

2] A Mighty Angel and a Faithful Priest (Sunday, September 19, 2021)

Scripture: Daniel 8:15-27; Luke 1:5-12

INTRODUCTION

It is always important to keep in mind that God's chief end is His own glory.

You and I are not the center of God's plan.

However, the fact that God seeks His own glory is the best news for those who are in Jesus Christ.

If you are in Jesus Christ, then you have assurance of God's great work for your good in all situations.

The story that we continue to read and study from Luke's gospel is not just a human interest story like you would find in the old Reader's Digest.

Luke chooses to begin his gospel by focusing on the birth of the greatest OT prophet, John the Baptist.

R. C. Sproul commented that John the Baptist may be the most underrated person in the whole New Testament.¹

We probably do not give proper attention to the awesome fulfillment of God's Word and the incredible significance of the birth of John the Baptist.

As we continue in Luke 1, we will consider in two parts, verses 5-12.

1] A Righteous But Childless Couple, vv. 5-7

2] A Mighty Angel Meets a Faithful Priest, vv. 8-12

God Must Work in Our Barren Hearts to Give Life.

1] A RIGHTEOUS BUT CHILDLESS COUPLE, VV. 5-7

¹ Sproul, Chapter 2.

Last week I shared that William Ramsay and other historians have identified that Luke was the most accurate historian of the entire ancient world.²

We see this in the detail that he gives in verse 5.

We also understand that Luke is not just writing an historical account but an important theological account.

John MacArthur very helpfully points out the importance that Luke begins with the account of John the Baptist.

First, it is a most important connection between what we call the OT and NT.

Scripture is one record of God's work.

Judaism properly understood is not the religion of the OT but rather the departure from the truth.

Second, Luke begins with John the Baptist to show the fulfillment of the great prophecy found in the last book of the OT, Malachi.

Third, we must appreciate the incredible significance of what we have starting with verse 5 in terms of God's revelation.³

There has been a period of about 400 years of silence.

There has been no new prophecy.

This has been simply a period of waiting for God to fulfill the great promises of the coming of John and Jesus.

This 400 years of silence is about the entire history of our nation.

The appearance of the angel Gabriel to Zacharias is the shattering of this long period of silence.

² Sproul, 4.

³ From John MacArthur's excellent sermon on Luke 1:5-7.

It is hard to put into words how significant this account is, and yet it seems almost ordinary.

This is the genius of Luke's writing and it also is how God often works – He does extraordinary things so often in the midst of the ordinary!

In verse 5, we are in the time of the reign of the king we know as **Herod the Great**.

Herod is correctly identified as the king of Judea in verse 5.

Herod, however, was not a Jew. He was half Edomite and half Arab, but he was a very clever and wicked man.⁴

He had at least 5 different wives.

His wives and children were expendable.

When Augustus heard that Herod had put to death one of his sons he said, **I would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son.**

To summarize, Herod was the most powerful king of Israel since Solomon and like Solomon built a most beautiful temple and many, many other splendid buildings.

But nothing Herod did was motivated by righteousness or obedience.

Truly this was a dark and wicked time, but God was at work in His perfect timing in the these concluding days of Herod's rule.

According to conventional chronology, Herod died in 4 B.C. This would mean that Jesus had to be born around 6 B.C.

There is good reason to suggest that Herod died in 1 B.C. putting the birth of Jesus around 2 B.C.⁵

So, with verse 5, we are at about 3 B.C.

More important than wicked Herod is the faithful couple also introduced in verse 5 – Zacharias and Elizabeth.

⁴ <https://www.hope-of-israel.org/herodsdeath.html>

⁵ <https://www.hope-of-israel.org/herodsdeath.html>

Zacharias - Zacar + Yah = Yahweh remembers. It is a beautiful name.

His name really is at the heart of God's work of redemption.

Elizabeth is also another beautiful name from the OT - God is fullness, happiness.

Elizabeth is the NT form of the OT name, Elisheba.

Luke records that Elizabeth was also of the line of Aaron.

The name Elizabeth also is the name of Aaron's wife as we see in Exodus 6:23.

I don't know if you remember my dad's sermons on the book of Luke that he started many years ago.

For whatever reason, one thing that always has remained in my memory is the detail from verse 5, that **Zacharias served in the division of Abijah**.

I remember my dad preaching from this text how David established 24 divisions of priests; Abijah was the eighth division.

Now sadly, after the captivity, only 4 divisions returned as we see in Ezra 2:36-39.

However, these four divisions were divided again and the 24 divisions of priests were again established.⁶

What this means is that a priest served as a priest for only 2 weeks each year, two times a year for one week.

Now let's look at verses 6 and 7 which give us such an important description of this faithful couple.

Verse 6 describes them as righteous and blameless.

Verse 7 describes them as childless and old, and Elizabeth as barren.

It is important that we grasp the importance of these descriptions, because to a Jew of that day, these two verses would seem to be contradictory.

⁶ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 85.

In verse 25, Elizabeth says the Lord has taken away my reproach or disgrace among the people!⁷

For just about their entire married life, Elizabeth lived with the terrible shame of not being able to have a baby!

I really don't think we can grasp the weight or burden this would have been.

Why do bad things happen to good people the common saying is?

Going back to verse 6, it is very important to understand how this faithful couple were described as righteous and blameless.

