

The Forerunner of the Savior

Luke 1:8-20

SS Lesson for 12/18/2016

Devotional Scripture: John 1:19-28

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Believe without knowing because belief should be by faith not by sight (2 Cor 5:7)
Believe without knowing because belief should be looking toward the unseen, not the seen (2 Cor 4:18)
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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson reviews God's work in Zacharias's life in bringing about **The Forerunner of the Savior**. The **study's aim** is to realize that God will work in much the same way to help us understand and receive His Word. The **study's application** is to learn to respond to God's Word, in faith quickly and consistently.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Luke 1:13-14

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."

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

Luke arranged the material in this section and the following sections in a form which compared John's birth and maturation with Jesus' birth and maturation. In both cases the parents were introduced (vv. 5-7 and 26-27), an angel appeared (vv. 8-23 and 28-30), a sign was given (vv. 18-20 and 34-38), and a woman who had no children became pregnant (vv. 24-25 and 42).

1:5-7. John's parents were a **priest named Zechariah and Elizabeth, who was also a descendant of Aaron**. John therefore was by lineage one who was to become a priest. His parents lived when **Herod the Great** ruled as **king of Judea**, from 37 to 4 B.C. (See chart on the Herods.) They were godly people, or **upright** (*dikaioi*, "righteous"), **observing all the Lord's commandments**. They were **both well along in years** and thus had no prospect of children. This fact was a constant embarrassment to Elizabeth as is evident from her statement later on (v. 25). God's allowing a barren woman to have children occurred several times in the Old Testament (e.g., the mothers of Isaac, Samson, and Samuel).

1:8-9. Luke recorded that **Zechariah's division was on duty**. This division was one of 24 groups of priests, drawn up in David's time (1 Chron. 24:7-18). The priests in each division were on duty twice a year for a week at a time. Zechariah was of the division of Abijah (Luke 1:5; cf. 1 Chron. 24:10). Zechariah **was chosen by lot** (*elache*) to be the **priest** who offered the **incense**. Because of the large number of priests this would be the only time in Zechariah's life when he was allowed to perform this task. As elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Es. 3:7), the sovereignty of God is stressed even in matters which seem like chance, as in the casting of a lot.

1:10-11. While Zechariah was inside at the altar of **incense**, a crowd gathered to pray. The incense for which Zechariah was responsible symbolized the prayers of the entire nation. At that particular moment Zechariah was thus the focal point of the entire Jewish nation. At that unique moment in Zechariah's life **an angel of the Lord appeared... standing** where Zechariah was praying beside **the altar of incense**.

1:12-13. The purpose of the appearance of the **angel** of the Lord was to announce the birth of **a son to Zechariah and Elizabeth**. Zechariah **was gripped with fear** (lit., "fear fell on him"). In Luke, many people responded with fear or awe (*phobos*) when confronted with mighty acts of God (cf. 1:30, 65; 2:9-10; 5:10, 26; 7:16; 8:25, 37, 50; 9:34, 45; 12:4-5, 32; 21:26; cf. 23:40). Because of the angel's response, **Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard**, it may be inferred that Zechariah was praying for a son, or possibly even for the coming of the Messiah and that the birth of John would be a partial answer to his prayer. The angel told Zechariah what to name his son. This was also the case when the angel appeared to Mary (1:31).

1:14-17. The angel not only gave the name of the son, but also detailed six aspects of John's character.

1. **He will be a joy and delight to you** (v. 14). Luke frequently used the word "joy" in his accounts in Luke and Acts, often linking it closely with salvation. An illustration of this is in Luke 15, where three times joy and rejoicing came because something lost had been found, a picture of salvation. And John the Baptist's ministry brought joy to the Israelites who believed his message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3:3).

2. **He will be great in the sight of the Lord**. The expression "in the sight of" (*enōpion*) is characteristic of Luke. Though it appears 35 times in Luke and Acts, it is used only one other time in the other Gospels (John 20:30).

3. **He is never to take wine or other fermented drink.** Later John voluntarily took on himself a Nazirite vow, refusing to drink anything fermented (Num. 6:1-21). Luke did not specifically state that John would fulfill all aspects of the Nazirite vow. Instead, John would avoid taking any wine perhaps to support his contention that his message was urgent. Another way he emphasized the urgency of his message was to dress, act, and eat like Elijah the prophet (cf. Matt. 3:4; 2 Kings 1:8).

