

This Week in the Word

Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Ps 119:89.



The Forerunner of the Saviour

**Study Scripture: Luke 1:8--20.
Lesson 3, December 17, 2016.**

Key Verse

But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

Luke 1:13 – 14

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Luke has a unique introduction. It was written in formal language, befitting an important document destined for the hands of a powerful, important, and cultured person. But it is also important to note in addition to the benefit of us having such a careful and thorough analysis of the facts about early Christianity, that it presents a description of the times when the promised Messiah came, which is remarkably similar to our days, and hence the Book's introductory analysis on the factual information must cause believing Christians to ponder and meditate on the current state of affairs.

This letter was addressed to Theophilus, a name which means "friend of God". Some feel that this person was a Christian, or a person sympathetic to Christianity. However, the language used does not make this clear. The title "*most excellent*" given to him was one usually reserved for high officials. See for example Acts 23: 26; 24: 3; and 26: 25. Some feel therefore that Theophilus was a high-ranking Roman official.

Luke gives several reasons for his writing all of which reasons are noteworthy for us and have great relevance for our belief and our witness

First, he acknowledged that there were earlier attempts at writing, indicating that there was great interest in information about Jesus and His ministry. We note therefore that contrary to what some seem to believe, the people of the nation of Israel were not ignorant of Scriptural teaching and its implication for them. They however all had different reactions to the facts placed in front of them by

inspired men, and by the Holy Spirit, as He worked to convict all men on earth of *sin, righteousness, and judgment*.

We are not really in a much different position from the people of that day when Messiah came, for in truth and in fact we have a great deal of light and moreover can look at the past actions of those who had been called to belong to Christ. Scripture has been written to say something to us at the end of the age.

We presume that these scholarly analyses and eyewitness attempts were authorized, and that Luke might have had before him written documents and records which he would have studied carefully, before he began his writing.

Secondly, Luke's account confined itself to the events and beliefs of the faith that had been completely accepted and believed by the brethren. We must therefore acknowledge and live by what we are told to be "**the truth**" about the Saviour and His close associates and representatives.

Luke's writing does not suggest or indicate that those before him were wrong, but he stressed that the things he wrote about were things that had been certainly believed by the followers of Christ, there being obviously a strong oral and written record. Luke's account was aimed to give a complete, clear, accurate, and faithful record of the things firmly believed by the faithful. His account differs from the others previously done because of its greater comprehensiveness.

From this we can see that during the lifetime of the Apostles it was recognized that there should be an accurate, well arranged and competently written Life of Christ document. The Holy Spirit would have initiated this belief, and would have given Luke, who had been a faithful fellow-laborer with Paul, an abundant measure of inspiration, so that he could write the testimony for believers.

Note that Christianity is based on a series of facts. We can therefore thoroughly investigate these facts. In fact, it is our duty to do so, in order that we realize we are dealing with truth, and not emotional nonsense or fantasy. Then we will no longer call our faith into question. Our faith rests on a solid foundation.

Third, information that Luke records were from eyewitness and ministers of the word, namely the original Apostles. Luke had accurately researched all his facts. In Acts 21: 17 we were told that he had seen James at Jerusalem. Most likely, through James, he had become acquainted with Mary and the other brothers of Jesus, and had learned much from them. Luke could therefore be very precise about what he wrote, and give us places, names, and times of events.

Fourthly, the information Luke had, had been *delivered*', a term meaning traditions that had been passed on. Clearly very early on, people had thought that it was important to have this information.

Fifthly, Luke stressed that he was capable of compiling a perfectly true and orderly account about Jesus and His life. We know from looking at the Book of Luke and the Book of Acts, that Luke was not only educated, but was capable, hard-working and could accurately record the historical events, as well as the doctrines and teachings of an intellectual such as Paul.

Note as we study how in this first chapter how Luke introduces us to and stresses the preparation of Elizabeth and Zechariah as he tells us of the time frame of events and describes the central characters.

Luke is giving us insights into what God is doing and how He approaches human affairs so that we can learn much about the character and personality of God. Note these insights are given from the perspective of a Gentile, something we should treasure and pay special attention to since most believers nowadays are mostly from a Gentile background.

God apparently likes to use and have us focus on regular people. We like to laud the rich and famous or people who we think have great spiritual depth and maturity but God certainly seems to have a different approach.

