

EVIDENCE BASED FAITH

Luke 1:1-4 *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 eye-witnesses and servants of the word. 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, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

How do you know that what you are told is true? Luke was a physician, trained to discover the truth, expert in taking medical histories and comparing them with reports from other members of the family. After Jesus ascended into heaven, many people wrote about His life and ministry. But which accounts were authentic? Luke, who also helped Paul, applied his training in literature and science to the task of evaluating the many reports about Jesus - finding the truth from eye witnesses, and writing ... so that we can be certain about what we have been taught.

This was no quick newspaper report. It must have taken many months of patient research; with careful questioning and note-taking after all the contact-tracing and travel, comparing many manuscripts against the first-hand narratives of those who were there at the time. Witnesses would have included Mary, the disciples and probably at least two of the Jewish ruling council. Of course, the 'Jesus-story' extended far beyond His earthly ministry, and Part 2 of Luke's book is now known as the Acts of the Apostles. Both were addressed to Theophilus who was a senior official, or lawyer; either to assist his personal discipleship or to be able to stand up for Christians in court.

Jesus has always been controversial. Today, those who love Him need to be secure in the truth they believe; those who are seeking need evidence; and those who want to reduce Jesus to being one wise teacher among many, need to know that there is eye witness evidence of God who became a man. Luke's account has the credibility we need, including intimate details of events leading to the birth of Jesus. Believing in Jesus starts by understanding who Jesus is, why He came and how He is qualified to be your Saviour (see www.crosscheck.org.uk to know more). That information does not come from inside us but from external sources we can rely on. So Luke's Gospel is just right for the seeker and the sceptic, as it will provide solid evidence for making a decision to follow Jesus; also it gives many good reasons to affirm believers in their faith. As we study each verse, it will provide wonderful insights for family, friends and colleagues who are wondering if what they have heard about Jesus is true. Do share it with them, and discuss it in your workplace fellowship or prayer group.

Prayer: *Father God. Thank You for Luke's gospel about Jesus. Thank You that I can rely on what is written, and base my faith on sound eye-witness evidence. Help me to be able to share this truth with others who are seeking Jesus, and to find fresh confidence in my faith as each new page unfolds fresh wonders about my Saviour. In His precious Name. Amen.*

FAITHFUL FAILURES?

Luke 1:5-7 *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 upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well on in years. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

If God is on your side, why is life littered by unwanted challenges and broken dreams? Luke is introducing us to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth - a godly, devout, faithful couple who obeyed the Jewish rules. They were both descended from Aaron so Zechariah was a priest who served in the temple, and any male children would, automatically, have become priests. But there was not even one child. This was also a personal spiritual problem because, in the Old Testament, fertility was a mark of God's blessing. No child, and in some way, God must be displeased. So this couple tried as hard as possible to be as good as they could.

They did not seem to have faith that Elizabeth might be like Abraham's wife, Sarah, who was also well past the menopause when God gave her a child. They just plodded on with their religious routine but with that constant underlying sadness of disappointed hope: probably also with that unwanted feeling of being not good enough for God. They were faithful, but failures in their own eyes. The story will turn out very differently as we shall see, but for now; the stage is set with 'hopelessness' written all over it.

It is easy to see God triumphing over circumstances, when they have been miraculously resolved; or to understand His purpose of painful years in preparation, after His masterpiece is revealed. But during the trials, the battering from people outside or the weariness of internal doubts, the future can look like a fog. Yet that is where many of us live, spiritually speaking. God has not allowed us the luxury of knowing how today's confusion will be resolved, or when the perfect solution will arrive to disarm the fear of impending disaster. In the following verses we shall see how God led Zechariah and Elizabeth through a roller-coaster experience to a glorious outcome, rather like Paul's comment in [Ephesians 3:20](#), "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us." That is the way God works. So even if you cannot see it, or dare not even imagine it, God is powerfully at work. His plans are always greater than ours, and His power is more than enough to achieve what He plans. Ask God to help you to trust Him in the crisis you face today, or in the lingering sadness that has dulled you for many years.

Prayer: *Dear Lord. I cannot understand all of the way You have led me, including its hardships and painful mysteries. But help me to believe that You can fulfil all that You choose to do through me and for me. Help me to grow in confidence that Your Will shall be done, and that it will be good for me as well as for the glory of Your eternal Kingdom. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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THE FEAR OF DUTIFUL FAITH

Luke 1:8-12 *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 worshippers were praying outside. 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. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Religious people have faith, but in what? Zechariah obeyed God's commandments in his private life, and fulfilled the requirements for priests when he was working in the temple. He certainly believed in God and was faithful to the rules, but there was something missing: he did not expect God to communicate with him.

Like many 'good church-goers', Zechariah tried to keep the rules of religion, and carefully fulfilled his official role; but had little understanding of a personal relationship with God. The incident in today's passage was the once-in-a-lifetime privilege for a priest. Zechariah was appointed to burn incense, alone in the Holy Place of the temple, representing the prayers of Israel. As he did so, a large crowd prayed outside, asking God to come to save His people. It was a regular ritual, but not even the priest expected that God would respond.

