



World Christian Fellowship

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Zacharias the Priest

Luke 1:5

Luke 1:5, *There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.*

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.

Therefore, we understand that the Old Testament, which is Scripture, makes predictions which the New Testament fulfils. Hence, the New Testament is the Scripture as well.

Beginning the story with John the Baptist also is important because John the Baptist's birth was the first point at which God spoke.

The silence was broken, with that the 400 years with no word from God ended and the saga of salvation began.

Luke wants to take us right back to the first place where God acted decisively, supernaturally, and immediately in history and he has to go back to John.

Not only is that the first place where angels appear and they will continue to appear through the two birth narratives, the birth of John and the birth of Jesus.

As we know, the angels play a very important role in the annunciation to Mary as well as in the time of Christ's birth. This is the first of those angelic appearances.

It is also true that the birth of John was a miracle.
His birth was miraculous, and so was that of Jesus Christ.

By telling us the full story of the birth of John, the miracle of his birth, and the involvement of angels with a message from God, Luke is careful to begin the story where the story really begins, where God first initiates supernatural activity.

The story of John the Baptist establishes beyond argument that he is the forerunner of Messiah. If we know that to be true, then we can therefore know who the Messiah is.

Whoever John identifies will be the Messiah.

One day when Jesus came down to the Jordan River where John was baptizing and John turned toward Him and said, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*"

John pointed to Jesus Christ as the Messiah of which he was the forerunner!

If you establish who the forerunner is and it is John the Baptist, then you know who the Messiah is!

Now this is a major concern of Luke's, to link John the Baptist and Jesus.

The angelic annunciation of John's birth, the miracle of his birth, the story of the annunciation of Jesus' birth, the miracle of Jesus' birth and John the Baptist birth are woven together in

chapters 1 and 2 of Luke's gospel. They are woven together because they are inseparable.

Jesus is the Messiah because of His connection to the one who clearly is the forerunner who came to identify the Messiah.

Zacharias

There were eighteen thousand priests in Palestine at the time. He was just a certain one of them, just one priest who lived somewhere out in a village somewhere and carried on his priestly duties like his eighteen thousand other priestly compatriots.

But he becomes such an important character in the story, it is really remarkable.

Personal righteousness,
Priestly responsibility,
Prophetic revelation,
Doubtful response, and
Punishing rebuke.

Let us start with the first one, his
Personal righteousness.

He was a priest and nothing more notable than just to say "just a certain priest."

Judea was under Roman occupation, to be sure. It was under the fearful leadership of Herod. The Jews, however, even though it was under Roman occupation had the right to practice their religion freely so the priesthood was in full force and there were eighteen thousand or so priests actually functioning within the Jewish religion.

How priests' function?

The nation of Israel is a theocratic kingdom. It was ruled by God. It basically was a kingdom ruled by God. God mediated that rule for the officers of the kingdom who were priests.

All the priests were sons of Aaron. They all came through Aaron's loins and he had two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar in particular, and out of their loins came others who are identified with the priestly orders and he had other sons and they were priests.

Everybody who came out of Aaron, every male child who came from the family of Aaron was considered a part of the priesthood.

They were the agents of God. They basically operated the theocratic kingdom. They took care of the public issues and the public events and the teaching of Scripture.

To be a priest then was to be honoured.
It was to be a representative of God.

It was to be a descendant of the one who was the originally high priest who was to be set apart by God for holy service.

They were able to go into the temple and offer sacrifice on behalf of the people. It was a very noble and respected position.

They were pronouncers of blessing also.

They were servants of the temple.

It was the priests who were the butchers who did all the sacrificing of the animals for the people.

It was the priests who interpreted the Scriptures.

It was the priests who taught the Scriptures and who counselled people out in their villages where they lived.

Zachariah was one of them.

There were about 18,000 priests of them throughout the history of Israel that they had to be divided into twenty-four orders.

1 Chronicles 24, David, before the kingdom even divided into the northern and southern kingdom, in the reign of David he divided the priesthood into twenty-four orders because Eleazar and Ithamar. The two of Aaron's sons, combined had twenty-four sons, the head of an order of priests and their sons and their sons and their sons and all the way down the line would belong to those orders.

There were twenty-four orders of priests. The eighth order, by the way, was named for the eighth son of Eleazar, Abijah. And it happened that that was the division, it says there, in which Zacharias did his priestly service.

