

## A DISTINCTION WITH A DIFFERENCE

### NO. 1405

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*“And Zacharias said unto the angel, How shall I know this?”*  
*Luke 1:18.*

*“Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be?”*  
*Luke 1:34.*

ZACHARIAS and the Virgin Mary were both very dear to God and, therefore, highly honored and greatly favored. The points of likeness between them are many. They were both persons of eminent character, for Zacharias walked blameless in all the ordinances and commandments of the Lord and Mary was equally gracious and devout. They were both visited by an angel and were both favored with the prediction of a marvelous birth. Their answers to the angel are our two texts and, at first sight, they seem to be alike. One does not see much less of faith or of unbelief in the one than in the other at first reading them and, yet, Zacharias was blamed and chastened by being made dumb for a season. On the other hand, the Virgin was indulged with an explanation and was afterwards praised by the Holy Spirit who spoke through her cousin Elizabeth and said, “Blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.”

It appears very clear, then, that God can see differences where we see none. Though two persons may act very much alike and from their lips may fall similar expressions, yet their temper and spirit may be widely different. Where you and I would put them together and say, “They are alike,” God sees a difference. While we judge sights and sounds, the Lord weighs the spirits. You must have noticed this in other parts of God’s Word. I will give you two instances in the life of Abraham. Lot was commanded not to look towards Sodom, but his wife, after looking to Sodom, was turned into a pillar of salt. And yet that morning Abraham got up early to the place where he was known to meet with the Lord and it is recorded that he looked toward Sodom.

The very thing which Lot must not do, Abraham may do. It is the same action but, if you think a moment, you can clearly see that the looking back of Lot would mean a lingering desire to return, but the look of Abraham had nothing of that kind in it and could have no evil significance. He was simply looking to the burning cities and admiring with solemn awe the justice of the Most High as he saw the heavens ruddy with flame and afterwards dark with dense clouds, while the smoke went up like the smoke of a furnace. The action was the same *externally*, but widely different in reality. The Lord God does not so much regard our outward acts as the *motives* which direct them and the spirit in which they are performed.

Perhaps a more remarkable instance is that of Abraham and his wife Sarah. When they each received a distinct promise of the birth of Isaac, it is said that Abraham fell upon his face and laughed. And then we read a little farther on, “Sarah laughed within herself.” We never find that Abraham was censured for laughing. He laughed rightly. It was the natural expression of a wondering and amazed delight. It was *holy* laughter and he was not censured nor called to account for it. But the Lord said unto him, “Why did Sarah laugh?” Sarah was censured for doing the very thing which in Abraham was quite right and did not need to be corrected!

They both laughed—the one was right, but the other was wrong. Why? Because there was a vital difference between them. Sarah’s was the laugh of *unbelief*—she thought it could not be that at her age she should bear a child, her lord also being old. She laughed at the very idea! It seemed altogether too absurd. The mere notion struck her as being perfectly ridiculous and, though a devout woman, she somewhat forgot the reverence due to Him who gave the promise and she laughed, though in a subdued and quiet way, “within herself.”

Abraham believed that the Divine promise would be performed and his was the laugh of joy to think that he should see a son born to his beloved Sarah who should be his heir and the inheritor of the Covenant. His soul danced within him

with delight because he believed what the Lord had spoken. Yet the two actions outwardly are so exactly similar that if you condemn one, you think you must condemn the other! But God does not, since He sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. We may apply this great Truth of God to ourselves. We all sang the same hymn just now to the same tune—and yet from one it may have been to God's ear music and from another mockery. We closed our eyes just now and bowed our heads in prayer—anyone looking upon us might have supposed us to be all equally accepted—but the Lord knows in whose case the heart was wandering upon the mountains of vanity and in whose case the soul, with all its powers, was crying out unto the living God.

Judge yourselves, Beloved, but never judge yourselves according to the sight of the eyes! And never be satisfied with yourselves because externally everything is correct—because you have passed through the routine of religion and attended to the machinery of the outward form. Do not be content with postures, sounds and looks—the *soul* is the soul of the matter! Look at the heart and cry to God, also, that He would search you and make you clean in the secret parts—and in the hidden parts make you to know wisdom. Otherwise you may stand as God's people do and go in and out of the House of Prayer even as the brightest of the saints do and never be separated from them until the trumpet rings out the Great Tremendous Day and you are sent to the left with the goats to be withered by a curse—while His people on His right hand shall receive the blessing forever!

Let us all remember that there may be an external similarity in apparent right or wrong and yet there may be an inward and a real dissimilarity. It is the *inward* that is the real, not the outward—and the great Judge will search and try and separate between the precious and the vile—though the vile may seem to be more beautiful than the precious genuine diamond. But now, leaving the general principle, I invite you, dear Friends, to come back to my texts and accompany me in looking at these two persons to see whether there is not a difference perceptible by ourselves. And I think we shall find a great deal more diversity than we had expected. I cannot work out the whole matter in one sermon, but some prominent points will, I hope, interest and profit you.

**I.** First let us take the case of ZACHARIAS who said, “HOW SHALL I KNOW THIS?” And notice, to begin with, that supposing the two expressions of Zacharias and Mary had been identical, and supposing that they had conveyed the same thoughts, yet if they had *both* been wrong, Zacharias would have been the more faulty of the two, for he was a *priest*—a man set apart by office to study the Word of God and to draw peculiarly near to God on his own account and for the people. Mary was simply a humble village maid. Mary, it is true, was of royal descent, but her family had fallen into obscurity. She was a person of superior mind, but she held no office that could distinguish her from others.

Zacharias, being a priest, was bound to act with a higher degree of faith than Mary, the lowly maiden. The priest's lips should keep knowledge and teach many. Were not the priests set apart to be instructors of the people, helpers of those that are weak and guides of those who are ignorant and out of the way? They should, therefore, in all things set an example. If Mary had been unbelieving and Zacharias unbelieving—and both unbelieving to the same extent—yet in Zacharias it would have been much worse because his *very* office called upon him to display greater Grace than the humble maiden.

Brothers and Sisters, may I not apply this to myself and to you? Brother ministers, if we are unbelieving, we, in our unbelief, do not sin so cheaply as our people! We have more time to study the Word of God and, therefore, we have, or ought to have, more acquaintance with it. We are more familiar with Divine things and ought to be more richly filled with their faith-creating spirit. If the Lord has been pleased to make us under-shepherds over His people, we are bound to be examples to the flock. Our high position demands of us the exhibition of a greater degree of Divine Grace than we can expect from common Believers, who are God's dear people, but are not set apart to be leaders.

The same line of argument will apply in due proportion to each servant of our Lord Jesus. According to their measure of Grace, more is expected of some than of others. You, dear Sisters, who teach young people should remember that they watch you and they expect to see in you a bright example. And, what is more, God, who has placed you in the position of teachers, or of mothers, intends that there should be in you, by His Grace, something that others may look up to, that the young beginners may learn from you. Take heed that they never learn unbelief from your doubting! Let them never see in you that worry, that anxiety, that fretfulness which denotes the absence of a calm reliance upon God, but let them, whatever they gather from you, learn that which is worth knowing.

And what can be a better lesson than that of faith in God? You who are in the Church, dear Friends, preachers, elders, deacons and instructors of others, see to it that your lives and words do not breed unbelief! Especially do I speak to myself upon this point, for, being much exercised in spirit, I tremble lest I should suggest to any of you doubts and fears, or encourage you in them. Let those of us who are guides of others see to it that we do not dishonor God by mistrust and questioning, for unbelief in us is a glaring fault and God will surely visit it upon us, even if He winks at it in the weak ones of the flock.

Again, in Zacharias' case it was not merely his *office* that distinguished him, but he was a man of years. We read that both he and his wife were "well stricken in years." Now, a man who has had a long experience of the things of God—a man of prayer who has had many answers—a man of trouble who has had many deliverances. A man who has seen the hand of God with him in a long journey through the wilderness of life is expected, by God, to exhibit a far stronger faith than the young people who have but lately learned His name. I speak to many here who are by far my seniors, of whom I may say that they were in Christ before me and they must pardon my saying that they should have more faith than I by reason of their years of constant experience of the Lord's faithfulness.

