

§ 004

THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE BIRTH OF THE BAPTIST TO ZACHARIAS

⁵ In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

Luke 1:5-25¹

¹ The Holy Bible: English standard version. 2001 (Lk 1:5-25). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Introduction

1. The narrative begins with the announcements of the births of John and Jesus, so that the divine promises (1:5-56) can be seen to come to their fulfillment (1:57–2:52).
 - The stories are deliberately parallel in form.
 - Both show how the saving events were initiated by the action of God;
 - in both the divine revelation about the birth and future role of the children is made by Gabriel, and
 - in both a confirmatory sign is given as an earnest of the miracle to follow.
2. The two stories are tied together by the facts that the confirmatory sign for Mary is the birth of her _____² Elizabeth's child and that the greatness ascribed to John is an indication of the superior greatness that will be ascribed to Jesus.
3. The story follows familiar Old Testament patterns.
 - The situation of Zechariah and Elizabeth resembles most closely that of the aged Abraham and Sarah, but it also echoes the situations of Jacob and Rachel (1:25), of Samson's parents, and of Samuel's parents.
 - John himself is described in a way reminiscent of Samson and Samuel, but his role is specifically that of a second _____³ whose task is to prepare for God's visitation of his people; there is no direct mention of the coming Messiah, but the term 'Lord' (1:15, 17) would convey the thought of 'Christ the Lord' (2:11) to Christian readers.
 - The greatness of the herald of this mighty event is foreshadowed by his wondrous birth which indicates that God has a rich destiny for him.⁴
4. Luke employs such techniques as repetition and association to introduce us to Zechariah and Elizabeth in as economic a way as possible.
 - His agenda seems not merely to provide background on this couple, but to win for them our sympathy.
 - Verses 5–6 emphasize their socio-religious status, so that we anticipate that they will be on "the winning side of history" (cf. Deuteronomy 28).
 - Verse 7 parallels v 6, however, introducing tragedy into the story.

² *cousin*

³ *Elijah*

⁴ Marshall, I.H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: A commentary on the Greek text*. Includes indexes. The New international Greek testament commentary (49). Exeter [Eng.: Paternoster Press.

5. Though the Lukan presentation is more economic in the way it juxtaposes righteousness and childlessness, it can be compared with the portrayal of Abraham and Sarah (esp. Gen 18:11) and Elkanah and Hannah (esp. 1 Sam 1:1–2).
 - With this dissonance between blamelessness and lack of blessedness, a great need has been introduced into the narrative.

6. The situation is impossible: Not only is Elizabeth barren, a condition that might conceivably be reversed, but both she and her husband are too old for childbearing.
 - Still, comparison with these couples from Israel’s past breathes into the narrative a wisp of hope.
 - Had God not _____⁵ the impossible in their lives?⁶

7. The history of John the Baptist and his parents forms the link between the revelation of God in the Old Testament period and that in the New Testament period.
 - “Here we see all the things of the past economy, and this remarkable man, John, linking up that past with that which was to come.
 - The old and the new are seen to be a continuous movement in the program of God.
 - Sharp the break in many ways between the old and the new on the level of humanity’s experience; but in the economy of God everything moved forward” (Morgan, *in loc.*).

8. For a period of about four hundred years after the appearance of the last Old Testament prophets, no further direct divine revelation had been given to the chosen people of God.
 - The voice of prophecy had been silent, for the Old Testament revelation had been finally rounded off.
 - Everything was now in readiness for the second and last phase in the progress of the divine revelation.
 - This time God was to turn not merely to a chosen group but to the whole world.
 - “But when God begins a new work, He does not scornfully break with the instrument by which the past work has been effected.
 - As it is from the seclusion of a convent that in the middle ages He will take the reformer of the church, so it is from the loins of an Israelitish priest that He now causes to come forth the man who is to introduce the world to the renovation prepared for it.

