

# Unspeakable Joy (Luke 1:5-25)

**Context:** Similar to other biblical writers, Luke establishes the historical background (Isa. 1:1; Jer. 1:2-3; Hos. 1:1; Amos 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Zeph. 1:1) by identifying Herod as the “king” of Judea (40-4B.C.). While he was responsible for rebuilding the temple, he also erected temples in honor of pagan gods.

## 1. Dedication (v.5-7)

- Luke’s account begins by identifying a priestly family in the order of Abijah and Aaron (v.5). The husband, Zechariah, means “God has remembered again.”
- There is a double emphasis on their moral excellence through repetition (v.6), as they are described as being righteous before God, obedient to the statutes and commands of the Lord.
- This couple is barren. We are unaware how long they have been barren, but they are advanced in age, beyond the child rearing years (v.7).
- One of the covenantal curses for disobedience is barrenness and sterility (Deut. 4:40; 28:4, 11, 15-18). Barrenness was seen as divine punishment for breaking God’s covenantal stipulations. Culturally, barrenness brought stigma and shame.
- Luke is designating a type-scene in the story of Abraham and Sarai (Gen. 11:30; 16:1, 10-11; 17:15-17 18:11), Elkanah and Hannah (1 Sam. 1:1-2), Isaac and Rebecca (Gen 25:21; 30:1) and Samson’s mother (Judg. 13:2).
- Whenever Scripture pronounces a woman barren, God will later give a son for whom she longed (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah, etc.).
- Despite Zechariah and Elizabeth’s moral integrity and exemplary commitment to the Lord, their obedience has gone unrewarded. These two individuals lived in ceremonial, and moral conscientiousness when few Israelites cared to, yet were not granted any children (Psalm 127:3).
- They nobly accepted their lot in life and set no conditions for obedience. Even in great disappointment and perplexity, they committed their ways to the Lord.

## 2. Visitation (v. 8-12)

- Zechariah was from the priestly division of Abijah, who was the eighth class (1 Chron. 24). These priests would have served during all the major festivals (Passover, Pentecost, Day of Atonement, and Feast of Booths), along with regular service in the temple. These priestly services included officiating worship, burning sacrifices, burning incense, celebrating liturgy, having confessions, accepting sacrifices and offerings, and the daily butchering of animals.
- In total, there were between 18-24,000 priests. Each class (order) of priests would be selected through the casting of lots as to where and when they would serve.
- The lot fell on the eighth order of Abijah (1,000 priests), and then separate lots for service in various locations. Not every priest was able to serve in every priestly capacity. The lot fell on Zechariah to carry out the priestly duty to burn incense. This was a “once in a lifetime” opportunity, as not all priests would have been selected.
- The altar of incense was twenty inches square and forty inches high, covered by gold, and placed in the holy place, directly before the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. Incense was burned morning and afternoon (Ex. 30:34-38).
- While several priests would have served in this ceremony with Zechariah, he alone would have taken the coals into the holy place from the altar of burnt offering. As the incense was burning, he would fall prostrate. The incense signified prayer, which was a sweet smelling offering to the Lord. Afterward, he would pronounce an Aaronic blessing to the people who were praying in the court of the temple (Num. 6:24-26).

- An angel appeared to Zechariah during the hour of incense. This angel, later identified as Gabriel, stood to the right side of the altar of incense.
- While the altar symbolized the presence of God, the right side is the station of authority. Gabriel is standing on the right side, a place of exaltation. This does not symbolize his status, but the significance of his announcement.

## 3. Jubilation (v.13-17)

- Zechariah’s response to this appearance was fear (v.12).
- His prayer has been answered (v.13). Is this his prayer for a child, or a prayer for the nation of Israel to return to the Lord through the coming of the Messiah? Both.
- Elizabeth will become pregnant and give birth to a son whose name will be John. He will be “great” in five ways:
  - A. He will refuse the wine of fermented drink (not a Nazarite vow, Numb. 6).
  - B. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from the womb (v.15).
  - C. He will bring back (“return”) Israelites to the Lord their God (v.16).
  - D. He will go in the spirit and power of Elijah (v.17): while he will not possess the fulness of Elijah’s miracles, he will have his character, strength, and fortitude. John is going to call every generation to repentance and will prepare the soil of the nation to receive the seed of the gospel.

## 4. Consternation (v.18-23)

- Zechariah responds to this great news with doubt (v.18) by requesting a sign.
- In the Old Testament, requesting a sign was not an act of unbelief that would merit chastisement, as Abraham (Gen. 15:2), Moses (Ex. 4:1), Gideon (Judg. 6:36-40), Samuel (1 Sam. 10:2) and Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 20:8) all requested signs and were not rebuked for it.
- In the New Testament, requesting a sign is mostly regarded as an act of unbelief (Matt. 12:39, 16:4; Mark 8:11-13; Luke 11:16; Acts 13:11; 1 Cor. 1:22). The greater the degree of revelation over God’s redemptive timeline, the greater the consequences of unbelief.
- The temple had an opening at the top, where the smoke from the altar of incense would escape. As it exited the temple, that smoke would be a sign to the pious Jews in the courtyard to pray for the nation in anticipation of the coming Messiah. They would be praying until the priest would show himself from the altar and offer a blessing to them.
- Finally, Zechariah visits the praying people, yet is unable to say anything. God chastised him for unbelief, and consequently, he was unable to bless the people. While he made many attempts to speak to the people, they were unable to understand him (v.21-23).
- His muteness, presumably for nine months, was a habitual reminder of both the mercy of God and the severity of unbelief.

## 5. Consecration (v.24-25)

- Elizabeth, upon conception, retreated from the public eye for two reasons: she wanted to commit her ways to the Lord in the early days of pregnancy, and second, to avoid the public doubt of her pregnancy until it could be proven, as she was advanced in years.
- There are two responses to the announcement of good news. Zechariah, who hesitated, and Elizabeth, who believed.
- Elizabeth is the model of faith, not Zechariah. Her response echoes Hannah’s (1 Sam. 1:19-20), Sarah’s (Gen 21:6), and Rachel’s (Gen. 30:22-23). God has taken away her disgrace.
- Luke begins his narration by identifying an obscure priestly family through whom the Lord will bless tremendously. Since John the Baptist is the greatest man who has ever lived (Luke 7:28), it would be fitting for this forerunner to be introduced. Luke is not just focused on the political and historical context, but the redemptive aspect as well.