When the angel appeared next to the altar, Zechariah was petrified. This was not part of the prescribed ritual at all. But God wanted to speak to Zechariah; He wanted the priest to work with Him in order to be part of the answer to his own prayers. For those who don't know, the aged priest and his wife were to conceive a son in their old age, who we know as John the Baptist, the cousin and announcer of our Lord Jesus Christ. However at this stage in the story, nothing could have been further from Zechariah's mind: so the angel came as God's personal representative to deliver the message. But instead of joy, he was met by fear; and, as we will see, the old priest proved that his faith was probably more in a rational religious structure than in the Word of the living God.

You may say you believe, but what do you believe? You may be a cultural believer, a social believer, a religious church-goer, but if you do not have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ the biggest bit of faith will be missing. If you are not sure, see www.crosscheck.org.uk and check it out. If you are enjoying a real relationship with the Lord, are you keeping it quiet? Everybody has the right to know how they can have freedom of forgiveness in Christ, and a real friendship with the God who made them. So if you know the truth of salvation, you are God's messenger (that's what 'angel' means!) to announce the Good News to your family, friends and colleagues.

Prayer: *Almighty God. Thank You for wanting to communicate with me personally, and for Your desire to include me in Your family. Help me to hear Your call to let others know that You want them to be saved too, by repenting and receiving the truth about Jesus. Please refresh my faith, through Your Word, so that I may be constantly alert to Your presence wherever I go, so that I may know how to please You each day. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

Luke 1:13-16 *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 give him the name 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 from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. (NIV)*

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Some people say that if you have great faith, then God will answer: and there are Scriptures to support that. But God is also far greater than the limits of our faith. In this narrative, Zechariah the priest had prayed for a child, but did not believe it was possible (see [Luke 1:18-20](#)). Nevertheless, his faithless prayer would be answered!

An angel had appeared unexpectedly while Zechariah was performing a most sacred rite of temple worship. Firstly, he reassured the terrified priest. "Do not be afraid" is one of God's most common commands in the Bible - because we are naturally vulnerable and often afraid. Then the angel said that God had heard his prayer, and announced the birth of a baby boy even before he had been conceived (see [Luke 1:23-24](#)), naming him John (meaning: 'Jehovah is a gracious giver') and giving an overview of his life's purpose.

John would far exceed all his parents' expectations, bringing joy into their home, and much more widely. John's preaching would urge many to repent of their sins and get ready to welcome God's salvation through Jesus. Luke often uses the word 'joy' to describe the overflowing relief of salvation: here he applies it to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and to many in Israel. John was to be God's special messenger, and would be filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb (see [Luke 1:39-44](#)). That was also God's sovereign act, without John doing anything. So: John was known before his conception, and equipped with God's presence to fulfil God's appointment even before he was born. This was God operating in grace (unasked and undeserved), to John who was not yet born, his family who did not fully believe, and Israel who did not care!

We need these reminders that God is not limited by our formulae, or how we think He should behave - God does as He pleases, and pours grace on whosoever He wills. This passage should also encourage those who only see the future as a fog, because God is continually working all things together for the good of those who love Him (see [Romans 8:28](#)), even if their faith is weak. It is God who is strong; and He will always complete what He has decided to do. So be encouraged at home, at work and in the church ... God is at work far more than we can imagine.

Prayer: *Dear Lord God. Thank You for not giving me only what I deserve, or restricting Your grace to the limit of my faith. Thank You for reassuring me when I am afraid and encouraging me forwards to the future You have planned even when I cannot fully understand. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

BACK TO THE COVENANT

Luke 1:17 *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." (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

John the Baptist did not choose his career. God appointed him as the 'last of the Old Testament prophets' (even though his story is at the beginning of the New Testament). They all had the same task - to draw people back to God's covenant, and to look forward to the day when Jesus would institute a new covenant. After 400 years of prophetic silence since Malachi who predicted John's ministry (see [Malachi 3:1](#)), his task was to finish the prophetic relay race by personally identifying Jesus (see [John 1:29-34](#)).

The inspiration was to be God's - John would be filled with the Holy Spirit from before his birth. The example would be Elijah - who announced God's curse on sin, confronted false prophets, and spoke truth to the king who had abused his power. Like Elijah, John would be a lonely preacher who met with God in the desert - but that encounter would be with the physical Jesus, God the Son. The task was outlined in the last verses of the Old Testament, [Malachi 4:5-6](#), "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." In other words, John was to get all generations of the family of Israel ready and eager to meet their God .

John's ministry was unique; he was given a great privilege to introduce Jesus to the world. But our ministry is unique too. All God's people have a share in calling people to respond to God's new covenant in the gospel. Every Christian should understand it because we have received it ourselves, and by God's grace (along with repentance and faith) we have come into God's family (see www.crosscheck.org.uk if you are not sure). When we are born again, we are given the Holy Spirit: and as we are discipled, we learn God's Word for ourselves, and to pass it on. We too will have to face opposition and sometimes speak the truth to those who have never questioned their own authority. We too will find solace and strength as we talk in the secret place with Father God (see [Matthew 5:6](#)).

So there is a sense in which John's commission also describes the gospel ministry of the whole church (see [Matthew 28:18-20](#)) - a responsibility for every follower of Jesus who reads this message. Truth is in short supply in this world, but it has been entrusted to you! Use it to illuminate dark hearts and minds so that they too might receive Jesus who is the Light of the World.

