

*8 Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, 9 according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. 11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. 12 Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. 14 "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. 16 "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. 17 "It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

Let me begin by putting you at ease. We've now tackled the introduction to this story 2 different times, and I make no apology for that.

Luke's approach is different from all the other gospel accounts simply because, like us, Luke was a gentile, a foreigner to God's chosen people, the Jews. That's remarkable. Unthinkable to the Jews just 30 years before.

Yet amazingly, by the time Luke writes this account of Jesus and also the account of God doing a mighty new work through the chosen apostles of Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, the Acts of the Apostles, God has set the nation of Israel aside and is working a

new thing, calling out a new people for His name, not just Israel, but the church which is selected out of every tribe and nation.

Unthinkable! God has set His people Israel on a shelf?? And He is going to the nations calling people out of the nations to belong to Him. Incredible! And that is Luke's story.

And the story begins before the advent of Jesus. The story begins after a 400 year silence, no prophet, no evidence of God through miracles, it's as if Israel is forgotten by God, or as Hosea put it, an adulterous wife, purchased out of slavery, but the marriage goes silent for many days. No contact.

That has been Israel's situation for 400 years after Malachi, the last prophet of the old testament. God has been silent. Deafeningly silent. It had been over 500 years since the last miracle. Daniel in the lions den, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. No miracle since that time. Painfully silent, until this event with Zachariah and Elizabeth.

Luke *begins* here because this event breaks the long silence. But Luke will *end* his discourse with Theophilus thousands of miles away from Israel, in Rome.

God dwells among His people Israel, and shatters the long silence with Jesus, God with us, who does more miracles in a day than what Israel had seen in 20 centuries.

God bursts onto the scene, and Israel rejects Him. Luke will end, not in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish universe, but in Rome, the center of the gentile universe.

And the string of miracles and events and teaching and resurrection from the dead that gets us from Zachariah in Jerusalem, to Rome is

unmistakably God in the midst of a people doing mighty works that only God can do. But the people are not the Jews.

God goes from silence to claps of thunder as it were, and Israel misses it. And then God takes His story to the gentiles. Pinch yourself. Here we are in direct continuous line to the beginning of events, the end of the long silence, Zacharias and Elizabeth

But I want to put your minds at ease. You may be thinking, Jim's moving so slow, I think he's dragging this out so we'll be at the Christmas passage at Christmas. Nope.

Now the Spirit could do that, but it's not my plan. We're going to move at a good pace. Luke is almost a third of the new testament, so we've got to move along.

So God is going to shatter the silence with a thunderclap that should have rocked Israel to the core and brought a great fervor and fear to that nation. Here is how it happened;

*8 Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, 9 according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.*

The last time we met, I told you that there were probably 18000 priests at this time. Sons of Aaron's sons. Aaron's 2 remaining sons, remember, God killed two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu for presenting un-prescribed strange fire.

Their self styled worship, like Cain's offering, was rejected by God, and so displeased God that He killed them. But Aaron had 2 remaining sons and between them they had 24 sons.

The priesthood was then made up of 24 divisions. Each division was called by the name of one of the sons, the grandchildren of Aaron. Thus Zachariah is in the division of Abijah.

Each division might have 750 priests, and the divisions would rotate so that every priest had some time serving in the temple, offering sacrifices to God. It was Zachariah's time.

But what happens for him is like winning a lottery. Of those 750 priests, only one will be selected, by lot, to enter into the Holy Place. Not the Holy of Holies, but an inner chamber with just a curtain dividing the Holy of Holies where God dwells, and this priest is the one who will burn the incense in the Holy place.

Zacharias drew the lot to be that priest. It was a once in a lifetime event. Really amazing if you drew the lot to do that. *he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.*

Zachariah would have been overwhelmed with joy at this opportunity, and in a sense, perhaps the fact that the lot fell to him might in some sense lessen the stigma of being childless.

The jews considered childlessness to be a judgement from God that illuminates that you are somehow guilty and your guilt has caused His displeasure which is being shown to you by being childless.

So the lot fell to Zacharias, so perhaps God favors him after all. They should have read Job's account and learned not to stigmatize people because God is doing something with them that you cannot understand.