Why was it divided down into twenty-four orders?

Because there were so many priests, they couldn't all serve in the temple all the time and they had to be divided down.

They were divided down and here is how it worked.

Any priest would serve in the temple two different weeks a year, two separate weeks a year. That was it.

During the whole year you would only serve one week at one time of the year and another week at another time of the year, and that was how you were brought into temple service. Because there were so many you only were able to serve two different weeks a year in the temple.

Now all the priests came to the temple for Passover. It was not uncommon to slaughter as many as a quarter of a million lambs, a quarter of a million animals at Passover.

If eighteen thousand priests went about to slaughter a quarter of a million lambs just in a week's period, that would be a great undertaking.

They were covered with blood to the top of their head all the way to the toe of their feet. They slaughtered all day long. That is what they did when they were there. But in the normal course of things they served in the temple just two different weeks a year.

We find Zacharias at this time.

It is also interesting to note that it says Zacharias was of the division of Abijah.

Zacharias may not have been a descendant of Abijah.

There were twenty-four orders of the priests until a great event occurred and that was the Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. Up to that point those twenty-four orders were made up of the descendants of whoever the order was named for. They were all the sons of those twenty-four sons of Aaron.

What happened in the Babylonian captivity was all of Israel was taken captive. In three deportments, 605, 597, and 586 B.C. they are all carried into Babylon. Seventy years later they straggled back.

Only four of those orders of priests came back and Abijah was not one of the four that came back. Only four of the twenty-four came back under Zerubbabel, and that is in the second chapter of Ezra. For the sake of tradition, however, they wanted

back the twenty-four, so they divided those four families of priests back into twenty-four and restored the old names, even though they were not descendants of those people.

They restored the original names for the sake of restoration and the sake of tradition. So Abijah was not one of the four that returned, but the name Abijah was brought back into the priesthood so that they might have those same twenty-four.

So we can say then that Zacharias, while not in the line of Abijah necessarily, served in the division of Abijah and did his duty when that division was called to serve in the temple those two weeks a year.

Zacharias had a wife.

He was a priest and that would fill his life with religion all the time. He also had a wife who knew about that.

He had a wife from the daughters of Aaron. He married the daughter of a priest. Since all male descendants of Aaron were priests, her father was a priest, her brothers were priests, her uncles were priests, her grandfather, great-grandfather, she was in a world of priests.

She grew up immersed in Jewish priestly function. He chose the best. This tells us a little bit about his devotion to the priesthood, his devotion to God, to his priestly duty. He married

a girl who was most exposed to the devout involvement in the religion of Judaism.

She must have come from a pretty good family, a serious family of priests because they named her Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is a beautiful name!

Exodus 6:23, *Aaron took to himself Elisheba, daughter of Amminadab, sister of Nahshon, as wife; and she bore him Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar.*

She was named after the wife of the original high priest Aaron. That tells you something else about this family that she came from.

These are serious about their religion.

These are serious about priestly function.

By the way, Elizabeth is a beautiful name. It means "My God is an oath," or "My God is faithful," or some variant of that. It celebrates the faithfulness of God.

So here is this man, just a common ordinary garden-variety, vanilla priest out in some village somewhere, serious enough about his priesthood that he finds a woman to marry who has all her life filled with priests, who will understand his life and his love for the priesthood and for God. One who so comes from

such a devoted family as to have been named after the wife of the original high priest, Aaron. This is a remarkable couple. This certainly provided tremendous heritage for John the Baptist.

In a time of Jewish apostasy and a time of Jewish defection from true worship of God, a time of hypocrisy, a time of self-righteousness, this couple was devout.

Luke 1:6, *And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.*

They were both righteous in the sight of God.

Now they were not like the hypocrites. The hypocrites were righteous in the sight of men.

We must have to get this distinction.

The hypocrites were very concerned about how they looked. That is why Jesus said about them in Matthew 23 that you are like painted graves, inside you have the stench of death, but you are whitewashed on the outside.

But that was the way Judaism at the time was. They were involved in being righteous before men. That was the scribes and that was the Pharisees.

These two were not righteous in the sight of men, they were righteous in the sight of God!

As far as God was concerned, they were right with Him and God does not look on the outward appearance, God looks in the heart.

God said they are righteous.

What does that mean?

That means their sins were covered.

The only way God could declare someone righteous was if He did not impute their sins to them. They were right with Him. Their sins were covered.

