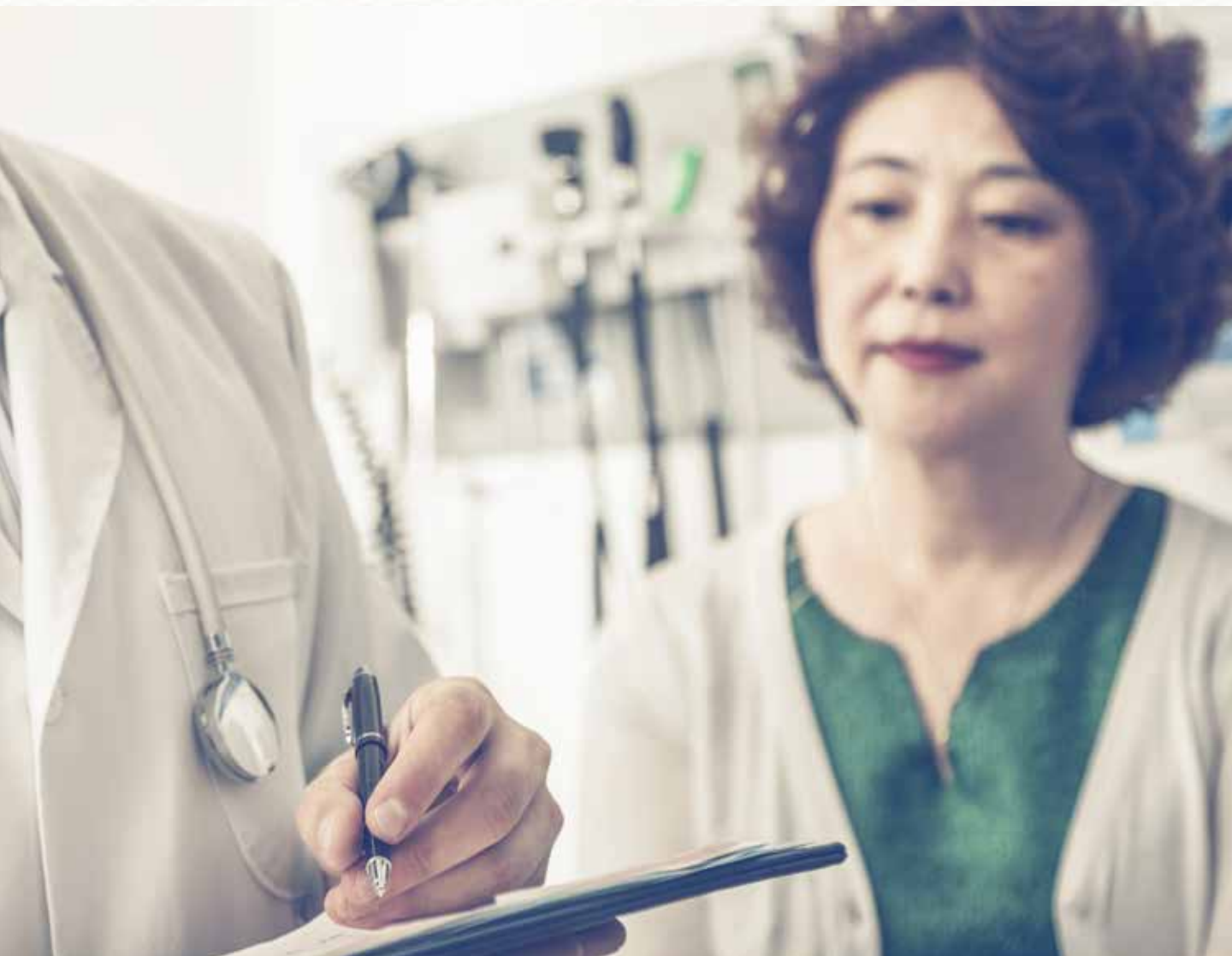


SESSION 4

REDEEMED FROM CRIPPLING DOUBT



*Whose word have you learned to
always trust?*

QUESTION #1

#BSFLbeauty

THE POINT

God's Word can be fully trusted.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Trust isn't what it used to be. My grandfather never locked his door; in fact, he didn't even have locks on the doors and windows of his house. But I wouldn't think of leaving my car unlocked even while making a quick trip into the grocery store.