God also seems to like to lay great stress of the hurting of women, particularly “barren” and seemingly unproductive women. We look carefully at the story of Sarah, at Rachel and her experience without children and of course at Hannah, the mother of Samuel.

Note also how the story progresses outward from the priestly class of Zechariah, to his wife who was a homebody, to Mary a teenage girl who was really simply insignificant to most, and who could fit into the class of someone at whom one could make crude jokes about her pregnancy. Then the story moves to include the most insignificant and lightly regard of all, the band of shepherds, whose occupation was at the bottom rung of desirable occupation.

Does this not tell us something about how God sees the world, in contrast to how we look at people and the world? Luke certainly wants to startle and to wake us up.

Luke's account begins with historical references, placing events squarely in a specific period of time. Throughout, he emphasized the Jewish roots of Christianity, frequently including references to the prophecies in the Old Testament Scriptures, referring to the line of David, stressing Jewish themes such as God's concern for the poor and the oppressed, and Jesus' carefulness about properly following the correct biblical traditions. At every step of the way, Luke proved that the historical events he was reciting were accurately fulfilling the promises of God in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Note Luke's careful arrangement of the events he records in chapter 1, linking Jesus and John. He tells of the events surrounding John's birth, and then compares it to the events surrounding Jesus' birth. He introduces the parents of Jesus and the parents of John. In each case, he tells about an angel appearing. In both cases, a sign is given to confirm the truth about the children that are to be born and childless women become pregnant in supernatural circumstances. Both John and Jesus are therefore tied together in several respects.

Luke makes it known that John was a prophet, but when he presents Jesus, by way of contrast, he presents Jesus as being more than a prophet. John was great, and there was joy at his birth, but Jesus is presented as linked to John, but as far greater, and worthy of much more joy.

The story we look at today is very important as it deals with the mystery of godliness, and how God manifests this to man.

Even a cursory examination tells much of the nature of God, how He assesses people, the qualities for which He seeks, and the qualities He prizes.

These people therefore, though clearly people with human flaws are persons who are approved by God. He deals with them in His own way, to punish and correct them, as well as to reinforce in them a proper perspective on who they are, and who He is.

Luke sets the birth of John in the time of Herod the Great, who ruled from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. and we can mull over what kind of leaders we have and what kind of damage they can do. One writer describes the leader and the times:

"Herod ...was the first Jewish king to sit on the throne since the fall of the southern kingdom some 580 years before. There had been 580 years of Jewish humiliation and servitude under Babylonians, Persians, the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great, the Ptolemy Empire of Egypt, and the Syrian domination of the Seleucids. Now, at this time, Israel was controlled by the might of Rome. There had only been 105 years in that entire period when Israel had known any independence, after the Maccabean revolt against the Syrians.

Herod was not a real king of Israel. He was merely a puppet, a vassal put there by the authority of Rome.

He was a man of degeneracy, not a man of god. He should have been a spiritual leader, a model to the people, yet he was anything but that. The land was rife with immorality. Herod had introduced Roman temples into the land and had built idols to Roman gods. He had introduced the Roman games into the life of Israel. Gentile money flooded the country, causing great economic instability and imbalance. He encouraged a Babylonian immigration into Israel which upset the economy. Even the priesthood was corrupt; there was much buying and selling of priestly offices. These were desperate times in Israel, times of darkness, weariness, injustice, disease, and economic desperation".

Are our times much different from the times then? Have the problems inflicting us in the society and among the people of God changed much? Do we struggle with diseases of many types and struggle with cancer, and pain killer and opioid addictions? Do we have people struggling with gambling, drinking, attempted suicide, unemployment, and wages which decrease in values as prices rise? Do we have grandparents raising children and battling with the State to raise up these children as God required?

These are desperate times for many today as they were back then, even though we have made much technological progress, and marked progress in fighting some diseases which unfortunately seem to have a new lease on life as our drugs lose their potency.

But then Luke changes the pictures in the middle of the darkness and corruption and he introduces us to the time appointed by God when He would begin His work with a simple, faithful couple as He had promised in great detail in the beautiful section of Isaiah 9:1-7. This should be compulsory reading before looking at the Lesson Scripture.

Zechariah, a name which means "the Lord remembers", was a priest, and a descendant of Aaron. He belonged to the division of priests in the class or course of Abijah. 1 Chronicles 24: 7-18 discussed the arrangement where only descendants of the sons of Aaron could serve in the sanctuary

itself. Each one of the courses ministered in the temple for a week at time. There were twenty four courses, the course of Abijah being the eighth. This arrangement was followed from the days of Solomon.

