

Prayer

Dear Jesus come near with Your love;
Come with Your support and Your power.
Come with Your empathy and Your wisdom,
Come with Your helpfulness and Your strength,
Come with Your compassion and Your discernment,
Dear Jesus, may Your presence bear fruit in my life today.

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Thank God for being alive, and praise Him for the different aspects of your daily life

On-going prayers

- **Pray for major industrial nations** *Pray for the USA, whose economy effectively controls all others. Pray for wise leadership and governance.*
- *Give thanks for those who have helped you in recent days*
- *Pray for those who live in fear of other family members*

Meditation

Simplify my life, O Lord;

Remove the jumbled messages which sin provides,
And fill my heart with graciousness and loving-kindness.

Transform my life, O Lord;

Remove the guilt ridden memories of conflicts past,
And wipe them out by patient help and divine counsel.

Focus my life, O Lord;

Remove the clumsy waywardness entangling my soul,
And settle my hands, my eyes, my heart, on faithfulness.

Direct my life, O Lord;

Remove the cruel bondage addicting my heart to me,
And let me fall into Your arms of love, forever free to be.

Bible passage – Luke 1:18-25

¹⁸ Zachariah asked the angel, 'How can I know this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.' ¹⁹ The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ Now look! Because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time, you will be silent and not able to speak until the day these things happen!'

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were anxiously waiting for Zechariah, wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them, and they realised that he had seen a vision in the temple sanctuary; he was making signs to them and remained unable to communicate. ²³ So when his time of service was completed, he returned home.

²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion; she said, ²⁵ 'The Lord has done this for me; He has shown favour to me right now, and taken away my disgrace among the people.'

Thought for the Day

Text

Luke 1:25

²⁵ *'The Lord has done this for me; He has shown favour to me right now, and taken away my disgrace among the people.'*

Thought

Elizabeth was amazed at God's graciousness towards her, and she responded with joy and praise to God when she knew she was pregnant. Unlike her husband, who had been struck dumb after expressing doubt to the angel of God, Elizabeth knew she had been blessed.

Today, people generally assume that they have control over the bearing of children, and many feel cheated if their plans fail. We are wise to continue to regard the mystery of life as God's greatest gift. The conception of each child is a divine partnership between two people and God, and we should praise Him for His favour.

Bible Study

Review

In the previous study, we left Zachariah standing in the 'Holy Place' of the Temple. He went into the Temple in awe of his exceptional task to present prayers for Israel to God, and he found himself facing an angel of the Lord, standing between him and the presence of God in the 'Most Holy Place' of the Temple! The angel had just told him that God had answered his prayers, and he would have a son to be called John (1:13,14). In addition, after indicating that his child would be *'full of the Holy Spirit'* and live a life of holiness (1:15), he would be none other than the expected 'fore-runner' of the Messiah; the one who would *'to prepare a people who are ready for the Lord'* (1:17)!

Few of us who would be bold enough to suggest that in such circumstances we might fare better than Zachariah, who blurting out to the angel an urgent request for clarification; *'How can I know this?'* At this moment of high spiritual drama we can hardly criticise Zachariah for his apparent lack of faith; what was happening to him was extraordinary. Though in a well known Old Testament story, we will find that when Abraham was told that his ageing wife would bear a son (Gen 17:17), he broke out into laughter, saying *'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'* We might think it unfair that Zachariah was punished for his faithlessness but Abraham was not; but we should not be too hasty to judge God ourselves. Scripture contains many stories of the Lord doing great things through the birth of children to barren women (see also Judges 13:2f. and 1 Sam 1:2f.), surely Zachariah would have known this? Perhaps his sin was not lack of faith in God's power to act, but lack of faith that God would act through him, Zachariah. In this, his story is very different to that of Abraham.

In response to Zachariah's incredulity, Gabriel confirmed his authority, proclaiming his name and the source of his message. He said, *'I am Gabriel ...'* (1:19), and declared that he had been faithful to the task God had given him to deliver 'good news' to Zachariah (1:19). 'Good news' is one word in Greek, and it is the same word used throughout the New Testament for God's work of salvation through Jesus Christ. As we will quickly find out in the rest of Luke 1, the Lord had begun to do the good work of salvation He had been promising to do for centuries. Despite Zachariah's initial incredulity, those involved soon began to realise the enormity of what was happening in their midst. Nevertheless, Zachariah's disbelief would have consequences, and his punishment would prove to Zachariah that God was indeed at work in him; he was struck dumb (1:20).

