

Good News from Doctor Luke 1
His Name is Jesus!

Luke 1:5-25, 57-66

PP1

Zechariah was a priest and, like all descendants of the sons of Aaron, was entitled to officiate in the temple. The priests were divided into 24 groups, each of which served twice a year for one week. There were so many priests in each division that they drew lots for the privilege of serving in the inner sanctuary at the morning and evening sacrifice. No priest was allowed to perform this function more than once, and many priests never had the opportunity. For Zechariah this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, the greatest day in his life, when he was the one man in the nation privileged symbolically to enter the presence of the Living God to offer up the nations prayers. The rising smoke of the incense symbolised the prayers of the congregation rising to God. The priest was expected to represent the worshippers before god and then to come out of the sanctuary and bless the people, assuring them that their prayers had been heard and received by the God of Israel.

Zechariah's prayers on behalf of the congregation were mingled with the great sorrow of his life, his childlessness. Year after Year he had come to Jerusalem hoping he would be chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary to bring before God the prayer for the cure of Elizabeth's barrenness but now it was too late. They were both past middle age and Elizabeth was long past the age of childbearing. He poured out the well-rehearsed prayer before God, more in sorrow than in hope.

Suddenly he had the incredible experience of a divine visitation and a promise so amazing that he found it impossible to believe. 'He was startled and was gripped with fear' and found himself protesting, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.' The angelic response was, 'Now you will be

silent and not able to speak until the day this happens because you did not believe.'

It would appear that the silent world into which Zechariah was plunged as a consequence of his unbelief was one of deafness as well as dumbness. He was unable to receive or to give out, so he could not even give the blessing and priestly assurance for which the congregation were impatiently waiting. This interpretation would appear to be confirmed by the events eight days after the birth of Elizabeth's child, when family, friends and neighbours came for the naming ceremony. They wanted to call him Zach Junior, but Elizabeth said: 'No! He is to be called John.' This was the Greek version of Jehohanan, which means 'God's gracious gift' or simply 'Gift of God'. They turned to Zechariah to settle the dispute. 'Then they made signs to his father to find out what he would like the child to be named.'

If Zechariah had been able to hear they would no doubt have spoken to him. One normally makes signs only to someone who is deaf. As soon as Zechariah had written down 'His Name is John' he was healed and began to praise God. It was an awesome experience for all who were present as Zechariah came out of his silent world and for the first time began to witness to the revelation he had received in the temple concerning the might, majesty and power of God. His testimony was so powerful that 'throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about these things.' (v65).

Now I believe that Doctor Luke tells this story to us as a warning to all who would fall into a religious rut and the heinous trap of Unbelief. There is an important message for the Body of Christ is this story set in stark contrast to the story of Mary that follows. The major reason for Zechariah's unbelief was probably unanswered prayer. No doubt he had cried out to God concerning Elizabeth's barrenness for many years. Gradually hope was dimmed until, on the day of the angelic visitation, he had clearly

lost faith as well as expectation. It is also possible that, despite the excitement of being chosen to burn incense, the deadening efforts of formal routine religious observance over a period of years had taken their toll. Zechariah's theological education and training as a priest would have made him sceptical of any unusual spiritual experience. Hence the request for a sign - which we know, from the numerous similar requests to Jesus, was a typical reaction from the religious establishment of his day.

The consequence of Zechariah's unbelief was that he was plunged into a world of silence, unable to speak and therefore unable to continue his duties as a priest. It is entirely possible that he joined Elizabeth in seclusion for the five month period mentioned in v24 during which they both came to terms with the impact of the message and sought an understanding of the purpose of God for their lives in this miraculous answer to prayer.

Elizabeth's pregnancy following the divine visitation resulted in a revitalising of faith for both herself and her husband. She saw it as taking away her disgrace (v25) and Mary's visit resulted in her being filled with the Holy Spirit (v41) and exercising the gift of prophecy. Zechariah's faith reached the level at which he was ready to be obedient to the word of God given by revelation and to witness to all that God had said and done.

