

Several years ago, I decided I wanted to run a half marathon. I'm not a runner, I've never been a runner, but I decided that I wanted to see if I could do it. I was an athlete growing up, I like the feeling of making my body work hard, so I set the goal to run the Indy Mini in the spring.

I trained, a lot. I ran by myself, I ran inside, I ran outdoors. There were days that it felt great and there were days that I hated every step. But I wanted to finish what I said I would do, so I trained anyway.

I signed up for the race, paid for the packet, and had the date on our calendar. And it got to the Monday of the week of the race, and my husband asked me about my logistical plan for the weekend. And I said "what do you mean? I'm going to go early, run my race, and come home." And then he preceded to tell me that I had to pick up my race packet on Friday afternoon, that the race brings in thousands and thousands of people, every hotel around Indy was sold out, there would be no place to park... etc. etc. I had no idea. I honestly just thought I'd show up, get my packet, run my race, and it would be super simple. I'd run a few 5k's here and there here in Bloomington, so that's what I was expecting. Obviously, this half marathon was something completely different. And as we tried to figure it out with logistics – could I drive up there on Friday to get my packet and then go back on Saturday, did I want to park miles away and walk by myself to the race – I came to the realization that running in the Indy Mini just wasn't going to work.

So, on that Saturday morning of the race, I woke up, and I ran a half marathon. By myself, around Bloomington. No start and finish line, no encouraging fans or fun signs to read, no post-race snacks. No race pictures with my bib number – this was the only picture I took during my half marathon experience.

(PICTURE)

Just me, starting and finishing at my house. I was really disappointed. Looking back, I think was most frustrated with the situation because I was doing a good thing, and still disappointed with the outcome. Running is healthy, it keeps me active, it's good for my physical and mental health. I was working hard, I was disciplined in my training, I stuck to the plan, I was obedient to the schedule and what I said I was going to do. And yet it didn't turn out at all the

way that I had hoped it would. I was disappointed because I was expecting one thing and my expectation was unmet.

Now, this story about my half marathon is a very lighthearted story about disappointment. I have heavier stories in my life – one specifically in which I carry daily disappointment about a relationship with someone in my family that I love dearly, and our relationship will likely never be what I long for it to be due to addiction in this person's life. But the point is that each of us experience disappointment in our life. I'm sure that every single one of you can think of a situation in your life that has left you with feelings of sorrow, sadness, and frustration. Even situations where you were doing the right thing, the good thing, and still experiencing these feelings.

What is your disappointment?

In Luke chapter 1 we read about Elizabeth and her story of disappointment. We can all learn from Elizabeth, because we all have a similar story.

Elizabeth had unfulfilled longings and unmet expectations in her life. The most important thing we can learn from her is how to be faithful through disappointment.

Let's set the context of Elizabeth's story. Luke 1 vs. 5 says

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

Now, we don't know exactly how old Elizabeth was, those details were not included. Some scholars say that she was around 88 years old. But all we know for sure is that she was “very old”.

Along with being old, we read that Elizabeth and Zechariah were righteous in the sight of God. They were descendants of Aaron, they have a long lineage of people that served the Lord, and they were these Godly people, they lived a life that honored God. It says they observed all the Lords' commands. So,

think of the kindest, most Christ-like person you know, and that's probably how you can imagine Zechariah and Elizabeth. Just good, God-honoring people. They were righteous and blameless. But they were also childless.

Knowing the context of scripture is always really important, it's not just the content that we need to know when we're reading the Bible. And an important piece of cultural context is that during that time, being childless, or being barren, was a source of shame and humiliation for any woman.

So here is Elizabeth. A righteous woman, married to a righteous man, and she is unable to have children. Imagine the disappointment that she must feel. But what we learn from Elizabeth is that she was faithful in the midst of this unmet desire. She was obedient and faithful, and continued to live a righteous life and a life of prayer even though she longed for a baby and her desire to be a mother was not fulfilled. Imagine praying every day for YEARS for something, and God not answering that prayer the way that you want him to. I'm sure some of you can relate to that.

Many times, the things that we face in our life that cause disappointment are things that we don't have control over. It's easy to think that you've done all the right things, or you are doing the right things, why isn't life going the way you want it to?

Sometimes we think that "if we just obey God, if we just do all the things that we're supposed to do, then he'll answer all of our prayers the way that WE want him to." That is simply untrue.

Disappointment often comes out of expectation. When our expectations go unmet, that is when we invite disappointment in. Sometimes obeying the Lord comes with a season of disappointment because what we want is not what He has planned for us. Unmet expectations are our own fault. God doesn't promise us anything, he doesn't promise to meet all of our expectations.

Following God and living a life that honors him does not exempt you from disappointment. Because **God's timetable and his methods do not have to conform to what we expect.**

Now, this does not mean that we shouldn't have hopes, and dreams, and longings, and expectations. And it doesn't mean we shouldn't pray for them. But it does mean that we have to hold our expectations with an open hand.

