

3] A Mighty Angel and a Faithful Priest, Part 2 (Sunday, September 26, 2021)

Scripture: Malachi 4; Luke 1:13-25

INTRODUCTION

I stated last week that we must keep in mind that you and I are not the center of God's plan.

A related and very important message is that God's calling of the believer, the work that He gives us to do is not a sign of our greatness but of God's mercy and grace.

As we see from our text, Zacharias, Elizabeth, and John were given an incredible calling, but this was not a testimony to their own greatness, but of God's.

Our focus must never be on how great or important we are.

Our focus must be on how great God's work in is changing rebellious hearts and turning them to the Lord.

Oh, how we pray that this great work of the Lord will continue according to God's power and through the witness that His church is called to bring.

Psa. 115:1 Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us,
But to Your name give glory,
Because of Your mercy,
Because of Your truth.

As we continue in Luke 1, we will consider in two parts, verses 13-25.

1] A Powerful Angel and Message and a Doubting Priest, vv. 13-20

2] The Response and Fulfillment of God's Sovereign Word, vv. 21-25

Let us never boast in who we are but delight in God's mercy and the calling that He sovereignly gives to us.

1] A POWERFUL ANGEL AND MESSAGE AND DOUBTING PRIEST, vv. 13-20

We focus our attention again on the incredible significance of Gabriel and his message to Zacharias.

This was the end of 400 years of silence!

We noted the detail that Luke gives of this scene. Gabriel appeared and was standing on the right hand of the altar of incense, right by the division between the Holy Place and Holy of Holies.

We ended with the very understandable response of Zacharias – he was troubled and fear fell upon him.

Gabriel's response to Zacharias, **Do not be afraid** or **do not fear** is used about 26 times in the NT.

Maybe you have heard people say, this is one of the most repeated commands in Scripture.

It is true; though we consider that they are not all addressed to us as believers but given to particular people.

Notice the important detail of verse 13, **"Your prayer is heard."**

What prayer was this?

Did Zacharias pray in this most holy moment for the birth of a child or was his prayer more general, for the salvation and deliverance of Israel, for example?

Another possibility is that Gabriel was speaking of how Zacharias and Elizabeth in the **past** had prayed that God would give to them a child.

I don't know that we can be dogmatic in our answer to this question.

We do keep in mind that even when we pray biblically, we don't see things as God does.

I would think that as Zacharias was in the temple, he was praying for the salvation and deliverance of Israel.

God was going to answer this prayer in a very unexpected way.

Look again how Gabriel gets right to the central message.

Your wife, Elizabeth, is going to bear you a son.

You shall call his name John.

As you know from the OT, naming a child was a significant act, often done by the father but sometimes by the mother and in certain cases **God was the one who gave the name.**

Naming is a sign of authority.

One commentator wrote: "For God to take over the task was a sign that he was making the child his responsibility."¹

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Luke*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 981.

John is a very common name in English.

The name in Hebrew means **Yahweh is gracious**.

What a beautiful name for the one who would be the greatest prophet and forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now think of the role of the prophets in the OT.

What comes to mind as you think of the calling that they were given?

You could say, it was a challenging calling.

Most people did not want to hear God's Word.

The role of a prophet was a dangerous job.

Now this all was true for John as you know his life, but here in Gabriel's message is another side to John's calling.

John in his birth and life would also bring joy and gladness in a very special way to Zacharias.

Many would rejoice in the birth of John as they came to understand his part in God's great plan of redemption.

In verse 15, Gabriel declares that John would be great in the sight of the Lord.

This is the only time in Scripture where this description is used.

I think John Calvin is correct in saying that these words are not to glorify John as a person but rather speak of the incredible calling he was given.

The comedian Brian Regan has a skit where he muses about being one of the 12 Apollo astronauts who got to go to the moon.

During a conversation where people are boasting about themselves and about all the places they have gone or the amazing cars they have driven, they can mention in the conversation, "I walked on the moon... Once I was driving in the Sea of Tranquility in my lunar rover..."²

John was the one who first directly pointed the way to God incarnate.

