

The Annunciation Of John

Luke 1:5-25

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The Gospel of Luke is the Gospel of praise and prayer. So it is only fitting that Luke should open this beautiful book with the scene in the temple at the hour of prayer and with the divine promise of the birth of the forerunner of the Messiah that fills our hearts with wonder and praise. So this book opens in the temple and it will close on the Mount of Olives with Christ's Ascension.

The annunciation by the angel Gabriel to Zacharias the priest concerning the birth of John the Baptist is the opening scene of the Gospel of Luke. Only Luke records what is written in chapters 1 and 2. This information is found nowhere else in the Bible.

Luke, the historian, gives us the time and setting of this opening scene. Verse 5 says, "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea..." This king was known as Herod the Great. There was a whole line of Herods—there also was Herod Antipas, Herod Agrippa, Herod Agrippa the Second, and they go all the way into the book of Acts. So Herod the Great was the first of several rulers from the Herodian dynasty. He ruled from 40 to 4 BC. He was an Idumaeon, which means he was a descendant of Esau, who was an enemy of Israel. The Edomites were enemies of Israel.

Herod the Great was wicked, cunning and ruthless. He was a vassal of Rome and ruled the Jews with tyranny and savagery. He murdered anyone who got close to him, fearing they would take his power and position away. His own sons were murdered. He had 10 wives and he murdered most of them. He was the one who murdered the children of Bethlehem, who were two years old and younger, when Christ was born. He also was a great builder. He built the temple Zacharias was serving in from our text, and he refurbished Zerubbabel's temple. He built the palace in the desert. And he built the Masada fortress.

But note, as a historian, Luke doesn't say, "A long time ago in a land far, far away lived a certain king." This isn't a fairy tale; this is history. This was a very dark and difficult time for Israel, but now the light was beginning to dawn. No matter how dark the world gets, God always has His people, His purpose and His plan. So we see a very dark time for the nation of Israel at the time of Luke, but the light was beginning to dawn. God's people, purpose and plan would be brought to pass the way God intended.

Have you ever seen America darker than it is now, spiritually speaking? I haven't. So I believe that the stage is set for the coming of Messiah. It is always the darkest before the dawn. We live in a very dark time, but the Lord Jesus promised to come again to establish His kingdom, and there will be righteousness on earth.

Our story in Luke today unfolds in three movements. The first is the supernatural appearance, Luke 1:5-12; the second is the prophetic utterance, Luke 1:13-17; and the third is the

unbelieving silence, Luke 1:18-25.

The first movement is the supernatural appearance, verses 5-12. Luke says, "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea..." The word "Judea" comes from "Judah," which means "praise." The nation of Israel was divided into Judah in the south and Samaria in the north. "... a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years."

"So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him..."—this is the supernatural appearance—"...standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him."

There are two individuals named in verse 5 who introduce this story. They are Zacharias, the priest, who was "of the division of Abijah," and his wife, Elizabeth, who "was of the daughters of Aaron." Their names are significant. The name Zacharias means "God has remembered," and the name Elizabeth means "God is my oath." And when you put them together, it means "God has made an oath, and God remembers His promise." Notice that "They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord."

Now what does it mean "of the division of Abijah"? There were so many priests at that time that they put them into 24 different groups or divisions. Each division served in the temple twice a year for one week each time. And they drew lots to see what assignment each priest was given. So this was one of the two weeks of the year that Abijah had their assignment, and the lot fell on Zacharias to burn incense in the temple before the curtain of the Lord in the holy place. This is the setting of the supernatural appearance.

There are three sections to verses 5-12. The first section is verses 5-7, where we see the people in this story. Zacharias and Elizabeth were both righteous, but they suffered in that Elizabeth had no child, verse 7, because "Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years." The lesson I want to drive home is that Zacharias and Elizabeth were both righteous, but they suffered the stigma of Elizabeth being childless. This was a great reproach upon women at that time.

The righteous do suffer. You may not be glad to hear that, but being a righteous person does not immune you from the sorrows, suffering and trials of life. And when it says, "They were both righteous before God" doesn't mean they were perfect or sinless; it means they were pious, religious, gave themselves to every jot and tittle of the law and devoted to God. Their hearts were right before God. They loved the Lord.