Prayer: *Dear Lord. Thank You for explaining a significant part of my purpose on this earth. Please help me to hear Your commission to bring light to a dark world, as I speak of Jesus and encourage people around me to receive the truth of the gospel which He offers freely to all. In Jesus Name. Amen.*

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NOTHING TO SAY

Luke 1:18-25 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years." 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. 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." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. 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." (NIV)

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

The angel had announced that a baby boy would be born to a geriatric couple. At first sight, Zechariah's question seems very reasonable. He and his wife knew that their biological power of reproduction had gone. But that was not just a function of their old age; they had never produced any children. Yet the angel rebuked Zechariah's unbelief and struck him dumb for nine months.

Compare the old priest's question with that of Mary's, "How will this be ... since I am a virgin?" (see [Luke 1:34](#)). The man was rebuked while the girl was blessed. Obviously God knows the motives in every heart, but looking more carefully we can also see Zechariah's problem. He said, "How can I be sure of this?" He may have been a priest, but he was not prepared to accept God's Word as being true. When God's ministers doubt God's Word, then in God's eyes they have nothing to say. So Zechariah's speech was removed. That was both a punishment and a sign. Mary, however, believed the angel's words but was very interested to know how God was going to do it!

God's Word is 'true and for you!' Refusal to believe that leaves you with nothing to say which is of any value to God's Kingdom. Religious leaders who follow Zechariah's example would be better keeping silent, than obscuring God's wisdom by words without knowledge (see [Job 38:2](#)): Jesus called them 'blind guides', 'whitewashed tombs' and 'a brood of vipers' (see [Matthew chapter 23](#)). Don't be like them! If you have any responsibility to lead God's people - in the home, church, community or workplace - be warned: God's Word will always be done but only those who embrace it can announce it with confidence.

Prayer: Dear Father God. Thank You for speaking to me through Your Word. Keep me believing what You say, and being willing to put it into practice, so that I have Your blessing when I speak to others in Your Name. For Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

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ACCEPTING THE FAVOUR

Luke 1:26-33 *In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end." (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

The old, childless couple had a baby on the way, because God said it would happen. Elizabeth was 3 months away from delivering John when a teenage unmarried relative, Mary, encounters the same angel who spoke to Zechariah in the temple. Gabriel surprises her by saying that God had chosen her so that He might pour out His grace on her. As with Zechariah, the angel commands Mary not to fear and then announced that God had chosen her to be the mother of the Lord Jesus Christ.

No descendent of Adam deserves God's favour; we are all sinners and included under the curse of [Genesis 3](#). That is why we need a Saviour, to rescue us from God's wrath (see [1 Thessalonians 1:10](#)). Mary's privilege was to give birth to the Saviour of the world, but she and Joseph did not create Him: God did. How did God select Mary for that task? Well, He has the right to choose to give His grace to whoever He wants; and He chooses those who will receive His gift. Mary was a great 'receiver': indeed, she received the Son of the Most High into her body.

Jesus was to be the greatest person ever, the promised King. Unlike all other rulers, His dominion would last for ever, and that means that He reigns over all the world today, and therefore we are all accountable to Him. Even Mary was accountable to her son (see [Matthew 12:46-50](#), [John 2:1-5](#)). Wherever you are, at work, at home, on holiday or in church ... you are accountable to Jesus Christ, because He is the King. He will come back again to call everybody to account, but all those who have received Him will also receive His favour (see www.crosscheck.org.uk to know more).

Prayer: *Dear Father God. Thank You for sending Jesus to be my Saviour. Mary was indeed favoured to be able to carry the physical body of Christ, and all who believe in Him can also be favoured as they receive Jesus. May I be more conscious of Your indwelling presence every day, and give thanks to You. In His Name. Amen.*

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THE WAY GOD WORKS

Luke 1:34-38 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. (NIV)

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Mary was a teenager who accepted the angel's message as truth from God: she accepted that her baby would become the Messiah King (see [Luke 1:31-33](#)). Most would have thought that the idea was incredible, but Mary believed (see [Luke 1:45](#)). However, her faith did not close off her enquiring mind, true faith never does. She did not doubt what God would do, but she was curious as to how God would do it, and what part she might need to play.

Some say that science is the opposite of faith. But every scientific enquiry has to start with an axiom - an idea which is believed to be true - and only after that can the experiment be done. The research is done to either prove or deny the axiom. However, when God speaks, He always says what is true - so to know the truth, we just need to believe Him. When we do that, we can cooperate with Him and prove how wonderful He is. Mary wanted to know what she had to do, and the answer was, "God will do it". She was quite content to accept that God would use her, and was glad to have the privilege of serving the Lord.

Although Mary's situation was unique, there are some important principles which apply to all God's children. Firstly, when God speaks through His Word, listen carefully ... He is speaking to you. Secondly, do not assume that God will do what you expect ... He is God and is calling you to do what He expects. Thirdly, don't assume that if God's Word seems impossible, that it is wrong ... nothing is impossible with God. When you hear Him speaking, don't be afraid to ask Him what He wants you to do ... almost certainly, He will want you first to accept what He has done, and if He wants you to take any initiative, He will make that plain. The great thing is that God speaks to His people, and if they are humble and servant-hearted like Mary, they will cooperate with Him to their blessing and His glory.