⁵ enabled

⁶ Green, J.B. (1997). *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (63). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

- The temple itself, the centre of the theocracy, becomes the _____⁷ of the new covenant, of the worship in spirit and in truth.
- There is, then, a divine suitability in the choice both of the actors and theatre of the scene which is about to take place" (Godet, *in loc.*).⁸

Commentary

1. Luke dates his narrative from the reign of Herod the Great (37–4 BC).
 - What he describes comes somewhere near the end of that reign.
 - He tells of *Zechariah*, a priest from the country (39f.), who took his turn in ministering in the temple.
2. There were many priests, but only one temple. So they served on a roster (1 Chr. 24:1–6).
 - The priests were divided into twenty-four divisions of which that of *Abijah* was the eighth (1 Chr. 24:10).
 - Only four divisions returned from the Exile (Ezra 2:36–39), but the four were subdivided to make up twenty-four again with the old names.
 - Each division was on duty twice a year, for a week on each occasion.
3. Zechariah was married to *Elizabeth*, a priest's daughter.
 - A priest was required to marry an Israelite virgin (Lev. 21:14), but not necessarily one of a priestly family.
 - To have a wife of priestly stock was a special blessing for a priest.⁹
4. Great care was taken in the selection of wives for the Jewish priests, so that the line of priests might be kept in every respect unsullied.
 - One authority states: "It was lawful for a priest to marry a Levitess, or, indeed, a daughter of Israel; but it was most commendable of all to marry one of the priest's line."

⁷ **cradle**

⁸ Geldenhuys, N. (1977). *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*. The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (60). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

⁹ Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (85). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

- Zechariah was especially honored in having for his wife one of the descendants of _____¹⁰ (Leviticus, chapters 8 and 9).¹¹

5. The piety of this couple is brought out with the adjectives *righteous* and *blameless*.
- This means, of course, that they served God faithfully, not that they were sinless.
 - It implies a religious rather than a purely ethical character, seen in obedience to God's commands and going beyond a merely external, legal righteousness.¹²
 - It made their childless state hard for them to understand, for people believed that God would bless faithful servants by giving them children.
 - The mention of their age is probably to make it clear that they could expect no change in the situation.
 - Zechariah may have been very old, for there was no retiring age for priests (as there was for Levites).¹³
6. Zacharias and Elisabeth fully came up to the _____¹⁴ of the ideal of Israelitish piety.
- Both were righteous and upright, as it was God's will that they should be.
 - They led a strictly religious and moral life, and this they did not merely in so far as they were seen by men but *before God*.
 - They asked, therefore, not what men thought of them but how God judged them.
 - This, of course, does not imply that they were quite sinless.
 - The quality of their life was, however, of such a kind that it presents to us a clear contrast with the general spirit of the period.
 - The purest Jewish piety kept its flame bright in their consecrated and noble conduct before God.
 - John, therefore, was sprung from parents in whom the highest form of Old Testament piety was personified.

¹⁰ **Aaron**

¹¹ Freeman, J.M., & Chadwick, H.J. (1998). *Manners & customs of the Bible*. "Rewritten and updated by Harold J. Chadwick"--Cover.; Includes index. (Rev. ed.) (497). North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers.

¹² Marshall, I.H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: A commentary on the Greek text*. Includes indexes. The New international Greek testament commentary (52). Exeter [Eng.: Paternoster Press.

¹³ Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (85). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹⁴ **expectation**

- In his parentage, as well as in himself, he represented the perfect form of the old Jewish religion and fulfilled its highest calling by pointing to the One that was to come.¹⁵
7. The Greek term *no children (steira)* is used of Sarah (Gen 11:30), Rebekah (25:21), Rachel (29:31), and Samson's mother (Judg 13:2–3; cf. also 1 Sam 1:5).
- *Well advanced in years* is used in Gen 18:11 of Sarah.
 - The mention of Zechariah and Elizabeth's childlessness and their being past childbearing age points to the human impossibility of the coming events and heightens the miraculous character of God's intervention in their son's birth.
 - Luke assumed that his readers would recall similar situations in the OT in which God blessed the barren with a son who was uniquely called to fulfill a divine task.¹⁶
8. *Now while he was serving as priest.* There were many priests and not enough sacred duties for them all, so lots were cast to see who would perform each function.
- The offering of incense was regarded as a great _____.¹⁷
 - A priest could not offer incense more than once in his entire lifetime (Mishnah, *Tamid* 5:2), and some priests never did receive the privilege.
 - Thus the time when Zechariah offered the incense was the most important moment in his whole life.
 - Luke does not say whether he offered at the morning or the evening sacrifice.
 - In either case he would go into the holy place with other priests, but they would retire, leaving him alone.
 - When the signal was given he would offer the incense.
 - The worshippers waited in the outer court until the priest discharged this duty.¹⁸
9. As soon as the people saw the ascending smoke of the incense-offering, which was the symbol of true consecration to God, they fell down before the Lord and spread out their hands in silent prayer.

