

THE ANGEL'S MESSAGE TO ZACHARIAS

Luke 1:5-23

Intro: Today I am beginning a brief series of five messages on *The Birth of Christ*, and I am doing this with a special emphasis on the Names and Titles that are given to the Lord in these passages. In my message for today we will be looking into the announcement which “an angel of the Lord” gave to Zacharias concerning the son which the Lord was going to give to Zacharias and his wife, Elisabeth. The Lord willing, I expect to follow this message with the angel Gabriel’s message to the virgin Mary. The third message will be on the message the angel of the Lord gave to Joseph who was engaged to be married to Mary, but this message was in a dream. The fourth message will be that which Zacharias gave after the birth of his son, John, who is known to us as John the Baptist. And then I will conclude with the message given to the shepherds after the birth of our Lord. In four of the five messages we will be concerned with the message of angels – all probably the same angel, Gabriel, with the addition of the heavenly host who appeared to the shepherds saying, or probably singing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14).

This, of course, does not include all of the historical records given in the four Gospels concerning the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, but, as I have said, my purpose is really to focus upon what was said in these passages regarding Who the Lord was, and what He came to do – in other words, His Names and His titles. And I have focused mainly on the ministry of angels to help us to see the solid testimony which was given concerning our Lord as a Person, as well as the work which He came to do. I hope that these messages will be beneficial to all of us spiritually, and that we will profit in many ways as we focus attention upon our Lord Jesus Christ. *We live in a commercialized and an increasingly pagan society where Christmas can be observed with little or nothing said about Christmas. Merchants are concerned about selling their goods and people are concerned about buying what they have to sell. But as little attention as possible is given to Christ. May we be careful not to set the Lord aside in all of the activities of the Christmas season.*

When the angel appeared to Zacharias in the passage before us today, an amazing thing was happening. *God was breaking a silence that had lasted approximately four hundred years!* I don’t mean by this that God has not been doing anything during those years. I do not mean that He has not been answering prayers. I do not mean that God had not been transforming lives. All of that and much more had continued during those four hundred years, often called, *silent years*.

They are called *silent years* because from the time of Malachi until the events leading to the birth of the virgin Mary's son *there had been no new revelation from God. No prophet had been raised up by God to give us another book of the Bible.* The NT has been completed, but that was all.

The Gospel records show that during that time a great deal of corruption had developed in Israel. The Pharisees and the Sadducees arose, and there were synagogues built many towns where the Jewish people gathered for their services. But what was worse was the fact that additions were made to the Old Testament Scripture, and much that was written was often corrupted and overruled by those who were in charge. So the religious life of most people was at a very low ebb.

And yet there was a godly remnant. There were people who knew the Lord, and who were concerned about the hope of Israel. And it is about some of those people that we learn in the opening chapters of the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke.

One of them was:

I. A PRIEST NAMED ZACHARIAS (Luke 1:5-7).

The times in which Zacharias and Elisabeth lived were not good times. The nation Israel was under the heel of Rome, and so Judea was actually ruled by a foreigner, Herod. But this made no difference to Zacharias and Elisabeth as far as their relationship to God was concerned. They both were descendants of Aaron, and when we are introduced to Zacharias we find that at that particular time he was acting as a priest. He was of the course of Abia, or as the name is given in 1 Chron. 24:10, "Abijah." It was his responsibility to offer incense for that specific day about which we are told in our text.

Verse 6 of our text speaks volumes of the spiritual character of both Zacharias and Elisabeth.

In the first place Luke made it very clear that both were really saved. He wrote, "They were both righteous before God." This is a very clear statement that they knew the Lord. They did not believe that they were saved because he was a priest and both were descendants of Aaron, in the nation Israel. But they knew that salvation was by faith in the promises that God had given throughout the history of Israel of a coming Redeemer. They knew that it was not because of Zacharias' priestly work that he was saved, or that she was saved because she was also a descendant of Aaron, and married to Zacharias. They both understood that salvation was a

matter of personal faith in the coming Redeemer. They knew that salvation was by faith, and not by works. This is the Holy Spirit's testimony to the genuineness of their faith. "They both were righteous before God."

Often when people talk about salvation, or getting to heaven, they mention what they are *before men*. However, all of the goodness that man can produce before his fellow men, will never be enough to make us acceptable to God. And Zacharias and Elisabeth understood this very well.