Because of the existence of this arrangement, there have been many attempts to calculate the exact time of the year that Jesus was born, by following the chronological date of the week of the course of Abijah. Some try to use this as the basis for calculating when John was born, and when Jesus was born, by calculating the date on which the course of Abijah fell. But it should be clear that any such calculation cannot be accepted with certainty, for one would have to prove first that Elizabeth became pregnant immediately after Zechariah returned home. In addition, it would have to be proved that the several courses of priests service, continued with absolutely no interruption in their succession, despite the wars, exile, or other political contingencies that we know occurred in the interim.

The text does not say that Zechariah was a High Priest, but only that he was a priest, despite what some might conjecture. Priests in each division served for one week twice a year.

THE TEXT

Verse 6. We learn that Zechariah's wife was also a descendant of Aaron. Any male child that they had would therefore be a priest.

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth, her name means “God’s oath”, were described as godly, upright, or pious Jews, who observed all the Commandments of God. This description indicated divine approval, such as that given to Noah. The description in verse 6 implied that they were blessed, and had the true character of Abraham.

This was rare, for the times were corrupt. The Pharisees had degenerated, and the Sadducees had sold out themselves for power and position.

This tells us that it is possible to be called “righteous” even when living in the midst of a corrupt nation. We can be righteous even in turbulent times. We therefore have no excuse for not living a life acceptable to God, despite the circumstances around us.

Note that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were descendants of Aaron. These godly people were careful to marry within the recommended boundaries, to keep themselves free from sundry mixtures that were unacceptable to God.

This precaution proved to be beneficial, for they both were found accepted by God, and placed in the remnant of God, in addition to being chosen for a most honourable and dignified position as parents of the Forerunner to Messiah.

We can learn a lesson from this. We too must be careful about what we do and the kind of intimate associations we form. It is not simply that our associations might be found to be evil in the sight of God, but it is important that we make the very best choices in our lives, so that God can use us in the number One role that he has reserved for us.

Verse 7. We are made to understand the fact that Elizabeth was childless. Having children, especially male children, was highly prized, and to be childless brought sorrow and often shame. In addition, every Jewish woman dreamed of being the mother of the Messiah, but Elizabeth’s dream had been dashed because of her old age. Certainly, she could look at the experience of Sarah in

Genesis 17, or Hannah in 1 Samuel 1, but to have her situation reversed so dramatically, as to become the mother of the Messiah in her old age was unthinkable.

Note that children are, and were then regarded as a gift from God.

But here were persons who were approved by God, walking in His way, in the commandments of God, following the way of life blameless, being honest and godly.

They had long wanted this particular blessing from God, the gift of children, but had been denied this blessing.

One writer comments:

“When God keeps His people long waiting for mercy He sometimes is pleased to recompense them for their patience by doubling the worth of it when it comes”.

Zechariah had a tour of duty in the Temple, and he would be responsible for serving during the morning and evening prayers. In his old age, he was given the great opportunity to offer incense in the Holy Place. Priests were chosen by lot for this great honor only once in their lifetime. The choice by this lot made this tour of duty therefore the climax of Zechariah’s career.

God had exercised His sovereignty and turned the ‘lot’ to choose this particular priest from the large number of priests available, and place him in the Holy Place. People might have thought that there was ‘chance’ in the casting of the lot, but God used it for His purposes. Proverbs 16: 33 reminds us:
*“The lot is cast into the lap,
But its very decision is from the Lord”*.

What was so important about the work of the priest at the altar of Incense?

The altar of incense was a small altar 18 inches square and three feet high, and it was used to burn sweet smelling incense. It was overlaid with gold, and placed in the Holy Place, near the Veil which divided the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Exodus 30:1-9 describes this altar and its purpose.

Aaron, the High Priest, was instructed to burn sweet incense every morning and every evening at twilight. Only a privileged few were permitted to so approach God in that Place and offer prayers. No unsanctified incense could be burned on that altar, and no other kind of offering was made on that altar.

Unger comments on this altar and its significance, and gives us some spiritual meanings connected with it.

“It was constructed of acacia wood (bespeaking Christ's humanity) and pure gold (symbolize his Deity). It was one a half feet square, three feet high, and equipped with rings and staves for transporting it. It had horns on its four corners, like the altar of burnt offering.