And I, too, who have known the Lord, now, for a considerable number of years, must never put myself down with those who were converted during the last few months and say that I am to have no more faith than they. Shame upon every one of us if every day does not bring us fresh motives for believing in our Lord! Every hour, indeed, should be filled with arguments for a more complete childlike trust in Him. What? Dear Sister, did the Lord help you in such-and-such a strait? And do you not remember that you said, "I shall never doubt Him again"? And yet you have done so! Ah, how grievous must those doubts be to your gracious Lord!

I know at one time you thought you would never be delivered, but you were mercifully lifted up from the depths—out of six troubles you have been rescued and in seven no evil has touched you! And now that a fresh trial is come, will you not believe your God? Well, if you do not, you will certainly incur very grievous sin and vex the Holy Spirit of God much more than your poor little sister, Mary, would do, if, having only lately known the Savior, she should distrust Him in her first conflicts. Babes in Grace should not doubt, but if they do, their unbelief is not so willful as that of fathers in Israel. If standard bearers faint, it is a sad calamity, and the faintness of poor wounded common soldiers is far less to be deplored.

When aged Zacharias errs in this matter he is more to be blamed than youthful Mary. Those two points are pretty clear, are they not? Furthermore, let us observe that Zacharias had made the birth of a child a subject of prayer, which, I suppose, had not so much as been *thought* of by Mary. Beyond the fact that it was the usual desire of all Hebrew women that they might be the mother of the Messiah, the Virgin had probably never cast a single thought in the direction in which the angel's salutation conducted her. Assuredly she had never made it a subject of *prayer*, but Zacharias had rightly done so. Read the 13<sup>th</sup> verse, "The angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth shall bear you a son." And yet, though the promise came as a distinct and manifest *answer* to his prayers, Zacharias asked, "How shall I know this?"

Now, this was wrong! It was very wrong. He had been praying for it and when it came, he did not believe it! Ah, Zacharias, you are verily guilty here. If it had come as a surprise altogether, as it did to Mary, there would be some excuse for your doubt. But when it is a reply to your own entreaties—a gracious yielding to intense requests—your unbelieving question is a grievous fault! If, when taken by surprise, Mary had doubted, it would have appeared natural, but for you, Zacharias—for you to whom the angel said, "Your prayer is *heard*"—how do you doubt it? Astonishment at answered prayers is amazement at Divine truthfulness! And what is that but a low idea of the Lord unintentionally discovering itself?

Yet I have sometimes thought that if the Lord wished to surprise His own servants, all He would have to do would be to answer their prayers! He does answer them continually and in consequence you hear one and another say, "Is it not surprising? You see, we met and had a prayer meeting for a certain blessing and the Lord has answered our supplications. How marvelous!" And yet if you sit down in a friend's house, do his children try to astonish you by mentioning cases in which their father kept *his* word? Do they dwell with amazement upon his having spoken the truth? I could wish that the Lord's children would even get as far as that! Alas, they even overlook the majority of the facts which prove His veracity, and slight His faithfulness!

When His people are in a better frame than usual they admit His faithfulness and mention as a great wonder that He heard prayer and fulfilled His Word! Should this be so? Has it come to pass that it is a wonder for God to hear prayer? Have we fallen into such a low state of heart that we think His truthfulness to be a surprising thing? It were far better if we were of the same mind as a good old lady who, when someone said, “Is it not wonderful?” replied, “Well, it is in one way, but it is not in another, for it is just like Him—just like Him.” We may well be surprised at the tenderness of His great mercy, but not as though it were a novelty for God to do good and to keep His promise by regarding His people’s cries!

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we ought to be surprised if the Lord did *not* hear us, seeing that He is the true and faithful, prayer-hearing God. When you and I have had a matter heavily laid upon our hearts and have been before God with it again and again, as doubtless Zacharias had, we should be looking for our Lord’s gracious reply. Do we not expect answers to letters which we write to our friends? Why do we not, in like fashion, expect replies to prayer? If God answers us, are we to be so doubtful in mind as even to question the truthfulness of the blessing? If so, we shall be manifestly guilty. If the Lord sends us a mercy in reply to our requests and we do not believe it, but say, “How shall I know this?” then our unbelief has a peculiar degree of provocation in it and we may expect to be chastened for it. This was the case with Zacharias.

The next point about Zacharias is that he doubted the fact which was announced by the angel in the name of the Lord. He said, “How shall I know this?” Mary did not doubt the fact—she wished to know how *it could be*, but she believed it would be. She believed, for it was said of her, “Blessed is she that believed.” But this good man did *not* believe, for the angel said to Him, “You believe not my words which shall be fulfilled in their season.” Now, Beloved, when it comes to this, that we dare to doubt the promise of God, is it not a very grievous crime? If your child—your own child whom you have loved so long and treated so tenderly—if he should fall into a state of mind in which he did not believe you, his own father—would you not feel it to be peculiarly grievous?

If you were conscious of nothing but love for him. If you were sure that throughout his life you had never broken a promise to him, but had always been as good as your word. If you had repeated your promise again and again and he still said, “Father, I wish I could believe you,” would you not be cut to the heart by such a declaration? The more earnestly he expressed regret at his inability to believe you, the more intense would be your pain. What an awful speech for a son to address to a father—“I wish I could believe you”!

You would grieve in spirit and say inwardly, “What does my boy think of me? What has come over my child that he cannot believe me? It was not an enemy, then I could have borne it—but it is my *child* whom I love who says not only that he does not believe me, but that he would do so if he *could* and finds himself unable to think me true. He speaks in deep earnest and thus I see how thoroughly the cruel feeling possesses him and how desperate is the evil which leads him to mistrust my love.”

Ah, Beloved, I leave your own thoughts, as I must just now leave mine, to peer into the depths of sin which must lie in what we sometimes talk of so flippantly, namely, doubts and fears! They are not the trifles which some men dream them to be—they are hideous profanities of the sacred Truth of God! They are revolting libels upon immaculate goodness! They are horrid blasphemies of infinite love! Shall the good God be thus assailed? Shall His own children thus abuse Him? Your child might doubt you and it might be a trifle to him, but it would be death to you, his father or mother. You would feel it keenly and so you may think that doubts and fears are trifles, but your heavenly Father does not think so—unbelief wounds Him and grieves His Spirit!

Hear what the Lord says—“How long will it be before they believe Me?” Forget not the Apostle’s warning in the third chapter of the Hebrews. “With whom was He grieved 40 years? And to whom swore He that they should not enter into His rest, but to them that believed not?” Zacharias did not believe and he had to smart for it, as you and I shall if we, when we see a promise written clearly in God’s Word and evidently quite adapted to our case, nevertheless say, “How shall I know this?”

Yet further. The good man Zacharias—for, remember, I am not doubting his Grace, but, on the contrary, I began by saying that he was a very gracious and eminently godly man. He was probably much better than any of us and possibly, in some respects, even more gracious than Mary herself, having a deeper experience, a fuller knowledge, greater courage and many other superior gifts and Graces—although in this point he failed—he doubted his Lord and showed

his unbelief by asking for a *sign*, “How shall I know this?” He needed a sign or a token that what the angel spoke was true.

This was not the case with Mary, who sought an *explanation* but not a token. Is it wrong, then, to ask for a token? Assuredly not in all cases, for it may even be sinful *not* to ask for one, as in the case of Ahaz, of whom we read, “Moreover the Lord spoke again unto Ahaz, saying, Ask for a sign of the Lord your God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord. And He said, Hear you now, O house of David. Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary God, also?” In the case of Ahaz it was sinful to refuse and in that of Zacharias sinful to request.

Here again I must come back to the remark I started with and remind you that the same thing may be right in one man and wrong in another, according to the  *motive*. It is very curious that Abraham used almost identical words with Zacharias, when he said, “How shall I know that I shall inherit this land?” He distinctly asked the Lord for a sign, nor was the request at all grievous to the Lord, for He knew that His servant Abraham asked that sign in all humility and childlike faith. Let me show you at once the difference between Abraham and Zacharias. Zacharias will not believe without a sign—Abraham has *already believed* and waited long for the fulfillment of the promise—and feels that a sign would be comforting to him.

It could in no sense have been said to the great father of the faithful, “Except you see signs and wonders you will not believe,” but some such rebuke might have been directed towards Zacharias. There was conspicuous faith in Abraham and the desire for a token was natural rather than sinful. So was it with Gideon who asked for *many* signs. You see at the very first that Gideon believes and he acts upon his faith. But he trembles because his faith is weak and he asks for signs to strengthen his confidence. Indeed, he did not distrust the Lord at all, but only questioned whether it was the Lord who spoke. Gideon said, “If now I have found grace in Your sight, then show me a sign that You talk with me.”