These jews were all about outward show, not what was inside. And Luke has told us that Zacharias was a righteous man. Childlessness had nothing to do with his inner state, it had

everything to do with the plan of God.

In any case, this was an exciting and re-assuring thing to Zacharias to have drawn the lot to burn the incense. A really big deal. But what happens next causes all this to pale by comparison.

*10 And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.*

Praying for what? Well, we can only guess that they were praying for national and individual blessing. Praying that God would visit His people and remember all of His promises. Praying I'm sure that God would restore national sovereignty to the nation.

They were guilty of all the same shallow hopes and dreams that we are. Praying for Gods blessing so they could ultimately be better off. Get rid of Rome. Get us a king that will make life better. All about here and now. We're guilty of that too.

And hopefully, God had a remnant who were praying for spiritual restoration and forgiveness. For the love relationship to be renewed. Praying that God would again be present with His people. Praying that God would again use His people to glorify His name. That's a better prayer.

That's all just conjecture. Luke only tells us they were praying. The multitude was praying. The burning of incense on the altar in the Holy Place was supposed to be symbolic of the prayers of the people of God. A sweet aroma to God, spiritually and physically.

That was what was supposed to be happening. Year after year, century after century. And Zacharias drew the straw that put him in charge of this great honor.

*11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.*

This event marks the first words from God, by prophet or angel or any other way, in 400 years. This angel breaks the long painful silence. God is visiting His people for the first time in 400 long years.

One of the great apologetics for the veracity and truth of this book is the simplicity in which it approaches miracles. Things that happen that are beyond physical determination. Things that are impossible for us to explain or account for. Easy for God, impossible for us. This book talks about it like it's very ordinary, because with our God, it IS very ordinary.

No build up. No fanfare. No drumroll. It just says, an angel appeared. He wasn't there, then he was. Out of thin air. Standing over there to the right of the altar, as if we were all saying, Oh, over by the altar? Just to the right of it? Oh, OK.

Standing you say? OK, so he had feet? It's very non-plussed. Very matter of fact, like, this happens all the time.

The angel is astounding, for sure, but what's more astounding is: God's going to visit His people for the first time in 400 years! Compared to that, the angel is just an angel standing over there.

Great to read about, but I can sympathize with Zacharias' reaction.  
*12 Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him.*

Our minds probably can't imagine this. The silence and darkness of this inner chamber. The solemnity of the occasion. Prescribed worship, and an elevated opportunity to experience that worship as

only very few ever would. Priests who win a lottery are the only ones who have ever been in this room.

That alone must have been charged with emotion. You wouldn't want this solemn time of worship to be over. And suddenly, you're not by yourself any more. And the being you're sharing the space with is a heavenly creature.

Pretty sure that would bring my heart to cardiac arrest. Suddenly the room is filled with heavenly light and an angel is standing to the right of the altar.

Terror would come. Those words, *fear gripped him*, are a description in greek words of sheer terror. Oops, I can't move; terror. Sort of like the paralysis of a serious electric shock. Fear that makes you frozen.

*13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias,*

That's the standard introduction that angels give. Every time one shows up, they have to begin here. Do not be afraid. Sure. Easy for you to say. You're perfect, and I'm wretched. You stand in God's presence. My sinfulness has banished me from God's presence.

I mean, one angel killed an entire Assyrian army of 185,000 men. You should be afraid. There is cause for concern. So I have a problem with these people who are having these flippant conversations with angels and writing books like travelogue articles. The real ones always have this effect. Terror.

*13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.*

I can't help but wonder how this news struck Zacharias. It would be like an angel telling me and Pam we're about to have a baby. Ummm, are you sure this is a good idea at this point? Sure you've got the right couple??

Yes, he had the right couple. This angel calls them by their names. Do not be afraid Zacharias. Your wife Elizabeth. And not only does he know their names, he names the baby. You will call him John. Make no mistake. This is about Zacharias and Elizabeth and John.

That might introduce a different kind of terror. I always wanted a kid . . . when I was young. Hows this gonna work for senior citizens. In a moment, Zacharias will mouth those concerns, and the angel will solve the problem. The mouth problem, not the other ones. God will solve those concerns with miracles.

*14 “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 “For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb. 16 “And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.*

Not just any baby either. Many will rejoice at his birth. Why?