J.C. Ryle said, "The grace of God exempts no one from trouble." Have you found that to be true? Sometimes you get the idea that you pray, you read your Bible, you go to church, you even go on Wednesday to church, so you should be given some credit for that. But you lost your job, or you lost your spouse and are widowed, or you've been diagnosed with cancer or have some other disease. Nowhere in the Bible are we promised to be excluded from the sorrows and sufferings of this world.

One of the reasons why is that although we are forgiven of our sins and born again and going to heaven, we still live in an unredeemed body. We haven't been glorified yet, so it still suffers from sickness and death. And we still live in an unredeemed world, where there are wars, famines, pestilence, earthquakes and all the troubles we endure. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world," John 16:33. We're not of this world; this world is not our home. But we will be subject to disease and sickness and death. Yet we know that God is in control, and God has a purpose and a plan.

Another thought is that though Zacharias and Elizabeth were both righteous and suffered, they were still serving God. I like that. Sometimes people say, "Well, I'm not going to go to church anymore. I'm not going to read my Bible anymore. What good does it do me?! Why should I live for the Lord?!" But Zacharias was still doing his priestly duties at his post in the temple. And Elizabeth was still serving the Lord, she still loved the Lord and she still followed the Lord.

When Job went through his trials, his wife told him, "Curse God and die!" Job 2:9. Everyone needs an encouraging wife at a time like that. But Job said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him," Job 13:15. I like that. And we should have the same faith to trust God, no matter what comes into our life.

So Zacharias and Elizabeth had a mutual commitment to God. Verse 6 says, "They were both righteous before God." They both loved God and served God together in their marriage. It's so important that husband and wife are both on the same page when it comes to serving the Lord.

The trial they experienced was part of God's plan. Someone said, "Our disappointments are God's appointments." Elizabeth's barrenness was God's purpose; to bring them to a place where He wanted them to be so that in God's time, He would answer their prayer and bring Messiah's forerunner on the scene. They would have the greatest son born of women, second only to Jesus Christ. Jesus would say about their son, John, "Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist," Matthew 11:11. So God had a great plan in store for this old couple. They were well advanced in years and barren, but they were still godly and served the Lord. William Graham Scroggie said, "On the heart of their hearts lay the ashes of dead hopes, but they were soon to be rekindled again in joy and parenthood."

In verses 8-10 we see the second section of verses 5-12. We see the occasion of the appearance. "So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division...." So Zacharias was serving in the temple in the holy place. He wasn't in the holy of holies. There was a dividing curtain between it and the holy of holies. In the holy place, there

would be the altar or table of bread; the menorah, which is the seven-branch candle stand; and before the curtain was the altar of incense, where was burned incense as prayers to God.

Verse 9, "...according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord." A priest may never have been given this privilege of lighting the incense and praying for the people. It would only be given to a priest once in a lifetime, and not all priests were given this opportunity. So this was God's providence in bringing Zacharias, this aged priest, to this blessed opportunity of doing this service in the temple.

Verse 10, "And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense." The Bible doesn't tell us at what time the incense was being burned. The incense was burned in the morning and in the afternoon. But the priest was praying, the people were praying and that's when God would come in His power and bring a glorious vision.

The third section is the supernatural encounter, in verses 11-12. "Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him." While Zacharias was in the temple, during his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity when he would only be there for a few minutes lighting the incense, an angel of the Lord appeared at the right side of the altar. This angel's name was Gabriel, as we find out in verse 19. "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God." It is the same Gabriel who was sent by God to Daniel to give him the revelation of the 70 weeks concerning the nation of Israel.

This detail Luke gives is that the angel stood on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled and fearful. In the Jewish mind, when you saw an angel, it meant you would die. When they saw an angel, it meant the judgment of God was coming. God is holy and His angels are holy. I'm a sinner, so I'm going to be judged by God. So Zacharias was freaking out, trembling and afraid.

I remember when I was a young Christian, I was praying on a mountain one time, and I had been reading about angels appearing to people. I foolishly prayed, "God, send me an angel! God, send me an angel! God, I want to see an angel!" The minute I prayed that I heard a rustling in the bush behind me. I totally freaked out. I almost died and went to heaven. I almost saw the Lord instead of an angel! Then this big lizard came out of the bush. "Oh, thank you, Lord! Never mind, Lord! I don't want to see an angel." If I'm afraid of a lizard, I don't want to see an angel!

Our text is the break from the 400 years of silence. Luke's Gospel starts earlier than any other Gospel, except for the Gospel of John, which goes back to the eternality of Christ in John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." But as far as history is concerned, Luke goes back to the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Messiah. This break is between Malachi in the Old Testament and this appearance of Gabriel to Zacharias. Bible students call it "the 400 silent years." That doesn't mean that God didn't work or do anything; it means God didn't give any revelation, didn't send

any prophets during those 400 years.

So we have this wicked king, Herod the Great; we have a very dark, difficult period of time spiritually and morally; and the people of Israel had become very formal in their worship of God, because you had the Pharisees, the Sadducees and Herodians. Yet God sends His messenger, John the Baptist, and breaks 400 years of silence.

As I look around the world today, I think, How long, O Lord, before You come?! How long before You show Yourself?! How long before You come to reign in righteousness?! But God's timing is perfect.

And God always keeps His promises. There is a promise in Malachi 3:1, the last book of the Old Testament, which says, "Behold, I send My messenger..."—who is John the Baptist—"... and he will prepare the way before Me." So Malachi had prophesied that before the Messiah would come, He would send the forerunner, a messenger, to "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord," Luke 1:17. So this is the fulfillment of God's prophetic words to the nation of Israel. God faithfully keeps His promises, so we must keep praying and faithfully serve the Lord, no matter how dark and difficult the times may get.

The second movement of our story is the prophetic utterance, in verses 13-17. The angel shows up, Zacharias is freaking out and the angel gives his message to Zacharias about the birth of his son. "But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias...'—the angel calms his fears—"...for your prayer is heard..."—God always hears our prayers—"...and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John." That's a beautiful name. The name John means "God is gracious" or "God has shown favor."

Verse 14, "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." Nationally and even today we rejoice at John's birth. "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord..."—speaking of his character—"...and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 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."

In this movement, the prophetic utterance, there are three sections. The first section is in verses 13-14, where we see that John is promised. What does it mean by "Your prayer is heard"? When Zacharias was burning the incense in the temple, he no doubt was praying. But it doesn't tell us what he was praying. He probably was praying one of the Aaronic prayers of the Old Testament; he was praying for the nation of Israel, for the coming of Messiah. But perhaps he had long ago stopped praying for a son, because he and Elizabeth were so advanced in years. When you're over the hill, you're not praying for children anymore. You're praying that you can survive each day. So Zacharias probably stopped praying for what he had prayed for years—for a son—and he assumed that God has said "No" to his prayer.

But the angel said, "Your prayer is heard." And God always hears your prayers. But sometimes God doesn't answer because of sin in our life. "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear," Isaiah 59:2. So you need to confess your sin. Sometimes disobedience is the cause. If a husband isn't "giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel," your marriage relationship and your prayers can be hindered. Sometimes God delays and sometimes God denies. Sometimes God defers our prayers. But God always hears them.

And God's delays are not God's denials, verse 13. "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John." My guess is that Zacharias had long ago stopped praying for a son, but God had not forgotten. Psalm 30:5 says, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." And notice verse 14 of our text says, "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." J.C. Ryle said, "No child causes such great joy as those who have the grace of God upon them." So this child will be used by God to bring great joy.

The second section is the character of John, described in verse 15. "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord." That's true greatness. It's not enough to be great in the sight of people. When Samuel the prophet went down to the house of Jesse to find a king for the nation of Israel, Jesse brought out his tall, handsome, strong and athletic sons to Samuel. But God told Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature....For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart," 1 Samuel 16:7. So Samuel asked if Jesse had any other boys in his family. Then David was brought before Samuel. He had been out watching the sheep. And when David, a little, red-haired, freckle-faced boy came before Samuel, the Lord told Samuel to anoint David, "a man after [God's] own heart," 1 Samuel 13:14. So true greatness is in the eyes of the Lord. That's what we want: to be great in God's eyes.

Every Christian should be motivated by the desire to one day hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant....Enter into the joy of your lord," Matthew 25:21. We may not have the praises of men, but we want the praises and approval of God. That is true greatness.

Then John's ministry, the third section, is described in verses 16-17. "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God." That's true ministry. "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." That quote was from Malachi 4:5-6, which says, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

Malachi 4:5-6 was partially fulfilled in John the Baptist, when he came in "the spirit and power of Elijah," but he was not Elijah. But before the Lord comes back in the Second Coming, I believe Elijah will be one of the two witnesses in the book of Revelation; that he will come back to

preach before the Lord returns at the Second Coming, during the time of Jacob's trouble or the tribulation. As Elijah came in spirit and in power, so did John the Baptist.

And he shall turn many people to the Lord and "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." So John was "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord,'" Isaiah 40:3. "The Lord" here is talking about Jesus. John turns people to God the Father, and he does it in the power of the Spirit, which is God the Holy Spirit. So we have the Triune God mentioned here. So John would turn people to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, the threefold facet of John's ministry on earth.

Now the third and last movement of our text, the unbelieving silence, is found in verses 18-25. The angel had told Zacharias that his wife was going to have a son, and he will name his son John. Verse 18, "And Zacharias said to the angel, 'How shall I know this?'" This is a question mingled with objection. He was basically asking, "How could this possibly happen?"

Continuing, "'For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.' And the angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.'" I identify with Zacharias; I can be dumb like him. Don't be dumb. "'But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place...'—why?—'...because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.'"

Verse 21, "And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless." He was trying to use sign language. "So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed..."—at the end of that week—"...that he departed to his own house. Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived..."—this is a miracle—"...and she hid herself five months, saying, 'Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.'"

So we see in verses 18-20 the unbelieving priest. But Zacharias had many reasons to believe what the angel said to him. First, he knew the Scriptures. The same thing is true of us. God takes unbelief seriously. Zacharias knew that God had done miracles like this before. He knew the story of Sarah, Genesis 16; the story of Rebekah, Genesis 25; the story of Rachael, Genesis 30; the story of Hannah—my favorite—in which she prayed and God gave her a son, who she dedicated to the Lord. So Zacharias knew the Scriptures and should have believed the angel.

Second, Zacharias had no doubt prayed for a son. It's funny that many times we pray and pray, and when nothing happens, we get discouraged and "grow weary while doing good" and we "lose heart," Galatians 6:9. Then maybe down the road months or years later, God answers our prayer, but we forgot we even prayed. We weren't praying any longer or believing any longer, but God does answer our prayers.

James 1:5-7 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord." So we need to ask in faith.

But sometimes our faith grows weary and we give up. Yet God still answers our prayers. In Acts 12, there is the story of Peter, who was in prison, and the church was gathered in a prayer meeting praying for Peter. One of the other apostles had just been murdered with a sword, and now Peter was in prison and they were worried. So they were praying for Peter.

And God answered their prayers; He sent an angel, who opened the prison doors, woke up Peter and took him out of the prison. So Peter ran to the prayer meeting and knocked on the door. A girl by the name of Rhoda came to the gate. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so glad that she didn't open it for Peter but ran back inside to tell the others he was there. She freaked out. But they thought she was crazy. "That can't be Peter; we're praying for him. Don't interrupt us right now! O Lord, just release Peter." When Rhoda finally opened the door and Peter came in, they were surprised that God had answered their prayers. Isn't it funny how God answers our prayers many times when we are faithless or we forget to pray?

Another reason why Zacharias should have believed is because he was told by an angel. When an angel shows up and tells you something, you should believe it, unless it's contrary to the Word of God. God takes unbelief very serious, verse 20. "But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time." Zacharias could not speak for nine months. Some people think that would be a blessing.

There is also a hint that he could not hear, because when they wanted to name the baby Zacharias Jr., he asked for a writing tablet and wrote on it that the baby was to be named John, Luke 1:63. They had to use sign language to get Zacharias to understand. So it was possible he also lost his hearing, as well as his ability to speak. Unbelief is a thief that robs us of being able to enjoy the blessings of the Lord. It silences us, but faith opens our mouth where we can learn to praise and worship the Lord.

