



**Sunday School Lesson Summary for December 2, 2007
Released on November 28, 2007**

"Called to Believe"

**Devotional Reading: Psalm 66:1–4, 16–20.
Background Scripture: Luke 1:5–25.
Printed Text: Luke 1:8–23.**

Luke 1:8–23

8 And it came to pass, that, while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course,

9 According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

11 And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

12 And when Zechariah saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zechariah: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

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

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.

16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

17 And he shall 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 a people prepared for the Lord.

18 And Zechariah said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.

19 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 show thee these glad tidings.

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.

21 And the people waited for Zechariah, and marveled that he tarried so long in the temple.

22 And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

23 And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

INTRODUCTION

The theme of this quarter's lessons, "God's Call to the Christian Community," can be seen in various contexts in the Gospel of Luke. Our first five lessons illustrate this call in the lives of persons related to the birth of Jesus. As we observe the divine call and their responses to it, we are challenged to ask what our response would have been under similar circumstances.

If you were a messenger given the task of taking good news to a chosen person or group, what kind of response would you expect? If you carried tidings of a great victory, the finding of a lost child, the discovery of a medical cure, the winning of an award, or the release of a kidnapped person, you would expect an enthusiastic reception. We can hardly imagine anyone responding negatively or apathetically to such news. Yet this is the response to God's news in this week's lesson. How would we have responded?

LESSON BACKGROUND

Through the centuries of the Old Testament, God spoke to the Jewish people through the prophets at many times and in various ways (see Hebrews 1:1). But by the time we reach Luke 1, it had been 400 years since God said anything at all. So when an angel came from Heaven to announce that God was going to raise up a prophet, it was (or should have been) a stunning development for God's people.

On a more personal level, the announcement was stunning to a priest named Zechariah. Although his name means, "God remembers," he and his wife, Elisabeth, perhaps thought that God had forgotten them. They were childless because she was barren; in addition, they were well along in years (Luke 1:7). Still, they were wholly devoted to serving their God.

As God broke His 400 years of silence, the events would be carefully recorded by Luke, a physician and an associate of the apostle Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11). As Luke explained in the opening verses of his Gospel, he was the recipient of eyewitness testimony and had "perfect understanding of all things from the very first" (Luke 1:3). We can put full confidence in what he wrote. The historical truth of these events teaches us a lesson that Zechariah learned the hard way: we are called to put full confidence in God.

LESSON AIM

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Describe the meeting between Zechariah and the angel Gabriel.
2. Explain why Zechariah should have believed the angel and why he doubted.
3. Better understand and trust in the Lord despite encountering many amazing challenges.

Customary Setting (Luke 1:8–10)

1. Why was the burning of incense such an exceptional event in Zacharias's life (Luke 1:8,9)?

Zacharias was a priest from the course of Abia (Abijah)" (Luke 1:5), one of the twenty-four divisions of priests established in the days of David (cf. 1 Chron, 24:10, 19). Each of these divisions ministered in the temple about twice a year for a week on each occasion.

Luke called attention to an astounding event that occurred "while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course" (Luke 1:8). His duty on this occasion was to burn incense. Because of the many priests officiating, they cast lots for the privilege of doing this. Almost certainly this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Zacharias.

It would appear, then, that it was by pure chance that Zacharias was chosen for this ministry on this occasion. But as in other scriptural events (cf. Josh. 7:14-21; I Sam. 10:20-24), God had determined the outcome of the lot (cf. Prov. 16:33). He wanted Zacharias to be the one to offer incense at this time so that he could receive a crucial message from Heaven.

Burning incense on the altar in the holy place symbolized Israel's prayers. So while Zacharias entered the sanctuary with the incense, the people stood outside praying (Luke 1:10). The rising of the perfumed smoke from the altar signified the ascent of their prayers to God.

Extraordinary News (Luke 1:11–13)

2. Where did the angel appear in the holy place (v. 11)?

God chose this moment, when Zacharias was representing the entire Jewish nation, to send His angel with a message for both him and them. The angel appeared to Zacharias "on the right side of the altar of incense." This would have been the south side; the altar faced east, and directions would have been noted from the standpoint of one looking east from the altar.

Two observations are in order here. First, only a divinely commissioned being had a right to appear with the in the holy place. Zacharias realized this, and it makes his later doubts about the angel's message all the more inexcusable. Second, Zacharias's recollection and Luke's inclusion of the angel's position demonstrated the reality of the angel's appearance. This was no fantasy or hallucination; the angel was really standing before him.