4. **He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.** “From birth” is literally “from his mother’s womb.” When Mary visited Elizabeth before John was born, the baby leaped in her womb. The ministry of the Holy Spirit was important to Luke, and he often went to great length to show His empowering and enabling ministry. Both of John’s parents were filled with the Spirit (Luke 1:41, 67).

5. **Many of the people of Israel would he bring back to... God.** Crowds of Israelites did turn to the Lord through John’s ministry (Matt. 3:5-6; Mark 1:4-5).

6. **He will go on before the Lord.** John the Baptist was the Lord’s forerunner, announcing His coming **in the spirit and power of Elijah.** Luke here referred to two passages in Malachi which speak of messengers: a messenger was to be sent to clear the way before the Lord (Mal. 3:1), and Elijah’s return was promised before the day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5-6) to restore **the hearts of the fathers to their children.** Zechariah apparently understood that the angel was identifying John the Baptist with the messenger in Malachi 3:1, for in his song of praise he noted that John would “go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him” (Luke 1:76; cf. 3:4-6). Jesus affirmed that John was the fulfillment of Malachi 3:1 (Matt. 11:10) and stated that John *would have* fulfilled Malachi 4:5-6 if the people had accepted his message (Matt. 11:14).

1:18-20. Zechariah had doubts that such a thing could take place because both he and Elizabeth were **old.** But **the angel,** identifying himself as **Gabriel,** reassured Zechariah that this **good news** was from the Lord. When Gabriel appeared twice to Daniel (Dan. 8:16; 9:21), both times he gave Daniel instruction and understanding. He did the same here with Zechariah, as can be inferred from the song of praise and trust which Zechariah uttered later (Luke 1:67-79). Zechariah’s inability **to speak** till the fulfillment of Gabriel’s message was, to some degree, a punishment for his unbelief. But it was also a sign. A sign in the Old Testament was often associated with a confirming observable phenomenon which accompanied a word of prophecy. For the next nine months Zechariah’s attempts to speak would prove the reality of Gabriel’s message.

1:21-23. When **Zechariah** finally **came out of the temple,** he was able to make the waiting **people** realize that **he had seen a vision.** He then **returned home** in Judah’s hill country after completing his temple duty.

Commentary from The Bible Expositor and Illuminator

This text concerns the birth of John the Baptist, who was another important part of God's messianic plan. God determined that the Saviour would benefit from a forerunner who would prepare the world for His entry. Our text points to two mighty effects of John's ministry—first in the lives of his family and then in the lives of the wider world, since many would rejoice over his birth. Obviously, John's parents, Zacharias and Elisabeth, were greatly blessed to have a role in the fulfillment of God's promise to send the Saviour. Joy and gladness came to them; this was personal. We cannot look at these Bible characters merely as passive instruments in the hand of a sovereign God. They were real people, and they personally received the grace of God in their lives. Let us always take the grace of God to heart in our lives so that it might instruct us in God's love and hold us strong in His mercy. But the wider concern here is the joy and rejoicing that John's birth would bring to the many. His birth would have a widespread impact. His whole life and ministry would have a powerful role in preparing the way for the Lord Jesus. John's ministry exalted Christ, and the blessing of God's salvation came to many in those days. John preached Christ, always making a clear distinction between himself and Jesus. He pointed others to the Lord, saying that he was not worthy to untie the sandal of the One who would come after him. In his day there was no greater preacher in the land than John, but his only intent was to point to the greater One. John served Christ, even though it ended up costing him his life. He willingly dropped back into obscurity after the Lord came on the scene, and then he was willing to pay the ultimate price of his own life for the sake of the truth. After John's death, the Lord eulogized him as the greatest man ever born of a woman (Matt. 11:11). His was a life of willing service to Christ. Our world has many ideas of greatness, but in God's kingdom the greatest are those who willingly and sacrificially serve, as John did. So John's whole life was consecrated to Christ. This is what led him to deemphasize the marks of earthly success. His modest diet and rough clothing were only reflections of a life that turned away from worldly success. He was unwavering in living for Christ. John the forerunner teaches us what being a follower of the Lord Jesus is all about. It is about consecration to the things of Christ, leaving in our wake a compelling and countercultural statement of the necessity of