The question, you see, was not the truthfulness of God, but whether, indeed, if the Lord had spoken! Zacharias, however, asks an altogether unbelieving question, “How shall I know this?” He wants a sign as the condition of his believing. You may very rightly pray, “Lord, show me a token for good,” but you must believe *before* you get the token and you must not let your believing *depend* upon that token. There is a difference—a wide difference between believing first and then asking for some cheering evidence—and that unbelieving obstinacy which demands signs and wonders and declares, “I will not believe unless I see a token.”

Thomas is an instance of this error when he says, “Except I see in His hand the print of the nails and put my finger into the print of the nails, I will not believe.” His Master bent to his weakness, but He said, and very significant are the words, “Thomas, because you have seen Me you have believed. Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed.” The chief blessing belongs to you who, whether you have evidences or not, are content to believe your God, taking this Word of God as quite sufficient ground for your confidence without any delights of heart or ecstasies of spiritual visitations! Our God is true even if no wonder is worked and no sign is given. Let us settle this in our hearts and never allow a doubt to intervene. O Holy Spirit, help us in this!

All this together shows that the error of Zacharias was unbelief and his chastisement which he received for it is worthy of our earnest attention. He was chastened for his unbelief because the Lord loved him. His affliction was sent not so much in anger as in love. He had asked for a sign and by a sign was he *chastened*. God often makes us gather the twigs from which He makes the rod with which He scourges us. Our own sins are the thorns which cause us to smart. Zacharias asked for a sign and he gets this sign—“You shall be dumb, and not able to speak until the day that these things shall be performed, because you believe not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.”

For months he shall not be able to speak a single word! But while his mouth is closed to others, it shall be open to himself—that dumb mouth of his shall be preaching to him and saying, “You did not believe what was spoken to you of the Lord, and now you are unable to repeat it to others, for the Lord will not employ an unbelieving messenger. If you will not believe when God’s angel speaks, you shall not speak, yourself.” Many a dumb Christian, I am afraid, has had his mouth sealed through unbelief. The Lord saves him and gives him much enjoyment, but He denies him utterance because he has such slender faith.

I have no doubt Zacharias was very happy in the prospect of the birth of his child and looked earnestly onward to the day when John, the Prophet of the Highest, should be born, and he should recover speech. But still, it must have been

very painful to remain for so long a time in utter silence. How he must have longed to speak or sing! But I have no doubt that many a man is put aside from bearing his testimony through unbelief which he calls diffidence and delicacy. The Lord says, "I shall never use you as a preacher. I shall not make use of you in addressing your fellow men. I shall not help you to bring men to Christ in private conversation because you have so little faith. You have doubted Me and now you must be dumb for a season." I hope that, if this is the case with any, your silence will soon end. Lord, open their lips and their mouths shall show forth Your praise!

Dear Friend, I hope the Lord will unloose your tongue by-and-by, for if you are in a right state of heart it will be a very painful thing to you not to be able to declare what the Lord has done for your soul. But it is so with some—they are dumb because they believe not. Moreover, Zacharias had the further affliction of being deaf at the same time. How do I know that he was deaf? That is pretty clear, because when his child was born, it is recorded in the 62<sup>nd</sup> verse that "they made signs to his father how he would have him called." And, of course, if he had been able to hear there would have been no need to use signs. But he could not hear any more than he could speak—he suffered the double affliction of being deaf and dumb—no small cross to one who had such gifts of utterance as he showed in his song of praise!

It is remarkable that he could not hear anything, but it is also instructive. I have known Christians who, when they would not believe the promise, have become very deaf, spiritually. You say, "What do you mean? How are they deaf?" Listen and you will hear them say, "I cannot hear Mr. So-and-So." It is the same minister whom they *used* to hear with pleasure—the same man—and God blesses him to others as much as before. How is this? Others are drinking in the Word, but these poor deaf people say, "We do not know how it is, but we cannot hear our pastor." No, you did not believe and, therefore, you cannot hear. You did not receive his message. You did not rejoice in it and now you cannot hear it.

