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Zacharias Divine revelation

Luke 1:8-14

Luke 1:8-14, *So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is 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.*

We are going to look at two characters from this verse and following.

1. Herod the Great
2. Zacharias

Reason number one, it connects the Old Testament with the New Testament.

The Old Testament and the New Testament do not propose two different religions. There is not the religion of Judaism and the religion of Christianity. Rather, the Old and the New Testament are one revelation from God with continuity telling the story of redemption, of only one religion, one faith and that is faith in the true and living God which involves His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is one complete revelation from God. Either the Old or the New is incomplete without the other.

Luke begins the story of salvation with John the Baptist because that links John the Baptist as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies and that shows the accuracy of Scripture's prophecies.

Divine revelation

V 8, So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division

As a priest twenty-four courses of the priests so each of them got to serve down at the temple two weeks a year, one week at one time a year and another week at another time.

They would go down and for a full week they would do their priestly duty which was mostly making sacrifices.

All day did the sacrifice and were covered from head to toe with blood, slaughtering animal after animal for those who came to make sacrifices.

Abijah was one of the grandsons of Aaron. There were twenty-four divisions of the priests, each named for one of the grandsons of Aaron, the sons of Ithamar and Eleazar, and his particular order was the order of Abijah and it was Abijah's order time.

Even under those orders they were divided into other orders and families. His group was now serving in the temple for their week and he was just doing his duty there.

That was the common thing that he was doing.

V 9, *according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.*

This is very much not routine.

We cannot imagine what a thrill this was for Zacharias. There is no way to understand it unless you know some of the background.

This is a great moment in this priest's life.

The custom of the priestly office was that every day at the temple, in the morning and in the evening, there was a burnt incense offering given to God.

In the morning there was the sacrifice of the animal on the brazen altar. That was the sacrifice of the spotless lamb that was sacrificed in the morning and in the evening.

At the time of the sacrifice in the morning and the evening, there was also the offering of incense to God. So that was done in the morning and the evening.

Not every priest could do that.

The priest was chosen to do that by lot.

Priest name must be drawn. It was a very great honour if their name were drawn because many priests would never have their name drawn, never.

No non-priest would ever be able to have this privilege and only some priests. To spread it around, it could only happen once in your life. If someone had ever done this, offered the burnt incense then they could not do it again.

This was then Zacharias' great moment.
This is the pinnacle of his priestly service.

Many priests would never have this privilege and priests could only have it, who did have it, once. This would have been the high point of his whole life. It would bring him from the outer court of the Israelites into the holy place.

In the Tabernacle there was a court of the Gentiles and the women, and then there was the inner court of the Israelites.

The sanctuary or the temple, which was divided into two parts, the first part called the holy place, then there was a curtain and behind that was The Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant was which symbolized the presence of God.

No one could go in there ever except the high priest once a year on the Day of Atonement to sprinkle blood on the Mercy Seat in atonement for the sins of the nation. So, the priest and the people stayed outside the temple.

Only one priest in a day could walk in there and offer that burnt incense and come back out. This then would take Zacharias from the normal place where he was outside butchering animals by the altar, and it would take him into the holy place. He would be able to do this only once in his lifetime, so the privilege was just supreme.

The temple entrance faced east at the far end of the holy place, when you went in, the far west end as you went in was this incense altar.

It was golden and it was for incense. It stood barely outside the veil between the holy place and the Holy of Holies.

It was as close to the presence of God as anybody could get except the high priest once a year going inside. This was as close as one could get. This was the supreme honour. God, to them, was at a distance and this was getting as near as you could get.

This golden incense altar though it stood outside the Holy of Holies, it is associated with the Holy of Holies.

Hebrews 9:2-5, *For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary;³ and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All,⁴ which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant;⁵ and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.*

The reason for that is because on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest went into the Holy of Holies, he not only took blood from the sacrifice on the altar, the brazen altar, but he took incense from the incense altar with him and sprinkled it on the Mercy Seat.

So, because the incense from this altar was sprinkled on the Mercy Seat once a year, it was associated with the Holy of Holies. This is the holiest place that anyone could get but the high priest once a year.

Zacharias, probably in the evening when there was a larger crowd than there would be in the morning because it tells us the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

What he would do would be gather coals off, using some utensils, gather coals off the altar of the burnt offering, the brazen altar and he would place all these coals in a golden bowl.