3. What was Zacharias's first reaction to the angel's presence (v. 12)?

The priest's reaction to the angel's appearance was predictable. "He was troubled, and fear fell upon him." The two verbs used here indicate that he was greatly agitated and

seized by terror. Without question, Zacharias expected to die. This is only the first of several such human responses Luke recorded when the veil between the natural and supernatural worlds was suddenly drawn aside (cf. 1:29-30; 2:9; 5:8-9; 7:16).

4. How long had it been since Israel had received any message from Heaven (v. 13)?

The angel sought to allay Zacharias's fears with the words "Fear not." Interestingly, these were the first words from Heaven in four hundred years. What a contrast to the last words of the Old Testament "lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (Mal. 4:6)! God had been silent for four centuries, but now that He was speaking again, He sent a message of hope.

Zacharias had good reason to take heart, for the angel told him that his prayer had been answered and that Elisabeth would bear him a son (Luke 1:13) whose name was to be "John" (meaning "the grace of the Lord").

Exceptional Son (Luke 1:14-17)

5. Why should the angelic message have brought joy to Zacharias (v. 14)?

John would be God's gift of grace not only to Zacharias and Elisabeth but also to all Israel, whom he would prepare for their promised Messiah. John's birth would thus be the occasion for joy. That John would be an occasion of joy and gladness was a promise to Zacharias personally. Instead of the paralyzing fear he had felt at first seeing the angel, he would rejoice at the fulfillment of his promise. But the joy the parents would experience would spread to others: many would rejoice because of his birth.

6. In what sense would John the Baptist be a great man (v. 15)?

Luke 1:15 introduces the reason John's birth would bring widespread joy. He would be "great in the sight of the Lord." After John's public ministry had ended and he lay languishing in prison, Jesus would give His estimate of John's greatness. According to Jesus, John was greater than all the prophets, for his ministry of introducing the Messiah surpassed theirs in importance (Matt. 11:9-10). Indeed, said Jesus, "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater [one] than John the Baptist" (v. 11). John would have the greatest privilege of any man, and he would fulfill his role with integrity.

To fulfill his unique role, John would be set apart to the life of a Nazarite, which forbade the use of wine or strong drink. In most cases this life was undertaken voluntarily and temporarily through a vow (cf. Num. 6:1-12). But Samson and Samuel and now John were dedicated to it from birth. In accordance with this unique calling, John would be "filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15).

7. What unique mission would John fulfill (vs. 16,17)?

Gabriel's prediction that John's mission will be to call *the children of Israel* to *turn to the Lord* implies that many Israelites have fallen away from *God*. Many eventually will flock to hear John, will repent, and will be baptized by him (Matthew 3; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-20; John 1:19-28).

John's mission was also predicted at the end of the Old Testament: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet ... and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:5, 6). In this way John is to prepare the people of Judea for the coming of the Messiah. Although John

himself may or may not have been aware of his importance as a "type" of Elijah, Jesus understood it perfectly (see Matthew 17:10–13).

It is striking that God's closing words in the Old Testament and some of the first words in the New Testament are about John the Baptist. Although there have been more than 400 years of silence between the times of Malachi and Luke, God's plan has not changed. Now John will have a significant role in helping to make that plan a reality. He will be wholly devoted to preparing the way for the Messiah. John will have no regard for his own importance. Right up to the time of his grisly death, he will live only to answer the call of God.

Divine Confirmation (Luke 1:18–23)

8. What question did Zacharias ask the angel? Why was his doubt inexcusable (v. 18)?

This revelation was too much for Zacharias. He simply could not believe all this would happen. So he asked the angel, "Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." He was asking how he could be sure of this. In light of his advanced age and that of his wife, an angelic announcement was not good enough. He wanted an additional sign.

As much as we can sympathize with Zacharias, we cannot excuse his unbelief. Had he never heard what the Lord had done for Abraham and Sarah? Did he not know how He had overcome the barrenness of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah? Zacharias was a godly priest, but like many godly saints, he faltered in faith when a difficult test faced him. His doubt reminds us that none of us achieve perfect trust during this lifetime.

9. What sign was given that God's word would be fulfilled (vs. 19, 20)?

God would indeed give Zacharias a sign. But before the angel revealed it to him, he told him the seriousness of his lack of faith. This angel was no other than Gabriel, who stood in God's presence and was one of His chief messengers. It was he who had come to Daniel with messages about the future (Dan. 8:16; 9:21) and who would announce Jesus' conception and birth to Mary (Luke 1:26).