God is proving that the silence is broken by bringing a baby, filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb, a baby who is of high esteem not before men, but before God. *And he will be great in the sight of the Lord.*

We need to stop for a moment and talk about greatness. The other day for some reason I was watching a you tube and you know how other ones will pop up like click bate when the one you were

watching is over. And there was one where Billy Crystal gives a eulogy for Caciuss Clay. Mohammed Ali for those of you that aren't as old as I am.

Caciuss clay broke new ground. Yeah, he was a gifted athlete and won some fights, but beyond that, he broke new ground.

Never before him was there someone who stood up and beat on his own chest over and over and over and told the world that he was the greatest human ever born. He did it so often, I guess people began to believe it. Many of us were waiting for the worms to come, like Herod in the Bible, but they didn't. We were appalled at the audacity . . . and after a while, we weren't.

My point is this; The biblical standard for greatness is very different than the world's standards. And the world's standards actually dropped significantly when Caciuss Clay taught us that the one who beats their chest the loudest and announces to the world the most often that they are the greatest . . . evidently; is.

God's not impressed. In fact His book teaches pretty much polar opposite of what Caciuss Clay announced about greatness.

So who actually is great then? What does greatness look like by this book's standards? Well, we just read it in those 3 verses. Let's look at it again, now that we spent some capitol talking about what greatness isn't.

First of all, whatever this world calls great; isn't. Whole different set of standards. Here they are again; *14 "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord;*

There's the disconnect. God gets to declare who is great. Great in

the sight of the Lord. As opposed to great in the site of this world. Great in the realm where God has the authority to reign, the Kingdom of God, as opposed to great in this world, ruled by Satan. So, then, who does God pick; listen to 3 criteria of greatness in the Kingdom.

*and he will drink no wine or liquor,* seperation from this world's pleasures. Seperation from living in the fallen flesh of this world.

*and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.* Instead of walking like the sons of this world, people who are controlled by the Spirit of God live lives bathed in godliness and have spiritual power. Otherworldly living by God's power.

*16 "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.* Evidence. Instead of walking like the sons of this world, he is turning "many sons" out of this world and into God's world. He calls sons to a repentance that aligns them with God.

Seperation. Spiritual power. Fruitfulness for the Glory of God. That is the formula for true greatness. And Jesus will say later that John was the greatest man ever born of women.

How does this world respond to true greatness? Later on, an evil king will get so excited watching an adolescent girl doing a lascivious dance that he'll offer her anything she wants, and she'll say, bring me the head of the greatest man in the world on a platter. That's this worlds reaction to true greatness.

So much for greatness in this world. It can cost you your head. But the angel announces that this baby will be great in the sight of the Lord.

This baby will come with a miraculous birth. Zacharias and

Elizabeth are proven time tested losers in the baby making world, and now add to their track record, they are advanced in years.

That's soft peddling. Advanced in years. Sounds like *senior citizen*. Trying to put the best positive spin on the real negative actual facts. They're older than dirt and they couldn't produce babies when they were young.

That all adds up to a miracle. God is breaking His silence with an angelic announcement that a miraculous birth is going to happen!

*16 “And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.*

This verse is an indicator of the spiritual temperature of Israel at this point. They are a nation that collectively need a revival. They are apostate. They have devised a man made religion of law keeping that requires no God. They are spiritually dead.

This son, John, will be used by God to re-ignite the love relationship for many sons. He will lead a revival in Israel. Wake up. The long silence is over. Israel missed their messiah, but not all of them. Some were awakened.

*17 “It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

There is a play on words here. I believe it's on purpose. Very telling. In vs. 16 you have son's. And in vs. 17 you have disobedient fathers.

If we were to translate that to national Israel, the Fathers are the leadership in Israel. The Council of 70 of the most powerful priests. These are the movers and shakers of Israel. These are the men who set the spiritual tone and pace. And their religion is described in Vs. 17 as *TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous*

The Fathers of Israel are collectively disobedient and far away from the attitude of true righteousness. They were creating their own righteousness by doing prescribed works. And it was far away removed from God.

On the other hand you have sons in vs. 16. And nationally these are ordinary everyday folk. Painfully ordinary. Unremarkable. Zacharias and Elizabeth are presented this way. A certain priest.