A lot of Christians are on their way to heaven, but they're not having heaven on the way. D.L. Moody said, "A little faith will take your soul to heaven, but a lot of faith will bring heaven to your soul." And a lot of Christians aren't happy; they don't have peace, joy and contentment. They're not living by faith. They're full of unbelief. They're not trusting the Lord. They're freaking out. They're worried and fretting.

Maybe you're fretting about your job or your health or fretting over your marriage. Maybe you're fretting over your children. Maybe some recent medical diagnosis a doctor has given you is making you freak out, instead of resting in the Lord and trusting Him. The Bible says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths," Proverbs 3:5-6. So they're on their way to

heaven, but they're not experiencing God's peace, joy and rest as we journey here on earth. God takes unbelief seriously.

And the people were waiting outside all this time, verses 21-22. What a picture this is. Whenever the priest would come out of the temple from burning the incense, he would come out quickly and pronounce the blessing on the people. "The Lord bless thee and keep thee, the Lord make His face to shine upon thee, the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace." That's the Aaronic blessing. So the people were waiting for the blessing, but no blessing was coming forth; Zacharias was in the temple too long. Maybe the people were thinking, He's old and can't see to find his way out. Maybe he fell. "And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless." How do you convey in sign language, "I saw an angel"?

Then Zacharias left for home, and the promise was fulfilled, verses 23-25. "So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house." He probably lived outside of Jerusalem. "Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived." God always keeps His promises. This is a miracle. God did it before, and He can do it again. Nothing is too hard for God. "...and she hid herself five months." We don't know why, but at her age if she went around saying that she was going to have a baby, they would want to institutionalize her. So she hid herself until she would be showing that she was pregnant. People would realize that it was a miracle. Then she said, "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

As I said, in that time and culture, a Jewish wife wanted to be a mother. And it was a great reproach not to have children. But God had removed this reproach from Elizabeth.

Now I want to give you four takeaway lessons from this story. Number one, God always keeps His promises. Whatever God promises, God will bring it to pass. Someone said, "Our impossibilities set the stage for God to do His best work." Jeremiah 32:17 says, "There is nothing too hard for [the Lord]." Keep trusting the Lord.

Number two, God's delays are not His denials. As you wait on God, trust in Him; His ways and His timing are perfect. One of the advantages of being "well advanced in years" is that you have walked with the Lord long enough to see that His timing is always impeccable. He doesn't keep my time schedule, He doesn't do it necessarily the way I like or want, but I've discovered His ways are perfect. So you can learn to trust God.

Number three, we learned that when God intervenes, His surprises are always for His glory and for our ultimate good. When God comes to visit us, when God shows up, when God comes into our dark, difficult circumstances, God always surprises us with His glory, and He uses it for our good. In Romans 8:28, Paul says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

Number four, God takes unbelief seriously. Unbelief kept Israel from the Promised Land, and it keeps you from being blessed. Unbelief will keep you from experiencing heaven right now in your soul. You're going to heaven, but if you're living in fear, in unbelief, it keeps you from enjoying heaven right now.

Years ago, I was on a flight, and there was a woman sitting in the seat right in front of me. She was screaming and yelling and gripping the seat in front of her and shaking it. I'm glad I wasn't in that seat. She was afraid to fly. I don't know how they got her on the plane. She was freakin' out. That poor woman! She wasn't enjoying the flight. But she was going to get there. She was going to land and get off the plane.

And at the same time, she was screaming and yelling, standing in the aisle and looking up at her was this little boy with a cowboy hat on eating a cookie. He was just enjoying his cookie and looking at her while she was screaming. The plane landed and everyone got off. We all arrived safely. One enjoyed the ride eating his cookie. The other one freaked out the whole way.

I thought, that's so typical of Christians. We're all going to go to heaven. We're all going to arrive there. Some will have enjoyed the ride, eating a cookie on the way, but others will freak out and scream and yell the whole way to heaven. So we need to learn to trust the Lord.

"Most assuredly I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has eternal life, and has passed from death into life," John 5:24. And John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him..."—there's faith—"...should not perish but have everlasting life." God takes unbelief very seriously. So trust God for salvation, and trust Him to take care of you on your journey to heaven.