As proof of their salvation, they were "walking in all the commandments." This refers to those commandments given to Israel in the Law, not to obtain salvation, but as evidence that they were saved. Whether we are speaking of the commandments given to the nation Israel under the Law, or the commandments given by our Lord Jesus Christ, or those given later in the epistles, true obedience was only possible in the lives of those who were right before God, and who were therefore trusting the Lord to make it possible for them to live in obedience to the will of God.

But they were also "walking in all the . . . ordinances of the Lord." This probably is a reference to the offerings that were required of them under the Law. It would include the observance of those holy days which were required of the people under the Law. And note that they paid attention to "all the commandments and ordinance of the Lord"! That showed that they were knowledgeable of the Scriptures in a days when the religious teachers of Israel had so mixed the Word of God with the regulations that men had added, that most people did not know what really was the Word of God. But Zacharias and Elisabeth knew, and it was their purpose in life to find out what *the Lord* wanted them to do, and then they did it – not just at certain times or on certain days, but it was the way they lived day by day.

And, in regard to the Word and its bearing upon their lives, they were "blameless." This does not mean that they were perfect, but it does mean that they could not be charged with any willful violation of God's Word.

This is a remarkable testimony to be given to any child of God at any time in his or her life, but with conditions as they were in the nation Israel in Zacharias' day, this was an outstanding witness to the godliness of their lives. And it is all to the Lord's glory. Regardless of how bad things can get, the Lord always has people who know Him, love Him, trust Him, and who are living for Him. Zacharias the Elisabeth were two people in whose hearts the Lord had done a deep work of grace.

However, there was one great sorrow in their lives: they had no children.

And their situation, humanly speaking, was hopeless because Elisabeth was barren. And at the moment to which Luke was referring, they were “well stricken in years,” *i.e.*, beyond the ages where they could have children. Undoubtedly, like Elkanah and Hannah before them, this matter had been laid before the Lord for years, but God had not been pleased to bless them with a family, and especially with a son.

This leads in Luke’s account to:

II. THE APPEARANCE OF THE ANGEL, GABRIEL (Luke 1:8-17).

In spite of their long-standing disappointment, Zacharias was faithfully doing the work that the Lord had appointed for him to do. We don’t know how many priests there were who were doing what he was doing, *i.e.*, doing the will of God from the heart. There certainly were not many, but Zacharias was one of them. He teaches us to trust the Lord even when our prayers are not answered. Our obedience to the Lord must not have any conditions attached to it.

It is really a beautiful picture that we have here at a time when the nation had sunk to the depths spiritually. Outside, because the people were not allowed to come in where the priest was, there were many people, and they were praying. Again, we do not know how many of them were really praying, and how many were only saying prayers. At any rate they appeared to be praying, and we must give them the benefit of the doubt. God was their Judge.

Suddenly something very unexpected happened. “There appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.” This angel, whose name we learn from verse 19, was “Gabriel.” He didn’t make himself known to the people. He appeared to Zacharias alone.

We can well understand Zacharias’ reaction. He was “troubled, and fear fell upon him.” Zacharias had been going about his work calmly and carefully when the appearance of the angel disturbed him greatly, and made him afraid. To say that “fear fell upon him” means that it took possession of him, fear controlled him. He was beside himself with fear. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before, and he did not know how to handle it.

Gabriel sought immediately to calm his fears. He spoke those words from the Lord which have often calmed the worst fears that people can have. And the angel went on to say that what he and Elisabeth had been praying

about for years, was finally to take place. *They were going to have a son!* And the angel even told Zacharias what his son's name was to be: "John"!

So before his child was even conceived, and without the aid of an ultra sound, Zacharias knew that he was to be the father of a son. Thayer tells us that John means, "God is a gracious Giver." And this idea carries over from the Hebrew. God is the One Who named John the Baptist, because his very birth as well as his ministry had to do with *the grace of God in salvation!* This was a truth which Zacharias and Elisabeth understood to some degree, but now that truth was to be impressed upon them as never before.