Prayer: *Almighty God, who achieves what is humanly impossible. Thank You for every time I have heard You speaking to me through Your Word. Forgive me for not listening more, and for doubting You. Help me to know how to accept Your grace; and to pray so that I will know how You want me to participate with You, in the work You are going to do in and through me. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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BLESSING COME THROUGH FAITH

Luke 1:39-45 *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Mary, in the early stages of pregnancy, went to stay with her relative Elizabeth who was six months pregnant with John. These women were separated by many years: Elizabeth was way past the menopause and Mary was a virgin teenager, yet God had done a miracle in each of them. Aged Elizabeth was carrying her old husband's baby: it was God's idea, even though Zechariah did not believe (and was struck dumb for his faithlessness). Yet, that punishment was a sign of God's power and so he did sleep with his wife, who miraculously conceived (see [Luke 1:11-25](#)).

But Elizabeth had faith in God. As Mary arrived, the Holy Spirit moved the baby John to jump and Elizabeth to speak prophetically about the identity of Mary's child. What a great affirmation that must have been to Mary. There is no indication that her faith was deficient, but God provided sufficient signs that He was in control so that Mary's faith would be sustained for the task ahead (including the crucifixion ordeal). Every episode was treasured (see [Luke 2:19](#)), and the Holy Spirit used them to help her keep trusting the Son of God, and their Heavenly Father.

However dramatic our early encounters with God, faith is not easy in the darkest days. Yet God graciously provides us with enough confirmation so that our hearts can hold on, even when we cannot see. Luke got this account first-hand from Mary in her old age: and Elizabeth's prophecy was still ringing in her ears, *"Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"* That is also true for us. We are called to trust the same Lord. Every year is a test of faith, so start by considering all the way the Lord has led you, and thank Him for every way in which He has confirmed your calling as a follower of Jesus. Then go confidently into the year, with the assurance that God is with you and will keep all His promises.

Prayer: *Dear Lord. Thank You for Your Word which teaches me how to worship and witness. Thank You, too, for every act of Your power and every way in which You have encouraged me to trust You. Keep my heart strong to keep believing, ignoring the confusion which tries to invade my mind and heart; so that I can be Your servant at home, at work, in the community and in the church. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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BLESSINGS PROMOTE PRAISE

Luke 1:46-49 *And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Mary had received confirmation of the angel's message through Elizabeth's prophecy. Mary's faith was already settled, and she was willing to be the Lord's servant in bearing God's child; but now her private faith became public praise (and has continued to be used in Christian worship for two millennia). It was not enough that she passively accepted God's privilege of being the virgin mother of the Lord Jesus - because blessings given are designed to praise God and not bring praise to the receiver. When God gives, the proper response is to shower Him in praise and give Him the glory.

Yet strange and unique circumstances often combine with a desire to wait and see, before making any announcement. Many new pregnancies today are marked by the same caution in public. However, God wanted to remove any need to be restrained from praise, because the incarnation of His Son demanded great praise. This whole song is the undiluted, yet brilliantly concise, explosion of praise to God, not unlike Hannah's song in [1 Samuel 2:1-10](#). Both women had experienced the hand of God in their humility, and they were neither afraid nor ashamed to express their joy.

God blesses the humble, and humility is best expressed by magnifying the Lord in public. Although that is difficult for believers under persecution, it is still true that God is honoured when we verbally confess His goodness to us. It is as true for sanctification as for salvation (see [Romans 10:9-11](#)). Praise in worship is not about making us feel good - it is about bringing glory to the One who has done good things for us! That is one of the benefits of a church or workplace fellowship - it should provide the essential opportunity to testify to the Lord's goodness. Without such praise, the Christian can easily be seduced into thinking that he or she deserves God's honour and becomes proud. But when God's servants release praise, He releases them to serve in joy so that He will get the glory.

Prayer: *Dear Lord. You have done such wonderful things for every believer, including me. Please help me to see the importance of verbally expressing my praise and giving You the glory that You deserve. Please help me to treat every meeting with another follower of Jesus as an opportunity to release my praise of all Your goodness to me. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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MERCY IN GOD'S HAND

Luke 1:50 *His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. (NIV)*

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Unlike many god-figures who are worshipped today, the true God has a remedy for failure: mercy. Mercy is God's privilege, to withhold judgement from those who deserve it; and is closely linked to grace, which is God's privilege to give blessings to those who could never earn them. Mary had a realistic view of herself. Her humility was honest, she was nothing and had nothing, but she feared the Lord and was willing to trust Him. That is the sort of person to whom God extends His mercy, so that they will not be crushed but lifted up to be usable in His service.

Mary's testimony was that God's character had perfectly matched her situation. The mighty honour of bearing the Son of God was not a prize for her perfection, but because she feared the Lord and did not trust in herself - so God could trust her. This principle had been part of the Old Testament teaching for centuries and is expressed in the Hebrew word 'hesed' which combines the qualities of mercy, steadfast love, and kindness. All these come from God and He dispenses them as He pleases. But this verse implies that there is a condition ... mercy is given to those who treat God as the awesome person He is, and who do not either take His Name in vain or despise His kindness.