The answer must be because this couple had been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and given faith to believe in the promise that God would send the Messiah who would bring true atonement for sin.

MacArthur stated:

They believed in God. They believed in the true and living God. They believed the Word of God. They believed the revelation of the Old Testament. They believed God's holy law was right and true and just and good. They believed that they couldn't keep His law. They knew they were sinners who fell short of the law of God and they knew that the law of God called for penitence and repentance and they also knew that God was a God of mercy and grace and loving-kindness. They believed all that and so they saw the law of God, they saw its holy standard. They realized they fell short of it. They went to God with a penitent heart and they asked Him for grace and mercy.⁸

Verse 6 also states that this couple lived a sanctified life.

By God's grace they took sin, obedience, and holiness seriously.

Their reputation in terms of outward obedience to God's Law was **blameless**.

⁷ MacArthur notes that rabbis used to say seven people are excommunicated from God. This list begins with a Jew who has no wife, or a Jew whose wife has no child!⁷

⁸ John MacArthur, Sermon on Luke 1:5-7.

Phil. 2:15 that you may become **blameless** and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,

Phil. 3:6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, **blameless**.

The church of Jesus Christ suffers from two related conditions:

1] Hypocrisy

2] No care for true holiness

2] A MIGHTY ANGEL MEETS A FAITHFUL PRIEST, VV. 8-12

During the time of John, there were thousands of priests.

I have seen estimates from 8000⁹ to 18,000.¹⁰

Some state that according to Jewish tradition, a priest could not offer incense more than once in his entire lifetime and some priests would never have the privilege of what is described in verse 9.¹¹

Listen to Exodus 30:7-8 which describes the altar of incense inside the Holy Place of the tabernacle and later the temple.

Ex. 30:7 “Aaron shall burn on it sweet incense every morning; when he tends the lamps, he shall burn incense on it. **8** And when Aaron lights the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense on it, a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations.

⁹ John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, vol. 35A of Word Biblical Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 27-28.

¹⁰ Sproul, Luke 1:5-12.

¹¹ Morris, 85. Nolland says it could happen once or twice in a lifetime. Some differences on these details.

Twice a day incense was to be offered and it was done in connection with the daily morning and evening sacrifices.

While Zacharias had this awesome duty of burning incense inside the temple, outside the main temple stood the multitude in prayer.

J. B. Lightfoot writes:

When the priest went in unto the holy place to burn incense, notice was given to all by the sound of a little bell, that the time of prayer was now.

After this time of silence and prayer would come the sacrifice on the outside altar and the Levites would begin a time of singing and sounding of a trumpet.¹²

For most of this time, Zacharias would not have been alone.

Other priests would have been carrying out their duties inside and outside the temple.

However, it appears according to Jewish tradition, that Zacharias for a brief time would have been alone in the temple.¹³

I can only imagine that although Zacharias as an older man knew exactly what to do, it was still an awesome experience for him to have this great privilege.

You are entirely focused on what you are supposed to be doing.

You don't want to make any mistakes in this very holy time.

But then suddenly in the brief moment when Zacharias was alone, a mighty angel appeared.

Notice again how much detail Luke gives to us here:

The angel was standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

The altar of incense was one of three pieces of furniture in the Holy Place.

¹² John B. Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the Gospels From the Talmud and Hebraica*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 2343.

¹³ Nolland, 28.

The Table of Showbread was on the north.

The candlestick was on the south.

In the middle, closest to the curtain separating the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies was the altar of incense.

It was so close, that the author of Hebrews describes the altar of incense as being part of the Holy of Holies, likely because the incense would enter into the Holy of Holies.¹⁴

Lightfoot quotes a rabbi who suggests that this angel might have come out from the Holy of Holies.¹⁵

Verse 19 identifies this angel as Gabriel.

Only two angels in the Bible are given a name even though you find so many references to angels in Scripture.¹⁶

We must believe that the appearance of Gabriel would have been breathtaking, truly awesome in appearance.

This is an angel, an archangel, who stands in the presence of God.

Apart from the very presence of God, you don't get any higher up on the scale, do you?

We can understand very well the response of Zacharias in verse 12 – trouble and fear.

Troubled - just 2x in Luke; 17x NT

Luke 24:38 And He said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

Fear - 7x in Luke

Luke 2:9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

¹⁴ Hebrews 9:4.

¹⁵ John B. Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the Gospels From the Talmud and Hebraica*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 2349.

¹⁶ *NBD*, s.v. "Gabriel," 389.

Heb. 1:13 But to which of the angels has He ever said:

*“Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool”?*

14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?

Four hundred years of silence was now in the process of being shattered!

The lives of Zacharias and Elizabeth would soon be changed.

Israel’s life would be changed.

Our lives have been changed because of all of this!¹⁷

CONCLUSION

God Must Work in Our Barren Hearts to Give Life.

The wonderfully humbling message of grace and God’s sovereign work!

We don’t view difficulty simply as God punishing us.

We should not view prosperity then simply as all must be well.

We praise God for the amazing way that He works all things for His glory and our salvation.

He is not bound by His people.

He chooses to use His people.

The ordinary can become extraordinary in God's purposes.

Waiting and service!

Prayer

Hymn 80

¹⁷ Sproul, s.v. Luke 1:5-12.

BENEDICTION - 1 TIMOTHY 3:16

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory.