

**International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
December 18, 2016**

Lesson Text: Luke 1:8-20

Lesson Title: The Forerunner of the Saviour

Introduction

The story of the incarnation of Jesus Christ is not a myth. It is a verifiable story both biblically and historically. Luke, the author of third gospel, because he was a careful historian, provides his readers a detailed account of how the Son of God came to earth. Part of his story includes the working of miracles and divine intervention in the lives of different people in different places.

As Luke's gospel opens, it has been over five hundred years since a miracle has occurred. It has also been five hundred years since an angel appeared, and over four hundred years since God has spoken. God breaks the silence with an angelic announcement to a priest named Zacharias and his barren wife Elisabeth. The angel told Zacharias his barren wife Elisabeth would become pregnant and give birth to the forerunner of the Savior, John the Baptist. This is a great moment in the life of Zacharias, Elisabeth, the nation of Israel, and the world.

The Priest (Luke 1:8-12)

Verse 8-9

“And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.”

“He” is a reference to “...a certain priest named Zacharias” (Luke 1:5). There are several men named “Zacharias” in the Bible. One Old Testament prophecy bears the name, “Zacharias.” The name means, “The Lord remembers” and signifies God has never forgotten His promises to Israel throughout their long history.

Luke gives us several details about “Zacharias.” First, he was “righteous” (Luke 1:6). Second, his wife's name was “Elisabeth” (Luke 1:5). Third, Luke tells us Zacharias was “executing the priest's office before God in the order of his course.” It has been estimated the number of active priests at this time in history to be around 20,000. The priests were divided into twenty-four divisions and subdivided into four to nine houses, each serving a daily rotation during their week of service (1 Chronicles 24:1-18). On this occasion, Zacharias' “lot

was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord” (Exodus 30:7-8).

Twice each day, a priest would enter the Holy Place, trim the wicks on the lampstand and burn incense on a small altar in front of the veil separating him from the Most Holy Place. Considering the number of priests, this was likely the one and only time Zacharias would perform this duty. This was no ordinary day in more than one way!

Verse 10-12

“And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.”

While Zacharias was trimming the lamps in the Holy Place, the crowds gathered in the courtyard of the temple for the morning or evening prayers. They would wait there for word the offerings had been made and accepted. In this holy scene as the smoke cleared from the incense, “there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.”

Luke does not tell us what form the “angel of the Lord” took, but his presence deeply affected Zacharias as “he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.” The word “troubled” comes from the Greek word *tarasso* {tar-as’-so} which means “agitated.” “Fear” is the Greek word *phobos* {fob’os} which means “alarm or fright.” Zacharias has been brought face-to-face with a messenger from another world.

The Promise (Luke 1:13-17)

Verse 13

“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.”

The angel’s first words were “Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son...” The overwhelming presence of the Lord at the altar must have caused Zacharias to think he might die. The angel assured him he need not worry. His “prayer” had been “heard” and he and his wife were going to have “a son.”

We do not know how many times Zacharias and Elizabeth prayed for a child. The word “prayer” is the Greek word *deesis* {deh-ay-sis} which indicates a long-standing petition. They were old; so, it might have been a while. They may well have given up on their prayer. Maybe they considered that prayer a hopeless

prayer, one they would never see answered. But here is a lesson we learn about prayer from Zacharias and Elisabeth. Prayers are not rejected just because God's answers are delayed. If we have prayer requests of God, keep praying!

Christmas is about to begin with God answering a long-standing prayer for two elder people. It remains incredible how God works in lives in such small and seemingly insignificant ways. Never doubt or underestimate what God can do through you or anyone who will trust Him.

The angel told Zacharias his son's name would be "John." The name "John" means "God is gracious." By giving Zacharias' and Elisabeth's son the name "John," God is declaring He is about to send "grace" to a lost world. The message of Christmas is God's amazing grace!

Verse 14

"And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth."

The angel's message to Zacharias was not a message of fear or sadness. His message was nothing to be sad about, it was something to be "joyful and glad." Zacharias and Elisabeth would have "joy" at the birth of John. In fact, "many shall rejoice at his birth." "Joy" is the Greek word *chara* {khar-ah} which means "cheerfulness, calm, delight." Israel had known misery, darkness, and the silence of God for four hundred years. The tyranny of Rome and Herod hung over their head even as the angel was speaking to Zacharias. But now, "John," the herald of the Messiah, was to come, bringing "joy and gladness."

Verse 15

"For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb."

The angel revealed John would be "great in the sight of the Lord." "Great" is the Greek word *megas* {meg-as} which means "big, large, wide in application." John would come carrying great stature and weight with "the Lord."

"...And shall drink neither wine nor strong drink..." This meant John would be consecrated as a Nazirite from birth, designating him as a messenger from God, holy and set apart for special use by the Lord.

According to the law given to Israel through Moses, a man fulfilling a vow to accomplish a task for the Lord would abstain from anything associated with the juice of the grapes, including wine or raisins (Numbers 6:1-21). A Nazirite would refrain from cutting his hair or touching a dead carcass until the task had been completed.

Moreover, the angel revealed John would “be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.” “Filled with the Holy Ghost” means John was under the control of the Holy Spirit. God often gave Old Testament believers a special gift of the Holy Spirit to accomplish a task. John would be “filled” with the Holy Ghost from the moment of conception. Never before had someone been “filled with the Holy Ghost” from conception to death.

Verse 16-17

“And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

The angel’s words in these verses are a partial quotation from Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6. “Many” Israelites did “turn to the Lord” through John’s ministry (Matthew 3:5-6; Mark 1:4-5). The word “turn” carries the idea of “conversion.” Part of the reason they repented and came to the Lord was because John ministered “in the spirit and power of Elias,” or Elijah. This is important because the Jews believed that before the Messiah would come to establish His kingdom, the prophet Elijah must come. They believed that because of the prophesy in Malachi 3 and 4. So, the Jews were expecting Elijah, but they got John the Baptist ministering “in the spirit and power of Elijah.”

John’s ministry would so affect “the hearts of the fathers to the children” that families in Israel would be changed forever. God used John’s ministry to restore families to the hope of Messiah. He used John to convict the “disobedient” and touch the “wisdom of the just.” The “wisdom of the just” is speaking about those hardened skeptics in Israel who needed their hearts softened with understanding concerning the coming of Messiah. Simply stated, John came to “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

The Proof (Luke 1:18-20)

Verse 18-19

“And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.”

“Zacharias” responded to Gabriel’s announcement with the words, “Whereby shall I know this?” It is hard to fault Zacharias for his question. The news was almost too much to believe. However, the angel did not appreciate the lack of trust on the part of Zacharias. Disbelief has no place in the house of God and

no place in the heart of man. Zacharias stands for all time as the man who put the first question mark on Christmas.

Verse 20

“And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.”

Questioning God’s message is serious and has consequences. Gabriel told Zacharias he would be “dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed.” Zacharias was forced into the silent world of the speechless. In the quietness of his heart he would have plenty of time to ponder the words of promise. Not being able to talk was an everyday every moment reminder of his unbelief. His speech would not return to him “until the day that these things be performed.”

Gabriel’s words “which shall be fulfilled in their season” is a powerful reminder that disbelief does not stop the promises of God from being fulfilled. Faithless people could not prevent the first Christmas and they cannot prevent Christmas today.

Conclusion

Christmas is about believing the promise God has sent His only begotten Son into the world (John 3:16). Sixth months before the angel announced the promise of Christmas to Mary and Joseph, he announced the promise of the forerunner to Zacharias. He and his wife Elisabeth would be the parents of John the Baptist who would herald the coming of Jesus Christ.

The angel told Zacharias his son would be filled with God’s power and cause many to turn to the Lord. Zacharias initially struggled to believe the angels announcement and was unable to speak until John was born. Once his speech was returned, “...*he spake, and praised God*” (Luke 1:57-64).

If the Christmas story has become routine or common-place, try reading the story again. It is easy to become skeptical like Zacharias. The only remedy is to believe the promises of God.

Amen.