¹⁵ Geldenhuys, N. (1977). *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*. The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (62). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

¹⁶ Stein, R.H. (2001, c1992). *Vol. 24: Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (74). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁷ **privilege**

¹⁸ Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (85). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

- For several minutes there followed a _____¹⁹ in the temple sanctuary and in the surrounding temple-building and courts.
- To Zacharias, as to every other priest, this was one of the most solemn experiences of his whole life—especially since the privilege of offering the incense, as we have seen, fell to the lot of a priest only once in his lifetime.²⁰

10. *There appeared to him an angel of the Lord.* Luke gives us no description of the angel.

- He simply tells us that the heavenly visitor stood *on the right side of the altar of incense*.
- As directions are often given in the Bible from the standpoint of someone facing east, this probably means the south side.
- The angel would then be standing between the altar of incense and the golden candlestick.

11. The angel first reassured Zechariah: *Do not be afraid.* Then he went on, *your prayer is heard.*

- The aorist tense seems to indicate prayer on one specific occasion, rather than habitual prayer.
- If so, it will surely be the prayer Zechariah offered at the time of the incense.
- Our first thought is that he had prayed for a child.
- But, even allowing for the lack of faith with which we so often pray, Zechariah's blank incredulity when told he would have a son is hard to reconcile with this.

12. Moreover a priest might well have thought it unseemly to make his private concern the object of prayer at such a moment.

- It is more likely that he prayed for the _____²¹ of Israel.
- Now he was told that this prayer would be granted.
- But that was not all: in addition he would have a son. The child's name was to be John (= 'The Lord is gracious').²²

¹⁹ **dead silence**

²⁰ Geldenhuys, N. (1977). *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*. The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (63). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

²¹ **redemption**

²² Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (85). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

13. In a poetic passage the angel speaks first of the joy that would come to Zechariah and many others at the birth of the child, and then of the destiny the boy would fulfill.²³

- That Zechariah would have *joy and gladness* was only to be expected.
- But this child would be *great before the Lord*, so that _____²⁴ would be happy as well.²⁵

14. *He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.* The language expresses _____²⁶ and care of a person from his very birth, but here in connection with 1:41-44 a pre-natal sanctification of John is implied; even before he was born, the hand of God was on him to prepare him for his work (Lagrange, 17).

²³ Like Samson's mother (Judg. 13:4), he was to abstain from *wine* and *strong drink* (= any alcoholic drink apart from wine). Some deduce that he would be a life-long Nazirite (Num. 6:1-8; so Fitzmyer); but this is never said, and the absence of a reference to the hair (a Nazirite's hair was never cut) is against it. It may be better to see John as having a unique position, neither Nazirite nor priest, though with points of connection with both. The most important thing is that from the very first John was to be *filled with the Holy Spirit*,¹ without whose help God's work cannot be done effectively. John is the only person said in the New Testament to be filled with the Spirit *from his mother's womb*; this emphasizes the fact that God chose him and equipped him from the very beginning. For the contrast between the stimulation caused by wine and that of the Spirit cf. Ephesians 5:18.

The child would *turn* many Israelites *to the Lord their God* (which makes it clear that they had gone away from him). His ministry is likened to that of *Elijah* (cf. Mark 9:13) and the prophecy of Malachi 3:1; 4:5f. is invoked. This brings out both John's greatness and his subordinate place. The fulfilment of prophecy and the comparison with Elijah emphasize the greatness of the man. But on the other hand he was no more than a forerunner, one who would prepare for the coming of the Lord. The meaning of *to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children* is not immediately obvious. It may be that John was to remedy disunity in families (so Marshall). This may mean awakening fathers to perform their parental responsibilities (cf. the failures of Eli, Samuel and David to discipline their sons) or awakening disobedient sons to change their way of life so that their fathers come to approve of them. Or *the fathers* may mean the patriarchs, the great ancestors of the present sinners. From their vantage-point in the next world they looked at their descendants and were displeased. But John would bring about such a change that the fathers would come to look with favour on Israel (cf. Isa. 29:22f. for a similar thought). Similarly John would change *the disobedient* so that they accepted *the wisdom of the just* (cf. Prov. 4). The result would be *a people prepared* for the Lord. (Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (86). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.)