He is the one who had the awesome privilege of baptizing Jesus Christ.

And yet we know that this incredible calling for John was not a **sense of pride but of great humility**.

Should that not be true for all believers?

Do we really think we are important or indispensable?

It is not our greatness, but what a calling we have been given as witnesses and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Further in verse 15 we see that John was not to ever have wine or strong drink.

Some have understood this to mean that John was a Nazirite.

Certainly, John had a calling similar to both that of the Nazirite vow and also a priest in service who was not to have any alcohol while performing active duties.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBJ6yptGqm4>

Leon Morris says in summary, "It may be better to see John as a having a **unique position** neither Nazirite nor priest, though with points of connection with both."³

Verse 15 also states that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb.

What a testimony to the personhood of the unborn child that Luke gives in this first chapter.

I think Gabriel says this about John to show the incredible calling that John was given, but we do later see that **even when in his mother's womb, John was serving as a prophet.**

I am speaking here of what we will later see in verse 41, where John leaped in Elizabeth's womb when in the presence of Jesus who was in Mary's womb.

John was a prophet even before he was born!

John's ministry is summarized in verses 16 and 17.

The key word in verses 16 and 17 is the verb **turn**.

This verb is used about **40 times** in the NT.

It is a verb that here means **repentance**, a turning from sin and a turning to the Lord and His truth.

He will turn many of the children of Israel to the LORD their God.

Isn't this one of the most beautiful statements of ministry in all of Scripture?

³ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 86.

This is why John is the greatest of prophets.

He would be used to turn many unto the Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe we don't always think of this part of John's ministry.

Notice the language of the first part of verse 17.

He will also go before **Him**...

Is this not a stunning reference to the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ?

John would go before the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord God of Israel.

John's ministry was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi 4:5 and 6.

In his ministry, there would be a strong connection or resemblance to the powerful ministry of Elijah.

We focus on the words, **to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children**.

This is the fulfillment of Malachi 4:6.

Commentators are not in agreement as to the exact meaning of this phrase.

Do fathers speak of the **patriarchs** or literal fathers and their children?

When a people turn from the Lord, there is also a break down in the order and love that is to characterize a family.

Children turn from the truth and embrace a rebellious spirit.

Fathers also do not do all that they are called to do.

John Calvin wrote:

The expression, *bring back the hearts of the fathers to the children*, is not literally true; for it was rather the *children* who had broken the covenant and departed from the right faith of their fathers, that needed to be *brought back*. But though the Evangelist does not so literally express that order of *bringing back*, the meaning is abundantly obvious, that, by the instrumentality of John, God would again unite in holy harmony those who had previously been disunited.

But especially as we read Deuteronomy, we recognize the **special calling** that fathers have been given in terms of teaching and training their children in the truth!

John's calling is given two more descriptions in verse 17.

To turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just and to make a people prepared for the Lord.

We have here a picture of the nature of rebellion and God's sovereign work of salvation.

In our rebellion we want **nothing to do with God's truth**.

We are fine; we need no assistance.

And yet God sees it as **disobedience** and **foolishness**. We need the **wisdom of the just**.

As we think of John's calling, we should also be encouraged in the calling that God has given to us today.

We are not repeating John's role, but our duty does in some ways parallel John's work and role.

Listen to 2 Cor. 5:20-21.

2Cor. 5:20 Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore *you* on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. **21** For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

R. C. Sproul in his commentary on this text presents very well how serious is the sin of unbelief.

"We have the tendency," he writes, "to think that if someone doesn't believe, if he is not convinced, he may be wrong *but at worst it's an error in judgment.*"⁴

Unbelief is not just a trivial sin is it.

Unbelief is an accusation against God Himself!

This is why God is perfectly just in sentencing unbelievers to eternal punishment.

It is no little sin.

1John 5:10 He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son.