salvation and the ultimate futility of devotion to earthly attainments. Let us be like John, a bold and burning light for Christ in the world (John 5:35). This is how to bring joy to a troubled and sad world. John pointed people to the joy of salvation. So today we are challenged to be lights to the world, bringing the joyful news of salvation to as many needy souls as we can.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Luke 1 provides the only detailed account of John the Baptist's origins, revealing the miraculous circumstances of his birth. In certain respects, the story of Jesus' life and the founding of the church begins with John the Baptist (who is not to be confused with the apostle John). John the Baptist was predicted to be "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isaiah 40:3; compare Luke 3:4-6). John was to be the messenger to prepare that way (Malachi 3:1; compare Luke 7:27); and John was to be an Elijah in correcting wayward hearts (Malachi 4:5, 6; compare Luke 1:17, in today's text). The comparison with the prophet Elijah is telling. Elijah's ministry was one of dramatic confrontation (see 1 Kings 17:1-21:29; 2 Kings 1:3-17; 2 Chronicles 21:12-15), much of it occurring during the reign of King Ahab (about 874-853 BC). He was the infamous monarch who married a pagan and promoted idolatry among the northern tribes of Israel (1 Kings 16:29-33). The circumstances of Elijah's departure from this life were well known in the first century AD: as his disciple Elisha watched, "suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind" (2 Kings 2:11). Some years later, a (speculative) conclusion was reached that Elijah had not in fact died. Instead, he was alive with God in Heaven, waiting for a command to return to earth and resume his preaching of repentance. As Malachi 4:5 reveals, Elijah's return is associated with the coming of a great day of judgment. After introductory remarks, Luke begins his Gospel by sketching the time frame of his first narrative: it was "in the time of Herod king of Judea," who reigned 37-4 BC (Luke 1:5). The focus then shifts immediately to the situation of a priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. Three further facts set the stage: (1) both were righteous, (2) the couple was childless, and (3) no child was expected because of advanced age (1:6, 7).

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

God's Hand in Ordinary Life (Luke 1:8-10)

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.

Through service (8)

Service that has as its foundation the precept that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35)

35 In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

Service that bears the failings of the weak and tries to strengthen them (Rom 15:1-2)

15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

Service that carries other's burdens (Gal 6:2)

2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Service that meets the needs of others (James 2:15-17)

15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Loving service that has action, not just words (1 John 3:16-18)

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

Through election (9)

An election that is according to God's purpose (Rom 8:28-30)

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

An election accomplished through the sanctification of the Holy Spirit (2 Thess 2:13-14)

13 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 14 He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

An election accomplished through the foreknowledge of God (1 Peter 1:2)

2 who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

An election whereby God makes me holy and beloved (Col 3:12)

12 Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering;

Through prayer (10)

Prayer that is continual (1 Thess 5:17)

17 pray continually;

Prayer for the spreading of the gospel (Eph 6:19)

19 Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel,

Prayer in faith and the Holy Spirit (Jude 20)

20 But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.

Prayer that waits in expectation (Ps 5:3)

3 In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.

Prayer about everything with thanksgiving (Phil 4:6)

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

A heart that is devoted to prayer (Col 4:2)

2 Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

God's Message at the Perfect Time (Luke 1:11-17)

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."

From a Divine source (11-13)

From a Divine source because God promises to teach, counsel and watch over His people (Psalm 32:8)

8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.

From a Divine source because God guides with His counsel (Ps 73:22-25)

22 I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. 23 Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

From a Divine source because God teaches what is best and directs in the right way (Isa 48:17)

17 This is what the LORD says-- your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.

From a Divine source because obedience to it results in blessings (Acts 8:26)

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

With joy (14)

Joy expressed in praise and song (Ps 33:1-3)

Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. 2 Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. 3 Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.

Joy expressed in my soul (Isa 61:10)

10 I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Joy expressed in spite of circumstances (Hab 3:17-19)

17 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. 19 The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

Joy expressed because the Bible tells me to do so (Phil 4:4)

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Joy expressed because I believe and love God (1 Peter 1:8)

8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,

Seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit (15-16)

Filled with the Holy Spirit so that the word of God can be spoken boldly (Acts 4:31)

31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Filled with the Holy Spirit as part of living wisely (Eph 5:15-18)

15 Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. 18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

Filled with the Holy Spirit to serve (Acts 6:2-6)

2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." 5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Filled with the Holy Spirit as evidence of the grace of God (Acts 11:22-24)

22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Seek to be prepared for Jesus' coming (17)

Prepare by letting our light shine before men (Matt 5:14-16)

14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Prepare by being watchful because the day is nearer than believed (Rom 13:11)

11 And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

Prepare by being watchful because I don't know the day or hour (Matt 25:13)

13 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Prepare by making the most of every opportunity (Eph 5:15-17)

15 Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.