Somehow, he would carry that golden bowl with those hot coals, and he would go inside the holy place. Never have been there in his life, he would go in. He would proceed through a place he had never seen to the far end where he would find the golden altar of incense.

There he would put the coals and they would be spread around with some utensil. At that point he would put incense on top of those burning coals and immediately a huge column of smoke would rise up and it would carry both the smoke and the fragrance of that incense wafting everywhere around the temple. That was all his duty was and then he was to leave.

It was customary that the priest doing this did not stay very long.

There was a tremendous fear as they got close to the curtain, close to the Holy of Holies that they might do something to dishonour God, trivial, blasphemous, and it was a dangerous place to be. Equally dangerous as going inside the Holy of Holies.

When the high priest did that, they put bells on his skirt so they could hear him moving around so they would know if God killed him in there for some blasphemy. If the bells stopped ringing, they would have to put something under and drag him out.

So, it was a frightening thing!

He would then spread the coals, put down the fragrance and the incense would rise up.

The ascending, aromatic cloud was symbolic of the prayers of people,

- salvation,
- repentance,
- confession,
- thanksgiving,
- peace of Jerusalem,
- coming of Messiah,
- blessing,

- family,
- the nation,
- the Saviour would come and take away sin, and
- the kingdom to come.

All those things would be part of the praying of the people, and that is what was going on outside.

V 10, *And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense*

The whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. They were doing what the incense symbolized.

The incense symbolized their dependence on God, it symbolized their submission to God, it symbolized His sovereignty over them, it symbolized their dependence on Him. As it was being symbolized with the incense, it was being enacted with the prayers.

This heightens the drama of the moment. The people are all praying and praying and praying and the incense is going up.

V 11, *Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.*

An angel of the Lord appearing does not happen every day!

God has stepped in!

God has invaded history.

- 800 years without miracles,
- 500 years since the fiery furnace in Daniel,
- 400 years since God spoke,
- 500 years since an angel had been there.

Suddenly an angel appeared to Zacharias was probably just about ready to leave.

He had read Old Testament accounts about angels.

- Angels appearing to the patriarchs in the book of Genesis.
- Angels appearing to the prophets.
- Angels assisting Israel to defeat the enemies.

He knew about the last apparent appearance of an angel in a vision to Zechariah the prophet nearly 500 years before.

This was not really a vision. This was an actual angel.

He actually saw this angel standing to the right of the altar of incense.

Standing to the right of the altar of incense, what does that mean?

This angel was present in actual physical form so that he could be specifically located.

An angel there and he was standing to the right side of the altar of incense between the altar of incense and the golden lampstand that was right over on that side.

He was simply identifying for us the reality of this appearance.

God had invaded and sent His messenger!

What was his reaction to this incredible, unheard of event?

V 12, And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him

Zacharias was happy?

No.

He was panicked.

An angel is a perfectly holy, glorious being and this was an angel of the Lord that came right out of the presence of God.

Panic was the right response, sinful man in the midst of a holy visitor from heaven.

He was terrified!

It was the reaction of Gideon in Judges 6 when a heavenly visitor confronted him.

It was the reaction of Manoah, the father of Samson!

Judges 13:22, *And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, because we have seen God!"*

Sinners feeling the tremendous weight of their guilt in the presence of a holy visitor. It was the exact same reaction of Isaiah when Isaiah saw God high and lifted up, heard the angels singing, "Holy, holy, holy,"

Isaiah 6:5, *So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts."*

Daniel 6:21-22, *Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever! ²² My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths, so that they have not hurt me, because I was found innocent before Him; and also, O king, I have done no wrong before you."*

It was the same reaction of Ezekiel the prophet.

Ezekiel when he saw that almost indescribable presence of the glories of the throne of God.

Ezekiel 1:28, *So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking.*

When Angel Gabriel visited Daniel in Daniel 8.

Daniel 8:17, *So he came near where I stood, and when he came I was afraid and fell on my face; but he said to me, "Understand, son of man, that the vision refers to the time of the end."*

Daniel 10:8, *Therefore I was left alone when I saw this great vision, and no strength remained in me; for my vigour was turned to frailty in me, and I retained no strength.*

Daniel 10:10, *Suddenly, a hand touched me, which made me tremble on my knees and on the palms of my hands.*

It was traumatic, it was terrifying.

Same thing happened to Mary.

