

Prayer

Lord God, we confess our sins to You partly in sorrow because of our failures, and partly in thankfulness because of the privilege of our salvation and its price as paid by Jesus. Forgiven, may we face the challenges of living in this beautiful yet troubled world, and grow in maturity into people who demonstrate the godliness of holy living. Through repentance, lead us on to higher things; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray about the most difficult things you face today, and then deal with them in the strength God gives you.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for pioneering scientists.** *Pray for those researching the origins of the universe. May they know that finding particles is not the same as finding God.*
- *Pray for the stability of the world's financial services sector*
- *Give thanks for teachers who work daily to help children grow*

Meditation

Lord God, challenge me to grow in spirit
Show me how salvation can move my soul

Colour my life with visions of Your glory
And use me to paint faith's vibrant pictures

Set my emotions free to bless and not curse
And liberate my feelings to love and be loved

Grant me the strength to be a challenge to evil
And protect my family from all the devil's wiles

Provide me with the courage to use all wisdom
And open my mind to embrace deeper truths

Lord God, challenge me to accept Your guidance
And may I discover the great privilege of obedience

Bible passage – Luke 1:5-17

⁵ In the days of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah, and he had a wife who was a descendant of Aaron, whose name was Elizabeth. ⁶ They were both righteous in God's sight, living impeccably according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord, ⁷ but they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren and they were both well advanced in years.

⁸ Once, when he was serving as priest before God on the roster of his division, ⁹ Zechariah was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the inner sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ When the time came for the incense offering, with the entire assembly of the people praying outside, ¹¹ and an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right hand side of the altar of incense. ¹² When he saw him, Zechariah was shocked and overcome by fear.

¹³ But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you must give him the name John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and a delight to you, and to many people who will rejoice at his coming, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled

with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ In the spirit and power of Elijah he will go ahead before the Lord, to 'turn the hearts of the parents to the children', and the disobedient by the wisdom of the righteous, to prepare a people who are ready for the Lord.'

Thought for the Day

Text

Luke 1:13

The angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you must give him the name John.'

Thought

Here, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, receives a message from an angel in answer to his prayers. He and his barren wife will be blessed by the gift of a son, moreover, he will also be God's messenger and announce the coming of the Messiah!

We all want to know that our prayers have been heard, yet like this answer to prayer, God's word may be partly for us, and partly for something greater. So instead of agonising over 'unanswered prayer', we can rejoice that God will do far more through our prayers than we imagine!

Bible Study

Review

This is the wonderful story of God's announcement of the birth of John the Baptist to Zachariah. Luke 1 is unique in Scripture, telling us about two remarkable events, birth of John the Baptist, and the announcement of the birth of Jesus to Mary. Luke recorded these stories and to fulfil his promise to give an '*orderly narrative*' of the beginning of Jesus' life and ministry (1:1,4). Yet there is so much more. These stories demonstrate an amazing combination of two things; highly personal stories about the lives of ordinary Israelites, and the extraordinary supernatural intervention of God in their lives. In this way, Luke announces that God has intervened in real human history to be made to real men and women. The Gospel is neither myth, nor rumour, nor religious proposition. It is the truth about real life and about the only real God.

The story of the announcement of John's birth is lengthy (1:5-25), and it tells us a great deal about the life and times of Jesus. We will therefore study verses 5 to 17 today, and verses 18 to 25 next time, with some overlap between the two.

There were probably around twenty thousand priests in Judea in the first century, and they were divided into twenty four divisions (1 Chron. 24:7-18). Each division was allotted two weeks per year for Temple service, and with so many priests in each division, the individual duty of saying prayers in the sanctuary was allocated by lot. This sacred duty could only be performed once, so many were never chosen; but the privilege was immense, the highlight of a priest's life. Zachariah would have undoubtedly felt the great honour of performing the task allotted to him (1:9).

Zechariah a godly man (1:6). His marriage, though many years ago, would have been filled with hope because although priests were allowed to marry any 'virgin daughter of Israel', Zachariah had married the daughter of a priest, a pure 'descendant of Aaron (1:5). Yet Zachariah and his wife had lived through many years without the one blessing they desired most from the Lord; the gift of children. So as Zachariah performed his great task of entering the Temple sanctuary, his duty was to pray for the people, but his personal prayer was about the agony of childlessness.