Mary's example of how to relate with God is an important lesson for us. Some may treat Him carelessly, presuming on His goodness. Some may shrink away from Him assuming that He has no desire to be kind. Some may wrap up their worship in such mystery that they have no way of knowing if they are engaging with a loving Heavenly Father. Some may simply ignore Him and His rightful demands on their lives and lifestyles. All of these miss the point, and are at risk of missing the privilege of Divine mercy meeting their need and preparing them to fulfil God's commands. The workaday world does not understand the virtues of humility, awe, fear and mercy; so those who follow Jesus will live a countercultural life. However the suffering world needs God's mercy and when people can see that Christians can both receive and share God's mercy, then a window of hope is opened.

Prayer: *Dear Lord God. Thank You for Your character which longs to display mercy to all who repent and honour You. Help me to set aside my pride and all that works against a humble heart, so that I can receive Your mercy, steadfast love and loving kindness; and share with others how they may do the same. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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TRANSFORMED VALUES

Luke 1:51-53 *He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Mary's faith had given her an understanding about what really matters, because she knew what was important to God. Although we may applaud human achievements, the creation was God's enterprise, salvation was God's plan and the second coming of Jesus will mark the end of history. God's powerful deeds are irresistible and history-making, and no human agency can ultimately defy His sovereignty. To put it plainly, God does things very differently than proud humanity would dream up. And He works towards long term objectives in total assurance of His own power; while we operate short term pretending that our wisdom is right and our power is sufficient.

By human standards, Jesus should have been born in a palace to a wealthy ruler who dominated others. But that was not God's way. The Son of God was born amongst animals, evacuated as a refugee and laboured as a craftsman; before fulfilling His purpose in a sacrificial crucifixion. Jesus said that those who wanted to follow Him must value that kind of lifestyle, crucifying self-interest on a daily basis (see [Luke 9:23-24](#)). Mary was willing for that, and Simeon's prophecy predicted that she would experience her own personal suffering when Jesus was put to death (see [Luke 2:35](#)).

By contrast, the commercial world encourages self-assertion, and glorifies those with big ideas; but God can scatter them like the wind blowing away the autumn leaves. The rulers of empires, countries, business and academia are only in their positions as long as God allows; but He will elevate the humble, because they can be trusted. Those who are hungry for righteousness will find God's satisfaction (see [Luke 6:21](#)), but the wealthy who are self-satisfied and oppress others find no place in God's kingdom (see [James 5:1-6](#)). So, if you are a true follower of Jesus, you will be making radical decisions this year which the world will not understand. At the same time, encourage other believers to stay true to God's lasting values; and trust Him to vindicate you in the end.

Prayer: *Almighty God. I know that You can do all things, but sometimes I forget that You are All-mighty. Forgive me when I put my petty power-agenda in the place of hearing Your voice and working with You. Help me to be like Mary who valued humility, service and acceptance of Your will. And please enable me to encourage other believers to think that same way and to be an example, making decisions which show that I am truly Your disciple. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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COVENANT MEMORY

Luke 1:54-55 *He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Mary, like every Jewish child, would have been taught that Messiah would come one day; because God had promised in His Word. We can still trace the trail of prophetic promises all the way from Genesis chapter 1 to Malachi chapter 4 - the whole of the Old Testament bears witness to Jesus. God is the only person who keeps all His promises; and the covenants God has made will all be fulfilled. [Genesis 12:2-3](#) is a covenant promise of blessing to Abraham which would be fulfilled through the Messiah.

However, although there were many Israelites whose belief in the Messiah was more cultural than a part of their relationship with God, Mary believed. She was not a simple and gullible teenager, she was a woman of faith: to her, God's Word (written over the previous two thousand years), demanded to be taken at face value. It was a matter of personal conviction, that God meant what He said and would meet every promise with action. So when the angel Gabriel spoke from God about the incarnation of the Son of God (see [Luke 1:28-38](#)), she believed - she had got used to believing God's Word. Faith is not just about inspiration, it is a practised response.

God uses people, like Mary, who take God at His Word. Her understanding of God's covenant promises may not have been theologically exhaustive, but it was devotionally adequate. We do not need to know everything about God, but we need to accept that He knows everything about us. We do not need to know precisely how God will fulfil His promises: it is enough that we believe He will act. The best training in practical faith is to accept His written Word as being authentic, accurate and active, and to believe He will do what He says. The roadmap for followers of Jesus is plain to read. Those who do what He says will receive His grace, and uncover His blessings day by day. Those who refuse to believe will ultimately receive His promised judgement - because that is one of God's covenants. So whatever our calling in life, practise trusting His Word, and encourage others at work and home to do the same.

Prayer: *Oh Lord God, who keeps His covenants. Thank You for giving me so many reasons to trust You. Help me to believe that You will keep all Your promises, and forgive me when I have doubted because I could not see how You will act. May my life of faith be an encouragement for others to keep trusting even when they cannot see. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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PREPARATION TIME

Luke 1:56 *Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Wise people schedule time to prepare. Although most busy people have to multi-task (ask any mother of small children), any special new challenge needs dedicated time to rest, reflect, refresh and get ready. God knew that Mary needed to get ready for her unique role as the mother of God's Son. But there were other pressures too. A pregnant betrothed girl should have been stoned to death under Jewish law (see [Deut 22:23-27](#)), and if her husband-to-be was responsible, then he should also die. So Elizabeth's house was a sanctuary against a death sentence, and also gave Mary's father and Joseph time to decide what they might do.