How did that happen?

The same way it happens all the time.

Same way it happened in Genesis with Abraham, the first of all the Jewish line.

Genesis 15:6, *"And he believed God and it was counted as righteousness unto him."*

God literally gives righteousness as a covering to those who believe Him. They believed in God.

- They believed in the true and living God.
- They believed the Word of God.
- They believed the revelation of the Old Testament.
- They believed God's holy law was right and true and just and good.
- They believed that they could not keep His law.
- They knew they were sinners who fell short of the law of God.
- They knew that the law of God called for penitence and repentance and they also knew that God was a God of mercy and grace and loving-kindness.
- They believed all that and so they saw the law of God, they saw its holy standard. They realized they fell short of it.

They went to God with a penitent heart and they asked Him for grace and mercy.

That is what the Old Testament reveals.

Zachariah and Elizabeth both knew what the prophet Isaiah told.

Isaiah 61:10, *I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, My soul shall be joyful in my God; For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*

They knew that even though they were sinful they could be covered with righteousness. God would be merciful and gracious to them and cover them with a robe of righteousness. So that when God looked at them, He saw righteousness, not sin. He covered up their sins.

How could God do that and still be holy?

How can a holy God be just and the justifier of sinners?

How can God just cover up sin and still be holy?

Zachariah and Elizabeth both knew how.

Isaiah 53:4-6, Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

They knew there was coming someone who would bear their sins, someone who would be bearing their griefs, carrying their sorrows, who would be pierced for their transgressions, crushed for their iniquities.

Their iniquity would fall on Him.

That is how God could cover them with righteousness.

How?

Because someone else would bear their sin.

Who was that someone else?

Whoever fulfilled Isaiah 53.

Who was it to be?

The Messiah.

That is why when John first saw Jesus, when John was down at the river in his ministry and Jesus showed up for the first time, John didn't say, "There is the Messiah, there is the King." John said, "Behold the Lamb."

John spent his life head deep in blood in the sacrificial system over and over and day after day all through the year these orders of priests just slaughtered animals.

Never ever did it take away sin. The people had to come back make another one, and another one all their life long. He was looking for the final sacrifice, the one who would bear his sin. He was believing that God would provide a sacrifice.

Doesn't that sound like Abraham, who took his son up on Mount Moriah way back in Genesis and believed that God would provide a sacrifice?

They were believing people.

They believed in God, they believed in the true and living God, they believed in His law. They knew they fell short of it. They were penitent in their hearts. They cried out to God for mercy and they knew that God would have some provision for their sin. Someone would bear their sin. He of all people, Zacharias, and Elizabeth of all ladies would know their hopeless incompleteness of the sacrificial system.

Butchering, slaughtering day after day after day after day after day. Same people over and over and never were sin taken away, never was the price finally paid, never were the souls of people truly ransomed.

You can imagine the exhilaration in John the day he pointed to Jesus and said, "*Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world.*"

There would come one, Zacharias knew it, who would die the death for sin which fully satisfied the holy justice of God. God knew that that sin would be covered so He could take care of the sinner by covering him with a robe of righteousness based upon what Christ would do. This is justification by imputation.

We are not righteous, but God looks at us and we are righteous in His sight because He covers us with righteousness because we believe.

By our faith, our sins are placed on Christ. When Christ died on the cross, He was bearing the sins of Zacharias, Abraham, Sarah, Elizabeth, and everybody else who ever believed. He was the sacrifice.

Luke chapter 18 we read about a Pharisee who went to the temple and he said, "I thank You that I am not like other men," and he goes on parading all of his external virtue. There was this other person beating his chest. He will not look up and he says, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*" Luke records that Jesus said, "*That man went home righteous and not the Pharisee.*"

That is the kind of person Zacharias and Elizabeth were. They were righteous because God had covered them with righteousness because they believed Him, and they believed that God would provide a sacrifice for their sin. In the meantime, they cried out for His mercy.

They were really part of a remnant, true godly Jews in the midst of a nation of apostates.

There were more we are going to meet them: Joseph, Mary, Anna, that old lady in the temple, Simeon, that old man. They were part of the remnant. They were part of the remnant who probably were hanging on to Malachi's words that the sun of righteousness is going to rise and hoping it would be in their lifetime.

They were not just justified but they were also sanctified.