It is hard for us to imagine the awesome responsibility of offering prayer for all Israel in the presence of God in His Temple. When priests went alone into the sanctuary, people listened outside (10) for the sound of the bells attached to the hem of the priest's robe (Ex 28:34), to ensure that he was still alive. It is possible that a rope was tied to the priest's foot so that he could be dragged out in an emergency, though there is no record of this in Scripture! With this level of awe and responsibility, Zachariah's response to the sight of an angel in the sanctuary, standing 'at the right hand side of the altar of incense' (1:11), was of shock and terror (1:12)! The angel was standing directly between him and the place where God was believed to dwell, in the 'holy of holies', just behind a curtain! (I have described the details of the Temple, priestly service, and the position of the angel, later in the 'going deeper' section of the study).

The angel spoke to Zachariah in the same way that angels frequently speak to people throughout the Bible, saying 'do not fear ...' (see Gen 21:17, Matt 1:20, Acts 27:23,24), and the message was astonishing; God had heard his prayer (1:13). Firstly, God had heard Zachariah's prayer for a son; his wife would become pregnant and have a son to be called 'John'. Moreover, God would answer the priestly prayer and bless His people Israel, because this same child would herald the Messiah! The gift of the Holy Spirit (1:15) and the quote from Malachi 4:5 (to '*turn the hearts of the parents to the children*' – 1:17) were well known and specific promises associated with the coming of the Messiah. It is hard for us to understand the awesome flood of emotions that must have filled the terrified Zachariah!

Going Deeper

The Bible study does not deal fully with the angel's prayer, some issues will be dealt with in the next study. Here, we go deeper to look at these issues:

- Background to priesthood and the purity of Zachariah (1:5-7)
- Background to priestly service in the Temple (1:8-10)
- The position of the angel in the Temple (1:11,12)
- The angel's speech and the calling of John (1:13-15)
- John, the 'forerunner', Malachi and Elijah (1:16-17)

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V6 'impeccably'

Most translations have 'blamelessly' or 'faultlessly', but the words do not mean that Elizabeth and Zachariah had no sins, rather that they did everything in their power to live according to the law. I have chosen the related English word 'impeccably' because it avoids the incorrect assumption that these two good people were used by God because they were 'faultless' before God, beyond what we might expect of normal people.

V8 'roster'

You may not be familiar with this word within Scripture, but the Greek word 'taxei' here means 'order, in sequence, or succession', and the word roster seems to me to fit the meaning of the Greek very well. A roster is defined as an ordered division of things, and this is exactly what is meant here.

V9 'inner sanctuary'

Most Translations have 'Temple' here, but this causes confusion, because the word 'Temple' can mean anything from the entire Temple complex to the central building containing the sanctuaries. However, it is clear that in this story, Zachariah entered the first room of the inner sanctuary (see study).

Significant phrases

V14 'He will be a joy and a delight to you, and to many people who will rejoice at his coming'

Other translations:

'He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth' (NIV)

'You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth' (NRSV)

The Greek could either mean 'he will be a joy to you ...' (hence the NIV and my translation) or 'it will be a joy to you ...' (hence the NRSV). I prefer the first because the subject of the paragraph is John, but the difference between the two is minimal. More important is the end of the sentence, and the meaning of the Greek word 'genesis' which can mean either 'beginning', 'coming', or in the case of a baby, 'birth'. Most Bible versions say 'birth', but I have kept things more open by translating this 'coming'. The phrase points forward to the crowds who would come to hear his preaching in future years (see also the commentary on Luke's Gospel by Howard Marshall).

Going Deeper

Background to the priesthood and the purity of Zachariah (1:5-7)

In Jesus' day, the people of Israel were proud of their inheritance, and its antiquity was of great interest to the Romans, their imperial masters. The guardians of this heritage were the priesthood, the descendants of Aaron, Moses' brother, who served in the Jerusalem Temple. At the time of this story (3/4 BC), the Temple in Jerusalem was new, having been built by Herod the Great, the powerful governor and 'King' of Judea, appointed by Rome. The new Temple replaced one built in haste after the exile (see Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai), but although grand in scale, it copied the original Temple built by Solomon and destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC; and the inner sanctuaries, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place were modelled on the 'Law' as in Exodus 35-40.

1 Chronicles 24:7-18 lists the original twenty four divisions of the priesthood under the chief priest Zadok, and the eighth of these is 'Abijah'. When the Judeans came back to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, only four returned, and not Abijah. However, over the years since, the priesthood was subdivided, making up the original twenty four and re-assigning the former divisional names.