Of course, Mary would not have known about Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy, 65 miles away in a hillside village outside Jerusalem, unless the angel Gabriel had told her (see [Luke 1:36](#)). It was all in God's plan to provide a refuge for Mary, understanding company and help for Elizabeth, and an opportunity for both women to talk and worship together. Elizabeth's prophetic announcements to Mary (see [Luke 1:41-45](#)) would also have confirmed what she heard from Gabriel. And Mary would have been prepared practically for her own labour experience; as her three month's visit would have overlapped the time of John's birth. During that time, Gabriel also spoke to Joseph enabling him to welcome Mary as his wife, instead of divorcing her (see [Matt 1:20-25](#)). God had a lot planned for those three months!

We must all take time away from our usual routine to understand God's holy purposes. The Jewish Sabbath or 'Shabbat' simply means 'stop doing'; it is God's command to His people, one day a week. But disobey that essential creation principle, refuse to meet with God's people for worship and stop receiving His Word - that is a recipe to wear out, burn out and walk out of God's purposes. Regular sleep and holidays (holy days) are necessary too; and sabbaticals are healthy every seven years. Mary's example shows how God uses such times to protect and equip us (and others) for the task ahead: she even wrote a worship song while she was away (see [Luke 1:46-55](#))! The busy working world is often afraid to stop. But believers should be worried if they do not! It could be very helpful to discuss this with friends and colleagues who love Jesus. We all need to stop, rest and listen before we can do God's will.

Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father. Thank You for this reminder that I am not designed to work without rest or to fulfil Your purposes without preparation. Forgive me when I work beyond my limits, and then have little appetite for Your Word or fellowship when I am resting. Help me to recognise the opportunities You provide for refreshment and renewal, and to plan time to pray and hear Your Word. May I also be able to encourage others to find their strength as they rest in You. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Luke 1:57-60 *When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Everybody has a name: it is their most precious and personal possession. Their name is their external identity and reflects their parents' choice and family bonding. Naming customs vary throughout the world, some follow family names and others invent new names. The custom in Britain has been a combination of the two, the first (Christian) name being the parents' choice, the last (Surname) name being the family name of the father and middle names which honour other family members. The custom in Israel, when John was born, was to name a son with the father's name. However, God had sometimes given a new name when he gave a new commission (Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul).

This child was to be God's special wake-up-call to Israel. He was born for ministry (he was functionally the last of the Old Testament prophets), to prepare God's people for the arrival of their Messiah. So Gabriel delivered God's name for the boy (see [Luke 1:13](#)) even before he was conceived. "John" means "God is gracious", and the same word is used in Greek to mean 'preceding'. His name was God's way of telling the parents and the child what his purpose was to be - preceding and announcing the Messiah. This Divine naming was also a special mark of God's Lordship over His appointed person.

So God's name for John was a surprise break from the family and cultural tradition. Elizabeth had to speak against all the relatives at the naming part of the circumcision ceremony, because Zechariah had been struck dumb because of his faithlessness on hearing God's Word (see [Luke 1:19-20](#)). Her joy at the safe arrival of a son after years of barrenness did not push God's instruction into the background, nor was she swayed by the power-pack of relatives. She was faithful to God's commission. For us, the pressure of family or powerful colleagues in business may tempt us into giving way over some matter for which we are responsible, even though we know that God's Word speaks differently. The man or woman of faith will resist such pressure and intimidation and be unashamed to say that they are going to follow the Lord. For Elizabeth that moment would have been anticipated for months: she was prepared, and she did not fail the test.

Prayer: *Father God. Thank You that You know me by name, and speak to me personally through Your Word. Forgive me, when I am in responsibility, and know the truth but fail to ensure it is done. Help me to be a person of true faith, accepting Your commission and fulfilling what You have appointed for me. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

FAITH AT LAST

Luke 1:61-66 *They said to her, "There is no-one among your relatives who has that name." Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbours were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Zechariah, the elderly priest, had not believed the angel Gabriel. The announcement that the geriatric couple would have a child (and that his name was to be John), was met by logical doubt about their biological capacity, instead of faith in God's ability. So Zechariah was struck dumb as a sign that God's word was true. Now, at the circumcision and naming ceremony, it is left to his wife Elizabeth to resist the family's pressure to call him Zechariah. But the relatives refused to accept her word, and asked Zechariah. This time, faith propelled his pen. By declaring that he agreed with God's name for the child, immediately he was able to speak again.

The dumbness had been a sign to Zechariah and Elizabeth that they must dare, after years without intimacy, to 'try for a baby'. How much faith was involved we do not know. But by writing, "His name is John"; he demonstrated his faith that this child was no accident of nature, but a direct fulfilment of the angel's prophecy. The instant healing of dumbness was then a sign to the whole family and community that the Lord was responsible for this miracle; and that he was born for a purpose.