²⁴ **others**

²⁵ Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (86). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

²⁶ **divine choice**

- Thus in the strongest possible way the divine choice of John for his crucial task is stressed.²⁷
- In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit usually came upon a prophet later in life, although certain prophets were also called while still in the womb or from birth (Samson, Judg 16:17; Jeremiah, Jer 1:5; the Servant of the Lord, Isa 49:1, 5; Paul, Gal 1:15).²⁸

15. Zechariah refused point blank to believe the angel. His question is identical with that asked by Abraham centuries before (Gen. 15:8), but it is asked in a different spirit.

- It amounts to a demand for a _____.²⁹
- Gideon and Hezekiah, it is true, asked for signs (Judg. 6:36–39; 2 Kgs 20:8), but again in a very different spirit.
- Zechariah speaks from unbelief as he reminds the angel that both he and his wife are old (his *I* is emphatic).
- Babies are not born to people like them.

16. The angel retorts with an emphatic *I* of his own as he discloses his name.

- *Gabriel* means ‘man of God’.
- His place *in the presence of God* shows something of his dignity.
- Zechariah would be in no doubt about the importance of his informant.
- And this great Gabriel *was sent* (i.e. by God) to bring *good news* to the old priest.
- Luke emphasizes the point by employing a verb later to be used characteristically for preaching the good news of the gospel.

17. Zechariah’s refusal to believe must be seen in the light of God’s condescension in sending such a messenger with such a message.

- To reject him was serious and it would have its consequences.
- Zechariah would get his sign all right, though not the kind of sign he wanted.
- He would be *silent*, quite *unable to speak* until such time as Gabriel’s words were fulfilled.
- Gabriel leaves no room for uncertainty. What God has said will come to pass.³⁰

²⁷ Marshall, I.H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: A commentary on the Greek text*. Includes indexes. The New international Greek testament commentary (58). Exeter [Eng.: Paternoster Press.

²⁸ Stein, R. H. (2001, c1992). *Vol. 24: Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (76). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

²⁹ *sign*

³⁰ Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (87). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

18. It did not take long to offer the incense, and priests normally came out quickly from the holy place (lest they be punished for some act of presumption).
- The people had no way of knowing what was keeping Zechariah so long beyond the normal time, and they *wondered at his delay*.
 - *Temple* would be better translated ‘sanctuary’.
 - People and priests were all in one part or other of the temple, but Zechariah was ministering in the holy place.
 - When he came out he should have joined the other officiating priests in pronouncing the _____³¹ (Mishnah, *Tamid* 7:2).
 - His making of signs and remaining dumb made it evident that something unusual had happened in the sanctuary.
 - The people could not know exactly what it was, but they concluded *that he had seen a vision*.
19. Zechariah evidently remained at the temple until the end of his week of service, then went home.
- In due course Elizabeth *conceived*, thus affording him evidence of the truth of what Gabriel had said.
 - It is not clear why Elizabeth hid herself for *five months*.
 - But during this time her pregnancy would not have been noticeable.
 - It may be that she did not want to be seen until it was obvious to all that the Lord had *looked on her to take away her reproach* (cf. Gen. 30:23).
 - Childlessness was usually considered a punishment from God, and Elizabeth had evidently had to put up with reproaches from people who did not recognize her piety.
 - Now she would know this no more.³²

Conclusion

I. THE CHARACTER AND POSITION OF ZACHARIAS

Here we cannot fail to discover some profitable lesson. He was undoubtedly a believer. He is said, in the sixth verse, to have been righteous before God. No man ever obtained such a reputation except by faith. “The just shall live by faith.” No other

³¹ **benediction**

³² Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (88). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

righteousness than that which is faith is of any esteem in God's account. Such was the righteousness of Abraham, and such was the righteousness of all the saints before the advent of our Redeemer. Such, too, has been the standard ever since. Zacharias evidently was a real believer. Yet for all that, when the angel appeared to him, and God gave him the promise of a son, he was amazed, bewildered, incredulous, and could not credit, but only question the announcement. "How shall I know that these things shall be?"

Nor was he merely a genuine believer; he was well instructed and greatly enlightened, for he was a priest, and, as a priest considered, he was righteous before God, and blameless, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. That he was well instructed in the Word of God is undeniable. He could not otherwise have discharged his duty, for the priest's lips must keep knowledge, and he must teach men. Being proficient in the one, and competent for the other, ignorance offered him no excuse. Moreover, as a man of years, he was probably to be classed among the experienced saints of his time. He had borne the burden and heat of the day, and received proof upon proof of the abundant mercy of God. Now mark this. For any of us to doubt, who have been justified by faith is a shameful delinquency. For those to doubt who have, in addition to their first convictions, a thousand confirmations of the truth they have embraced, who are acquainted with the covenant and its rich inventory of promises, who are deeply taught in the things of God — for such to doubt involves a higher degree of guilt. I do not think that had Zacharias been a mere babe in grace, or an inexperienced stripling, his unbelief would have met with so stern a rebuke. It was because he was a venerable priest, one thoroughly schooled in sacred truth, a man who for many years instructed the people of Israel in the oracles of God, that it became a crying evil for him to say, "Whereby shall I know this?" when the angel told him of his prayer being heard, and of the manner of answer the Lord would vouchsafe him.

The high office that Zacharias held as a priest caused him to be looked up to. Hence his conduct was more narrowly watched, and his example had a wider influence. On a similar account we have need, all of us in our several spheres, to consider the effect of our actions upon others. The higher a man's position, the greater his responsibility; and in the event of any delinquency, the graver his offense. For you to disbelieve, my dear brother, who are at the head of a household, is worse than a personal infirmity; it is a violation of duty to your family. And you, dear friend, who preach the gospel, for you to disbelieve, who are looked upon by many as an advanced Christian, as a mature saint whose example may be safely followed by those who listen to your counsels — this is a great and a crying evil, whereby you dishonor the Lord. I pray God that your conscience may be tenderly sensitive, and that you may be aroused to a sense of the dishonor you bring to him by your faithlessness.

How peculiarly favored Zacharias was! An angel of the Lord appeared unto him. Not to any of the other priests, when they were offering incense, did such a heavenly visitor

come. And what welcome tidings he brought! It was a wonderful message that he was to be the father of a child great in the sight of the Lord, one who should minister in the spirit and power of Elias, and become the forerunner of the Messiah. This surely was a signal instance of Divine favor. And mark this, beloved, our God is very jealous of those whom he highly favors. You cannot have privileged communications from the Lord, or be admitted into close communion with him, without finding that he is a jealous God. The nearer we draw to him, the more hallowed our sense of his presence will be. But to doubt his Word, or question the fulfillment of his promise when he speaks kindly to us, must incur his censure. I speak after the manner of men; we do not expect from a stranger the esteem which we ought to merit from our servants. But our friends, who know us better than servants, ought to trust us more implicitly. And yet beyond common friendship in the near relation and tender attachment of a wife to her husband, the most unqualified confidence should be reposed. Even so, my brethren, if you and I have ever been permitted to lean our heads on Jesus' bosom; if we have sat down at his banquets, and his banner over us has been love; if we have been separated from the world by peculiar fellowship with Christ, and have had choice promises given us, we cannot, like Zacharias, ask, "Whereby shall I know" without grieving the Holy Spirit of God, and bringing upon ourselves some sad chastisement as the result.

What soothing comfort had just been administered to Zacharias by the angel of the Lord! Was not the manner of the salutation fitted to allay terror, and inspire him with trust? The troubled thoughts that perplexed him, and the fear that fell upon him when the angel appeared standing at the right hand of the altar, met with no rebuke. If it was natural that so unwonted a vision should startle him, there was a gentle sympathising tenderness in the angel's address that might well have stilled the throbbings of his heart. "Fear not, Zacharias, for thy prayer is heard." And so is it with us when the consolations of God have been neither few nor small, and when his good will towards us has been pointedly expressed, does it not make doubt and questioning more inexcusable? Do we not thereby aggravate the sin? Some of us have lived in the very bosom of comfort. Precious promises have been brought home to our souls; we have eaten of the marrow and the fatness; we have drunk the wines on the lees well refined. We are no strangers to the blessing of his eternal and unchanging love, or to the light of his countenance, which they prove who find grace in his eyes. Oh! if we begin to doubt after these discriminating love tokens, what apology can we offer? How can we hope to escape from the chastening rod?

Moreover, the misgivings that Zacharias betrayed relate to the very subject on which his supplications were offered. It was in response to his own petition that the angel said to him, "Thy prayer is heard." I marvel at his faith that he should persevere in prayer for a boon which seemed, at his own and his wife's age, to have been out of the course of nature, and beyond the domain of hope, but I marvel a great deal more that, when the

answer came to that very prayer, Zacharias could not believe it. So full often is it with us; nothing would surprise some of us more than to receive an answer to some of our prayers. Though we believe in the efficacy of prayer, at times we believe so feebly that when the answer comes, as come it does, we are astounded and filled with amazement. We can scarcely think of it as a purpose of God, it seems rather to us like a happy coincidence. Surely this adds greatly to the sin of unbelief. If we have been asking for mercy without expecting it, and pleading promises while harbouring mistrust, every prayer we have offered has been only a repetition of our secret unbelief; and it is God's faithfulness that brings our inconsistency to light.

One other reflection is suggested by the narrative. Zacharias appears to have staggered at a promise which others, whom we might well imagine to have been weaker in faith than himself, implicitly believed. The veteran falters where a babe in grace might have taken courage. And is it not always a scandal if any of us who have been conspicuously favored of God are ready to halt, while our feebler brethren and sisters are animated and encouraged? No dubious thought seems to have crossed the mind of Elizabeth, no incredulous expression fell from her lips. She said, "Thus hath the Lord dealt with me."

This case was the very opposite of that of Abraham and Sarah. There Abraham believed, but Sarah doubted; here the wife believes in the face of her husband's scruples. In like manner, Mary, that humble village maiden, accepts with simple faith the high and holy salutation with which she was greeted. She just basks a natural question, and that being answered, she replies, "Be it unto me, according to thy Word." Her surprise was soon exchanged for joy, and by-and-by she begins to sing with a loud voice, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior." Not a little remarkable is this opening chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. Woman, who had been in the background through long preceding generations, seems suddenly to take a foremost place. Zacharias and Joseph stand in doubt, while Elizabeth and Mary exultingly believe. And who knows but I may be addressing some poor woman here who, in the depth of affliction, bodily suffering, and poverty, nevertheless rejoices in God with all her heart? But without a doubt, I am now speaking to many a man who is vexed with trifling cares, murmurs bitterly because of petty annoyances, and distrusts his God when clouds come over the sky so that he sees not his way. Shame on our unbelief. Think shame of yourselves because of it, I pray you. Never does it disgrace us more than when the weaklings of the Lord's family put us to the blush by the simplicity and sincerity of their faith. The character and position of Zacharias may furnish a striking moral, but I do urgently entreat each Christian to point the keen edge of criticism at himself, and consider how much he is personally to blame for his own unbelief. Let us now proceed to investigate: —

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II. THE FAULT OF ZACHARIAS

Whence this perilous wavering at that privileged hour His fault was that he looked at the difficulty. "I am an old man," said he, "and my wife is well stricken in years." And while he looked at the difficulty he would fain suggest a remedy; he wanted a sign. "Whereby shall I know this?" It was not enough for him that God had said so; he wanted some collateral evidence to guarantee the truth of the word of the Lord. This is a very common fault among really good people. They look for a sign. I have often trembled in my own soul when I have felt an inclination thus to tempt the Lord by looking for some minute circumstance to verify a magnificent promise. When I have thought, "Hereby shall I know whether he does hear prayer or not," a cold shiver has passed over me, the shudder has gone through my soul that ever I should think of challenging the truth of God's word, when the fact is so certain. To us who have full often cried unto the Lord in our distresses and been delivered out of our troubles, to raise such a question is indeed ungrateful. For a child of God who habitually prays to his Father in heaven to look upon his faithfulness as a matter of uncertainty is to degrade himself, and to dishonor his Lord. Yet there is no denying the tendency and disposition among us to want a sign. As we read a prophecy of the future, we crave a token in the present. If the Lord were pleased to give us a sign, or if he told us to ask for a sign, we should be quite right in attaching a high importance thereto, but for us to doubt a plain promise, and, therefore, ask a sign, is to sin against the Lord. Sometimes we have wanted signs in spiritual things. Meet and proper is it for us to rejoice in the true delights of fellowship with Christ, but it ill becomes us to make our feelings a kind of test of our acceptance, or to say, "I will not believe God if he does not indulge me with certain manifestations of grace; unless he gives me the sweetmeats I crave, I will be sulky and sullen, and refuse to eat the children's bread." Why, such conduct is wilful and wicked; it is weak, and utterly inexcusable. Yet how many of us have been guilty of this folly? Now, as Zacharias stood upon the threshold of the gospel dispensation, and he was the first among those who heard the glad tidings to express unbelief, it was necessary that he should be made an example of.