Zechariah's release from physical bondage followed immediately upon his act of public obedience. He regained the power of speech and immediately began to praise God and to declare His Word, witnessing to his family, friends and neighbours, telling them all that God has said and done. All who heard his testimony were filled with awe as 'Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied' (v67) and the Word of God spread through the region of Judea.

The message that God is conveying to the Church today through the experience of Zechariah is a strong warning concerning the consequences of unbelief. A large part of the Church seems at

present to be deaf to the Word of God, having no expectation that He either can or does speak to His people today: and of course if that's your expectation then it's unsurprising that you are not disappointed!!

PP2/3 this passage reminds us that:

God is sovereign

400 year gap...then God begins preparation for the coming of Jesus. Will He not do the same when Jesus is to return again with or without our cooperation! A lack of belief in or understanding of the Second Coming is a huge weakness in the armoury of many believers. But be reassured:

God uses imperfect saints: Zach & Liz are a mixture of godliness and suffering (drives us to God in a deeper way). Still He does today (Church growing in places of huge suffering and persecution). Don't listen to Satan's lies but keep your spiritual life current.

God answers prayer: sometimes unexpectedly! He does it when and how He chooses: His timing, His purposes, His Glory Alone. There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. Q: are we on His team or ours?

God isn't happy when we are unready for prayer to be answered: Zach struck dumb & deaf (v62). Lesson: don't pray unless you want God to answer. If what you are asking is sinful or God is clearly saying no, then stop, but if not go on till fulfilled. The disciples struggled with a spirit of unbelief in Luke 9 37f: their response as ours needed to be repentance and humility.

PP4 Is fear ruling over faith in my life?

Like Zach (v12) / contrast v74 / be encouraged: there is mercy after chastening v78.

God's purposes are not easily aborted in our lives: Yes! Hope! Privilege not withdrawn from Z&L. God does not withdraw His plans lightly or easily. He does not deal with us as our sins deserve!!!

Gods chastening does not go on forever: When God expresses His displeasure it may feel as if He has abandoned us for ever. Zach had to endure long and lonely months cut off from the joys and pleasures of being involved in the birth but the name John means: The Lord has shown His Favour.

Gods chastening ends at the point when we have learned what God wants to teach us: e.g. Job 42:5/6 (not 19:25). Release comes at the point of new obedience. His Name is John (v60)! **PP5** Result is *Praise* (Benedictus) when Z speaks out faith and prophesies over his son v76) and *real time testimony*.

Sadly there is a widespread blindness to the significance of events in our own lifetime, a lack of awareness that God has any hand in the massive changes that are sweeping through social, political and economic affairs of the nations, or that God is actually fulfilling His declared Word in scripture to shake not only the Nations but the whole created order, so that what is of the Kingdom will stand and what is not will fall to the ground, to prepare the way for the coming Kingdom.

Christians have been talking about the coming of the Kingdom of God for nearly 2000 years and praying 'Your Kingdom Come'. 'Your Will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' This has become part of routine religion and there is now a lack of expectation that anything will ever happen. Much of the Church has ceased to believe in the nearness of the second coming of our Lord.

Jesus himself says that He will come when least expected (a bit like the angel and Zechariah) and questions whether He will find faith on earth at His coming? Unbelief in the Church is a major reason why the Word of God is not being heard with power and authority among the nations. It is not logical argument that will convince secular mankind but the unshakable conviction of those who have heard from God and cannot hold back from declaring

His Word. As Amos says: 'The Sovereign Lord has spoken - who can but prophesy?' (Amos 3:8)

I repeat: ***the biding effect of unbelief can be broken only by repentance and a turning to/back to God in humility.*** Faith will be revitalised only when the Church is prepared to undertake a simple act of obedience in declaring the name of Jesus before a waiting world, just as Zechariah declared the name of his child publicly in obedience to the Word of God. Power will return to the church when we are prepared, through a simply act of obedience, to declare to the world that there is salvation only in the name of Jesus. Just as Zechariah wrote: 'His Name is John! So must the church declare: 'His Name is Jesus!!!'

Pastor David

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