Verbal confession that Jesus is Lord, is an essential part of faith (see [Rom 10:8-10](#)), and is the normal response of those who are saved. Those who refuse to acknowledge the grace of God, lose both their joy and their usefulness. Although we may use words lightly, God treats what we say very seriously. Words are the currency of truth and the personal certificate of faith. Of course they can be misused, or even made up (lies), but God knows what we mean when we speak and every word spoken in faith is precious to Him. So, if you love the Lord, speak it out! When you do so, you may well encourage other believers to emerge from their caves of fear, and start to experience the blessing of all those who confess His Name (see [Hebrews 13:15](#)). Once the Name of Jesus and the truth of His Word starts to be spoken where you live and work and worship, others will be convicted by the Holy Spirit that God is among you ([1 Cor 14:24-25](#)).

Prayer: *Gracious God. Thank You for speaking to me. Please forgive me for the many times when I have failed to confess that Jesus Christ is my Lord. Thank You for the opportunities You give me to speak out what is true; but please help me to recognise them. May I seize the occasion to show my devotion to You, by witnessing to the grace of Christ. May I be truthful and courageous to speak of my Saviour as You open the way in my home and workplace. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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PRAISE AT LAST

Luke 1:67-68 *His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

After 9 months of silence, Zechariah could speak again (see [Luke 1:59-64](#)). The Divine rebuke of dumbness (see [Luke 1:18-22](#)), combined with the irrefutable evidence of God's word being fulfilled, gave the old priest no option but to confess that God had been right all along: and so God let him speak again. Zechariah was now able to join the celebration for his son, and express his praise to the Lord. As with all true praise, it was due to the work of the Holy Spirit who had filled him; just as He had filled his unborn baby John and his wife Elizabeth (see [Luke 1:15, 41](#)).

Naturally, we have no inclination to praise God. By ourselves we can neither see the need to praise, nor be motivated to worship God for all He has done. Without God breathing into us, we cannot breathe out in true worship: liturgy becomes a stale repetition; hymns become sterile words strung along the line of a tune. But when we accept the Lordship of the living God, in repentance and faith, then the Holy Spirit of God opens our lips and praise comes out (see [Psalm 51:15](#)).

Zechariah's song shows that the primary reason for worship is that God, in His sovereign grace, has come to redeem His people (see www.crosscheck.org.uk to know more). To speak or sing out that truth, is both praise and prophecy: humble thanks to God, and urgent proclamation to those who need to repent. But such truth flies in the face of all the world's proud boasting of self-improvement. We could never buy ourselves back from the kingdom of darkness; God had to do it for us. Without Him we have no hope, whatever we try to achieve. Even to understand this elementary spiritual truth, we need the Spirit's illumination. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to embrace it, and as we do - He enables us to proclaim it in praise. So let Him keep on filling you, so that you can praise Him with a full heart. In your home and workplace, praise the Lord! By yourself, walking, riding or driving, speak out His praise! With other believers speak and sing and pray - because that is what believers do with the help of the Holy Spirit. It pleases God, encourages the saints, proclaims truth to the world and satisfies the believer. Is it not time to give Him thanks and praise!

Prayer: *Most wonderful and gracious Lord. I want to thank You for revealing Yourself to me through the message of the Scriptures, by Your Holy Spirit. Thank You for wanting to redeem me, and for sending Jesus to pay for my soul with His own blood. Thank You for Your promised Holy Spirit; but forgive me for grieving Him and quenching His fire in my heart. Please fill me again so that I may have a heart to praise and a mind to declare Your wonderful grace in my home and church, community and workplace. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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SALVATION DESCRIBED

Luke 1:69-75 *He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us - to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Zechariah now believed that God's Word was true: he had moved from doubt to faith, from silence to open confession. He was filled with the Holy Spirit who put God's words into his mouth. And so the father of John the Baptist was privileged to start the prophetic ministry which John would continue. Zechariah's prophecy remained in the family archives (and our Bible), and would have been a ministry model and encouragement to John long after his father's death. Fathers: the best way to encourage your children in ministry is to do it yourself!

As Zechariah praised God, he also described the nature of salvation through Jesus Christ. Firstly, it is a 'horn' - that means it is strong to overcome every enemy. Secondly, it is the same salvation which has been consistently prophesied through the Old Testament. Thirdly, it is to rescue us from our greatest enemy, the devil and the fatal darkness of his kingdom. Fourthly, it vindicates the faith of God's servants (see [Hebrews chapter 11](#)). Fifthly, it is the active fulfilment of God's promises (and the covenant to Abraham, in [Genesis 12:1-3](#), included Jews and Gentiles) to redeem his people. Sixthly, it takes away our terror of God's judgement. Seventhly, it not only rescues us from sin and Satan, but establishes us as God's holy people who live in His righteousness and learn to serve Him in a right way. All of that describes the salvation which comes through Jesus Christ (see www.crosscheck.org.uk to know more).

So, salvation through Christ not only provides release from the devilish magnet which is dragging the world to hell with him, it also commissions us to serve God in a way which pleases Him, and without dreading His wrath. These are the believer's great privileges, but they are linked and must not be separated. Rescue from Satan's slavery is also our commission to serve the Lord. It was never His intention for us to escape the clutches of hell in order to serve our own interests. Alas for many, the church has become a playground for self-indulgence and power, rather than a training camp for the battleground of spiritual warfare. Those who have misunderstood salvation or ignored its meaning should repent and start to serve the Lord. And don't forget that He provides as many opportunities for service at work as in the church; so look out for them today!

Prayer: *Almighty God. Thank You for Your salvation which was Your plan to lift me out of the slimy mud of sin, so that I can be secure in fulfilling Your purposes. Please forgive me when I take the privilege of salvation but fail to give myself wholeheartedly to your service. Help me to value the honour of being Your child, that I will want to work with You, to Your praise and glory. Please help me to see those opportunities for service which You have arranged for me today. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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JOB DESCRIPTION

Luke 1:76-79 *And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

Fathers should feel a responsibility to guide their children. But Zechariah's prediction about his son's future ministry was different. It was not a parental idea, but God's. The Holy Spirit had filled the old priest, who then issued God's job description for John the Baptist. His was to be a unique role, preparing Israel to receive God the Son, Jesus Christ; and marking the beginning of His ministry at baptism (see [Luke 3:2-22](#)). Although John's role was special, the same principles apply to anybody who introduces people to Jesus, and might well apply to you as well.

Jesus Himself fulfilled many roles, but was not fully defined by any of them; as God, He was and is greater than all His actions and achievements. So John's prophetic role was to establish that the Christ (Messiah) was also the Lord, the one to whom all are accountable; but also the one through whom the humble and penitent will find forgiveness and peace. Until John, prophets said that God would bless all who kept the law. But John's task was to announce salvation, not through good works (see [Ephesians 2:8-9](#)), but through the sacrifice of Jesus. His salvation includes a merciful and thorough cleansing of all past sin, and the assurance of a new life, away from darkness and into the light of God's peace.

We all need Christ's salvation; without it we remain in darkness, with eternal death as our only destiny. But when we receive God's mercy everything changes, the past as well as the future. Proclaiming this salvation continues to be the task of Jesus' people, until He returns. Of course, the uniqueness of salvation through Christ is a challenge to those who think that their good ideas, good works, religious ritual or religious tolerance will secure God's favour. Followers of Jesus are not always welcome when they bring the message of mercy and peace. John the Baptist was not appreciated either; he was executed shortly after introducing Jesus (see [Mark 6:14-29](#)). However, uniquely, the gospel has God's power to save those who believe (see [Romans 1:16](#)). So, if you believe, you hold the key to life in your heart: but don't keep it to yourself, let it out! Tell others that Jesus has come to save them, whatever their background: because as John said, Jesus takes away the sin of the world (see [John 1:29](#)). Your colleagues need to hear that: and believing it will transform their life and eternity.

Prayer: *Loving God. Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, so that we might have full salvation. Thank You for those who told me the gospel and for the way in which Your Holy Spirit confirmed the message to my heart. Please help me to prepare others to meet Jesus when He returns one day. Please fill me with Your Holy Spirit so that I can be unashamed to share the gospel message. Help me, also, to pray for my family, friends and colleagues believing that You will convince them that the truth I share from Your Word, is true. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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HIDDEN GROWTH

Luke 1:80 *And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel. (NIV)*

You can read the verses around this Bible passage from the [Internet Bible](#): - in English, and many other languages

John the Baptist is absent from the Bible between his circumcision-naming ceremony and the beginning of his public ministry. This verse is the only clue to his upbringing and preparation for serving the Lord. Of course, we know that his parents were old when he was born, and presumably they died when he was a child or early teenager. We do not know who may have looked after him, or for how long he lived a solitary life in the desert. But we do know that he was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth (see [Luke 1:15](#)) and became 'strong in spirit', as did the Lord Jesus (see [Luke 2:40](#)). So we know that God himself was nurturing and protecting John, with or without the help of others.

As the son of a priest, John's primary spiritual education came from God's Word: taught either by his father or another priest. But John knew its meaning because the Holy Spirit interpreted God's message to his heart. He would have heard the stories of his remarkable birth, and the Spirit would have confirmed his special responsibility to be the forerunner of Christ as he read [Isaiah 40:3-5](#). But what is the significance of the time spent in the desert? Well, Jesus Himself spent time away from the crowds in prayer with Father God; the Apostle Paul spent time in the desert of Arabia - time to pray and meditate, and to allow the Holy Spirit time to educate the heart with God's will and purpose.

Today, there is a tendency to rush everything, to cram education into a little time, and to pass examinations with speed. But God is never in a hurry. He uses time to mould our hearts into His shape. And it takes time to meditate - by that I do not mean the emptying of our minds, but allowing God to order our minds with His truth. Biblical meditation honours God by taking His Word seriously, and welcoming His Holy Spirit to explain His thoughts (rather than us imposing our ideas!). Biblical meditation is not just for special people; every follower of Jesus should set time aside each day, week and year to wait on the Lord (see [Is 40:31](#)). Some say they are too busy; but that is not a time constraint, it is really arrogance in putting God's priorities lower than our own. No wonder some believers feel they do not know what God wants of them, if they have not taken the trouble to read and pray.

Prayer: *Gracious Lord. Thank You for giving me Your Holy Word and Your Holy Spirit. Please forgive me the many times when I have ignored You and preferred my own opinions and the priorities of my own lifestyle. Forgive my proud arrogance which has kept Your voice away from my heart. Help me to want to draw close to You again, to read the Bible and to pray, listening to what You are saying. May I also encourage my friends and colleagues to do likewise. For the sake of the glory of Jesus, and in His Name. Amen.*

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