The horns on the Tabernacle’s altars evidently symbolized God's power as the “horns of.... Salvation” (2 Samuel 22: 3; Psalms 18: 2; Luke 1: 69), and therefore were regarded as places of refuge. (1 Kings 1: 50-51; 2: 28-32)

The incense altar was positioned in the Holy Place before the Veil. It portrays Christ our Intercessor in Heaven (John 17: 1-26; Hebrews 7: 25) through whom our prayers and praise (incense) ascend to God. (Hebrews 13: 15; Revelation 8: 3-4)

Aaron was to offer incense twice daily, showing how important prayer and praise are. There was to be no “strange incense” that was “unprescribed” or “improperly compounded”, speaking of “will-worship” (Colossians 2: 23), or purely ritual treadmill performance. See “strange fire” (Leviticus 10: 1-3)

For the cleansing of the altar, Aaron was to apply atoning Blood to its horns annually. The altar of incense sets forth what true worship is.”

Multitudes of people, the pious Jews, had gathered outside in the outer court, to pray silently while Zechariah offered prayers for the nation and burned incense, so that the sweet smell would ascend with the prayers to God. This was a very important function.

Note the scene. Zechariah’s work involved prayer.

Prayer was and is a great part of our service to God. In prayer we honour God, and commune with Him, and acknowledge who we are before Him, and His lordship.

While the priest prayed, the people of God also prayed outside. They spoke with one voice. These all were a praying people.

Verses 8-9. Zechariah was from the particular lineage that could serve in the temple but there were so many eligible priests, that service in the temple became recognized as a great privilege, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enter the Holy Place and burn incense before the Lord. Incense was burnt on the golden altar in the Holy Place every morning and every evening. Lots were cast to determine who would have this great privilege to enter the temple and officiate at offering the incense.

At this particular time the priestly duties in the temple fell to the priests in the division of Abijah, and Zechariah was elected to the coveted task of burning the incense in the Holy Place. One can easily imagine Zechariah's great anticipation of fulfilling his task. It is very likely that he would have talked to the other priests that had burned incense before the Lord, to find out what the experience was like to minister before the Lord in this special way.

One writer describes the elaborate procedure and ritual, so that we would understand the extreme significance the nation and the priests placed on this unique practice. Hopefully we will get some inkling as to how seriously we should take this matter of offering “sacrifice” to God, especially in view of the teaching of Scripture (Rev 8:4) that in Heaven our prayers are offered up to God with burning incense:

“There were several lots cast to determine who did what at the morning sacrifice. The first lot determined who would cleanse the altar and prepare its fire; the second lot determined who would kill the morning sacrifice and sprinkle the altar, the golden candlestick, and the altar of incense. The third lot determined who would come and offer incense.

This was the most privileged duty; those who received the first and second lots would repeat their duty at the evening sacrifice, but not with the third lot. To offer the incense would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Before dawn, hundreds of worshippers were gathered at the temple. The morning sacrifice began when the incense priest walked toward the temple, through the outer courts, he struck a

gong- like instrument known as the Magrephah. At this sound, the Levites assembled and got ready to lead the gathered people in songs of worship to God.

The other two priests chosen by lot that morning walked up to the temple on each side of the priest chosen to offer the incense. All three entered the Holy place together. One priest set burning coals on the golden altar; the other priest arranged the incense so it was ready to go. Then those two priests left the temple, and the incense priest was left all alone in the Holy place.

In front of him was the golden altar of incense; it was eighteen inches square and three feet high. On that small table lay the burning coals, with little wisps of smoke rising up, ready for the incense. Behind the gold altar was a huge, thick curtain, and behind that curtain was the Holy of Holies, the Most Holy Place, where no man could enter, except the high priest, and that only on the Day of Atonement. As he faced the golden altar of incense, to his right would be the table of showbread, and to his left would be the golden lamp-stand, which provided the only light for the holy place.”

So Zechariah, at what he would consider to be the greatest moment of his life, entered the Temple with a sense of awe and wonder, stood alone there in the dimly lit Holy Place, gazed at the curtain which hid from his sight the most sacred emblems of Israel in the Holy of Holies. He would then proceed to pray for the deliverance of Israel and the coming of King Messiah to fulfill those long-awaited and precious promises of God, and offer prayers of intercession on behalf of the people.