Would you?

Blind trust is never wise, but we often let skepticism replace any form of trust. And why wouldn't we? Elected officials promise big changes, but they rarely deliver. More and more religious leaders are caught in moral failures. Corporate executives hoard money while their companies (and their employees) hurtle toward financial ruin.

It's difficult to trust people. And let's admit it: sometimes it's difficult to trust God. Zechariah certainly believed in God, but when God sent a specific word to him, he found it difficult to trust.

As we'll see, God didn't leave Zechariah in his doubt—and He will not leave us, either.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Luke 1:11-20,63-65 (NIV)

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. **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, and you are to call him 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 before he is born. **16** He will bring back many of the people of Israel 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 parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

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.”

19 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. **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 appointed time.”

63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” **64** Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. **65** All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.

Altar of incense (v. 11)—The altar of incense stood before the curtain that separated the holy place from the holy of holies in the temple. The incense burned on the altar was symbolic of the people’s prayers offered to God.

Elijah (v. 17)—Like the Old Testament prophet Elijah, John the Baptist was given the Spirit of God to fulfill his ministry.

A people prepared (v. 17)—Fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-5, John the Baptist would serve as the herald preparing the people through his ministry for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.



When have you been blessed by an answered prayer?

QUESTION #2

Luke 1:11-17

The Bible is filled with miracles, and two of the most familiar have to do with miraculous births:

- ▶ Abraham and Sarah and the birth of Isaac (see Gen. 21:1-7)
- ▶ Mary and Joseph and the virgin birth of Jesus (see Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-7)

Another important birth preceded the birth of Jesus by mere months: the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ.

Like Abraham and Sarah, John's parents were past childbearing years. Zechariah and Elizabeth desired a child; they had prayed for one, probably for years. In spite of their righteous and blameless lives (see v. 6), their prayers had seemingly gone unanswered—seemingly. In reality, God heard their prayers, and He chose to respond in His own timing.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, the man naturally “was startled and was gripped with fear” (v. 12). Who wouldn't be? But the angel sought to calm his fears and announced that “your prayer has been heard” (v. 13). Gabriel gave specific details about Zechariah's son, including what his name would be and the kind of impact he would have on the world. Gabriel also promised that the son would bring joy and delight to his father and that many would rejoice at his birth.

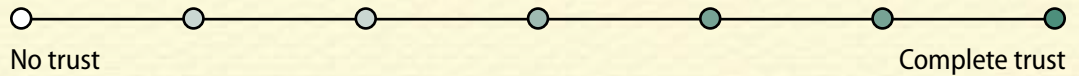
We all desire to have our prayers answered. If we didn't expect an answer, we wouldn't ask in the first place. Yet how many times do we seek something from God, only to be surprised when He answers? Or how many times do we ask God for direction, yet we hesitate when He gives us direction through His Word? Perhaps it would be easier if an angel stood directly in front of us with the answer, but as we'll see, even such a miraculous sight doesn't always remove our doubt.

God wants to establish a pattern with His children. When we hear His Word, we should believe it, push through our fear, and step out in faith.

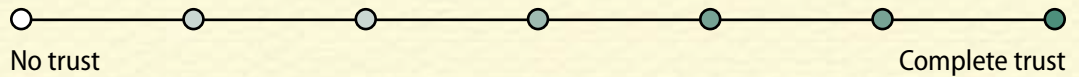
TRUSTING GOD

To what degree have you been able to trust God throughout the different phases of your life? Answer the following questions to see how your level of trust has progressed.

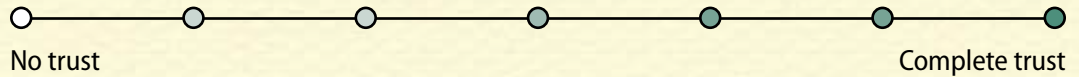
How much did you trust God as a child?