God would show at the very outset, even before John the Baptist was born, that unbelief could not be tolerated nor should it go unchastened. Therefore, his servant, Zacharias, must, as soon as he had asked for a sign, have such a sign as would make him suffer for months to come, constrain him to be sorry that he had ever dared to proffer the request. Oh! beloved, is our faith still so weak, and our experience still so contracted, that we cannot yet trust our God? Twenty years have we known him. Has he been a wilderness to us? Have his mercy and truth ever failed us in time of need? Shall all his tender dealings with us count for nothing? Do ye think so lightly of the gift of his Son, the gift of the Holy Ghost, of the dally providence which has guarded you, and of the hourly benediction which has been vouchsafed to you, that ye would fain put aside these

unfailing benefits from your grateful remembrance, while you indulge in some paltry whim, and tempt the Lord your God by your mistrust? That be far from any of us! We would rather take up the position of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who, when arraigned before Nebuchadnezzar, and adjudged to be thrown into the furnace of fire, said, "Our God is able to deliver us; but," they added, "if not (though he should do nothing of the kind), nevertheless be it known unto thee, O king, we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." That is the spirit in which we ought to walk before God — "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." What if he does not spare my mother's precious life? What if he does not preserve my child from the ravages of the fatal epidemic? What if he take away the desire of mine eyes with a stroke? What if my business should cease to thrive? What if my health fail and my strength decay? What if I be dishonored by the scandal of my neighbors? Shall I, therefore, cast off my allegiance to God, or betray my trust in him? Am I to engage in rebellion like this? Not flood nor flame could quench or extinguish his love to me. Shall anxiety or tribulation, disappointment or disaster sever my heart from devotion to him? Nay, God give me grace to see my cattle destroyed, and my goods swept away, and my children cut off in their prime, and to hear cruel taunts from the wife of my bosom; to be covered with sore boils, and to sit on a dunghill and scrape myself with a potsherd and find my best friends miserable comforters, and yet, in the midst of accumulated distresses, to be able to say, "I know that my Redeemer liveth; he has not failed to deliver me hitherto, and though, after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God. Though the fig-tree should not blossom, though the flocks and herds be cut off, yet will I trust in the Lord, and glory in the God of my salvation." If true to our high profession, the Christian's faith should not borrow its hue from the circumstances by which he is surrounded. To hanker after signs that a promise shall be fulfilled is obviously to show distrust of the promiser. "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace, in believing, that ye may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost." So shall you be restrained from asking for a petty sign to justify you in relying on his princely bounty. The Lord keep you from this great transgression! We pass on to observe: —

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III. THE PENALTY ZACHARIAS INCURRED

His morbid propensity was followed by a mortifying punishment. He had doubted, and he became dumb, and as the narrative clearly shows us, he was deaf likewise. Such was his chastisement, and it was sent not in anger, but in God's own covenant love. What a salutary medicine! Although bitter to the taste, how effective it was! Read his song, and you will see the evidence. He had been for months silent, quiet, shut out from all sound, and unable to make any. But well he had occupied his months of seclusion. He had searched the prophets — do you see that? He had been musing much upon the coming

one — do you see that? Deep humility had taken the place of arrogant presumption. He was bowed down before the majesty of God, yet at the same time full of peace and blissful hope. Thus he looked into the glorious future. Oh! dear brethren, if you are prone to doubt, this sickness of the mind will require a strong corrective. Very likely God will give you some sharp medicine, but it shall work for your good. As his child, he will not chasten you so as to injure you, but he will chasten you so as to benefit you. I do not think children generally court the rod, however beneficial it may be, and yet I am quite sure there is no wise child of God who would not shrink from the graver ills which render such discipline essential to his soul's health.

See how judgment was tempered with mercy. The punishment sent to Zacharias was not so severe as it might have been. Instead of being struck deaf and dumb, he might have been struck dead. As I read this passage, I wondered that God had not struck me deaf and dumb when I have spoken unbelieving words — when I have been depressed in spirit, and spoken unadvisedly with my lips. Oh! had the Lord been wroth with me, and said, "If that is your witness about me, you shall never speak again." That would have been most just, and I might have been a mournful instance of his indignation against his unbelieving servants; he has not dealt so with me; glory be to his name!

And this chastisement did not invalidate the promise. The Lord did not say, "Well, Zacharias, as you don't believe it, your wife, Elizabeth, shall not have a son. There shall be a John born, but he shall not come to your house." Oh! no; that is a grand passage — "If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful; he cannot deny himself." The promise still stands. God does not take advantage of our unbelief to cry off and say, "I will give thee no blessings because thou doubttest me" — no, but having said it, he does it and his Word does not return unto him void. Even the trembling, doubting children, though they get the rod, get the blessing too; and the promise is fulfilled, though the father is dumb when the blessing comes. Very painful, indeed, was his chastisement. One would not like to be deaf and dumb for a day; but to be deaf and dumb for the space of nine months must have been a very painful trial to this man. Moreover, he could not bless the people; he could not speak a word; he could not instruct the people; he was useless for that part of the priest's work; and when the song went up within the hallowed walls of the temple, he could not hear it. He might know by signs that they were singing a hallelujah, yet his ears could not catch its grateful strains. That poor tongue of his was silent. He could not add a note to the volume of praise that went up to the God he loved. It must have been mournful to him to have no prayer in the family which he could hear, and in which he could join, and to be as good as dead for all practical purposes. Now I am afraid thence are many believers who have had to suffer something like this, for many days, on account of their unbelief. I think I can point out some who are unable to hear the gospel as once they did many years ago, a friend said that he could not hear me preach. I said to him, "Buy a horn." "No," he said, "it is not your voice; I can hear that, but I don't enjoy it." My

reply was, "Perhaps that is my fault, but I am far from sure that it is not your own." I fear, in such cases, it is quite as often the hearer's fault as the preacher's fault. At any rate, when others profit, and our judgment approves, though our hearts find no refreshment, there is reason to suspect that in the dullness of our senses we are compelled to bear chastisement for our unbelief. You go where others go, and find no solace. You hear what edifies and comforts them, but there is no cheer for you. You are deaf; your ears are closed to what the Lord says. Very often it has happened, I fear, to some here, that, for want of faith, they have lost their speech. Time was when they could tell of the Lord's goodness, but they seem silent now. They could sing once, but their harps are hung on the willows now. As they get with their companions, they seem as if they have lost all their pleasant conversation. If they try the old accustomed strings of the time-worn harp, the ancient skill is gone. They cannot praise God as once they did; and all because on one occasion, when the promise was clear before their eyes, they would challenge and mistrust it. They could not rely upon their God. Little do we know how many Fatherly chastisements come upon us as the result of our unbelief.

The lessons I gather, and with which I conclude, are these — First, if any of you, beloved, are weak in faith, do not be satisfied about it. Cry to God. Our God deserves better homage of us than a weak, attenuated faith can render him. He deserves to be trusted with such confidence as a child gives his parent. Ask him to increase your faith. And you who have faith, oh! keep it jealously, exercise it habitually; pray to the Lord to preserve it. Never begin to walk according to the sight of the eyes. Confer not with flesh and blood. Don't come down from that blessed height of simple confidence in God, but ask that you may abide there, and no longer doubt. The Church wants believers to believe for her, and to pray for her. "He that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven by the wind and tossed. Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord." Art thou strong in faith, be thou stronger still; art thou weak in faith, be thou strong.

But let the unbeliever, the utter unbeliever, tremble. If a good man, a saved man, a noble and a blameless man was nevertheless for months struck dumb for unbelief, what will become of you who have no faith at all? He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed on the Son of God. To you, unbeliever, no angel Gabriel will appear, but the destroying angel awaits you. What shall be your fearful chastisement? You will be silent; it will be eternal. Oh! you shall stand silent at the judgment-seat of Christ, unable to offer any excuse for your rebellion and unbelief. Unbelief will destroy the best of us: faith will save the worst of us. He that believeth on the Lord Jesus Christ hath eternal life — he that believeth not (whatever else his apparent excellences will assuredly perish. Faith, faith! this is the priceless saving thing to every one of us. The gift be yours to believe. The grace be yours to inherit the righteousness of faith. The joy be

yours to believe in Jesus Christ with all your hearts. The triumph be yours to believe now to the saving of your souls. Amen.³³

³³ Spurgeon, C. H. (1998). *Spurgeon's Sermons: Volume 62* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Spurgeon's Sermons. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