It is fascinating that although Zacharias and Elizabeth were described in verse 6 as those saved by God's grace, they were justified and were being sanctified, this does not mean that they were sinless.

⁴ Sproul, *Luke*, 15.

Zacharias was far from being an unbeliever, but here he was **guilty of the sin** of not believing the message that Gabriel delivered.

And I think we can understand very well why Zacharias did not believe.

He focused on **his outward situation** rather than believing in the power of God to fulfill His word.

Now it is very important to understand the nature of faith.

Faith is not believing in yourself or in your dreams.

Faith is not a wish or an empty hope.

Faith is believing what God has revealed and trusting that He will fulfill all that He has promised.

It might seem that Zacharias was punished more harshly than other examples that you find in Scripture.

But we must keep in mind God knows the hearts of his people.

It is not always possible that the details would be described.⁵

As John Calvin encouraged, we must keep diligent watch over our own hearts; if such a godly man like Zacharias was overtaken by the sin of unbelief in this situation, how much more should be humble before God and stand against the snares of the devil.⁶

Zacharias's punishment was that he would be unable to speak until the birth and the naming of John.

⁵ John Calvin, *Luke*, paragraph 67510.

⁶ *Ibid.*, paragraph 67512.

As we will see, John was named on the 8th day of his life as part of the ceremony of circumcision.

Some believe that because of what we see in verse 62 that Zacharias also may have lost his ability to hear, but what Gabriel declares here is the inability to speak.

We serve a merciful God; and in God's mercy He does chastise His people.

2] THE RESPONSE AND FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S SOVEREIGN WORD, vv. 21-25

The detail that Luke gives to this account really shows that he has done his homework as it were and that this is not some fanciful, imaginative account, but the real history of God's work.

I imagine that you would be able to set your clock to the regular rhythm of the temple and the work of the priests.

There was a process. This was no time for calling audibles or inventing new ceremonies.

Zacharias should not have been long inside the temple in doing his part in the burning of incense.

Now reading verses 11-20 doesn't take very long, maybe about 2 minutes.

I don't think we are to believe that the encounter of Zacharias and Gabriel only took 2 minutes or that was all the time that elapsed in this encounter.

Understandably the people **marveled**.

This verb translated as **marveled** is used 13 times throughout Luke, 4 times just in chapters 1 and 2.

There are a lot of amazing things connected with John and Jesus.

What was going on was not yet known, but the people concluded based on Zacharias's attempt to communicate, that he had seen a vision in the temple.

They were not completely correct, but the Lord was giving a foreshadowing of more to come!

Zacharias finished his one-week term of duty. I imagine that not being able to talk made the rest of his duty more difficult, but he finished his holy duty and then went home.

We are not told what Elizabeth thought of her silent husband.

Luke focuses on the fulfillment of God's Word through Gabriel.

A. T. Robertson cites the fact that Luke uses almost as many words for pregnancy and barrenness as the famous Greek doctor Hippocrates.⁷

We can say this reflects Luke's medical background and understanding of these issues.

Now, why did Elizabeth go into seclusion for five months?

Verse 25 gives part of the answer to this question.

The Lord had taken away her reproach.

⁷ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2001).

When Rachel was finally able to conceive and give birth she said the same thing in Gen. 30:23.

Gen. 30:23 And she conceived and bore a son, and said, "God has taken away my reproach."

Pregnancy likely would have been difficult for Elizabeth.

Perhaps waiting 5 months also kept others from saying, are you sure you are pregnant?

This seclusion also provided a time for deep reflection, meditation on God's Word, and preparation for motherhood at an advanced age.

God was doing something amazing and yet this was only the beginning!

CONCLUSION

Let us never boast in who we are, but delight in God's mercy and the calling that He sovereignly gives to us.

1] Nature of unbelief in the Christian life

2] Praying earnestly for God's Work in bringing revival

Prayer

Hymn 253

BENEDICTION - HEBREWS 13:20-21

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen.