surrounding our text. When Gabriel first appears “on the right side of the altar of incense” (v. 11), we read that “Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him” (v. 12).
 - a. Such a response to these angelic beings is quite typical. In fact, every time they appear in these opening chapters it is fear that is incited in the human heart. When Gabriel later appears to Mary, she is “greatly troubled” (v. 29). When an angel of the Lord appears to the shepherds out in the field, they are “filled with fear” (2:9). Such a response is appropriate for a lowly man before a magnificent creature.
- B. Though Zechariah was initially taken by fear, it seems he has regained his courage at the point of his response, and he is talking back, as it were, to this being! Now we see something of the insanity of this moment. “And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this?” Do you now catch a little different flavor here? If we were to put it a little more starkly, it's as if Zechariah is saying: “Prove it to me. You say this miracle will happen. How do I know that you and God are able to deliver on this? Your word isn't enough.” Now we start to get why Gabriel responds the way he does.

Illustrations Abound

- A. But we must linger here for a moment. For Zechariah's response is just one expression of the fundamental problem that plagues humanity as whole. This doubt, this demand for proof, that God bend to us, it is in us all. Illustrations abound at this point!
 - 1. I'm reminded of something I posted to Facebook a while back: “Will scientists find an end to the universe? No. Because there isn't one. Amazingly, it is in our consideration of the earth's place within the cosmos that we see the finite actually interfacing with the fringes of the infinite. Every moment on earth is a mysterious, alluring mix of finitude and infinity, a conversation, we could say, between man and God. Perhaps this is why the heavens are always spoken of as God's dwelling place. He is infinite, omnipresent, eternal, etc. and the heavens, with their corresponding, though analogical, attributes, would seem to be an appropriate dwelling place for Him (though even they can't contain Him [1 Kings 8:27]). He is all around us! We stare into the infinite, even the very face of God, every time we look up, if ever we

do, in this busy world. Look up with me today and, please, don't tell me that the infinite everything came from a vacuous nothing. Indeed, "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Psa 19:1)! Can you hear them?"

a. If you think looking into an angel's face and saying, "Prove it" is bold, what are we to make of this? He can be known through what He has made. We look into the face of God, as it were, every time we look up. And yet we say, "Prove it!" Tragically, it is often the scientists, the ones who get closest to the vast wonders of God's creation, that also so vehemently deny His existence!

i. What are we to make of this? If the heavens are declaring the glory of God, humanity is pictured for us perfectly in those Jewish leaders that rejected Stephen's testimony of the Christ in [Act 7](#): " ⁵⁷They cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ^{58a}Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him (Act 7:57–58a).

(1) We will not hear this! If the heavens are declaring, let's yell louder. If we can still hear their message over our noise, let's stop our ears. And if that still won't get God out of our consciousness, let's kill Him altogether!

How Did Zechariah Get Here?

A. How did Zechariah get here? In one sense, I know I've overplayed my analysis. I don't think Zechariah is trying to expunge God from the universe (yet), but he is caught, it seems to me in the terrible drift of doubt.

1. Doubt seems at first to be relatively harmless, but there's a drift to it, a current that pulls beneath the surface. It will never stay where it begins but means to take you further downstream, if you'll let it.

B. I imagine this doubt began to pull at his heart years ago. When we first face tragedy in the Lord, we are often more hopeful. The difficulty his wife had in conceiving, it would have driven him to his knees in prayer, perhaps even with expectation that the gracious God of Israel would answer, much like He had in years past with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and others. As a priest, you can be sure he knew the stories. He even taught them. It's quite likely that he even lived in the same region as these patriarchs: "the hill country of Judea" (1:65; v. 39; Jos 20:7; 21:11).

1. But over the years, as calluses start to form on his knees—prayer after prayer with seemingly no answer, so too calluses start to form on his heart. "What's the point?!" He's watching his wife still insulted by the other women in the marketplace for her barrenness. He's still putting his arm around her when she breaks down at the end of the day. He's watching all the neighbors still multiplying and bearing fruit—the family down the way just had their fifth child. He's watching the wrinkles develop on his and Elizabeth's face. It's over. At this point, doubt has settled into

his heart and he's accepted another interpretation of reality, of YHWH. Pain, improperly handled, can often have this effect.

Drifting with Doubt towards Atheism

- A. But let's follow this drift of doubt a bit further. Let's see where it's trying to take us. I think we can see with Zechariah, and with ourselves, that this doubt is drifting ultimately towards atheism, though it does so subtly, insidiously, moving slowly through various phases.
 - 1. It's my observation that this doubt seems to drift first towards Traditionalism, then Naturalism, then Liberalism, finally sending us over the edge into Atheism. This is the devolution of an atheist. Let's consider these one by one.
 - a. I should say before we begin that, really, all doubting of God, at every stage, is atheistic in principle, it's just that it becomes more self-conscious, more settled, more egregious as it moves towards a full brazen atheistic confession.

(1) Traditionalism

- A. If doubt is not dealt with before the Lord in a right way, if we slowly give up the fight of faith, if we let it settle into our hearts and fester, it will first move us towards Traditionalism.
 - 1. Here doubt actually becomes our operating principle, though, at this point, we might not even be aware of it. We start doing religious things not because we believe anything will happen necessarily but because we've always done it this way. Whether we do our duties from comfort, or superstition, or whatever else, we certainly don't do them from zeal for God and expectation of meeting with Him. We could sum Traditionalism up in this way: we stop expecting.
- B. Consider Zechariah as our case study. He's busy with all his religious deeds. He's a good priest. He's done all the washings. He's wearing the right gear. He's gotten ready the right incense in the right way. He's in the Holy Place. He's probably lying prostrate interceding for his nation. He's busy in His religion. But does he actually expect anything to happen? Does he expect YHWH could speak to Him and make possible the impossible? No.
 - 1. "How shall I know this?" "You mean you're actually telling me you're going to do with me as you did with Abraham? There was a point when I thought that could happen, but over the years they just became comforting stories to me, not an anticipated possibility." "How shall I know this?"
- C. This was a major point of conviction for me during my preparation. We have to turn this in on ourselves and ask: Why am I here this morning? Why do I come to church? Is this where I'm at? Do I actually believe God is at work in this room right now, that He is here?!
 - 1. What is this book? Just a good story? Just a philosophy, one of many options? Is what I'm doing here along the same lines as a TED talk, or lecture, or political rally?

Or is God throwing open graves and calling the dead to life! Are these the very words of God?!

2. What are we doing when we sing? Is it just comforting music or a concert venue? We were talking at Home Group about how weird at first worship seemed to us. People were raising their hands, engaging this Being that no one could see. I remember the first time I raised my hands. I started with this move down low, but then got the courage to go for the full spread. I knew this was a big deal. I was pouring out my heart to the God of the universe. And He was listening in. Now it can be so normal. Too normal. Even traditional.
3. Or what about prayer? When we pray during the service, is it just to deal with the awkward transitions between elements? Or do we really think God of heaven is condescending to hear and move?
 - a. Do you remember how the church, which was gathered to pray for Peter's release from prison, responded when the little servant girl came back from the knock at the door exclaiming: "It's Peter!" "You are out of your mind" (Act 12:15). "We pray, but we don't expect God to actually answer!" O but He does!

(2) Naturalism

- A. If Traditionalism is allowed to settle in our hearts and in the church, the drift of doubt won't let us stay there. It seems to me the next stop along the way is Naturalism.
 1. Here we become more self-conscious of our doubt. It is understood in contrast with the supernatural. It doubts the supernatural is even possible in the first place. It starts to look with suspicion at who God is and what He says. Everything must appeal to my reason or it can't be true. It is the move from stop expecting to stop believing. It is only a matter of time. Tradition starts to leech a vanity into the whole religious enterprise. Before long we not only don't expect God to move, we don't believe He can. Such a thought is unreasonable.
- B. We see this in the reason Zechariah gives for his doubt: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (v. 18). Have you looked at Elizabeth and I lately?! Such a thing would be impossible.
 1. Zechariah doesn't realize that this is, in fact, God's very point! "³⁶And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:36–37). He defines what is possible. He makes the rules that govern life in this universe.
 - a. This would be something akin to telling a painter that because the paint is dry on his latest work, he can't come back and add another color. Of course he can, quite effortlessly. He has the paint, the brush, and the creativity!

- C. Are we here? Perhaps we wouldn't go so far as to vocalize it, but we know we're moving in this direction when our first instinct to the problems in our lives isn't to cry out to God for help but to try to fix it ourselves. Prayer is just going to slow down the process of getting to a solution.

Or if we do actually pray, even if we see God move in response, we leave the backdoor open for Naturalism again: "That would have just happened anyways. Peter must have broke out of the prison. Have you ever seen Shawshank Redemption? It was probably like that. Angels? That's a bit far-fetched."

1. Here's something from an article I read in response to some of this Naturalistic toxin that I found particularly helpful: "Reported miracles in Scripture are critically important passages that remind us of a desperately needed truth: there is no natural world. This world is made and sustained by the Creator God. Sometimes God blesses us with breathtaking miracles that we can attempt to explain. Anyone who has held a one-minute-old baby knows they hold the miraculous work of God in their arms, even if we have a pretty good idea of what happens between conception and birth. Anyone who has watched a thunderstorm sweep its way into town along a cold front has seen the miraculous power of God at work, even if He is never mentioned on The Weather Channel. If God can make life and thunderstorms, we should not be surprised to learn he can make wine from water.

A defining characteristic of a Christian is to believe that a man named Jesus was hung on a cross until He died, and even though He was dead, He came back to life. This is a miracle. To be a Christian is to believe that sometimes God chooses to work in ways that have no natural explanation. This is good news! This is our hope! Our lives, our relationships and our world often seem so broken that we cannot imagine any way to fix them. But our God can work miracles. He does things we cannot explain. He does things that make us uncomfortable. He can leave us saying, "I have no idea how God did this, but I praise Him for work He has done." May we say the same when our children ask about the Red Sea, sight for the blind and a feast for thousands from only a few loaves and fishes. (Carlson, "Embracing the Mystery of Biblical Miracles")

- a. If we give up the miraculous, the supernatural, we give up Christianity! For it has at its core, the most improbable miracle of all: the resurrection. Let's invite back into the church the God of the resurrection!

(3) Liberalism

- A. But again, if Naturalism is allowed to take up residence in our hearts, it will try to push us towards Liberalism. When I say Liberalism here, I'm not talking about political liberalism but theological.
1. Here is the move from stop believing to stop obeying. Things start to get even more blatant. We've already questioned the supernatural core of God and His word, now, if this isn't God speaking, why do we even need to listen to it? Now we start talking about updating the Word of God to fit our modern and evolved sensibilities. There's a fine kernel of truth in the Scriptures but to get to it we have to tear away the husk

of all these unevolved, premodern notions. A lot of this is ancient stuff, irrelevant for us today.

- B. At the turn of the 20th century, major seminaries started going this way. Westminster exists because Princeton went this direction theologically. Today, entire denominations are giving way to the undertow of such doubt. I know of churches in the bay area drowning in these waters. Issues like homosexuality have brought this to a head in our country. Are we going to stand with the Scriptures, or are we going to update them, edit them?
 - 1. Before long, all these churches meet but they are more like country clubs or support groups than an embassy of the kingdom of heaven. They still have the forms—with their chapels and crosses, pastors and pews—but they have long since denied the faith that alone makes any sense of them. They're like the shells that the cicadas would leave stuck to the trees in my backyard in Arizona. There's a semblance of life but the substance has long since flown away.
- C. Are we here? We've been going through the motions so long. We no longer expect, nor believe that anything's really happening here. So why should we listen? Why should we obey? We start editing His words to suit our own desires, what I think is reasonable?
 - 1. You don't want to be here! Let's move against Liberalism and receive humbly, like a child, all of God's revelation even when it supersedes or mystifies our reason. What could be more reasonable than for little insignificant creatures like us to trust the omnipotent Creator in everything He says?!

(4) Atheism

- A. It is only a matter of time before the doubt is followed to its logical end: Atheism. Why keep playing religion if you no longer believe in the God of it? What are you doing singing, and praying, and studying, and tithing if you don't think God is even really there? Here is where stop obeying becomes stop altogether.
 - 1. What seems at first to be a mere innocent question, truly has within its compass the very seed of a full-bodied atheism. Isn't that how the world went wrong at the beginning? "Did God really say?" A seemingly innocent question that has now a world of sin, sorrow, suffering, and death in its debt! This drift is nothing new. It's as old as humanity. O Mercy Hill, beware of the drift of doubt.

Conclusion

Zechariah's Silence

- A. So what is God going to do with this? Returning to the narrative in Luke, we will deal much more with the details next time, but for now I want to draw our attention down to [v. 20](#), particularly the last part.

1. Gabriel is responding to the heart behind Zechariah's question with a pretty sturdy rebuke. Because of his unbelief, Zechariah will be given a sign, albeit probably not the kind of sign he was hoping for: "And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak..." A devastating blow right? It's like the equivalent of a spiritual time-out: "You just sit here and think about what you've done!" Except it's gonna last for 9 months!
2. But when we keep reading we come to a most marvelous statement: "...until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." These things will "take place"! These words, "will be fulfilled"!
 - a. We will reflect much more on it next time but for now let it's rays begin to warm your cheek. God doesn't need our faith to accomplish His plan, fulfill His words. Actually, it's quite the opposite. We need Him to accomplish His plan and fulfill His words if we are ever to have faith in Him at all! He's got to change this heart or it's over for me!

