

## CHAPTER ONE



# A New Era Dawning

## The Annunciation to Zechariah

(Luke 1:5-25)

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

—LUKE 1:5-7

IT HAS BEEN SAID that Luke begins his Gospel like a good Shakespearean play: with a pair of minor characters who prepare the way for the lead roles to take the stage.<sup>1</sup> Before the main drama surrounding Joseph, Mary and Jesus begins, this first scene in the Gospel of Luke introduces us to an important supporting cast: Zechariah and Elizabeth, an older Jewish couple who are about to be caught up into God's plan of salvation in a way they probably never imagined.

## Waiting for a Child

Zechariah and Elizabeth stand out as a couple with high credentials in first-century Judaism. Members of the priesthood were honored among the Jews. With Zechariah serving as a priest, and his wife also coming from the priestly family of Aaron, they would hold a position of great respect. Luke, furthermore, goes out of his way to emphasize that they are both “righteous before God” and even “blameless” in following all his commands.

Portrayed thus as a priestly family that is faithful to the Lord, Zechariah and Elizabeth are showcased as model Jews. That is why the next statement in verse 7 would be so shocking to Jewish minds: “But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.”

Barrenness was often considered shameful in Judaism. It was even seen as evidence of God’s punishment (see Deuteronomy 28:15, 18). Yet we know these model Jews are not outside of God’s favor. Given the emphasis on their righteousness in the previous verses, this statement in verse 7 introduces us to a tension between their holiness on one hand and their childlessness on the other.

Such a tension brings to mind other godly women of the Old Testament—such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah—who suffered from barrenness until God miraculously blessed them with a child. Like these great matriarchs of old, Elizabeth waits for God to act in her life. And the reader of Luke’s Gospel also waits to see how this tension will be resolved.

## Holy Smoke!

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood,

it fell to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

—LUKE 1:8-11

Luke now begins to tell us about the day that changed the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth forever.

Zechariah serves as a priest in “the division of Abijah,” and his division is on temple duty (see Luke 1:5, 8). With a large number of priests among the people but only so many duties to perform in the temple, the priests were divided into twenty-four groups. Each group would travel to Jerusalem twice a year for a weeklong rotation of service in the temple and then return home.

When a division reported for its week of service, the priests cast lots for assignment to duties in the temple. On this particular day Zechariah is chosen to carry out the most treasured task any priest could hope to perform: “it fell to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and *burn incense*” (Luke 1:9, emphasis added). In this ritual the priest would represent Israel before God and pray on behalf of all the people at the morning or evening sacrifice.

Offering the incense in the temple generally was considered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. After a priest performed this action, he would not be eligible for the casting of lots for this privileged duty again. Some priests might go through their whole careers without ever having the chance to offer the incense.

What made this practice so honorable was not simply the offering itself but also *the place* where the offering was made—at the altar of incense. This altar resided in the Holy Place, the

second holiest chamber in the temple, where only priests were allowed to enter.

The altar of incense stood in the rear of the room before a curtain that separated the Holy Place from the innermost sanctuary of the temple, the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies is where God's very presence once dwelt over the ark of the covenant. This was truly holy ground, where the Jews believed heaven met earth. Only one priest in Israel—the high priest—could venture past that curtain into the Holy of Holies, and even he could do so only once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

The altar of incense would be the closest to the Holy of Holies that an ordinary priest could ever get. Consequently, for a Levitical priest like Zechariah, being chosen to offer incense meant he had the once-in-a-lifetime chance to pray at that most revered altar and stand just outside the holiest spot on the face of the earth. That is why this would have been one of the greatest days in Zechariah's life. Indeed, it would have represented the pinnacle of his priestly career.

One can imagine Zechariah's approaching the Holy Place, trembling with great awe and wonder as he is about to make an offering at the altar of incense for the first time. One also can imagine his great surprise when he discovers something no other priest has ever seen there before: an angel of the Lord!

## **Touched by an Angel**

And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth; for he will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine

nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, 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."

—LUKE 1:12-17

Understandably, Zechariah is startled to find an angel beside the altar. The angel quickly assures him not to be afraid and gives him a message from the Lord: his wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and the child should be called John.

What is most interesting about this scene is not simply that Zechariah and Elizabeth finally will be blessed with a child. The angel reveals that this child will bring blessings not only to his parents but to all of the people, for he will be one of the most important prophets ever sent to Israel. Let us consider three amazing things the angel tells Zechariah about this child.