This encounter delayed Zachariah in the sanctuary. Stories from the early part of the first century indicate that a priest would stay in the Holy Place for the briefest possible time in fear of being consumed by the holiness of God. It was assumed that if a man delayed there, then something dire had happened (1:21f.). So when Zachariah came out, unable to speak, his fellow priests naturally realised that something extraordinary had happened, and assumed it was a vision (1:22). The situation was exacerbated by the fact that Zachariah was unable to pronounce the expected blessing of the people (see Numbers 6:24-26, and the discussion of this in the previous study). This must have caused something of a stir, but Zachariah's fellow priests appear to have rallied around, and he remained serving in the Temple until his week was completed.

The last part of our text is a beautifully phrased description of the consequences of this dramatic event back in Zachariah's home. His wife became pregnant, and after Zachariah's incredulous words to the angel

(1:18), her words are a beautiful response to God's work within her; *'the Lord ... has shown favour to me ...'* (1:25). They express the great historic hope of all Israel (Psalm 106:4).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The purpose of Gabriel and his reply to Zachariah
- Zachariah's speechlessness, and the response of the priests
- Elizabeth and her praise of God

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V21 'anxiously waiting'

The Greek word 'prosdokaw' is translated by most Bible versions as just 'waiting'. However, the verb does carry a sense of heightened expectancy, and most Greek dictionaries indicate that the word can be translated 'living in suspense'. I suggest 'anxiously waiting' best sums up the meaning of the word, whereas 'waiting' is a merely neutral activity in English.

V22 'making signs'

The Greek word here ('dianeuw') usually means making signs by means of the head. It is not a well known word and there is some uncertainty about the full range of its meaning. I have kept the translation 'making signs', but in the study I suggest we should think firstly in terms of nodding.

V22 'unable to communicate'

The Greek word here is 'kophos'. Earlier in verse 20, Zachariah is told he will be silent and unable to speak, but the use of this word here means something more; it refers to being both deaf and dumb. The ancients perceived a clear connection between being unable to hear as well as speak, particularly in an age without the medical knowledge, and this is reflected in their use of the word. Today we would be cautious to link the two.

Significant phrases

V25 'He has shown favour to me right now, and taken away my disgrace among the people.'

Other translations:

'In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.' (NIV)

'when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.' (NRSV)

At the centre of this sentence there is a phrase in Greek, which is 'en emerais ais', and this means literally 'in these days'. However, when a time reference such as this appears in the New Testament it is generally translated freely according to the meaning of the story. Notice that although the NIV translates 'in those days', the NRSV, usually a very correct translation, translates this more freely, as 'when ...'. I prefer to use the phrase 'right now' because this captures the awe of Elizabeth at what is happening to her. It is a current expression and correctly conveys the meaning of the story at this point.

Going Deeper

The purpose of Gabriel and his reply to Zachariah

The character of the angel Gabriel was well known in the first century. He is described in a number of places within the various Jewish writings that make up the 'Apocrypha' (the books included within the canon of Old Testament Scripture in Jesus' day, but now excluded – see dictionary of Biblical books), and the nature of his work was the subject of discussion amongst rabbis and scribes. The name 'Gabriel' means 'Man of God', and the only other mention of him in our Old Testament is in Daniel (8:16 and 9:21). Here, Gabriel is the angel who helps Daniel understand his dreams and visions, and he also has the function of announcing the coming salvation of God (Dan 9:21-27). This text is important, because it led the people of Jesus' day to anticipate that Gabriel would herald the coming of the Messiah, just as Elijah would prepare his way (see Malachi 4:5,6). Luke tells us that God fulfilled these expectations completely, according to the traditional understanding of God's Word; *'... my words, which will come true at their proper time ...'* (1:20).