Today, we sit lightly to lists of names and records, but we must not forget their importance; to the Israelites, they proved both the truth and antiquity of their relationship with God. Zachariah himself was a man deeply aware of his privilege before God, and in the light of this history, his lack of a son would have been deeply distressing; why had God not blessed him? Zachariah was even entitled to divorce his wife and marry again in order to produce heirs, but he remained faithful to his wife, perhaps inspired by Abraham, his forefather, whose wife was also barren. This may be the reason why Luke calls Zachariah 'righteous' (1:6). He and his wife bore their pain with dignity, but the Lord was about to reward them.

Background to priestly service in the Temple (1:8-10)

Temple rituals are not always understood today, but a good idea is to gain a picture of the layout of the Temple. The inner sanctuary contained two rooms. The innermost room was the Most Holy Place (commonly called the 'holy of holies') was where God dwelt, seated on the 'mercy seat' above a box, the famous 'Ark of the Covenant'. Adjoining this and separated by a curtain was the Holy Place containing the incense altar, the candlestick with seven candles and the table of the 'bread of the presence'. This was where a solitary priest went, twice a day, to pray for Israel and offer incense, at the same time a sacrifice was made in the courtyard outside. It was Zachariah's task to offer the daily incense offering.

Outside the sanctuary was an open air courtyard reserved for priests, where animals were sacrificed according to the instructions in Leviticus. In the morning and the evening of each day, this was done by priests of one of the twenty four divisions. Beyond the courtyard of priests was a further courtyard used by male Jews for worship. So twice a day, after the sacrifices and offering of incense, the priest who had offered the incense led the other priests in giving a blessing to the male worshippers. Tomorrow, we will read about what happened when Zachariah came to do this and found out that he was unable to speak!



A priest stands in the Holy Place

Records exist of the prayers said by those who went into the Holy Place to pray for Israel, as follows (see the commentary on Luke by Earle Ellis SCM):

*Appoint peace, goodness and blessing
Grace, mercy and compassion
For us and for all Israel, Your people ...
Blessed are You, O Lord, who blesses Your people Israel with Your peace*

The prayer used to bless the people after the sacrifices and incense offering was from Numbers 6:24-26):

*The Lord bless you and keep you
The Lord make His face to shine on you
And be gracious to you, and give you peace*

The position of the angel in the Temple (1:11,12)

The picture attached shows a replica of a priest standing in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle, which was the fore-runner of the Temple. The Tabernacle was undoubtedly smaller than the later Temple, but this picture still gives us an idea of Zachariah's position in the Holy Place. The table of the bread of presence is to the priest's right (he is facing the curtain) and the candlestick to his left, with the altar of incense slightly on his left (though it is large in this picture). Luke says that the angel appeared 'at the right hand side' of the altar of incense, being directly in front of Zachariah, between him and the great curtain woven with cherubim. It would have felt very intimidating!

The angel's speech and the calling of John (1:13-15)

The angel's first words to Zachariah were, *'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard'* (1:13). The sentence is direct, and in the Greek, the angel is referring to the prayer said by Zachariah in the Holy Place, for the blessing of all Israel. Without knowing this, people have understandably thought that the angel told Zachariah that his personal prayers for a son had been heard, for the rest of his speech talks about this. So, which prayer does the angel say has been answered?

We can resolve this by looking at the words of Zachariah's prayer for Israel (above). Although the prayer applies to all Israel, it also reflect Zachariah's heart; the words, 'Appoint peace, goodness and blessing, grace, mercy and compassion for us and for all Israel' tantalisingly make his personal appeal for him. He would have used these words when praying for God's blessing in the gift of a child. Also, the words *'for us and for all Israel'*, imply a personal request for blessing as well as the general prayer.

All this might seem presumptive if it were not for the fact that the rest of the angel's speech is equally divided between the personal promise to Zachariah and his wife of a son (1:13,-15) and the prophecy that this child will be a blessing to 'many' in Israel (1:16), and be the herald of the Messiah. The evidence is solid that the angel answered the one prayer in two ways. One child would be born who would fulfil the hopes of Zachariah and his wife for a son, and also the fulfil the hope of Israel for a Saviour.