Luke 1:29-30, *But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was.³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.*

Shepherds

Luke 2:9-10, *And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.*

Whenever a perfectly holy visitor from the glories of heaven appears, terror is the appropriate response.

The apostles, when they saw the unveiled Christ in Matthew 17, fell into a coma.

John the apostle when he saw the vision of the glorified Christ! **Revelation 1:17**, *And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.*

A holy visitor from the presence of God shows up. You hear such folly, such worthless, rubbish being delivered by people today who supposedly have conversations with angels. It is and always has been an utterly terrifying thing.

Luke likes to talk about this fear. He refers to it repeatedly through his gospel. He makes note of the fact that it is a frightening thing to encounter holiness from heaven.

V 13, *But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.*

This is not something angels had never done, they had spoken. God has allowed angels to take on human form and human voice in history. That occurred in Old Testament times.

We note that it occurs also in New Testament times only at some special times of miraculous, divine intervention.

Angels must have learned to say this because this is their standard greeting, "Don't be afraid," because whenever they show up, people panic.

Whether you are going back to Genesis 15 or at Revelation 1, they have to say, "Don't be afraid."

Heavenly visitors must quell fear.

Why not be afraid?

This is not a judgment visit.

Zacharias would have known what the others knew that God is a great judge of sin.

If the holy God, or a holy angel appears, that sin is manifest, that sin is revealed. The presence of the holy being simply paints the picture blacker of one's own sinfulness.

The fear of judgment sets in. This is not a judgment visit. Also, Zacharias would know that angels were the instruments of divine judgment, they had been in the past and they would be in the future. This is not a judgment visit.

On the contrary, this is a blessing. *"For your petition has been heard."*

What is that petition?

Was he praying for the salvation of Israel?

Was he praying at that very moment for the Messiah?

Some say he was praying that the Saviour would come, that the true Lamb, the true sacrificial Lamb would come. It does not say that.

What is the petition?

"For your petition has been heard and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son."

The Greek implies that this is a long-standing petition. It does not necessarily mean he was praying it that day.

He may have lost hope. They may have been so old that maybe it was very rare for them to ask God to give them a child anymore. Maybe they did not do it at all.

But that was a common prayer for, you can imagine, days and years of their life. The prayer which maybe you started praying long ago and is still somewhere in the back of your mind has been answered and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.

Aren't you sort of stunned by the understatement of that?

Now, something is going to happen that you will not even believe. This thing is phenomenal.

Angel simply says that "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son."

They had been so deeply burdened by this barrenness, asking God and probably asking God mostly for a son.

Why?

Because he wanted to pass on the priesthood.

Isn't it amazing that God is the God of small beginnings?

One man who can best be described by the adjective "certain," not notable at all, just a plain old every-day average guy.

God is the God of small beginnings. It is incredible what God has done and does through one small beginning. It all starts when he answers the prayer of a little couple, insignificant, a prayer for a child.

In answering their prayer, He answers the greatest longings of the world!

Never underestimate what God has intended through small beginnings, through you.

At that moment Zacharias' fear must have turned into shock, not the shock of terror but the shock of disbelief.

What?

Further, "The angel says, 'You will give him the name John.'"

I cannot resist saying that. I am grateful to my parents!

What does that name mean?

John means "God is gracious."

The angel by giving him the name is saying God is about to explode upon the world His grace.

Luke 1:59-64, *So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. ⁶⁰His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name." ⁶²So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called. ⁶³And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marveled. ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God.*

Why are they making signs to him?

Why is he writing it?

Because by this time he is deaf and dumb!

How would you like to be 80 and for the first-time father a child and be deaf and dumb so you cannot tell anybody about it? That is what happened to him.

They were all astonished. So, they named him what the angel said to name him, John.

What a monumental moment.

V 14, *And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.*

This is not something to be sad for, this is something to be glad for.

There is going to be joy at his birth.

There is going to be joy on the part of a lot of people.

You are going to have gladness. It basically means highest joy, joy in the highest. That is the highest, supreme joy.

You are going to have not just joy, but the highest joy and not only you but many are going to rejoice at his birth, many.

Why are they going to rejoice at his birth?

He will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God.

They are going to rejoice because he is going to have a ministry of evangelization. He is going to turn people back to God.

God sends an angel. God speaks through that angel His message and God promises a miracle birth to this couple.

Divine intervention in the saga of salvation begins.