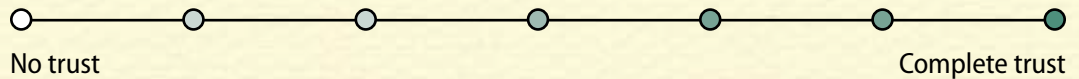
How much did you trust God 10 years ago?



How much did you trust God 5 years ago?



How much did you trust God last week?



Luke 1:18-20

If an angel, straight from the presence of God, stood before you and gave you details about how your prayers would be answered, what would you do? Zechariah doubted.

Why is it often hard for us to trust that God will do what He says He will do?

QUESTION #3

Can we blame Zechariah? That God had answered their prayers for a child was amazing in itself, but the news of his role in the kingdom of God is beyond incredible. I wonder if Zechariah thought to himself: *How can I possibly raise such a child? How do I take on this responsibility when I feel too old to begin a new season of life with a bouncing baby boy?*

We do the same thing with God. When we sense His Spirit leading us toward a certain task, we tend to respond like Zechariah: *God, are You really sure You want me to do this?* Zechariah's question to the angel Gabriel was telling: "How can I be sure of this?" (v. 18). He asked for proof. The angel promised Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a special son with a special ministry and a unique task. But Zechariah wanted more than a promise. He wanted proof. And we do, too.

How can we ask questions of God without drifting into doubt?

QUESTION #4

What further proof could God give? Here was Gabriel, a messenger who "stand[s] in the presence of God" (v. 19) and about whom Zechariah had read in the Book of Daniel (see 8:16; 9:21). So, Gabriel gave further proof, a sign that was punitive: "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" (v. 20). The promised child would cry out before Zechariah could.

Even so, Zechariah's doubt did not keep God from working. God always keeps His promises, and His plan will prevail. When we doubt God's Word, it hinders our walk with Him and our service in His kingdom. Thankfully, that's not where our story has to end—and it's not where Zechariah's story ended, either.

**When has your
obedience to God led
to joy?**

QUESTION #5



Luke 1:63-65

For nearly a year, Zechariah couldn't speak. He watched his aged wife struggle through the challenges of pregnancy. He surely prayed for a healthy delivery. He silently helped his wife make preparations for the son they would raise. And as the love of his life delivered their new son, he was surely overcome with emotion, including love for his child.

In addition, his love for God surely was even greater than before. Zechariah never forgot the promise God made, even as he learned a valuable lesson about doubt and trust. Zechariah was now ready to act in obedience, and he found a way to get into the group discussion. He wrote on a tablet that the boy would be called John, and immediately his mouth was opened and he began to rejoice.

Gabriel had told Zechariah to call his son John. At that time, Zechariah had been filled with doubt, but now he was ready to obey. His act of obedience to God's command set him free—and led him to worship! Zechariah had a voice again, but he no longer spoke words of doubt. Now he spoke joy and praise.

We can trust God's Word to us. Whatever He tells us—whatever He calls us to do—we can be assured of His presence and guidance. We can be assured that He will work *in* us and *through* us.

After all, God doesn't call the equipped. He equips those He calls.

LIVE IT OUT

How will you show your trust in God and His Word this week? Consider the following options:

- ▶ **List.** Make a list of the times when God used you in ways you would have never dreamed or imagined. Remember these amazing instances of His power at work in you and rejoice at His grace!
- ▶ **Pray.** Start praying bigger, bolder prayers. Confess your doubts to God and ask Him to use you any way He wants, stretching you beyond your comfort zone and teaching you to trust His calling on your life.
- ▶ **Act.** What is God calling you to do? It can be as big as a change in career or as small as calling someone who needs a word of encouragement. Act on it. Your trust in God is seen in your obedience.

You may not live in the kind of neighborhood where nobody locks their doors at night—few people do these days. But you can still find the courage to trust God. He will never let you down.



My thoughts