

Luke

*With Healing in Its Wings
(Luke 1:5-17)*

With Study Questions

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10/1/2023*

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With Healing in Its Wings
(Luke 1:5-17)

There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife *was* of the daughters of Aaron, and her name *was* Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. ⁸ So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, '*to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,*' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:5-17).

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A Major Contrast

Luke begins his account with about as big of contrast as can be found upon humans, Herod versus Zacharias and Elizabeth. Herod was about as cruel and calculating as any king could be. He had murdered his own wives and children at the mere suspicion of some type of guilt. He will be remembered for all eternity as the monster who **“killed all the male children in Bethlehem”** (Matthew 2:16) because he, and he alone, would be king.

Luke called it **“the days of Herod”** because prior to Christ, dates were recognized by who might be in power. As providence would have it, the days of Herod would soon come to an end (AD 4). And the child, of whom Luke would write later in this chapter (Luke 1:26-33), would have all the dates in human history calculated by His birth.

Luke sets Herod in a backdrop against Zacharias (Jehovah remembers) and his wife, Elizabeth (God is an oath, [reliable]). Unlike Herod (and most of Israel at the time) Zacharias and Elizabeth are...

...righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord (Luke 1:6).

This is not to say that they were sinless (Romans 3:10). The Scriptures will use these types of words to simply describe faithful people: Noah (Genesis 6:9), Job (Job 1:1), to a lesser extent, David (1 Kings 15:5). But the contrast is obvious.

We have a faithful couple of highly reputable religious stock (a priest and a daughter of Aaron), who were living out this religious pedigree both in moral behavior and worship, which is likely what is meant by **“commandments and ordinances.”**

Yet, as God’s plan and providence would have it, **“they had no child.”** And being advanced in years, the prospect of having a child was beyond the hopes of that which would be ordinary. For God not to grant children can be a very heart-breaking experience.

But earlier in history, it was not merely the heartache of not having the warmth of progeny, it would affect livelihood. Children were essentially a retirement program. It should also be pointed out that being

childless was not a judgment for some sin (as was often thought in those days). They were godly, blameless.

Yet this disadvantage did not somehow yield bitterness or faithlessness in this stellar couple. When Luke writes that they were **“righteous before God”** that was against a common externalism prevalent in God’s people at the time. Jesus would routinely chastise those who did their good deeds to be seen by men (Matthew 6:1, 5, 16; 23:5, 28). Their faithfulness flowed from a true gratitude of a God who had already granted them His riches, not from an effort to gain from God what they thought they needed.

It can be said of them that the words of Job apply.

Though he slay me, I will hope in him (Job 13:15).

Or Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego when threatened with a furnace of blazing fire.

If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 “But *even* if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up (Daniel 3:17, 18).

O that we would have a faith and faithfulness that is thusly produced by what God has already done. How different our worship would be! How much stronger our convictions!

In an environment hostile to the true religion and a true religion followed by so few even within its own covenant walls, Zacharias continues to serve.

So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense (Luke 1:8-10).

Persevering Worship

God's covenant people were in slavery to Rome, hovered over by a beastly king and God had not spoken to them in some four hundred years. Yet Zacharias does his priestly duty. Briefly stated, the priests had been organized into twenty-four divisions (1 Chronicles 24:1-6) and it was the responsibility of one priest (on whom the lot fell) to **"burn incense"** in the temple (the Holy Place) while the whole multitude prayed outside. This responsibility would happen once in a priest's life.¹

It is possible for ministerial activities to become rote and repetitious. But repetition need not become rote or mechanical. If hearing the pardon of sin on a Sunday morning does not bring some joy to your heart, you have probably not engaged in a very honest analysis of your own sin. If the Lord's Supper has lost its meaning (as some suggest will happen when done weekly), you may be living a life devoid of contemplating what He endured on your behalf.

Zacharias was no such feeble worshiper. He was blameless in the keeping of the ordinances before God. It must have meant a great deal to him to burn the incense. That we serve a God who hears our prayers is no casual thing. As Calvin taught:

The design of the incense was to remind believers that the sweet savour of their prayers does not ascend to heaven except through the sacrifice of the Mediator;²

And while Zacharias was doing his priestly duties, the **"whole multitude of the people was praying outside."** In similar manner, we have a group of faithful prayers who engage prior to church every Lord's Day. I am confident they wouldn't mind company.

¹ There eighteen thousand priests in Israel.

² Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). [*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*](#) (Vol. 1, p. 13). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

O Lord, I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you! ² Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice (Psalm 141:1, 2)!

Four hundred years of silence will end with a fearful encounter.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John (Luke 1:11-13).

A Fearful Encounter

Walking into a room that is supposed to be empty and finding a person, a mere person, in that room can be shocking. No doubt, Zacharias was in deep thought regarding his holy and pious duties. He sees an angel which was frightening. But the angel bids him **“Do not be afraid.”**

I don't find it terribly comforting when someone tells me not to be afraid when they're not the one I'm afraid of or they have no power to deliver me from what I might be fearing. The records in the Scriptures of people encountering God in various ways leaves them petrified. In this context, when our Lord tells us to fear not, the comfort has come from a legitimate source. And the argument can be made that if a person has received the words from God that they need not fear, that fearlessness extends to everything.