We can understand why Gabriel said what he did in verse 14. That would have been true of any son that he and Elisabeth might have had. And the fact that "many shall rejoice at his birth" would also be easy to understand. There may have been many of their friends who had been praying with them that God would give them a child. But the "joy and gladness" which the angel had in mind was completely beyond that "joy and gladness" which normally accompanies the birth of a child, and the "many" would include countless numbers of people, people whom Zacharias and Elisabeth would never meet, because this was a son whose ministry of the grace of God would touch countless numbers of people in Israel, and even down to the present day we rejoice in what God was doing then through His two faithful and devoted servants.

Now I said at the beginning of my message that my special emphasis in these messages which have to do with the birth of Christ, would be in the *names* and *titles* that are given to the Lord Jesus Christ in the Scripture passages we will be considering together. Let me point out to you three statements in our text that I want you to notice in particular:

- 1) In verse 15: "For he [John] shall be great in the eyes of the Lord."
- 2) In verse 16: "And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God."
- 3) And then at the end of verse 17: "To make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Sometimes, it is true, the name, or title, "Lord," (whichever you want to call it, is used of God the Father, but it seems clear that here the angel was speaking of the one who would go before the Lord, preparing a people for the Lord, and that could be none other than the Lord Jesus Christ! John's ministry was a ministry that pointed to Christ. His passion was the glory of Christ. He pointed even his own disciples to the Lord Jesus.

Now these words of the angel Gabriel meant that the One Whom John the

Baptist would go before, was the Lord. This meant that He, not John, but the Lord, would be a Member of the Godhead. It meant that in coming He would not cease in any way to be the Lord. It meant that the Lord would be absolutely sovereign in what He was coming to do. For the angel to call our Lord Jesus, “Lord,” meant that He was coming to minister the goodness of God to the people He would gather to Himself. That idea is contained in the Greek word for Lord. And for the forerunner of our Lord, to be named John, meant that John’s ministry and his message would be evidence that God is a gracious Giver.

So the birth of John the Baptist was like salvation itself. He was a gift, a gift of a gracious God, and that gift of God’s grace would be manifested in One Who rightly carries the name, “Lord.” And the whole ministry of John the Baptist was not for him to exalt himself, but for him to exalt the Lord.

Years later when John the Baptist preached, what was his message? “Behold, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). And speaking of our Lord, John said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). But when John baptized the Lord Jesus, the Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove, and the Father spoke from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). And then what did John say? “And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God” (John 1:34).

Oh, in these days when many religious teachers try to humanize the Deity right out of the Lord, let us be firmly convinced in our own minds that Jesus of Nazareth was none other than the Lord of Glory Who came in human flesh that He might save His people from their sins. No one but the Lord could offer the perfect sacrifice that was required to save Zacharias and Elisabeth and their son, John, from their sins. And no one but the Lord, the Son of God, could possibly offer a sacrifice that would be sufficient for your salvation and mine. Many things will be said about Jesus again at this Christmas season, but anyone who does not declare that He is the Lord, is uttering blasphemy!

What was the effect upon Zacharias? The remainder of our text tells us.

III. THE UNBELIEF OF ZACHARIAS (Luke 1:18-23).

We have seen that Zacharias was a true believer, but sometimes we as believers can be guilty of not believing God. Gabriel made it clear that he was not declaring his own message, but that he had come with a message from God, which he called “these glad tidings.”

I am not going to try to excuse Zacharias' unbelief because Gabriel didn't excuse it. But I can understand it. I am sure that the truth of salvation became clearer to Zacharias, the longer Gabriel spoke. But it seemed impossible to him because he did not see how he and Elisabeth could possibly have a son. It had been impossible all along, but at their ages it seemed more impossible than ever. What was the Lord seeking to teach Zacharias? That the things that are impossible with man (including his own salvation), are impossible with God.

But even those nine months, or a little more, of silence, was an act of God's grace. When Zacharias could not speak, he had to do a lot of what? Listening. And in one of the messages we will have in this series, we will see how much Zacharias learned during those days when he was unable to say a word.

Concl: May we always remember that when we speak of Jesus as the Lord Jesus, we are not only declaring that He was the Son of God manifest in human flesh, but that His very coming was a testimony that God is a gracious Giver, and that the gift of salvation which He provided in His Son was an expression of the infinite goodness of God. He is the sovereign Lord, calling sinners to Himself. And all who hear, come. I close with Isaiah's words of appeal uttered so long ago, and yet just as needed today as ever -- Isaiah 55:6-7:

6 Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near:

7 Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.