The words used to describe Zacharias is how we would introduce the most ordinary of ordinary. Just a certain priest. Could have been anyone. Pick one. God picked an ordinary one . . . who was righteous. Truly righteous.

It's fitting that the long silence, the 400 years of deafening silence that began with Malachi, will also end with Malachi. The last word from God, 400 years ago was that this person would come as a forerunner to the messiah.

Let's get our pro-nouns in order. 16 *“And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the **Lord their God**.* 17 *“It is he who will go as a forerunner before **Him***

Who is the he, and who is the Him? If you're a person who scribbles up their old school printed Bible, draw a circle around *Lord their God* at the end of vs. 16 and a circle around *Him* in vs.

17 and then draw a line to connect the two circles. Him is the antecedent of Lord, God. And that would be . . . Jesus.

Luke quotes the exact words of the prophet, but he does so carefully. The angel who speaks with Zacharias is careful to leave some room for a dual fulfilment of the final words of Malachi. His words are exact.

The final two verses of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:5,6 say this; 5 *“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD.* 6 *“He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.”*

The angel doesn't tell Zacharias this miracle son of his is going to be Elijah. He says he will be great before the Lord and that he will come in the *spirit and power of Elijah*.

The angel only quotes a small portion of Malachi's prophecy to Zacharias. 17 *“It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

The angel only quotes the part about turning the hearts of the fathers back to the children. We can say with 20-20 hindsight that the leadership in Israel, the fathers, did not respond to John the baptist. In fact they looked the other way while he was murdered.

The leadership in Israel saw all of the miracles and concluded that Jesus was from the devil. The hearts of the fathers were stone cold. They rejected Jesus and God, true to the prophecy, and God

smote the land of Israel with a curse. To this day. National blindness.

John the baptist announced that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But his success in turning Israel back to God was limited to a few poor believers in God. The common people, the sons, as opposed to the fathers.

When the pharisees and scribes, the "Fathers" in this vernacular of Micah's prophecy came to the Jordan, John confronted their useless works righteousness system. The religious literati did not listen.

They allowed John to be captured and ultimately murdered, and they saw to it that Jesus was murdered. And in 70 AD, God, true to His word smote the land with a curse. Judaism was over. Crushed by Rome. The jews were scattered to the four winds for centuries. They are back in the land today.

So, then, what do we say about John the Baptist and Malachi's prophecy? Is it un-fulfilled? We might go there and be puzzled. But God leaves the possibilites open when He says, lest I smite the land with a curse.

Many believe that's exactly what happened. Elijah came to announce the Lord their God, the messiah of Israel, and the Fathers in Israel rejected the message and the messiah.

In fact the leaders in Israel were responsible in the murders of both. And we look down through 2000 years of fulfilled prophecy. God indeed followed through and smote the land with a curse.

Many of us believe that the first Elijah, who was taken up to heaven alive, in a fiery chariot, will during the tribulation time, return and finish fulfilling Malachi's prophecy.

This time the land will be on the threshold of utter destruction on all sides, and God will open the eyes of the fathers to see and understand that Jesus, who their ancient fathers rejected, is in fact the Lamb of God, slain in their place to take away their sins, and a national mourning and repentance will grip every Jew who remains. 2/3 of them will have perished by that time, but 1/3, will be gloriously saved.

This will come up again and again as we study what the Bible teaches about John the Baptist.

We stand in awe of the Spirit's ability to take a portion of an exact prophecy and give it a dual fulfillment. If we only had John the Baptist, we could say, it didn't happen. The Fathers' hearts didn't turn to the obedient sons. God's word is not fulfilled.

And you could throw your bibles away. Except for those final words of that prophecy. *And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.*

The Fathers didn't respond. National repentance didn't come. And God smote their land with a curse. Just like He said. But we are still waiting for the ultimate fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. Elijah will come. The Fathers will repent. The promises will be fulfilled.

We are spectators in an exciting working of God. Israel is back in the land, tenuously. We can't help but feel that we are standing right on the threshold of God finishing this prophecy that He began to fulfill when that angel stood by the altar and spoke those words, recorded for us by Luke, so long ago.

Are you ready? Don't get bogged down in the cares of this world.  
We are, I believe, on the threshold of the next one.