Luke 1:6, *And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.*

They were walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

When God imputes righteousness to you, He also imparts righteousness to you. In other words, they were not the same after they believed. They were declared righteous based upon Christ's carrying bearing their sin. They were covered with a robe of righteousness, which God did for them.

But they also transformed.

So, we always say that justification, which is being declared righteous on the merits of Christ's substitutionary death, is never separated from sanctification, which is God making you different.

They were different.

They walked blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. That does not mean they were sinless. It does not mean they were perfect. It just means they were obedient.

They had a reputation for walking according to the will of God, the law of God.

They were like Job, of whom essentially the very same thing is said. Job was a faithful, and obedient man.

Job 1:1, *There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil.*

This means that salvation is justification, being declared righteous because Christ cares for your sins, and it is also sanctification and they must occur together.

Holiness was imputed to them, that is, put to their account.

It was also imparted to them.

They were regenerated.

They were converted.

They were transformed.

Psalm 19:7, *The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;*

They were made different people so that they could live a different way. They were able to live life as previously impossible.

They understood the Mosaic Law.

They grasped its perfections.
They knew they fell short.
They came to God and they got His mercy and His grace.
They then loved the law of God.
They wanted to keep it, they wanted to do it.
God gave them the capability of doing that by changing them.
They were then able to obey.

Joshua 1:8, *This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.*

Psalm 119:97, *Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.*

The gospel is not in conflict with true faith in Israel. It is in harmony with true faith in Israel.

These people would accept the gospel gladly because it is the next reasonable step because they are looking for their sacrifice. Contrast that with the apostle Paul, who was a Pharisee who was going around trying to establish his own righteousness and had to say about his entire life before Christ it was manure.

These people evidenced for Luke the fact that the New Testament message is not in conflict with true faith in Old Testament Israel.

It is not a new religion.

It is not a new way of salvation.

It is not a different way to God.

Jesus did not come to oppose the Old Testament law or to oppose the Old Testament sacrifice, He came to affirm them and fulfil them.

Everything the Old Testament taught about salvation, being right with God, confession of sin, repentance, faith, the substitutionary death of a sacrifice for sin, obedience to God's law, that's all taught in the New Testament.

Jesus said, "I'm not going to remove one jot or tittle," not one little breathing mark and not one little tiny little mark till it's all complete.

God's law, man's sin, faith in God, repentance for sin, justification, which is imputed righteousness, sanctification, which is imparted righteousness which changes you, obedience to God's law, worship of the true and living God, that's all carried from the Old into the New intact. Continuity is there.

Zachariah and Elizabeth two very righteous people, righteous in the sight of God.

Psalm 119:1, *Blessed are the undefiled in the way, Who walk in the law of the Lord!*

Probably they were not righteous in the sight of men.

Why?

Luke 1:7, *But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.*

What is the most severe shame that a Jewish woman would ever have?

Childless.

Psalms 127:3, *Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, The fruit of the womb is a reward.*

All their life, and they were probably married in their teens typically, all their life they bore the stigma, no child. They must have wondered into their heart saying what is wrong.

Many of the Jews believed that if God cursed you, He would make you childless. This was some symbol of their wickedness and their sinfulness. They bore this social stigma of being barren and now they are in their 60s?

The rabbis used to say seven people are excommunicated from God. Here is how they begin: A Jew who has no wife, or a Jew whose wife has no child. That was a terrible burden in that society.

This is what Rachel told her husband Jacob when she was barren.

Genesis 30:1, *Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die!"*

Elkanah and Hannah

1 Samuel 1:2, *And he had two wives: the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.*

To be barren was grounds for divorce. If your wife could not have a child, boot her out. She is probably accursed by God.

This couple righteous in the sight of God, maybe unrighteous in the sight of men. As godly as they were, they bore the stigma.

But Luke wants us to know that her barrenness had nothing to do with sin in their life.

But it had everything to do with something God was planning. Better you should have a bunch of unknown kids than to have just one John the Baptist.

God had something planned for them that was so much beyond their wildest dreams. To them was to be given the forerunner, the first prophet in 400 years, the last prophet of the Old Testament. John the Baptist is the greatest man who ever lived up until that time. They would have only one son. He would be the greatest human who had ever walked the earth, and that is from the words of Jesus Himself.

This is not divine punishment, their barrenness, this is divine planning.

They have no child and there is now no hope. Except by the miraculous and miracles did not happen.