Zechariah's Song

- A. And as the narrative continues, Zechariah waits in silence and watches while God moves forward to do just this. And He takes this unbelieving man with Him up the mountain, as it were, and gives him a staggering glimpse of the glory of His grace.
 1. 9 months pass, the day comes, and Zechariah's silence gives way to song! For 8 days after the birth of his son, when it came time to circumcise and name the child, we read: "His mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God" (v. 64).
 - a. And he sings this song in vv. 68-79 and here's the amazing thing: It's all about Jesus! You would think it would be about John, but it's all about Jesus. Even when his son is mentioned it's to show his relationship to Jesus: "⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins,⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:76-79).
 - i. Jesus is the Lord. Jesus is the One who saves. Jesus is the One who forgives sins. Jesus is the Sunrise from on high, the Light of the world. Jesus is way, the truth, the life. He is our peace!
- B. Jesus will be the way forward! What's happening with Zechariah here, moving from silence to song, is just an anticipation of what the Christ will do for all those who are His.
 1. He will absorb the full drift of our doubting all the way to its atheistic end and turn it on its head. Atheism in its ultimate expression is not just the denial of God but the

killing of Him. “Get out of my universe!” And Christ says, “Okay, come on. Kill me. And I’ll make it my means of saving you. I will not leave you in silence. I will loosen your lips in song!” He takes the atheistic principle and makes it subservient to a full-bodied Christian faith.

a. For in His resurrection and ascension, it’s as if He has dropped anchor upstream in God’s presence and is now pulling His people by His Spirit against the current of their flesh that they might be with Him where He is. Since Adam, we had been careening in the current of unbelief towards destruction, but now, the Second Adam has entered the water, and He is, even here this morning, pulling us against that current back towards His Father!

i. As the author of Hebrews tells us: “¹⁹ We have...a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf...” (Heb 6:19-20a).

C. People may be drifting in doubt this morning. God is saying, “It’s not over for you. Because of Christ I can turn the silence of your unbelief into the songs of the faithful.” O God do it, for Christ’s glory!



D. Is this not alive and well in our culture? What more proof do we need than what we will observe here in a month or so. The churches swell two times a year: Easter and Christmas. Why? Tradition. We just come in and do what we’ve always done. But do we worship the Son for His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Get real! Isn’t it time to get home and open presents already?



- D. Naturalism featured large in the Enlightenment era and still holds sway today. The enshrining of man's reason over God's revelation. The doubting of the supernatural and miraculous because it doesn't make sense to us. There are some who have tried to bring the biblical miracles under the authority of man's reason. "We want the Bible and Christianity still, but c'mon, miracles?" So they come up with ridiculous theories. This just in: According to a team of Israeli scientists, Jesus' walking on water could have been accomplished with some well-placed stones. "There, now the supernatural has been squeezed back into the natural. Now we're being reasonable."
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1. Every parent is presented this grim picture of human nature on a daily basis in parabolic form. It may come in a cute package, but it still is a grim picture. We watch the boldness with which our children deny our authority and assume their own.
 - a. A most recent example came at dinner this last week. Chloe had eaten all her dinner and so now came the part of the meal she was working so hard to get to: dessert. We have Halloween candy for days, so I pull out her bag and she chooses Skittles. She's enjoying them, but then she comes to a purple one, what any rational being knows is a grape skittle. "It's chocolate," she says. "Chloe, it's grape. Try it and tell me what it tastes like." "Chocolate." "Chloe. It's grape. The flavors are written on the wrapper. I want you to trust daddy on this. I've been around longer. I know." (I don't want to raise a postmodern relativist: "taste is truth." What I feel, what I like, defines what is true. This is running rampant in our culture these days. No! There is objective reality, absolute truth.) "The purple skittle is grape!" But then she picks up the wrapper and pretend to read it: "The flavor is chocolate and anyone who thinks it is not is wrong."
 - i. What is that? How can she look up at me, someone who's 3 times her size, who's been around 3 decades longer, and say, "I don't think you've got it right." That's a parental parable of this reality!
- B. And it shows us what's in here (my heart). It's not just in Zechariah, or scientists, or Chloe, it's in all of us!