

December 4, 2022

“Zechariah Hears from God”  
Lesson 1 of Unit

Luke 1:8-20

**Intro**

Our winter quarter begins with today's lesson, and is called “From Darkness to Light”. The first lesson in this study deals with God's preparations for calling His people from darkness into light. Our passage comes from Luke's account of Jesus' birth. Luke's account does two things Matthew's doesn't: it interweaves the story of Jesus' birth with the birth of His cousin John the Baptist, and Luke's account highlights worship given by people to God for these circumstances.

Zechariah was a priest in the division of Abijah (vs. 5). The priests came from Aaron's line, and became so numerous that David organized them into 24 divisions of service. Even after exile, these divisions appear to have continued into the New Testament times. The divisions served in the temple roughly 2 nonconsecutive weeks each year.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth (also a descendant of Aaron), were “righteous in the sight of God” and obeyed His commandments (vs. 6). They had no children, partly due to their age and partly because Elizabeth was barren.

**Read Luke 1:8-20**

1. vs. 8: As was noted above, there were divisions of priests who served at assigned times  
     Zechariah's division was “on duty” at the time of the event about to take place  
     A priest doing service before God is the background for what is about to happen
  
2. vs. 9: One of the duties of priests was to burn incense  
     This was done in the outer chamber, the sanctuary, of the temple  
     In the sanctuary there was an altar for the burning of incense  
         The incense going up represented the people's prayers going up to God  
  
     Because there were many priests, they drew lots to see who would burn the incense  
     This was seen as a way of determining God's will in a situation  
         See Proverbs 16:33 and Acts 1:21-26 for other examples of this  
     The priest who did this would never do it again; it was a once-in-a-lifetime role  
     Zechariah must have been aware of the specialness of this opportunity  
         He was a godly man getting to do a most holy task
  
3. vs. 10: There were many worshippers there, praying  
     They are outside the inner sanctuary, at the time when the incense was burned  
     Their prayers are not specifically stated in this verse  
         No doubt one prayer would have been voiced by several / many  
         God's restoration of Israel and freedom from Roman occupation

4. vs. 11: As Zechariah is performing his duties, an angel appears.

The word “appears” is frequently used to show a divine presence

The word has this same meaning in vs. 11

We are specifically told that this is “an angel of the Lord”

5. vs. 12: Zechariah’s reaction is one we can all identify with—he was “gripped with fear”

Fear here means both a sense of deep respect/honor and sheer terror

God’s representatives have been in His presence

Their very appearance and nature carry the weight of God’s holiness

Though Zechariah is a godly man, being in God’s presence is overwhelming

6. vs. 13: The angel’s first words are to calm and reassure Zechariah

Zechariah is not in trouble!

The angel then says that Zechariah’s prayer has been heard

The implication is that it will also be answered

The prayer being answered is not specifically mentioned

Because of what follows, it seems likely the prayer was for a child

The angel says that Elizabeth will have a child, and his name is to be John

God directing the naming of a child shows that child will be great for God

See Gen. 16:11, I Kings 13:2, Is. 7:14

7. vs. 14: John will be a cause of rejoicing

His parents will finally have a child, a joy and a delight to the parents

John will bring rejoicing to many because of what he will do

He will prepare people for the Messiah’s coming

He will declare God’s plan to them

8. vs. 15: Three amazing things are said about John even before he is born

1) “He will be great in the sight of the Lord”

John’s faithful ministry of preparation earns him this praise

Jesus said in Luke 7:28, “Among those born of women there is no one greater than John.”

2) “He is never to take wine or other fermented drink”

The Law of Moses has two groups who vow abstaining from alcohol

Priests during their service to God (Lev. 10:8-11)

The Nazarite vow (Num. 6:1-3)

John doesn’t become a priest, and Scripture doesn’t show him taking the vow

John’s practice of self-denial would have been noted by others

It would have marked him as devoting himself to God’s service

3) “He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born”

This is characteristic of God’s prophets in the Old Testament

Isaiah 61:1, Ezekiel 11:5, Micah 3:8

It’s amazing that this filling happens when he’s still in the womb!

He “leaped for joy” in the womb when in the presence of the unborn Jesus

9. vs. 16: The angel now begins to describe what John will do in his ministry  
“He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God”  
He will call the people back to God, indicating they have strayed from Him  
He tells then in Luke 3 that being from Abraham doesn’t indicate true repentance
10. vs. 17: The angel says John will go in the “spirit and power of Elijah”  
Elijah’s message was also one of repentance from unfaithfulness to God  
John will do the same, with reconciliation as a benefit  
“To turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous”  
Those who listen and repent will experience forgiveness and reconciliation  
John’s main purpose is again clearly stated by the angel:  
“to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”
11. vs. 18: Zechariah asks a logical question to most of us: “How can I be sure of this?”  
In the OT, it was common to ask for a sign as verification  
To ask was either seen in a positive or neutral way  
In the NT, asking for a sign is generally seen in a negative light  
Certainly to Zechariah, the angel’s promises appear impossible to occur  
To accept on faith that two older people will have a child was a big stretch
12. vs. 19: The angel reveals himself to be Gabriel  
This same angel appeared to Daniel, helping to interpret the visions  
Gabriel also appeared to Mary to tell her she would soon bear God’s Son  
The contrast between the two recipients of the message is notable  
Lowly Mary accepts the message with faith, humility and rejoicing  
Learned Zechariah responds with doubt and skepticism  
There are certainly shades in the degree of these responses by both  
However, the bottom line is Mary was open to God’s message; Zechariah was too guarded
13. vs. 20: Zechariah got his requested sign, but not in the way he wanted or expected  
He is silenced until the child is born  
This is a sign of God’s power, and “proof” that the message was from God  
God also shows His mercy  
Zechariah is not mute forever, but only “until the day this happens”

Application: This passage shows us that God calls the ordinary, the unassuming, the seemingly ill-equipped, to do His work. Most of us don’t see ourselves as similar or equal to the “heroes of the faith” we see in the Bible. But they were ordinary, faulty people, just like us. Which means that God can work through us as well, and that He wants to if we are open to letting Him do so.

Prayer: Father God, we are sorry that we sometimes doubt Your word and Your work, and that You would even want to choose us. Strengthen our faith so we can be ready when You call us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.