Prepare by being putting on the armor of God because the time is near (Rom 13:12)

12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

God's Proof to Help Doubt (Luke 1:18-20)

18 And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

19 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.

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."

Believe without knowing everything (18)

Abraham is an example of one who believed without knowing the results (Heb 11:8)

8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

Believe without knowing because one should hope without regard to seeing how it will turn out (Rom 8:23-25)

24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Believe without knowing because doubt causes disobedience because it causes me to waffle (James 1:6)

6 But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

Believe without knowing because belief should be by faith not by sight (2 Cor 5:7)

7 We live by faith, not by sight.

Believe without knowing because belief should be looking toward the unseen, not the seen (2 Cor 4:18)

18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Believe without knowing because Jesus says that those who believe without seeing would be blessed (John 20:29)

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Believe because God says it (19)

Believe because when God says it, it is trustworthy (Rev 21:5)

5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Believe because God cannot lie (Heb 6:18)

18 God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.

Believe because God's testimony is the greatest (1 John 5:9)

9 We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.

Believe because God's word is holy and righteous (Rom 7:12)

12 So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Believe because God's word is good (1 Tim 1:8)

8 We know that the law is good if one uses it properly.

Believe because God's word gives freedom and blessings (James 1:25)

25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

Consequences of unbelief (20)

A consequence of unbelief is sin (Rom 14:22-23)

22 Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. 23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

A consequence of unbelief is condemnation (John 3:18)

18 "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

A consequence of unbelief is that I am not one of Jesus' sheep (John 10:26)

26 But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you.

A consequence of unbelief is rebuke because of doubt (John 20:24-29)

Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." 26 And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!"²⁷ Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." 28 And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

An Angelic Appearance and Announcement (1: 8-17)

There were many priests in those days and thus the priestly duties were allocated according to divisions of priests (cf. 1 Chronicles 24). When it came time for the order of Abijah's division (cf. vv. 5, 8) to perform the temple duties, Zacharias went to Jerusalem. There, he was chosen for the very high privilege of burning the incense, which he would have done either in the morning or the evening. This was such a high privilege it could be done by a priest only once in a lifetime. It was a very coveted task.

One can only imagine the feelings which Zacharias must have experienced the evening before his duty was performed. On the one hand, he must have rejoiced in the high privilege which was his, which he had hoped for all his life. On the other hand, he must have reflected on Leviticus chapter 10, which records the death of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, for carrying out this ritual in a wrong manner. Thus, there were the mixed feelings of rejoicing and fear. He probably carefully rehearsed in his mind exactly how he would perform his duty, so that he would emerge from the holy place alive.

On the day of his duty, Zacharias went into the holy place, where he was to burn the incense. Meanwhile, outside a crowd assembled for prayer. I would take it that the prayers of the people were both for the fulfillment of God's promises to His people, that is for the coming of the King and the establishment of Messiah's kingdom. Included as well, perhaps, were prayers for the safety of Zacharias, as the dangers of his duty were well known.

Can you imagine the sense of awe and wonder Zacharias must have felt as he entered into the semi-darkness of the holy place, illuminated only by the light of the lampstand? Think how you would have felt in that awesome

place, where you alone were allowed, when you suddenly realized that there was another person present with you. If the angel Gabriel appeared in a burst of light and splendor (cf. Luke 2:9), then the experience would have been all the more frightening.

The angel's first words were of comfort. He assured Zacharias that he need not be afraid, for his prayer had been heard (v. 13). That prayer (singular) I understand to be his official prayer as a priest, representing the people of Israel. It would be a prayer that God's kingdom would come. A prayer with which the people outside would be in agreement as they prayed. While I used to think that the prayer referred to was Zachariah's prayer for a son, I no longer think this to be so. First of all, it would not be in keeping with Zachariah's priestly duty. Second, I think that Zacharias may have prayed such a prayer earlier, but now that its fulfillment seemed impossible, I believe that he had given up all hope, and that he no longer made this request. His request for a sign seems to confirm this. Thus, the angel's words are to the effect that Zachariah's prayer for Messiah's coming have been answered, and in such a way that his own son, born miraculously to this elderly couple, will have a part in announcing the Messiah's arrival.