Understand that God has given Christians the same privilege, for the prayers of the saints, whether uttered alone or uttered with others, are presented as an offering to God the Father along with burning incense and these prayers go before God as perfume in the ‘nostrils’ of God.
(See Psalm 141: 2; Revelation 5: 8; and Revelation 8: 3-4).

So that is why we should pray often to God the Father, for not only do these prayers for ourselves and the prayers of intercession for others work for the benefit of the saints, but they are part of a sacred heavenly ceremony before our Father.

So Zechariah prayed. He knew that for four hundred years his people had not heard a word from any prophet, that there were large divisions and antagonisms in his nation between those who were nationalists and the Herodians and Sadducees, groups that were considered to be in league with Rome. The strict religious party of the Essenes had separated themselves from the Pharisees, the priests and all religious leaders and had condemned them as not following the way of God. The Zealots were trying to establish the kingdom of God with force by expelling the Romans from the country. Practically everyone hated the ruler Herod the Great, who someone described as:
“Jewish in religion, heathen in practice, and monster in character.”

Even the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, who was well aware that Herod seemed to enjoy murdering members of his family in order to protect his throne, is reported to have said of Herod,
“It is better to be Herod's hog than his son”.

This was a land of spiritual darkness and tension.

Verse 10. Luke tells us that a multitude of godly people (Luke likes to use the Greek word *laos* as a synonym for crowd) had gathered in the temple courtyards. Typically, when they saw the two of the three priests who had entered the temple leave the Temple, they would kneel or bow their heads before God and pray; for they knew that at that moment the priest who represented them before God was in the Holy Place and would be praying in the very presence of God.

True children of God are to be a praying people; and prayer is the great and principal piece of service by which we give honour to God, achieve favours from Him, and keep up our communion with Him.

Verse 11 & 12. As the situation unfolds it is stated that as Zechariah offered incense and prayed, an angel suddenly appeared.

The fact that incense was offered with the prayers was very significant. This practise was commanded by God.

Some commentators feel that our prayers to God are acceptable because of the incense of Christ's intercession which is now being offered to the Father.

Note also that no mere man had the right to be in the Holy Place. Only an angel would have the right to appear in the Holy Place with the priest.

Zechariah was gripped with fear, a natural reaction experienced by many previously. Daniel felt the same when he was visited by the angel Gabriel. See Daniel 10. Cornelius also was fearful when an angel visited him. The angel had to reassure Zechariah, telling him that his prayers had been heard.

Actually, Luke was stressing that it was amazing God chose to even visit this Temple given the corruption of the priesthood and the shenanigans going on there. Zechariah himself must have been flabbergasted that a simple, unimportant man like him would be considered worthy to be visited by an angel.

But the word used for prayer meant that Zechariah had had a specific petition. Some have felt that Zechariah had been praying for the coming of the Messiah in his lifetime. This type of prayer is found in Psalms 14: 7 and many priests would have made such a prayer. Others believe that Zechariah was still praying for a Son.

But actually, the son he was praying for, if this was in fact the case, was more closely connected with the redemption of Israel, than Zechariah could have dreamed of.

The angel followed up his reassurances with some great news.

First, his prayers had been heard.

Second, his wife Elizabeth would have a Son.

Third, his name would be called John.

The angel then described several things about the child and about the effect his birth would have. His name John means "God is gracious".

First, the child would be a joy and a delight. Having a male child to carry on the family name would be of great importance to that family. Elisabeth, his mother would no longer be embarrassed and disappointed. They would experience the joy which could only come when a prayer has been answered.

Second, many would rejoice at his birth. His work would bring joy to those to whom he would bring the message of repentance for the remission of sins.

Third, God regarded the child as a great person with a grave task. He had an esteemed place in the plan of God, as he would usher in a great ministry of salvation, preparing the way for the Great One, who would save the entire world. Clearly, John would be truly great, for it is God's opinion that is important. The statement by the angel however, hinted that John could not expect earthly greatness. We know that what God likes is not what the world likes.

Fourth, his special position meant he would have to be brought up as a Nazarite, not drinking anything fermented, no wine or strong drink. (Numbers 6: 1-21; Judges 13: 2-5). Nobody could therefore say that his actions and lifestyle were due to the influence of anything else but the influence of the Holy Spirit of God. In other words, he would be consecrated to the work of God. This would put John in a similar position with Sampson and Samuel, who had been born to parents who had no hope.