Jesus himself sets that example for us. When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified, he prayed for what he desired. He didn't want to be crucified. He said, 'God, take this cup of suffering from me.' But in that prayer, he both expressed his desire, his longing, his hope, and then quickly followed that with the words "your will, not mine." Jesus held his expectation, his longing, with an open hand, trusting that God had a plan and knew the bigger picture.

A righteous life doesn't mean you won't experience disappointment, and on the flip side of that, it's important to talk about the fact that disappointment in our lives is not a result of sin. God doesn't work that way.

During this time in history when Elizabeth was unable to have a child, infertility was actually seen as divine "disfavor". This shame was felt more acutely by women because at that time if a woman couldn't have a child it was seen as her fault, and her failing. And we even see in Old Testament law in the book of Deuteronomy where it plainly states that those who are obedient to God's ordinances would not be barren.

So, imagine what Elizabeth might be thinking? Do you think she was wondering "God, what have I done wrong?" Have you ever asked that question? Or wondered if your sin is the cause of unfulfilled longings or disappointment in your life?

There is a story in John 9 where we see Jesus answer this question for us when he heals a blind man. When Jesus and his disciples come across the blind man, Jesus disciples ask him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And do you know what Jesus said? He said, "Neither this man nor his parents have sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

It makes me feel better about asking the question about sin causing disappointment because even the disciples ask Jesus this question. They said who sinned? But did you hear the answer that Jesus gave? He said, "No one's

sin caused this, this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

We don't always know why disappointment happens in our lives, but we can trust God in the midst of that disappointment. Because we can trust that God is making everything work for His good, just like this scripture says. Jesus is telling his disciples that he works through disappointment and that God can be glorified through unmet expectations. Your trial, your disappointment, your pain are not because of your sin, and it is not for nothing.

So, Elizabeth is disappointed, and she has unfulfilled longings to have a baby. In Luke chapter 1 we go on to read that Zechariah, remember he was a priest, he actually comes back to Elizabeth from his visit to the temple, and he can't speak. He can't speak because he didn't believe what the angel told him in the temple – the angel Gabriel told him his wife would become pregnant and they would have a son, and that they should name him John. Now, I am not surprised by Zechariah's doubt, because remember that they were very old. But he came home from the temple, he couldn't speak, and sure enough, Elizabeth became pregnant.

Think of the **joy!** Elizabeth, in her very old age, was going to have a baby that she had prayed for years, even decades. She had been faithful even in her disappointment. She trusted that God had a plan for her, even when for a really long time, the plan wasn't what she wanted. Elizabeth means “God promise” or “God's abundance”. How fitting, that Elizabeth's name would be lived out in her life, that he kept a promise to always be with her and always care for her, through the disappointment in her life into the joy of answered prayers.

It's at this time in the story, in Elizabeth's 6th month of pregnancy, that the angel Gabriel visited Mary and told her that she'll become pregnant with the savior of the world. That's a whole different sermon. But Mary receives this news from Gabriel, and she immediately goes to see Elizabeth.

Verse 39 says “At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she

exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

It says that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she said, “Blessed are you, Mary, blessed is your child, and why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Elizabeth knows that Mary is pregnant with Jesus – she is the mother of her Lord.

This is Elizabeth proclaiming Jesus as Lord and savior and because she claims him as Lord she is filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth is not only the first woman, but the first person, to identify Jesus as the Lord. She was a prophet, filled with the Holy spirit and she prophesied about Jesus’ coming. God placed Elizabeth in the Christmas story as the first one to worship the Lord Jesus Christ.

Elizabeth gives birth to her baby, she and Zechariah name him John, and in verse 65 of this story it says, “All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.” This makes me think of what Jesus told his disciples – that this happened so that the works of God might be displayed. I’m sure that Elizabeth and Zechariah’s neighbors had experienced and witnessed their years of sadness and sorrow over not having a child of their own. So when Elizabeth became pregnant and Zechariah couldn’t speak and then was able to speak when his baby was born, the people around them knew something was happening, they were seeing God’s work being displayed in big ways. God was going to do something amazing through this baby that Elizabeth had prayed for.

So who was this baby? We read Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb. I like to think that’s because of the relationship that those two babies would have.

This is verses 76-79, and this is what Zechariah says about who this baby would become...

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,
⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
 through the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
 by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
 and in the shadow of death,
 to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit;

After decades of disappointment, Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist. John the Baptist would be the one to go before Mary's son, Jesus, and prepare the way for him.

Are you making the connection? I know that Elizabeth waited decades for a baby, and I can only imagine the heartache she carried in her disappointment up to this moment. But if she'd had a baby at any other time than this specific time, this specific baby, it wouldn't have been John the Baptist. God's timing is perfect. His plan is perfect and beautiful and while he doesn't protect us from disappointment in these expectations that we've created, he makes everything work for his good and his time.

And it's always better than we could imagine on our own.

Ephesians 3:20 says “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.”

Elizabeth, in all of her years of praying for a baby, didn't know to even ask for John the Baptist, who would play such a vital role in the ministry of Jesus. We can't even imagine what he has in store for us. Don't underestimate God.

