

ZACHARIAS, THE FATHER OF
"THE PROPHET" OF THE HIGHEST

Luke 1:67-80

Intro: According to Alfred Edersheim (The Life and Times of Jesus The Messiah, Vol. I, p. 135), Luke 1, beginning with v. 5, records an event which took place about 6 B.C.

The priesthood of Israel was made up of 24 courses, or groups of priests, and Levites who assisted them. Each course served in the temple for one week. So this meant that each course served about twice a year.

Zacharias belonged to "the course of Abia" (Luke 1:5). This course was "the eighth in the original arrangement of the weekly service" (Ibid.). "There must have been each day about fifty priests on duty" (Op. cit., p. 134).

Each morning the priests who were to take part in the morning sacrifice were chosen by lot. They were to help in the sacrifice of the lamb, the trimming of the candlesticks, and the offering of the incense.

The most solemn part of the day's duties was the offering of the incense "which symbolised Israel's accepted prayers" (Ibid.). As the preparations were being made for the offering of the incense, "again was the lot . . . cast to indicate him, who was to be honoured with this highest mediatorial act. Only once in a lifetime might any one enjoy that privilege. Henceforth he was called 'rich,' and must leave to his brethren the hope of the distinction which had been granted him" (Ibid.). (The italics are mine.) This time the lot fell to Zacharias.

How overwhelmed he must have been, waiting as he had until he had passed his sixtieth birthday. (This was the age to which the term, "well stricken in years," applied--to 60 and after.) Priests were not disqualified by age--only by infirmity.

Although his life seems to have been characterized by waiting, and by disappointment, he was soon to realize why God had waited, and that this was indeed a divine appointment.

Zacharias was probably well-known for three reasons:

- (1) His age.
- (2) His marriage. "To be a priest, and married to the daughter of a priest, was supposed to convey twofold honour" (Op. cit., p. 135).
- (3) His character, and that of his wife (Luke 1:6).

So he must have been a very unusual person.

To complete the background, let me read from the words of Eidersheim as he describes how Zacharias would have proceeded to offer the incense:

"For the first, and for the last time in life the lot had marked him for incensing, and every thought must have centred on what was before him. Even outwardly, all attention would be requisite for the proper performance of his office. First, he had to choose two of his special friends or relatives, to assist in his sacred service. Their duties were comparatively simple. One reverently removed what had been left on the altar from the previous evenings's service; then, worshipping, retired backwards. The second assistant now advanced, and, having spread to the utmost verge of the golden altar the live coals taken from that of burnt offering, worshipped, and retired. Meanwhile the sound of the 'organ' (the Magrephah), heard to the most distant parts of the Temple, and, according to tradition, far beyond its precincts, had summoned priests, Levites, and people to prepare for whatever service or duty was before them. For, this was the innermost part of the worship of the day. But the celebrant Priest, bearing the golden censer, stood alone within the Holy Place, lit by the sheen of the seven-branched candlestick. Before him--somewhat farther away, towards the heavy Veil that hung before the Holy of Holies, was the golden altar of incense, on which the red coals glowed. To his right (the left of the altar--that is, on the north side) was the table of shewbread; on his left, on the right or south side of the altar, was the golden candlestick. And still he waited, as instructed to do, till a special signal indicated, that the moment had come to spread the incense on the altar, as near as possible to the Holy of Holies. Priests and people had reverently withdrawn from the neighbourhood of the altar, and were prostrate before the Lord, offering unspoken worship, in which record of past deliverance, longing for mercies promised in the future, and entreaty ~~to~~ present blessing and peace, seemed the ingredients of the incense, that rose in a fragrant cloud of praise and prayer. Deep silence had fallen on the worshippers, as if they watched to heaven the prayers of Israel, ascending in the cloud of 'odours' that rose from the golden altar in the Holy Place. Zacharias waited, until he saw the incense kindling. Then he also would have 'bowed down in worship,' and reverently withdrawn, had not a wondrous sight arrested his steps" (Vol. I, pp. 137, 138).

At this point Luke picks up the story. A prayer, so long prayed, but never answered, is now about to be answered, and with greater significance than Zacharias could ever have anticipated. What a marvelous illustration of God's perfect timing! The humiliation of Elisabeth was to be lifted from

her heavy heart. They could not have had their son before because they had to wait for Mary who, unlike they, was a young, engaged woman.

Their son would come in fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. And God was going to do for Zacharias and Elisabeth what he had done for Abraham and Sarah so long ago!

Do you wonder at Zacharias' question in Luke 1:18?

As a consequence of this he was not to speak at all until the time of the circumcision of their son.

What did he do during that time?

Luke 1:24 indicates that Elisabeth was secluded for five months--which probably means that Zacharias was too. After that Mary came, but we have no word of Zacharias until after John had been born.

His Benedictus, as it has been called, gives us the answer. Listen to these words from Alexander Whyte:

"Do you still ask what Zacharias was doing all that time? Has your New Testament a margin with readings? Your so instructive margin, if you will attend to it, will tell you the very Scriptures over which Zacharias spent his days and nights all that silent time in Hebron. All you have got to do some day, when you are in the mind, is to consult the margin over against Zacharias's prophetic song, and you are in that as good as looking over his shoulder at his writing table. You are as good as walking out alone with him when he goes abroad among the sunseting rocks of Judea to wonder, and to praise, and to pray over Elisabeth and himself and their unborn son" (Bible Characters, Vol. II, p. 24).

HE HAD BEEN IN GEN. IN THE PSALMS, IN ISAIAH, IN MALACHI.
(ESP.)

What were the results?

- I. The father of "the prophet" had become a man of faith. ("Faith cometh by hearing . . ." - Rom. 10:17). His mouth was opened when he wrote, "John."
- II. The father of "the prophet" was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:67).

Do we not have a definition here? A person is filled with the Holy Spirit when he is filled with the Word of God, i.e., when he is filled with the knowledge of the Word, and walking in obedience to that Word. (Other Scriptures bear this out.)

- III. The father of "the prophet" turned the Word into prayer, into praise (Luke 1:68-79).

How is his praise divided? First

- A. Praise for the Messiah, the "horn of salvation" (Luke 1:69). ~~HE WILL COME FIRST WHEN THE WORLD IS FILLING OUR HEARTS.~~

The whole section speaks of praise for redemption-- down to v. 75.

- B. Charge to his infant son (Luke 1:76-79). ~~WHAT A SPIRITUAL HERITAGE JOHN HAD!~~

He was to be what Archbishop Trench called, an "outspeaker."

He was not to prophesy concerning the future, but to explain for Israel what was happening at that time. He was given a message, and was commissioned to preach it, filled with the Spirit, with the authority of God behind him.

"OF THE HIGHEST" - GEN. 14
THE GOD OF ABRAHAM.

He was born a priest; he was to live a prophet. (Note his message of salvation.)

Concl: What was this to mean for him?

Cf. Luke 1:80.

Heaven had been silent for 400 years. His father had been silent for 9 months. Since a priest began at 20, it is quite possible that at that time he withdrew and spent some ten years himself in silence, becoming "strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel" (Luke 1:80).

The message which was to shake the world was introduced into the world in silence! The messengers had to be prepared to carry the wonderful message they had, and to be willing to be background for the greater glory of the Saviour and Messiah.