Fifth, he would be filled with the Holy Spirit from conception. The Spirit would be needed to guide John, protect him, and ensure that he remained obedient to the direction of God.

Sixth, John would be the forerunner of the Messiah, acting, living and behaving in such a way that all of Israel would be reminded of the ministry of the prophet Elijah.

Luke quoted from Malachi 3: 1 which spoke of an Elijah-like figure that would come to prepare the way for the Messiah. Zechariah certainly understood the words of the angel about that matter, for he repeated that theme in Luke 1: 76.

THE DOUBTING

Then doubts arose in Zechariah's mind. Zechariah was a senior priest who knew the Scriptures, and the experiences of Sarah, Hannah, and Rachel. He was a devout man, and knew he faced an angel. His objection seemed natural but the true reason behind the request for a sign from the angel, was known by God. Zechariah, given his position, should have believed without question. Sometimes we pray for certain things, but we do not really believe that God will hear us. See also the experience of believers in Acts 12: 1-17.

Zechariah's doubts that God had begun the greatest event in history, was particularly serious. He stood doubting in the presence of God and the angel, at the altar of incense. The angel's answer was full of dignity, and the name the angel gave, Gabriel, would immediately make Zechariah remember the visitation of this same Gabriel to Daniel. Zechariah would understand what the angel meant as he pulled rank and he said that he stood in the very presence of God, a place of great intimacy with God. Note that Jews believed that Gabriel was one of the seven archangels.

Gabriel however was not too severe with the erring Zechariah. The priest's unbelief carried a price tag however. For nine months or more, his attempts to speak would fail, and he thus would be

constantly reminded of his unbelief. Note that Zechariah was not only unable to speak, but he seemed to be also deaf. Verses 61 and 62 record that his relatives made signs to him when they were arguing over the name of the child.

God dealt justly with the Priest, for in fact he had been objecting to the Word of God.

But God was patient and showed His forbearance with sinful man.

God deal rather tenderly and graciously with him, putting a bridle on him, preventing him from expressing any unbelieving thoughts, and showing any distrust of God.

It is very likely that the silence caused by his affliction forced him to think more.

Verse 13. The angel first spoke a few words of comfort. He assured Zechariah that there was no need for fear. In fact, his prayers had been heard. This was most likely to be a reference to the priestly prayer that he had been making in line with his duty as a representative of the people of Israel. He would have been praying that God would send Messiah and that His kingdom would finally come.

Not only had God heard his official prayer, which we are sure he had spent much time preparing, but the angel told him that God would graciously give him the gift of a son, something for which he had long been praying but had for some time ceased. The angel's words were suggesting the soon fulfillment of his past long-held and delayed hopes. This kind of extraordinary promise which covered both seemingly impossible things would rock Zechariah. It all seemed too good to be true. Many had prayed for the coming of Messiah and nothing that happened. Many had prayed for children and nothing had happened. He himself had been praying for years for children and nothing had happened. His prayers for Messiah's coming had been many and yet nothing had happened.

Then the angel instructed that the name of his son which Elizabeth would give him should be called John. This was an extraordinarily unusual name for Levites and priests. It meant "***Yahweh has been gracious***", but it seemed to break all tradition. The insistence on this name later led to some controversy between the family and friends and Elizabeth.

Verse 14. God was giving them a gift and as a result both he and his wife would be joyful and happy and rejoice at the child's birth. Many would rejoice with them at the birth of the child, for what he would do would cause people to recognize his birth as a great and joyous event.

Verse 15. God would regard him as great, for he would have a special role in the plan of God. The phrase "*in the sight of God*" means that God had chosen him and approved of him. John's spiritual greatness would be the cause of joy.

He certainly would be devoted to God and the rules followed by the Nazarites and priests would certain apply to him. Indications are that he would have a very ascetic lifestyle, drinking neither wine nor strong drink. Note that it is difficult to determine from the description whether or not he would be completely a Nazarite.

The angel specifically stated however that from conception he would be controlled by the Holy Spirit of God. He would be consecrated to God and empowered and enabled to do everything that God required of him during his lifetime.

The Holy Spirit had historically been very selective in empowering persons in this way. The Spirit's choice certainly indicates that John was to be a chosen vessel of God. He was so important to God that his fitting and moulding would begin from conception.

