

SHE KEPT BELIEVING

A Five-Day Devotional from the Story of Elizabeth

She Did What She Could | Week One | Pacific Church of Irvine

Elizabeth's story takes up just a few verses in Luke 1. She is introduced, she conceives, she greets Mary, she gives birth. By chapter two she has disappeared from the narrative entirely. Luke moves on to the larger story he is trying to tell.

But in those few verses, he gives us something that most of Scripture's longer stories don't. He gives us a woman in her full complexity, the decades of waiting, the cultural weight of barrenness, the quiet faithfulness that kept going when nothing was moving, and then the extraordinary moment when she became the first person in the New Testament to recognize the Messiah.

This five-day devotional follows Elizabeth's story. Each day is drawn from a different moment in her journey from the long silence to the sudden announcement to the meeting with Mary to the birth of John. There is no right speed for any of it. Some days the questions will move quickly. Other days you'll get stuck on one and not want to leave. Let the Spirit set the pace.

DAY ONE

Righteous and Barren

Luke 1:6–7 "Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old."

Luke does something deliberate in these two verses. He places two facts right next to each other without any explanation for why they belong together. Righteous and blameless. And barren.

He doesn't say these things are connected. He doesn't explain why a righteous couple would be denied something so fundamental, so longed-for, so tied to blessing in their culture. He just puts the two facts side by side and leaves the tension there for you to feel.

Because that tension is the whole point. Elizabeth's barrenness was not a verdict on her character. It was not evidence that she had done something wrong, prayed something wrong, trusted something wrong. She was righteous. She was blameless. And she was barren.

In the ancient world, a woman who could not conceive carried a social weight that is hard for us to fully imagine. Barrenness was read as divine disfavor. Other people's eyes rendered a verdict on her life without knowing anything about her prayers, her faith, her character, or her God. She had been living under that verdict for decades.

And Luke's point, by placing these two verses together, is this: what the world reads as divine disfavor is sometimes divine preparation. The silence is not the sentence. The waiting is not the verdict. Righteousness and unanswered prayer can exist in the same life and the unanswered prayer says nothing about the righteousness.

This is the hardest thing to hold onto when the waiting goes long. Because the human heart has a way of eventually believing the story that the silence seems to be telling. If it hasn't happened yet, maybe it's because I don't deserve it. Maybe it's because I haven't prayed right. Maybe it's because God has decided something about me that I can't change.

Elizabeth's story begins by refusing that story. Righteous. Blameless. And waiting.

— Is there something in your life that you've been tempted to read as evidence of God's disfavor — an unanswered prayer, a closed door, a prolonged waiting? What story have you started telling yourself about what the silence means?

— Luke places Elizabeth's righteousness and her barrenness in the same sentence without explaining the connection. What does it do to you to consider that faithfulness and unanswered prayer are not contradictions?

— What is the difference between accepting that God’s timing is not yours, and the kind of resignation that stops believing altogether? Which one are you closer to right now?

DAY TWO

The Long Middle

Luke 1:13 "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.""

Three words buried in Gabriel’s announcement stop me every time I read this passage. “Your prayer has been heard.”

Present perfect tense. Not “your prayer will now be answered,” your prayer has been heard. It was heard when they first prayed it. It was heard every time they prayed it after that. It was heard in the years when nothing moved and the biology began to close the window and the cultural verdict hardened and Zechariah and Elizabeth somehow kept showing up to the temple, kept living righteously, kept going.

The prayer was on the record the whole time.

Luke doesn’t give us the long middle. He doesn’t show us the years of hoping and then grieving and then hoping again at a lower register. He doesn’t show us the conversation where Elizabeth and Zechariah stopped expecting a specific answer and started simply trusting a faithful God. He doesn’t show us what faith looks like when it has been stripped of expectation and is running on something quieter and more durable.

But those years happened. By the time Gabriel appears, they are both described as very old. Decades of ordinary faithfulness. Decades of prayers that seemed to disappear into silence. Decades of showing up anyway.

And none of it was lost. None of it dissolved into the air. The angel doesn't say your prayer is being answered now despite the long silence. He says your prayer has been heard, implying that it has always been heard, that the hearing preceded the answering by a long stretch of years, and that the stretch of years was not a gap in God's attention but a part of his plan.

Unanswered is not the same as unheard. These are not synonyms. We tend to treat them as synonyms, if God had heard, surely something would have moved by now. But Elizabeth's story is the counter-argument. The prayer was heard the first time. God had been holding it ever since.

The question the long middle asks is not whether God has heard. The question is whether you will keep praying as if he has.

— Is there a prayer you've been praying for so long that you've started to wonder if it's even worth continuing? What has the silence done to your confidence that God has heard?

— What is the difference between a faith that is waiting for a specific outcome and a faith that is trusting a faithful God regardless of the outcome? Which one is harder to sustain? Which one is more durable?

— The angel says "your prayer has been heard" past tense, ongoing. What would it change for you today to believe that your unanswered prayers are not unheard, but held?

DAY THREE

He Took Away My Disgrace

Luke 1:24–25 "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 favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.""

When Elizabeth finally speaks in her own voice, she doesn't say what I would have expected her to say.

After decades of waiting, after the prayer that was finally answered, after the thing she had hoped for had actually happened, she doesn't say "I'm so relieved." She doesn't say "I always knew it would come." She doesn't say anything about the length of the waiting or the weight of the years.

She says: he has taken away my disgrace.

The thing she names is not the pain. It's the shame. Disgrace is a social word. It's the verdict that other people's eyes had rendered on her life. It's the story her culture told about barren women, that they were less than, that they had been passed over, that something about them had made them unworthy of the blessing everyone else seemed to receive without effort.

And what Elizabeth is saying is this: God didn't just answer my prayer. He addressed the thing underneath the prayer. He didn't just give me a child, he demolished the narrative that had been defining me for thirty years.

This is what God consistently does. He doesn't just fix the surface problem. He goes after what's living underneath it. The pain is real, but the shame is often the deeper wound and shame, unlike pain, tells you something about your worth. It tells you that the waiting happened because you deserved it. That the closed door means something about who you are. That the verdict the world rendered is accurate.

Elizabeth's response to the answered prayer is a theological statement. She is saying: I know now what the waiting was not. It was not evidence that I was forgotten. It was not evidence that I was less than. It was not a verdict on my worth. Because if it had been, the disgrace would still be here. And he has taken it away.

There is a freedom in that sentence that goes beyond relief. This is a woman who has been carrying a weight she didn't deserve, and she is setting it down. Not because the prayer was finally answered. Because she now knows that God's silence was never his verdict.

— Is there a shame you've been carrying that is connected to something that hasn't worked out? A relationship, a career, a family situation, an unanswered prayer? What story has that produced about your worth?

— Elizabeth distinguishes between the pain of barrenness and the disgrace of it. What is the difference between the pain of your hard situation and the shame it has attached to your sense of who you are?

— God took away Elizabeth's disgrace when he answered her prayer. But what if the disgrace could be addressed even before the prayer is answered? What would it mean to let God speak to the shame today, regardless of what the circumstances look like?

DAY FOUR

The First Witness

Luke 1:41–43 "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 favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?""

Nobody told Elizabeth.

Mary walks in the door and Elizabeth responds immediately, fully, without explanation or introduction, with the most complete recognition of the Messiah that has yet appeared in the New Testament. The baby leaps. The Spirit fills her. And she says: this is the mother of my Lord.

Before the shepherds. Before the wise men. Before Simeon and Anna at the temple. Before the disciples who would spend three years walking with Jesus before they began to understand who he was. Before any of them ... Elizabeth.

The woman the world had written off as forgotten. The woman who had spent decades being read as someone God had passed over. The woman whose cultural disgrace had defined how others saw her for thirty years. She is the first human being in Luke's Gospel to name the Messiah for who he actually is.

God has a pattern of doing this. He chooses the ones the world has overlooked to carry the most important things. He fills the ones who have been emptied by long waiting with a clarity that the ones who have never waited don't have. There is something about the long middle the years of faithfulness in the silence that produces a sensitivity to the Spirit that cannot be shortcut.

Elizabeth didn't know what she knew because she was the most qualified. She knew it because she had been walking with God for long enough that when the Spirit moved, she recognized it immediately. The decades of ordinary faithfulness, the temple attendance, the prayers, the quiet obedience when nothing was moving, had formed in her a capacity to receive exactly this moment.

The waiting was not wasted. It was where she became the person who could carry what was coming.

And there is something else in her response worth sitting with. She doesn't say "blessed are you" with envy, or with the complicated emotion of a woman who waited thirty years for a child watching a young relative conceive miraculously. She says it with joy. Pure, unguarded, Spirit-filled joy. The long waiting had not made her bitter. It had made her generous. It had made her the kind of person who could celebrate someone else's miracle without needing it to be her own.

- Elizabeth was chosen to be the first witness to the Messiah not despite her long waiting but, in some sense, because of it. How does that reframe the way you think about your own seasons of waiting? What might they be forming in you that nothing else could?

- Elizabeth's response to Mary is pure joy, not envy or bitterness. What does that tell you about what the long years of faithful waiting had done in her character? Is there anywhere in your own life where waiting has produced bitterness rather than generosity?

- The Spirit filled Elizabeth in the moment she was needed. She didn't have to manufacture the recognition or the response, it came from a fullness that had been built over years. What ordinary practices in your life are building that kind of capacity to recognize and respond to what God is doing?

The Long Kind of Faith

Hebrews 11:1, 13 "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see... All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were strangers and foreigners on earth."

Elizabeth's faith is not the dramatic kind. It doesn't show up in a single act of heroism. It doesn't press through a crowd or argue with Jesus or risk its life in a moment of decision. It doesn't have a clear moment that everything turns on.

Elizabeth's faith is the long kind. The kind that has to be chosen again and again and again, across decades of silence, when nothing is moving and nobody is watching and the culture has rendered its verdict and the biological clock has run out. The kind that looks, from the outside, exactly like ordinary life because it is ordinary life, just ordinary life lived in the direction of a God you can't yet see doing what he said he would do.

Hebrews 11 calls this kind of faith the "cloud of witnesses." And it says something that is worth sitting with for a long time: not all of them received what was promised in their lifetime. Some of them died in faith. Some of them only "saw and welcomed the promises from a distance."

Their faith was real even when the answer didn't come.

Elizabeth did receive her answer. John was born. She lived to see it. But her faith, the faith that carried her through the decades before the answer came was already the real thing. It didn't become faith when Gabriel appeared. It had been faith the whole time. The answered prayer didn't create her faith. It revealed what had been there all along.

This is the invitation of Elizabeth's story for the long haul. Not to manufacture certainty about the outcome. Not to convince yourself that the answer is definitely coming in the form you've been imagining. But to keep walking faithfully in the direction of a God whose character you know, whose track record in Scripture and in your own life has given you reason to trust him even when the silence stretches longer than you expected.

Two things Elizabeth's faith teaches us that are worth carrying into the week.

First: faithfulness in the ordinary is never wasted. The years of temple attendance, the prayers, the quiet obedience, none of it dissolved into the air. It was being woven into something she couldn't yet see. God was not absent in the silence. He was at work.

Second: the waiting is not the problem. The waiting is the formation. Elizabeth could not have been who she was in Luke 1 (the woman filled with the Spirit who recognized the Messiah without being told), if she hadn't become who she became in the decades of waiting. The person who stands at the end of the long middle is not the same person who entered it. And that is not a loss. That is the whole point.

You are not forgotten. You are being formed. And the God who held Elizabeth's prayer is holding yours.

— Hebrews 11 describes people who died in faith without receiving the promise. What does it mean to hold faith as a long-term posture rather than a short-term transaction? How does that change the way you relate to your unanswered prayers?

— Elizabeth's faith was real before the answer came. The answered prayer revealed it, but didn't create it. What ordinary practices in your life are building the kind of faith that can sustain a long wait? What is missing?

— Looking back over this week’s devotional: which day landed most heavily for you? What is God saying to you through Elizabeth’s story about your own season of waiting?

A Note to Close

Elizabeth disappears from Luke’s Gospel after chapter one. The larger story moves on to Jesus, and she recedes into the background. We don’t know what the rest of her life looked like. We don’t know what she made of her son’s ministry, his imprisonment, his death. We don’t know if she lived long enough to understand what she had been a part of.

What we know is what Luke gave us. A woman who was righteous and blameless and barren. A woman who kept showing up. A woman whose prayer was held for decades and heard the whole time. A woman who, at the end of a long wait, was filled with the Spirit and became the first human voice to name the Messiah.

That is enough. That is more than enough. You don’t need to know the whole story to play your part faithfully. Elizabeth didn’t know the whole story either. She just kept walking in the direction of a God she had learned, over many hard years, to trust.

May the same be true of you.