That is a dreadful sort of deafness! If you suffer from a physical deafness you can buy a horn, or you can go to some skillful aorist who, perhaps, may help you. Moreover, you can read if you cannot hear. But if you get a *spiritual* deafness, I do not know a worse chastisement that can come upon you, nor one that will make you more mischievous to others. O Beloved, believe the good Word of the Lord! With meekness receive the engrafted Word and do not question it and provoke the Lord, lest, haply, because you did not accept the Word as the Word of God, the time shall come when you will not be able to hear it and your profiting will utterly depart! And the very voice that once was music to you will have no charms at all and the blessed Truth of God which once made your heart leap for joy will cease to have the slightest influence upon you.

Mary was not sentenced either to be silent or to be deaf, for she believed the Word of the Lord which was spoken to her by the angel. O that we, also, by a full obedience of faith may escape the penalties which surely attach themselves to unbelief! We must sorrow, but there can be no reason for increasing it by our own fault—and we may readily do so. While on the other hand, faith brings rest and peace. So much concerning Zacharias.

**II.** Now let us turn our eyes to MARY. Mary used much the same language and yet she spoke not after the same fashion. She asked of the angel, "HOW SHALL THIS BE?" In looking at her, first, it is to be noticed that she believed what the angel said. It was not "How shall I know this?" but, in effect, her language was, "I believe it. How shall it be?" There is no unbelief in the question. Of that we are sure, because not long after she is praised by her intelligent cousin, Elizabeth, who declares that, "blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord."

She notably believed. She asked for no sign. She sought no token whatever. The angel's voice sufficed her. The still small voice of Divine love within her soul was enough. She believed and only asked to be instructed in the matter—she needed no sign and seal. She was willing, also, to accept all hazards. I would speak with great delicacy, but to the Virgin, remember, it was a very serious thing to be the mother of our Lord. To this very day the base tongues of infidels have dared to insinuate gross criminality against her who was blessed among women! And she must have known that it was not likely that all would believe what she should and many a hard speech would be uttered concerning her.

Indeed, she might have had fear concerning her espoused husband, himself, who would have put her away had not the Lord shielded her. Joseph behaved nobly, like a believer of the first order, and he deserves to be ranked among the truest of the saints as does the Virgin, herself, who well deserves to be exceedingly commended by all who can appreciate pure, delicate and yet heroic faith. Whatever there might be of hazard, so great was the honor that was put upon the

Virgin that she does not appear to have felt the slightest hesitation, but said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to your word.”

I think her question may be attributed, in part, to surprise—to inevitable amazement! And what we say to the Lord when we are naturally surprised under the greatness of His mercy will not be weighed by Him letter by letter, nor shall we be judged for it, though if very closely examined it might appear like unbelief. The Lord knows His children’s frame and remembers that we are dust. I hope that many a word which drops from the child of God when he is in pain, when he is distressed as Job was on the dunghill, is allowed to blow away with the breath which utters it. How very little did the Lord say to Job about the naughty words which, in his petulance, he had allowed to escape, for, after all, he was grandly patient.

And so, even if there had been something of unbelief in these words of Mary, which there was not, yet they would have been viewed by the Lord as the fruit of surprise at the marvelous and unexpected mercy for which she had not even prayed. There was no unbelief in her language, but there was great wonder, surprise and admiration at so great a gift. How should this come to her? How should she be so highly favored? Her soul seemed to say, “Why this to *me*? That I, so humble and obscure—a maiden whose rank and race have been altogether forgotten—should be the mother of the Savior after the flesh, the mother of His humanity by whom humanity is to be redeemed?” She was full of wonder and *then* she began to enquire.

There is the point. She wanted to know how it would be. There was no wrong in that desire. There was no unbelief worthy of rebuke. She believed the surpassing promise and only wished to know how it could be performed. There might readily enough be unbelief in such an enquiry, but not necessarily so. You and I may say, as the Israelites did in the wilderness when God had promised to give them flesh to eat, “Shall the flocks and herds be slain?” That was unbelievably asking how it should be. But yet you may ask how a promise shall be fulfilled without any mistrust at all. No, your very faith may raise the enquiry! I know my soul asks again and again many questions of my Lord which He answers to my soul. He would not have answered had they been sinful questions.