Verse 16. John's ministry would be critically important, for he would fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 40:3-5, and the prophet Malachi, that is recorded in Malachi 4:5-6. Isaiah had said when he was speaking words of comfort to his people:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth; The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

The prophet Malachi in 3: 1 wrote: "*Behold, I send My messenger
And he will prepare the way before me.*"

Malachi 4:5-6 adds:

*"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 smite the earth with a curse."*

The passages of both Isaiah and Malachi are quoted by Luke in chapter 3:4-6 and referred to John the Baptist when he began his ministry.

As the prophets of God had done previously John would turn the hearts of many of the people of Israel back to God. The word "**turn**" is a term for "**conversion**", the changing of one's way of life, a turning away from sin and toward God.

So John would be the forerunner of Messiah, would preach a gospel of repentance, would stir up the desire for, and the expectation of the imminent coming of Messiah. He would purify the hearts of the people.

He would come with the same power and effectiveness of the great Old Testament prophet Elijah himself. When Elijah's ministry began, the people were rebellious and had turned away from God to Baal worship. Elijah had had to sternly rebuke King Ahab the idolatrous King of Israel, the husband of the idolatrous Jezebel, and told him to repent. He had called for the remnant to turn away from apostasy and return to God. Elijah had powerfully preached repentance and a pure covenant faith to that generation.

Similarly John would restore the pure faith to a rebellious people and prepare their hearts for the preaching of the Messiah Jesus Christ. He would have to deal with a rebellious generation of Israelites and corrupt leadership, and would have to be stern and unafraid in calling the remnant away from apostasy.

The world was in darkness and needed a Savior, and it was time for the prophesied forerunner to precede the Messiah and to call the people away from unbelief.

Verse 17. It was time. This was a generation badly in need of reconciliation. The heart of the fathers had to become the hearts of the children, and the disobedient would have to learn the wisdom of the righteous. Very few had been following the path of the Fathers of the nation. They had veered away from the path of Abraham and the patriarchs. They had to be redirected, and reoriented, turning away from the life that they now led. The Messiah was coming and when He did, those that did not have the *wisdom of the just*, whose heart were locked into sin, would face a terrible end.

Verse 18. Zechariah should have believed the angel and thank God for His gracious promise, for now God was initiating a new phase in the plan of salvation.

There was no question that he was a godly man, was obedient to the law, had ministered for a lifetime and knew the Old Testament Scriptures. He knew that God had given Sarah a son in her old age. It was not that God was doing something now that he had never done before. He knew that God had several times intervened in history in a gracious way. He knew that God had previously made and fulfilled many extraordinary promises.

It was not that God was asking him to believe in a virgin conception, which would of course be something very new. God was simply telling them that he and his wife would have a son in their old age.

The sad fact is that this was unbelief in someone that should never be found in that situation. He was a man of God, but his behavior proved he was just a man whose faith fell short. He was like many of us, a person of faltering faith. Because of faltering faith many men of God fail to hold on properly to the promises of God and depend on them. It is sad and it is a tragedy but it happens all too frequently.

Zechariah stood in the now brilliantly lit Holy Place, facing the gloriously shining angel standing there in all his splendor, and amazingly asked: “*How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years*”.

This is what weak faith does to a believer. It makes us waver and we do ridiculous things. We forget to ‘count our blessings, and name them one by one’.

Zechariah had ceased to believe that God would answer the greatest desire of his heart to provide a son for him, and would probably not send the Messiah for a long time. It just didn’t seem logical or meaningful anymore.

Verse 19. But on this occasion as on many occasions since, God did something gracious to help Zechariah believe. He often treats us the same way, graciously responding to our weaknesses.

It is probably difficult for us to understand what was going on among the believing people of Israel. If we did we probably would not be so hard on Zechariah, nevertheless, Zechariah made a serious mistake.

It was not easy for the godly people of Israel to live through four hundred years of silence, crying out every night, asking whether God had forgotten them, had failed them, had decided not to keep his word.

They had endured years of foreign rule, seeing the Maccabean dynasty come to power and quickly begin to violate many of the cherished dreams of the people of God. There were continuing power struggles among them and infighting had been shameful. And now an Edomite, a descendent of Esau, a person which should never ever be over the people of God, was on the throne. He was placed there by the cruel, barbarous, Gentile Romans, who delighted in worshiping a multiplicity of abominable gods. No wonder faith had begun to falter. Maybe Zechariah wanted to believe but couldn't.