First, he will not consume wine or strong drink. The angel gives this information not to tell us of John's future drinking habits but to indicate that he will be dedicated to the Lord for *special service*. In the Old Testament some Jewish men called "Nazirites" consecrated themselves to God by a vow and separated themselves from normal life. Abstaining from alcohol was a common practice for the Nazirites (see Numbers 6:3; Judges 13:4). So this fact about John indicates that he will be set apart for some special service for the Lord, like a Nazirite.

Second, the angel's description of the child's being "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from the mother's womb" tells us about the kind of service for which John is destined: he will be a *prophet*. It was the Spirit descending on Saul who transformed him into a prophet (see 1 Samuel 10:10), and it was the Spirit of

the Lord who spoke through David so that God's word would be upon his tongue (see 2 Samuel 23:2). It was this same Spirit who came upon the prophets Ezekiel, Elijah and Elisha during their ministry in Israel (see Ezekiel 11:5; 2 Kings 2:9-16; see also Joel 2:28). Thus, when the angel says the child will be filled with the Holy Spirit "from his mother's womb," he is presenting John as one of Israel's great prophets, even before he is born.

## The New Elijah

Third, the importance of John's prophetic ministry is seen in the final words that the angel uses to describe this child:

And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before the Lord 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.

—LUKE 1:16-17

These verses echo the last prophetic words of the Old Testament. The prophet Malachi announced that the Lord one day would come to redeem Israel, and that he would send his messenger to prepare the people for his arrival. In Malachi 3:1 God said: "Behold, I send my messenger to *prepare* the way before me" (emphasis added). The Book of Malachi goes on to say that this messenger will be like Israel's most famous prophet, Elijah:

Behold, I will send you *Elijah* the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. *And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers....*

—MALACHI 4:5-6, emphasis added  
(in some translations Malachi 3:23-24)

In light of this Old Testament background, we see that the angel describes John's prophetic ministry as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. John will be the Lord's messenger, the new Elijah, who will prepare the people of Israel for the Lord's coming, which will bring about the reconciliation of families to God and families to each other.

Now we can see that the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is not simply about a pious Jewish couple suffering from barrenness and God's intervening to bless them with a child. Rather, *their story is representative of the story of Israel*. Just as Zechariah and Elizabeth are barren and hope for God to show favor on them by blessing them with a child, so too are the Jews suffering in the first century and longing for God to show favor on them again by visiting his people, just as Malachi has foretold. God will respond to Zechariah and Elizabeth's desires for a child in a way that answers the needs of *all* the Jewish people: by sending them a son who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord and the restoration of Israel.

## **"I Am Gabriel"**

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he made signs to them and

remained dumb. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

—LUKE 1:18-23

After hearing all this, Zechariah doubts whether his elderly wife really will be able to bear a child. He asks the angel: “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” The angel then gives a mystifying response: “I am Gabriel...”

Think about that answer. Here the previously anonymous angel reveals his identity to doubting Zechariah. But how does this response answer Zechariah’s question, “How shall I know this?” Zechariah did not ask for the angel’s name; he asked for assurances!

Imagine meeting someone on an airplane who advises you to buy many lottery tickets because you are going to win the lottery sometime this year. Wondering why you should trust this stranger’s advice, you ask him, “How can I believe this will really happen?” What would you think if the man answered your question simply by giving you his name, “I’m Mr. Smith”? How would *that* answer your question?

## Avoiding the Question?

Yet the angel Gabriel knew what he was doing. He gave Zechariah the one bit of information that might help him tie all the pieces together. This one detail might help Zechariah see that God is really acting in his very own family’s life in order to bring the story of Israel to its climactic turning point.

Revealing his name was significant because the only time Gabriel is mentioned in the Old Testament is in the important



visions given to the prophet Daniel. In Daniel 9 the prophet was praying for God to show mercy on his people and bring an end to the Jewish sufferings under foreign oppressors. In the middle of Daniel's prayer, the angel Gabriel appeared to him at the hour of the evening sacrifice—the time when the incense would have been offered in the temple.

In this vision Gabriel delivered a message of good news and bad news to Daniel. On one hand, the people would continue to suffer under pagan nations for a long time to come. On the other hand, at the end of this period of suffering, God would send an anointed prince (the Messiah) to bring an end to sin and atone for iniquity. This anointed one would usher in everlasting righteousness and bring all of Israel's prophecies to fulfillment (see Daniel 9:24-27).

Given this background, we can see Gabriel certainly is no ordinary angel. He is the one who announced the end of Israel's oppression and the beginning of the messianic era to the prophet Daniel. Now this same angel returns for the first time in hundreds of years and appears to Zechariah. Revealing his name—Gabriel—recalls the prophecies of Daniel 9.

The parallels between what happened to Daniel and what just happened to Zechariah highlight this connection even more. Like Daniel, Zechariah *prays on behalf of Israel* as he offers the incense in the temple. Like Daniel, Zechariah makes this prayer *at the hour of the temple sacrifice*. And in the middle of Zechariah's liturgical service, the same angel—*Gabriel*—appears. Luke is clearly inviting his readers to hear the harmony in salvation history and view Zechariah's encounter with the angel in correspondence with Daniel's.<sup>2</sup>

## A Silent Retreat

In light of this background, we can see that the angel is revealing much more than his name. And he is announcing to Zechariah much more than the fact that his wife is going to have a child. By saying “I am Gabriel,” the angel basically is telling Zechariah that Israel’s long period of suffering is ending. Daniel 9 is finally coming to fulfillment, and *Zechariah’s own son* is going to play a key part in preparing the people for the long-awaited “anointed one”—the one Gabriel himself originally said would atone for sin, bring everlasting righteousness and fulfill all prophecy!

Indeed, such a profound announcement from an angel would have been enough to leave any pious Jew speechless. However, Zechariah will experience silence for a different reason. Because he doubted the angel, he is left mute. And the punishment seems to fit the crime. Zechariah simply could not believe that his wife would have a child in her old age. Now, as his wife’s miraculous pregnancy unfolds before him, Zechariah will have nine months of silence to ponder and reconsider Gabriel’s message and to contemplate the profound mission his son will have in God’s plan of salvation.

## Reflection Questions

1. How are Zechariah and Elizabeth portrayed in Luke 1:5-6? In light of Jewish tradition, why does this make the following verse (Luke 1:7) so surprising?
2. Read Luke 1:9. Why would being chosen to burn incense be such an important moment for Zechariah’s priesthood?

3. The angel tells Zechariah three things about his son, John.
  - ✱ First, read Luke 1:15a and Numbers 6:1-4. In light of this Old Testament background, what does the angel's statement about John's not drinking alcohol tell us about him?
  - ✱ Second, read Luke 1:15b. Consider this statement in light of what happened to the prophets Ezekiel and Elisha (see Ezekiel 11:5 and 2 Kings 2:9-15). What might John's being "filled with the Holy Spirit" tell us about the kind of ministry he will have?
  - ✱ Third, read Malachi 4:5-6 (Malachi 3:23-24 in some translations). How does this background shed light on the angel's description of John the Baptist's mission in Luke 1:16-17?
4. How is the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth symbolic of the story of Israel? Do you find in the story any encouragement for your life today?
5. Read Daniel 9:20-23. Notice the parallels between Daniel's experience in these verses and Zechariah's experience in Luke 1.
  - ✱ Daniel 9:20: What is Daniel doing when the angel appears?
  - ✱ Luke 1:9: What is Zechariah doing when the angel appears?
  - ✱ Daniel 9:21: Which angel appears to Daniel?
  - ✱ Luke 1:19: Which angel appears to Zechariah?

- ✱ Daniel 9:21: At what time does the angel appear to Daniel?
  - ✱ Luke 1:10: At what time does the angel appear to Zechariah?
  - ✱ Daniel 9:23: The angel's message is a response to what?
  - ✱ Luke 1:13: The angel's message is a response to what?
6. In Daniel 9:24 Gabriel foretold that the Jews would endure suffering for a total of "seventy weeks of years." How much time do you think might be meant by "seventy weeks of years"? According to Daniel 9:24, what will happen at the end of this period?
  7. In light of this background from Daniel 9, what ancient Jewish hopes would be stirred by the angel Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah?
  8. Compare and contrast Zechariah's question in Luke 1:18 with Mary's question in Luke 1:34. Why does Zechariah get punished for his question while Mary does not? Is it okay to question God? If so, how should we do it?