The whole scene here is set up by two brief phrases. Zachariah says '*I am an old man ...*' (1:18) and the angel says '*I am Gabriel*' (1:19). Zachariah identified himself as an old man, defined by his personal problem of not having an heir, and Gabriel identified himself as God's messenger. Gabriel's announcement was not simply a word for Zachariah, but an announcement of something far more, the proclamation of the fulfilment of God's plans to send His Messiah to save His people. Zachariah's response was of course a function of his own lack of self understanding and esteem, so he was unable to take on board what he had been told. He did not believe the promise of a son, the fact that God was dealing with him personally, and or that having now received a word from God he had the duty to pass this on. What he should have done was to leave the Sanctuary and then go and announce to the people what he had seen, by using his unique opportunity to declare the 'priestly blessing' (see above and in yesterday's study).

Zachariah's speechlessness, and the response of the priests

It was entirely appropriate for Zachariah to be given a sign of God's power at work in these circumstances. An analysis of the appearances of angels in the Old Testament will show us that angels frequently gave signs, for example to Abraham (Gen 15:18 – the Covenant and the gift of the Promised Land), to Moses (Ex 4:1 – the signs of the snake and the leprous hand), Gideon (Judges 6:17 – the fleece) and to king Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:8 – the famous movement of the shadow on the sun dial). Zachariah had shown lack of faith by questioning Gabriel, so the sign was designed not to punish Zachariah but to draw attention to what was going on. Zachariah's inability to speak certainly caused a stir, and it heightens our anticipation for what will happen when Zachariah receives his speech again (Luke 1:67f.).

Lack of speech is a frequent consequence of seeing a vision or seeing an angel (e.g. see Dan 10:15, Ezekiel 3:26 and 24:27), but we need to be careful about this impairment is described in the Bible. When the angel announced the sign, he told Zachariah that he would be '*silent*' (1:20), but when he emerged from the Temple sanctuary he was unable to communicate, and in verse 22 there are two words that reveal more about what happened to Zachariah (see Translation notes above).

Firstly, Zachariah is described as 'kophos' (Greek), which in the New Testament means both deaf and dumb. This is born out in Luke 1:57-66, where Zachariah appears to be deaf and unaware of what is said around him, otherwise the tale of his miraculous revelation of the name of his son John does not make sense (1:62). Secondly, the Greek word used to describe his communication usually means 'nodding', and there is uncertainty about whether it can mean any other gestures. The picture we must have in mind therefore is not of Zachariah gesticulating animatedly with his hands and body as if aware of what was said to him but unable to respond; rather, the man was confused after the vision and only able to nod in response to prompting. This is exactly what we mean by someone being 'struck dumb'.

In Jerusalem, the regular priests were members of the High priestly family and they regulated the Temple worship. They looked down on the priests who came from the country to serve on the weekly roster as if they were amateurs. Everything they saw reinforced this view. Perhaps we can see even in this incident the beginnings of a separation between the powerful work of God in salvation through Jesus Christ, and the official religious work of Jewish priests. God was at work amongst the people, not through the usual religious channels!

Elizabeth and her praise of God

Elizabeth's response to her pregnancy was twofold, firstly to hide away for five months (1:24), and secondly, to give praise to God (1:25). People have wondered why Elizabeth hid herself away, and various theories have been put forward. Most people reckon that she was unwilling to reveal her pregnancy until she was obviously pregnant and not too far away from giving birth successfully. A miscarriage in the early days of pregnancy would have been all the more intolerable if her condition had been made public.

It is more likely however, the Luke had his eye on a different issue, and this has to do with God's timescale. Luke drew attention to Elizabeth's seclusion because this highlights the birth of Jesus, which comes next. In tomorrow's passage, we read these famous words, 'In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God ... to a young woman whose name was Mary ...' (1:26), some of the most exciting words in Scripture! So although John was conceived before Jesus, Luke tells us that Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit was of prior importance. As we read through Luke 1, we will increasingly notice that Luke compares Mary and Elizabeth. The older woman conceived in the Old Testament tradition of prophetic awe, as indicated by Zachariah's doubt, the sign of his inability to communicate, and Elizabeth's praise of God's favour after five months. The younger woman conceived in a new utterly miraculous way, anticipated by Isaiah in his famous prophecy, '*a young woman will conceive ...*' (Isaiah 7:14), without a husband, without a doubt and with instant praise.