The name of this son, who would be filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb, and who will cause many Israelites to repent, in preparation for Messiah's arrival, was to be John. John, as the angel's words make clear, was to be the fulfillment of Malachi's final prophecy (Mal. 3:5-6). John would be great in the sight of the Lord, and was not to drink wine or liquor (v. 15). I believe that this was to assure those who beheld his ministry that his "inspiration" was from the Spirit of God and not from the "spirits" of strong drink, a not unfamiliar charge in those days (cf. Acts 2:13; Eph. 5:18).

A Request and a Rebuke (1:18-23)

In spite of Zacharias' godliness, his obedience to the Law, and his lifetime of ministry, his faith was weak when it came to believing such a marvelous promise. There in the shadow of this angel's splendour, Zacharias made a request of the angel, that he provide some sign, which would assure him that this promise would be fulfilled. He was given a sign, or should I say he himself became a sign, and in fact the sign was indicated by his speaking in "sign" language (1:22).

A friend of mine has suggested that Zacharias was struck dumb by Gabriel because his fear was of saying something stupid—a pretty good possibility in my opinion. You see, when the priest emerged from the temple, he was to pronounce a blessing on the people. Zacharias must have known that he would have to explain what had happened inside the holy place, and was afraid that no one would believe what he was promised; thus he asked for a sign. His speechlessness was an appropriate discipline for Zacharias, and it served to "announce" that something wonderful was about to happen. What Zacharias could have announced with his tongue, God announced through his dumbness.

The sad thing about the unbelief of Zacharias is that there were a number of examples of supernatural births in the Old Testament. God was not promising to do something for Zacharias and Elizabeth which he had not done for others before them. Abraham and Sarah had a son in their old age, as did Hannah and the parents of Samson. The virgin birth, on the other hand, was something entirely new, but Zacharias was not asked to believe this, only that he and his wife would have a son in their old age.

The angel Gabriel only now gives Zacharias his name, and he seems somewhat perturbed to have to do so. In effect, Gabriel is saying, "Good grief, man, do you not know who is telling you that you and your wife will have a son? I am Gabriel, the angel who stands in God's presence. When I speak, I speak for God. To disbelieve my words is to doubt God Himself." With this rebuke, Zacharias was struck dumb.

The task which Zacharias was to perform was one which should have been accomplished in a relatively brief period. The longer the delay in his return, the greater the concern of the crowd assembled outside. They may have wondered if Zacharias had been struck dead by God, just as Nadab and Abihu had been. I can imagine that members of the crowd began to whisper to one another. When Zacharias did emerge, the people waited for him to pronounce a blessing, as he would have customarily done. It must have taken a while for the people to grasp that the priests' contortions and hand motions were an attempt to communicate and that he had been rendered unable to speak. When this realization struck home, the crowds knew they he had seen a vision in the temple and that God was about to do something marvelous in their midst (v. 22).

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/1-silence-shattered-luke-11-38>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

We've all been told to be wary of deals that "seem too good to be true." Even so, scams continue to take in many people, and there are now websites dedicated to exposing the cons. Such sites may include testimonies from those who fell victim to opportunities that seemed too good to be true—and were. If you receive an offer of an unexpected tax return, don't share your bank account number! If a "businessman" from central Africa wants to transfer money to your account before it's seized by the corrupt, collapsing government of his nation, don't reply! Is it too good to be true? is an important question to ask when evaluating promises from other people. But real-life experiences along this line can make us hesitate to believe and act on God's promises. When we reflect on the hardships of life in general, on our own unmet needs in particular, and on seeming failures of prayer in the past, we may become as skeptical as Zechariah. If that begins to happen, we should quickly read the rest of the account of Zechariah and his family. That account is one more proof that God always keeps his promises.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. Dependability pleases God; He rewards faithfulness (Luke 1:8-10; cf. Matt. 25:23)
2. We must keep an attitude of hospitality, always welcoming God (Luke 1:11)
3. Fear and anxiety blind us to the fact that God's timing is perfect. He is a good Father (Luke 1:12-13; cf. Isa. 65:24)
4. We should make sure our motivation is to please God (Luke 1:14-16)
5. We cannot serve the Lord without prepared hearts (vs. 17)
6. We do not please God when we ignore the facts, avoiding the truth before us (Luke 1:18-20; cf. Matt. 16:4; 17:17)