But we know, because of the way that God works and orchestrates all the small details, that Elizabeth is just the right person to be the mother of John the Baptist, who would lead the way and bring others to know Jesus. Elizabeth was faithful in her life, and she was a righteous woman, and then she was finally able to see God's grand plan when she became pregnant at the same time as Mary.

What we see in Elizabeth's story is that joy can be found in the midst of disappointment. When we let God's timetable and method work the way he has planned, we'll experience joy. And this isn't necessarily because God answered Elizabeth's prayer the way she had hoped for after years and years of prayer. Because **joy isn't found in the absence of disappointment, but joy is found in the presence of God.**

Disappointment and suffering can you draw you deeper into your faith because you have to rely daily on the presence of God. It's like asking God every day for your daily bread – you say 'God help me find the joy in my day today.' You can experience God's presence and therefore the joy that comes with knowing him in a more intimate way when you're in a season of disappointment.

It's important to remember that joy is different than happiness. Happiness is based on our circumstances, which heavily correlates to our own expectations that we've created. But joy – true joy, comes from knowing that God is in control and that he is with us and that he knows the plan he has for us and those plans are good. And like Elizabeth, we can find joy in the midst of disappointment.

I told you my simple story about disappointment in my one and only half marathon race experience. And I don't know that I'll ever experience a race like again, that I'll ever put the work in to train and get ready for that. But even on that race morning, in the midst of the disappointment, I was able to see the good things that came out of that experience. I was healthy. I executed a plan with discipline. I was proud of myself. There were many good things. It's okay and valid to feel disappointed with unmet expectations while simultaneously identifying the joy and goodness in a situation.

Now, I know that it's easy to look at Elizabeth and think "well of course she found joy in her journey, because her prayer was finally answered." And for some of us, including Jesus, our prayer won't be answered the way that we want it to be.

So what do we do with that? As far as unmet expectations and finding the joy in the midst of disappointment, it all comes down to stewarding our disappointment and our suffering well. We have to manage what we're feeling

and use it for the glory of God. Often times our wants and desires don't line up with reality. Living in the co-existence of reality and our own expectations can be tricky. But none of us are alone in this. So use your heartbreak and your disappointment to connect with others. Use it to point others to Jesus. Use your journey, your story, God's story, to live a righteous life and point people to the joy that can only be found in Jesus.

And keep your eyes open. God's promises never die, he will always keep his promises. But we need to adjust our expectations of how he'll keep his promises. If we're only looking for answered prayers through one lens, we might miss what he has for us in the journey. You might be looking out the front window for an answered prayer while God has delivered it to your back door. He's kept his promise, but you might be overlooking it. So keep your eyes open to find joy in the journey and see how He may be answering your prayers in ways that you didn't even imagine.

The example that we see in Elizabeth's joy gives us a glimpse into the joy that we have to look forward to on the other side of the disappointments of this world.

Instead of our own worldly expectations that often let us down, we can look to the joy of divine expectation. Elizabeth and the joy that she experiences in the birth of her long awaited child, offers us a look into the depths of God's grace and the fullness of joy that awaits us.

There is a scripture in the Bible that tells us of the promise we have to look forward to. Revelation 21:3-5 says ³I heard a loud voice from the throne. It said, "Look! God now makes his home with the people. He will live with them. They will be his people. And God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death.' And there will be no more sadness. There will be no more crying or pain.

In other words, there will be no more disappointment.

Both Elizabeth and this vision in the book of Revelation show us the future filled with joy, a future where sorrow and pain will be no more. Elizabeth's joy, though earthly and fleeting, foreshadows the eternal joy promised in

Revelation. It is a joy that surpasses all understanding, a joy that comes from knowing and following God, even in the midst of disappointment.

Just as Elizabeth's joy was rooted in her faith in God's promises, our hope for eternal joy is rooted in those same promises. We trust in God who keeps His word, we trust in God who is faithful to His promises, God who is good.

In the meantime, we are called to live in joyful anticipation. We are to live in the midst of disappointment as those who know that the best is yet to come.

We have so much to learn from Elizabeth. But today, I encourage you to acknowledge the disappointment in your life. Hold your expectations with an open hand, be faithful in your disappointment in the same way that Elizabeth was, and find joy and the goodness of God all around you.

Today I want to invite you to take your disappointment into our time of response. This is the time in our worship together where we get to respond to what God has laid on our hearts.

In a moment you'll be able to move about the room to respond, and there are a few options. Communion is at the front and the back of the room on the tables, you can take that back to your seat. On one side there is a small cracker to represent Jesus' body was sacrificed for us, and the other side is juice that represents Jesus' blood that was shed. When you take communion today, I encourage you to think of that prayer that Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. Jesus didn't want to die, but he was willing to do that for you, and because of God's love for you.

During this time, you can find someone around the room to pray with, maybe a prayer to bring your disappointment out into the light. Just speak it out with someone.

Or maybe you need to make a decision to quit pursuing your own expectations and to live your life fully for Jesus by being baptized. Whatever it is, take this time to respond to God.

Prayer