There is nothing wrong with Elizabeth's praise; her words reflect those of Rachel, the wife of Jacob who conceived after years of being barren (see Genesis 30:23, and also Psalm 113:9), and they are sincere. However, they are the last echoes of praise to God from the Old Testament, praising the Almighty for what

He has done and looking forward to a future of hope. They also contain the words 'right now' (see Translation notes above for verse 25), indicating that God was beginning his new work of salvation at the very time she spoke. As we will find out tomorrow, after five months of Elizabeth's pregnancy, the Holy Spirit began the remarkable events that led to the birth of the Messiah; God's servant, Jesus Christ.

Application

When God does a great work in the world, this is not just a matter of the events we see here on earth and their consequences for the individuals concerned. What we see is like the tip of an iceberg, and in the case of this story, what happened to Zechariah is a small but powerful and observable event resting on the top of an enormous amount of work already done by God in the lives of people throughout centuries. We can easily see the connections between this incident and the life of Abraham, but the hope of all Israel for a Saviour lies behind the announcement of 'good news' by the angel Gabriel. Of course his words were good news for a man who desperately wanted to have a son, but they were also good news for all Israel, and ultimately for all people everywhere. God was 'on the move', active in the life of the world to do His will and put into action His plan for the salvation of the world.

I say this carefully because in Luke's day, as in ours, people can be tempted to think that a story such as this is no more than a great story, at best illustrating the way God works in the world. However, the Christian needs to stand up and declare something more. With Luke, we must say that this is what happened; it is real, it is history, and like all history, it comes not just through the stories people tell, but the subsequent effects of what happened. There is no doubt that John the Baptist was indeed born according to prophecy and according to the prepared plan of God, and what happened through him and through Jesus has changed the world. This is what Luke set out to record in his Gospel.

People love to debate the existence of angels today, and within the church, I have found that when pushed, a significant number of Christians will say that they do not believe angels exist, and by saying this, they imply that stories such as this are 'fairy tale', perhaps illustrating God's work, but not reflecting history. It is sad when those who claim faith prefer to remain stuck in disbelief. One of the truly interesting features of this story is Zechariah's difficulty in accepting that God was actually working through him, and it seems that some of God's people today have the same difficulty. They are happy for their faith to remain at arm's length, like a proposed truth that can be accepted or set to one side according to the pressures of life. As we will discover, Zachariah's disbelief was temporary. Let us hope that this is true for those who do not yet find it possible to accept that the Bible reports real stories of real people, real angels, a real God, and a very real salvation through Jesus Christ.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What similarities do you find between the faith of Zechariah and the faith of God's people today?
2. What effect might Zechariah's punishment have on him, as far as we can tell from the Gospel record?
3. Discuss the difference between the faith of Zechariah and the faith of Elizabeth as represented by their words in this story.

Topics covered by this text

- *The communication of God's Word through visions*
- *Faith and disbelief*

Personal comments by author

I can recall a number of times when I have been reluctant to believe that God has wanted to do a work through me. Perhaps you have been in this place too, and it is uncomfortable. Sometimes the Lord calls a person to do something but they refuse to do it, and I know that I have been concerned lest I have done this, perhaps inadvertently. The story of Zechariah however is a help to us not a hindrance, for here, the Lord's punishment is proportionate and designed to bring Zachariah back on board for what must be done. In my experience, this is indeed how the Lord works to bring us back into His will.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Examine yourself by asking whether there are any areas of disbelief in your own life, and whether you need to be more open to what the Lord can do through you. Pray about this, and discuss it with someone else who is spiritually close to you.*
 - *Ask the Lord in prayer to bless your own church or fellowship with a vision of what He would like to do through them. Pray that belief will replace disbelief amongst God's people.*
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Final Prayer

Let me hear Your voice tonight, faithful God and Lord of all. Speak to me so that I may know Your will, whether it be hard or easy, comforting or challenging, exciting or mundane; and let me value each and every word of the instruction You give for Your servant's life. Thank You Lord; AMEN