But then there never is any excuse for faltering faith. So Gabriel responded with a “**Look man, do you know who I am? Are your eyes open? Just look at me! Are you going to talk to me that way when I'm here to give you good news, the best news you could ever have?”** (**Excuse the interpretation.**) Gabriel just has to pull rank in response to Zecharias' foolishness. (I wonder what God would have to do to us sometimes).

He reminded Zechariah of who he was and where he came from. He made it known that he stood in the presence of God, was a special messenger of God and had even previously communicated God's plan to Daniel. He represented the power of God. He always stood in the presence of God. The angel reminded Zechariah that he should be extremely happy for what he had been told and praise God, instead of questioning him.

Verse 20. Zechariah wanted a sign and he would get one. Actually this seemed like a very simple and gentle sign, but it was a stern one.

Since he did not believe and since he had asked a silly question, he would be dumb and not able to speak until the predicted event of the birth of the child took place. The discipline fitted the sin.

It seems to happen to us that same way sometimes. God seems to look at our sin and give us a dose of our own medicine. When we are proud He does something to make us lose that sense of pride. He shows us up and our pride appears to be silly. When we love too much money, He invariably takes it away from us. When we like to speak what is not correct He invariably makes us too embarrassed to speak.

But note that this generally happens only to people of God. God wants to change His people. Often He lets the wicked get worse and worse, allowing them to enjoy their sin and continue their slide on the slippery slope, for that is the only thing that they will enjoy.

God dealt kindly with him, and very tenderly and graciously. For, **firstly**, he prevented Zacharias speaking any more distrustful unbelieving words. It is better not to speak at all than to speak wickedly. **Secondly**, he confirmed his faith; and, by his being disabled to speak, he is enabled to think about the matter more, and think better thoughts about God and His will. If by the rebukes we are under for our sin we are brought to give more credit to the word of God, we have no reason to complain of them. **Thirdly**, he was kept from divulging the vision, and boasting of it, which

otherwise he would have been apt to do, whereas it was designed for the present to be lodged as a secret with him.

Fourthly, it was a great mercy that God's words should be fulfilled in their season, notwithstanding his sinful distrust. The unbelief of man shall not make the promises of God of no effect, they shall be fulfilled in their season, and he shall not be for ever dumb, but only till the day that these things shall be performed, and then his lips shall be opened, that his mouth may show forth God's praise. Thus, though God chastens the iniquity of His people with the rod, yet His loving kindness will not be taken away.

CONCLUSION

Elizabeth and Zacharias played an important role in the coming of the Messiah. The events surrounding the birth of John revealed much about the character of these righteous people, and as such there are many lessons that we can learn by studying the way God deals with His people. Their strengths and weaknesses, their faith and doubt are all on display that we may learn by them.

Both Zacharias and Elizabeth are said to be righteous, walking in all the commandments. Their knowledge of the Scriptures, faith and patience apparently gave them insight into the future redemptive plan of God, thus they eagerly looked forward to the coming of the Messiah.

They lived their lives in such a manner that they were evidently vessels willing to be used by God. Elizabeth was barren and like Sarah past the age of child bearing. Thus they probably never thought that God would have used them in this capacity.

They really are ordinary people like you and I, who had been praying for a son, and at this time knew that only God's direct intervention could bring this to pass.

It is interesting to see the different reaction of the righteous to answered prayer and the call of God on their lives. Zacharias having an angelic visitation while performing Temple duty apparently struggled with the enormity of God's blessing; and doubt entered his mind.

In this case God dealt somewhat severely with His servant. This scenario is however an all too common occurrence. Have you ever earnestly prayed, then said "I can't believe it!" when you received God's reply? Probably more than once, right.

Thank God that His mercy leads His servants to appreciate His purpose, power and grace.

Elizabeth's faith however did not falter, her belief reached beyond the bonds of the naturally possible, and the greatness of her blessing did not lift her up in pride. The humility of Elizabeth was made plain when we see her encounter with her cousin. Her ability to receive the things of the Spirit also shone brightly, having direct revelation of the divine nature of Christ.

It is therefore evident that God has an extremely high calling for women. The pattern for godliness for all women today can be found simply by looking at the lives of the righteous women of Scripture.

Let us then look toward the traits of godly men and women. Let us avoid the mistakes they made and emulate those characteristics that brought them blessings.