To question a message from such a source as this was serious indeed. Besides, it was intended to be good news (Luke 1:19). It should have brought Zacharias great joy, not doubt.

Zacharias was given the sign he asked for, but he himself was the sign. He would not be able to speak until the day Gabriel's message was fulfilled. How ironic that at the very time God's good news demanded expression, he would be unable to express it! Zacharias's nine months of silence bore witness to both the fulfillment of God's promise and the consequences of human unbelief. It is a sobering reminder that true faith does not demand signs.

10. How does God interact with us today? What are some reasons for failing to notice God working in and around our lives?

God is sovereign, yet He reacts to and interacts with people. In today's text we see a unique way that He does so. On an ongoing basis, God interacts with us through His Holy Spirit (John 16:5–15; Acts 2:38, 39), through other believers (1 Thessalonians 5:11; James 5:16; 1 Peter 4:10, 11), and through the circumstances in our lives (James 1:2–4). Jesus told us that His Father is always at work (John

5:17). Yet sometimes we don't acknowledge what we see as coming from God. Even though we may be in a situation where nothing seems to be quite right, that does not mean that God is not working around us (Romans 8:28).

11. What transpired after the "vision in the temple" (vs. 21-23)?

Zacharias's encounter with the angel consumed far more than the ordinary time required for burning the incense. The people praying outside recognized that he had been detained, and they "marvelled." They probably became uneasy, fearing that for some reason their representative had been stricken by God. After all, Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, had died suddenly while offering incense because they offered fire to the Lord that He had not authorized (Lev. 10:1-2).

When Zacharias finally appeared, he could not speak; he could only motion to the people with his hands (Luke 1:22). In verse 62 we learn that he had lost his hearing as well. So the people surmised that he had seen a vision in the temple. One wonders whether anyone in the crowd that day ever discovered the significance of what had occurred. We can only hope that they later connected this providence with the supernatural ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

At the conclusion of his priestly ministry, Zacharias returned home, full of news that he could express only through writing and signs. Shortly thereafter, Elisabeth conceived. She rejoiced that, even at her advanced age, the Lord had taken away her disgrace among men.

Our lesson has reminded us that although God is long silent and seemingly unconcerned about His people, He has a plan that will surpass any of their expectations. It also has warned us that when He has revealed His plan, it is not for us to question its feasibility. Rather, we should thank Him for it and let Him work as only He can.

CONCLUSION

God tells no tall tales; it is impossible for Him to lie (see Hebrews 6:18). Throughout history, God has required that people listen when He speaks and that they believe what He says.

God's expectation applied to Zechariah, perhaps especially so. Yet even though he was a faithful priest (Luke 1:6), he stumbled at believing God's "impossible" promise. Since we have the advantage of hindsight of the completed New Testament, we may be tempted to excuse Zechariah's failure because we know some things he didn't. But Zechariah also had hindsight to draw on: he undoubtedly knew of the Old Testament accounts of how God intervened to bring sons to elderly, childless couples. Having hindsight is no guarantee that we will always exercise faith!

God did not intend to leave us in the bondage of sin. From the beginning of our disobedience, when God promised that the seed of woman would bruise Satan's head (Genesis 3:15), God had a plan to save us. After many centuries, God still pushes His plan forward. Now we—like Zechariah—are called to believe.

John: "Yahweh Has Been Gracious"

John the Baptist was rightly named. He was living proof of God's graciousness. To Zechariah and Elisabeth in their old age, God extended grace by granting them a son. To the entire human race, God proved His grace by sending His own Son—whose way John the Baptist prepared. As this all unfolded, one thing was clear: Yahweh (God) has been gracious.

As we enter this Christmas season, let us remember again each part of the sacred story. Let us rejoice to hear Gabriel's glad tidings to Zechariah and to Mary; let us

echo the multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God. We believe in the baby of Bethlehem; we believe in the Christ of the cross; we believe in the future return of our king. We have been called to believe—and we do!

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God yet calls us to believe.

PRAYER

Our Father, we thank You for remembering us in spite of our sins and for opening the door of salvation. Thank You for providing all we need to be able to believe in Your Son Jesus. He is the one by whom we are saved. In His name we pray, amen.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

In our next lesson we see that Gabriel was kept busy after announcing the coming birth of John the Baptist. He moved on to announce to Mary that she would have a son to be named Jesus. Study **Luke 1:26-28** "**Called to Be a Vessel.**"

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