I am reminded of Shrek, when Donkey is afraid of going into the woods and Shrek reminds him that he is scarier than anything they're going to see in the forest. To fear God and be comforted by God means not fearing anything.

There is some debate as to what prayer is answered here. Some say it's the prayer for a child, which was likely part of Zacharias' history of prayer. Others say it is the prayer that generally would attend this ministry that God would deliver His people through the promised Messiah. I can't say I'm sure which prayer Gabriel is talking about, but God seems to answer both.

I read one opinion suggesting that since Zacharias and Elizabeth, were past child-bearing years, he had probably quit praying about having children. Even if he did, it's not as if God had forgotten his prayers from many years ago. We may give up praying, that doesn't mean God gives up answering.

Here we have yet another miraculous birth. We've seen similar power with Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 21), Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 25:21-34), Elkanah and Hannah (1 Samuel 1), Manoah and his wife (Judges 13). The much-repeated lesson here is that God made a promise and doesn't need help keeping it. Of course, all of these miraculous births still included a biological father. This will not be the case when we are taught of Jesus.

Everything we're reading here is preparatory. The name "John" God has commanded, means "Jehovah's gracious gift." As wonderful as all this is, it is a story unworthy to tie the sandal of the story to come-the story that John is called to herald.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, *'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,'* and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:14-17).

Things Are Going To Change

Zacharias and Elizabeth aren't the only ones who will rejoice at the birth of John. Clearly, God has a plan that will affect all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3). Things are going to change. The earth will not be the same.

The prohibition against wine and strong drink is obviously not universal. We don't see this applying to others or even Jesus (Matthew 11:18, 19). Whether or not this meant John was a Nazirite, it is difficult to say. But that his ministry is unique goes without saying.

That John will be **“filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb”** is an astonishing statement. We do see this kind of language elsewhere (Psalm 22:9; Isaiah 49:1). Three brief points:

First, John’s ministry is lifelong.

Second, those who think the unborn baby is a mere cell cluster find themselves at odds with that which God has determined to be made in His image (cell clusters are not filled with the Holy Spirit).

Third, even though the ordinary means God uses to save those outside of His covenant people is the preaching of the word, over and against a common baptistic argument, He is quite capable of pouring His Spirit upon those who have not exhibited the capacity of intellect.

What might not immediately strike the reader is the language of turning **“the children of Israel...to their God.”** If God is their God, why do they need to be turned to Him? In this respect, there is a similarity of first century Israel to the twenty-first century western church. Israel was the church of the Old Covenant. This is the church John (and Jesus) are born into.

And yet the church had become so lifeless and faithless that the very people of God, His covenant people, needed to be turned. This would be a message John would vigorously preach. In the current west, we see great similarities. The distractions of true Christian doctrine and faithfulness are numerous.

On one side, churches with rainbows (not the Noah type) have sprinkled the evangelical landscape. On the other side, churches have been seduced and reduced to political voting blocks. This is why the commandments need always be accompanied by the ordinances. Word and sacrament must prevail.

John will come **“in the spirit and power of Elijah”** to accomplish this. He will not be Elijah reincarnated. He will be endowed by God to accomplish that (and more) which was accomplished by Elijah. This is a fulfillment of a prophecy we see in the very last book of the Old Testament. We are told in Malachi 3:1 that God will send a messenger who will **“prepare the way before Me [Him] (Malachi 3:1).**

The beauty of this is foretold in the words,

But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings (Malachi 4:2).

The faithlessness is Israel, similar to the faithlessness in today's church was the source of disrupted households. Gabriel tells Zacharias that John's ministry will become a source of healing within households, turning...

... the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:17).

Of course, it will go beyond households. Those living in disobedience will have their eyes opened to see the **"wisdom of the just."** What is not said here but will be said soon enough is that this healing, like a major surgery, or a battle, will not be without casualty. In the very next chapter, we are told that Jesus is **"destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel."** Mary's own soul will be pierced (Luke 2:34, 35).

Jesus taught, in no uncertain terms, that His presence will also divide households (Luke 12:49-53). I think it can be fairly stated that John's commission to **"make ready a people prepared for the Lord"** is a call be on the right side of these judgments, this **"division"** (Luke 12:51) as Jesus will call it. We are called to be people of faith-faith in Christ.

I think it can be safely said that people did not have a casual reaction to the message of John the Baptist. Some were angry, wanted him dead and dreaded the idea of an encounter with Jesus he would present. Others were hungry to enjoy those wings of eternal healing found in Christ. It might be a valuable question for us to ask ourselves with whom do we take rank?

Questions for Study

1. Why does Luke speak of the “days of Herod”? Contrast Herod and Zacharias and Elizabeth (pages 3, 4).
2. Do you find church repetitious and mechanical? Why (page 5)?
3. How is prayer like incense (page 5)?
4. Why do you suppose people are fearful? What is the answer to overcome fear (page 6)?
5. What are some things we learn from John the Baptist being filled with the Holy Spirit from birth (pages 7, 8)?
6. How is the first century church similar to today’s church (page 8)?
7. What does it mean to be “prepared for the Lord” (pages 7, 8)?