We ought to enquire about a great many things—we should be sacredly inquisitive. We should say, How is it He has chosen us? For our Lord replies, “Even so Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight.” But, still, why me? Why me? You may ask that question, for holy gratitude dictates it. And how is it that He could redeem us with the blood of His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord? And how is it that He renews us? And how will it be that He will perfect us? And how can it be that we shall have a mansion in Heaven and shall become like our Lord? And how is it that we shall be raised up? With what body shall we come? Many a question we may ask, which if not asked in unbelief, will have an answer, or will serve to increase our reverent gratitude.

But now notice, concerning Mary, that while Zacharias was the doubter and was treated as such, Mary was the enquirer and was so dealt with of the Lord. See the difference in the treatment of the two. For first, Mary did not ask for a sign but she got one—and it was one of the most pleasant that could possibly come to her, for it was her cousin Elizabeth! She was to be her sign. Behold, she that had been barren shall come to meet her and comfort her. Brothers and Sisters, the Lord knows how to give you signs if you do not wish for them! And I believe that those have the most tokens for good who do *not* ask for them but are content to take their Father’s Word without any confirmatory sign.

And then, there was another thing with regard to her. She was graciously instructed. Zacharias asked for a sign and he had it. She asked for instruction and she had it. The angel paused awhile and said to her, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you. Therefore, also, that holy Thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God.” If you will meekly and believingly ask of your Lord to be taught concerning Divine things, He will give you His Spirit who shall lead you into all Truth and instruct you and make you wise unto salvation.

Now, the conclusion is this—first of all, let us not do as Zacharias did. Dear Friend, are you, at this moment, questioning any promise? Are you saying, “How shall I know this?” Cease from doubting the Infallible Word and rest in the Lord, His Holy Spirit enabling you to believe! On the other hand, are you a seeking sinner and does Christ declare that whoever looks to Him shall be saved, and that whoever believes in Him is not condemned? Do not ask for any sign, but believe Him! He, Himself, is sign enough! He is God and yet Man—the bleeding Lamb, the Sacrifice for sin. Believe Him! Believe Him! Believe Him and you shall have the blessing!

And you, dear child of God, if you have a text of Scripture, a promise which evidently suits your case—which meets your trouble—do not say, “How shall I know this?” When the Spirit says it, it is enough that it is in the Word. Whatever the Scripture states, be sure of it, for if all the wise men in the world were to prove it, it would not be proven one bit more! And if they were all to *disprove* it, it would be none the less sure! If I were to *see* a thing to be true which God had declared in His Word, I would not believe my eyes so well as I would believe His Word—at least, I ought not to do so. This is where we ought to stand—all the world may deceive, but God cannot! Let God be true and every man a liar.

If you will come and trust Him in this way you shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water. Your leaf shall not wither and you shall not know when drought comes. If your walk through life is the walk of faith, as Abraham’s and Enoch’s were, you shall have a grand life—grandly full, eternal and Christly—but if you doubt Him you shall not be established. The unbeliever shall be as the rolling thing before the whirlwind, as the sear leaf that falls from the tree and as the heath of the desert that knows not when good comes. May the Holy Spirit save us, Brothers and Sisters, from unbelief, and give us rest in the promise of God!

And now, secondly, let us with all our hearts imitate Mary in being enquirers—often asking, desiring to know and looking deep and searching—for into the promises of God we cannot look too closely, since “these things the angels desire to look into.” You ought to realize the promise as to be sure that it means what it says and then you will naturally begin to ask how it will come to pass. Only strive to keep out all unbelief from your enquiry and say, “I know in my heart how it can be, for nothing is impossible with God.”

*There* is our answer to all questions—“With God all things are possible.” If I enquire, “How can He deliver me?” Nothing is impossible with God. “How can He keep me to the end?” Nothing is impossible with God. “How can He preserve me amid persecution? How can He keep me from temptation and preserve me from the world, the flesh and the devil?” Nothing is impossible with God! Fling yourself upon Omnipotence and you shall be strong! May the Holy Spirit help you to do this for Christ’s sake. Amen.

Adapted from *The C.H. Spurgeon Collection*, Ages Software, 1.800.297.4307.