John, the 'forerunner', Malachi and Elijah (1:16-17)

The prophecy of John's life given by the angel suggests that he would become a Nazirite, a recognised order of godly people within Israel (Numbers 6:2f.). However, only part of the great Nazirite vows are place upon John. He is not required to leave his hair uncut (see Numbers 6:5 and Judges 13:5f.). The angel says that he will be 'great' and that his guiding strength will not be worldly (*'strong drink'*), but supernatural, *'he will be filled with the holy Spirit from his mother's womb'*. These words place John directly in the line of Old Testament prophets, the great men whose words of prophecy guided God's people through the ages.

The angel then quotes the famous closing verses of the prophet Malachi, saying that in the *'spirit of Elijah'*, John will *'turn the hearts of the parents to the children'*. In Jesus' day, it was believed that Elijah would return to herald the coming of the Messiah, but what does the great prophecy about parents and children mean? At one level, this is a straightforward call for repentance, something that would be characteristic of John's later preaching. However, the angel adds a further 'couplet' to this, saying, *'and the disobedient by the wisdom of the righteous'* (1:17). In Hebrew and Aramaic (the language of Jesus' day), this couplet links the parents with the *'disobedient'*, and the children with the *'wisdom of the righteous'* as if to explain Malachi's prophecy. This means that the angel's message is remarkably similar to Jesus' teaching, *'unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom ...'* (Matthew 18:3). The angel's prophecy urges people to strip away the accumulated sins and prejudices of adult life and become like children before God, dependent upon Him, and thus ready for the message of the Messiah.

Application

There is no dearth of meaning within this powerful story. We are told about the fulfilment of Zachariah's unanswered pray, and when the answer came, it was far more than could be expected. Not only would he have a son, but he would be 'great', dedicated to God for a vital role in God's great salvation plan! I have heard people testify that when God has eventually answered a prayer maintained in righteous faith over many years, the blessing has been more than double. Of course, there will never be another John the Baptist, but our age needs people of faith, commissioned and equipped *'from the mother's womb'* (1:15) for service. I believe that God will raise up the men and women He needs to fulfil His own plans and answer the prayers of the faithful for revival, but also answer the prayers of individual faithful parents who earnestly seek God's will, and who will raise His servants. We sometimes forget that the Bible tells stories of people being born into God's work, and we should not always assume that they are 'converted' and then 'led' into it; we must not ignore the importance of the home for the future of God's plans.

This passage indicates the importance of faithful service to God over many years, both in Zachariah's life and also in its description of the Temple worship that had taken place for more centuries. In an age in which God's people are seeking to be bold for the Lord and work in new ways to break down the many barriers to faith, we are reminded that history counts. The truth of our faith in God is provable over history, and the reason why we may trust God is because His salvation has been consistently true and effective throughout the generations. We should not behave as if the future of the church depends upon us; it depends on our being faithful to what God has been doing throughout history.

Lastly, this passage suggests that way is made ready for the Gospel by the preaching of repentance through the power of the Holy Spirit. The message 'turn to God' may not sound fashionable or evangelistically exiting, but it is the ground in which the scattered seed grows. True repentance is rather like becoming a child again for the Kingdom of God.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What have you learned in this study about the religious life of God's people in the early days of the first century?
2. How does this passage help us live a life of faith, and what does the story of Zechariah tell us about faith?
3. How do we recognise the Holy Spirit at work in the life of someone else, and how will we know when God's hand is on someone for 'great' things?

Topics covered by this text

- *The worship of God's people Israel*
- *Answered prayer*
- *The eternal plan of God for salvation*
- *The work of the Holy Spirit, and repentance*

Personal comments by author

This passage describes an awesome event. It is as if God suddenly breaks through into the life of Israel after centuries of patience and observation. Now is the time for the Messiah, so John, the announcer and preparer must come quickly. It is so important that we realise that our own efforts to bring renewal and revival today may be laudable, but in this 'global village' of a world today, He will surely break through with a radical answer to all our problems, and work through those people He has prepared.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Write down a list of the prayers of your heart that remain unanswered. Pray about them again, and ask the Lord to show you if He has other purposes for your prayers, perhaps consequences you have not thought about.*
- *Pray for God to establish new leaders of His people, who will be at the forefront of radical renewal and revival across the whole world.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, You were there at the beginning, present in the creative work of the Father and graciously awaiting the time of Your revelation as the Saviour of the World. Keep us firm in our faith, strong in our hope, and constant in our love for others and for You, and in this way demonstrate our gratitude for everything You have done for us, Lord Jesus: AMEN
